"...western-born but spirit eastern..." : Annie Besant : between colonial and spiritual realms

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **67 (2013)**

Heft 4: **Biography Afield in Asia and Europe**

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-391493

"…WESTERN-BORN BUT IN SPIRIT EASTERN …" – ANNIE BESANT BETWEEN COLONIAL AND SPIRITUAL REALMS

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Abstract

The life of Annie Besant (1847–1933) is marked by a remarkable spectrum of engagements which entailed numerous crossings of borders and boundaries demarcating social, cultural, ideological, geo-political as well as gender distinctions. During her early career she was a prominent supporter of rationalism, atheism, women's rights, birth-control, and socialism. She later turned to Theosophy and settled in India, where she became the President of the Theosophical Society and an important figure in the Indian independence movement. Her biography can to a considerable extent be seen as a self-referential blending of political, spiritual and trans-cultural endeavours. While the combination of the political and spiritual is a feature of Besant's biography that is shared with other contemporary intellectuals and leaders, it gains an additional complexity as it dove-tails with an explicit trans-cultural endeavour concerned with translating ideas and terms from one culture into another, and proposing it as a solution to what she regarded as a crisis of colonialism and materialism, as well as of ancient values. The complexity of the constellations she has entered as well as created can be seen as resulting from her criticising and crossing boundaries at different levels. Her critique of bars and borders is often fuelled by the claim to interconnect realms that are usually kept apart. These different levels produce not only a multilayered discourse, but also a biography no less complex. Rather than it being made up of a sequence of neat phases, it seems to consist of co-existing fields of engagement and is characterized by a trans-cultural dimension as well, since Besant made the joining of cultures not only her agenda, but viewed herself as being the embodiment of such mediation.

The biography of Annie Besant (1847–1933) is marked by numerous crossings of borders and boundaries demarcating social, cultural, ideological, geo-political as well as gender distinctions. These boundary crossings were viewed by some contemporaries as violations of norms and codes of conduct, as transgressions that call for sanctions, while others would welcome her various engagements – be it for the sake of rationalism, atheism, women's rights, birth-control, socialism, Theosophy, Hinduism, Indian independence, a new world-teacher or the female divine. The multiplicity of Besant's life and of her views on political,

social as well as spiritual issues has bewildered quite a few biographers and led to various attempts to interpret her life according to certain "unifying" patterns. In some cases, this resulted in reducing the complexity of her personality either to psychological assessments or to her being the product of historical and social circumstances. While an analysis of the latter is indispensable for biographical research, it is also necessary to deal with self-perceptions and self-representations. In the case of Annie Besant, her resistance against boundaries and debarments was not only a topic in her autobiographical texts, but was also reflected upon and turned into a political as well as spiritual agenda. It was connected to her self-perception as being involved in spheres often deemed mutually exclusive, such as politics and spirituality, colonialism and cosmic history, India and Britain etc. The trans-cultural dimension is an important aspect of Besant's life as well, since she made the joining of cultures not only her agenda, but viewed herself as being the embodiment of such mediation.

The self-conscious dimension implied in the entangled structure of casting oneself as an intersection between opposites is thus an important dimension of Besant's life and is also implied in her various public roles. As the leading Theosophist in India, she propagated a convergence of cultures and races in a "universal brotherhood of humanity" by means of an ambiguous combination of conservative and reformist, anti-colonialist and imperialist positions in her interpretations of teachings of Theosophy and Hinduism. In so doing, her position differed from other British women who settled in India either as the wives of colonial administrators, or in order to make a living as teachers or nurses etc. Rather, Besant can be seen as belonging to a group of women who travelled to India for different reasons and became champions of Indian nationalism and "Hindu" values.[1] While some of them were renowned for the work they did in association with an important Indian political or spiritual leader,[2] Annie Besant settled in India as a celebrity in her own right (though, for some, a notorious one), and as a representative and, from 1907, president of the Theosophical Society. In this way she had an important institutional basis which played a crucial, though complicated and ambiguous, role in her activities. It allowed her to expand her activities in different directions and public arenas, for instance, by establishing new organisations, journals and newspapers. The

1 See BURTON, 1992, and RAMUSACK, 1992.

2 Margret Noble ("Sister Nivedita"), for instance, who followed Svami Vivekananda's invitation to support his mission in India, is seen as an important figure in the Indian Independence Movement; see RAO, 1996, and KUMAR, 1998.

intersection of political and spiritual aspirations with Indian reformist and nationalist discourse allowed her, as well as some other European women, to take leadership positions in India which they could hardly obtain in contemporary Britain. The ambiguous cross-cultural as well as colonial constellation played an important role in the biography not only of Besant, but also of other women of this period.[3]

In India, Besant's trans-cultural endeavour has found acknowledgement and even something like a canonisation. She is regarded, for instance, as one of the important figures of the Indian independence movement[4], a stamp with her portrait has been issued, and her image was also placed in the "Bharat Mata Mandir" in Haridvar, a new temple built in the 1980s in one of the most important pilgrimage centres in India.[5] Conversely, in Britain and the West at large there is no particular need to remember this "occidental daughter of India".[6] Also, when it comes to biographies and studies about Besant a cultural divide seems to be in place. Besant is mainly dealt with in studies dealing with the Victorian age and the history of feminism in the British Empire.[7] Apart from this there are studies on specific aspects of her political career and her Theosophical activities in India.[8] A similar divide can be observed with regard to the biographies which often focus on her life in Britain (see below). In recent years, there have been attempts to overcome such divides and to analyse what biographers have often viewed as "contradictions" rather than facets of the same quest or struggle, which groups as well as individuals were engaged in. The role of Theosophy in this constellation has received particular attention.[9] In a similar vein, the following analysis shall focus on the trans-cultural constellations of Besant's political and spiritual endeavours and on the way her self-perceptions and self-representations not only mirror but also produce such constellations as determining elements in the biography. Therefore, autobiographical texts are

3 For the historical dimensions of this constellation in the context of the "Empire" and modern colonialism see OWEN, 1989, the essays in CHAUDHURI / STROBEL, 1992 eds., and BURTON, 1994.

4 For instance, "The Great Women of Modern India", GROVER / AURORA, 1993, or "Women in the Indian Freedom struggle", KUMAR, 1998.

5 MCKEAN, 1996, analyses the Hindu-Nationalist agenda associated with this temple.

6 This is the title for the "collected biographies" of Annie Besant, Sister Nivedita (Margret Noble), Mother Theresa and the "Pondicherry Mother" (Mirra Alfassa-Richard) by RAO, 1996.

7 PAXTON, 1992; ANDERSON, 1994; MACKAY, 2001; MILLER, 2009.

8 ROBB, 1976; KUMAR, 1981; MORTIMER, 1983; GEETHA / RAJADURAI, 1995; CHANDRA, 2001.

9 WESSINGER, 1988; BEVIR, 1998 and 1999; VISWANATHAN, 1998; DIXON, 2001.

given particular attention, which shall be analysed with regard to the issue of "conversion" and the construction of an autobiographical "self". The analysis will focus on tropes of self-perception and on the impact of Besant's interpretations of the teachings of reincarnation and *karman* on her political and personal agenda.

Chronology: Annie Besant (1847–1933)

As a point of departure, some chronological orientation with regard to Besant's biography shall be provided. Besant was born on October 1st, 1847 in London, to an English father, William Wood, and an Irish mother, Emily Wood (born Maurices). Her father died in 1852 when she was only five years old, and Annie developed a close relationship with her mother, who managed to cope with the difficult situation and entrusted her to Ellen Marryat for her early education. In 1861, together with Marryat she made her first trip abroad, to Germany and France. At the age of twenty she married Rev. Frank Besant and gave birth, in 1869, to her son Arthur, and one year later to her daughter Mabel. Soon afterwards Besant began to doubt her Christian faith and refused to take communion. At that time she also discovered her talent for giving speeches, while lecturing to herself in an empty Church in Sibsey. Increasing tensions with her husband resulted in the break-down of their marriage, and in 1873 they were divorced, with Besant, who retained custody of her daughter, under the provision not to remarry. One year later, her mother died. In the same year she met Charles Bradlaugh, the leading atheist and rationalist in Britain, and joined his camp. She started publishing in atheist journals, and giving lectures all over Britain (often on the verge of scandal). In this way she was also able to financially support herself. In 1877 she and Bradlaugh published a book, written by Charles Knowlton, which propagated methods of birth control (the so-called Knowlton pamphlet). Besant and Bradlaugh were arrested and faced trial. In the aftermath of the trial, her former husband successfully claimed custody of her daughter, and Mabel was taken away from her. In the following years she became deeply engaged in the Freethought movement. Furthermore, she was an activist in the Match Girls strikes, and supported the founding of the Matchmakers Union in 1888. In 1879 she matriculated at the University of London, studying the sciences. She befriended G. B. Shaw and joined the socialist Fabian Society in

1886. In the following year she became a member of the London School Board, and became engaged in the women's movement.

In 1889 she wrote a review of H. P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, and met Blavatsky soon afterwards. She joined the Theosophical Society (henceforth: TS), and lived with Blavatsky until her death in 1891. In the same year, Charles Bradlaugh, whom, in spite of all the controversies, she still saw as a close friend, also died. Besant succeeded Blavatsky as head of the "Blavatsky Lodge" of the TS and, in 1893, as a representative of the TS at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. In the same year she moved to India, settled in Benares and started raising funds for a College for the education of Hindu boys, which opened in 1899. Plans for a Hindu girls school soon followed. In 1907 she was elected President of the TS and settled in its Headquarters in Adyar near Madras (Chennai). In 1908, the coming "world-teacher", J. Krishnamurti, was discovered by Charles Leadbeater, her close associate in the TS. This not only caused splits in the TS, but also led to controversies in India. Since for some time relationships with the more conservative factions of Besant's Indian supporters had become strained, she sought other alliances. From 1913 onwards she openly propagated "Home Rule" for India and also established her own newspaper (New India) for championing this cause. In addition to her opposition against the colonial government, she became increasingly critical of Hindu conservatism and resumed her feminist engagements. In 1916 she established the "Home Rule for India League". Closely observing Besant's "seditious" activities, the colonial government decided, in 1917, to put her under house-arrest. Soon after her release, later that year, she became the first female President of the Indian National Congress. In the same year she was also elected President of the Women's India Association, which she had helped to establish. In 1920–1921 she criticised Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns because she saw the danger of violent outbreaks. This and other incidents resulted in her increasing loss of support. Meanwhile, approaching her eightieth birthday she continued her spiritual activities, and also her support of the independence movement. From 1932 onwards she withdrew more and more from public life, and died on 20th September, 1933 in Adyar.

Narrating "Annie Besant"

Annie Besant's self-perception of being a person of challenging dimensions is acknowledged within and without the different realms she crossed over restlessly and relentlessly. Her life is marked by transitions, boundary crossings and negotiations of oppositions which biographers find difficult to cope with. This is perhaps the reason why there is still no biography which attempts to address the complexity of her life using a broad spectrum of sources and dealing with her life in Britain and India in a balanced way. In the available biographies, Besant's life is almost always reduced to certain aspects or certain parts of her life, which is usually divided into separate "phases".[10] Though being still the most comprehensive of all biographical accounts, Nethercot (1960, 1963) uses newspapers and journals, almost exclusively, as his sources. Furthermore, in order to cope with what appears to him as the twists and turns in Besant's life, he serialises it. This is evident already in the titles given to the two volumes: the first volume is entitled *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*, the second *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*. Five plus four makes nine of course; but what does this accountancy tell the reader apart from playing with the satirical "in its analogy to a cat's nine lives" as suggested by MacKay (2001: 99)? In explaining what is viewed, also by other biographers, as Besant's "volatility", Nethercot follows G. B. Shaw's ruling that Besant is a "born actress", and that she always followed the "leading man" she was in need of.[11] Such condescension is not limited to the patriarchy, as can be seen in Taylor's (1992) biography, which deals mainly with Besant's life in Britain and also contains psychological judgements (in this case: Besant's "higher egoism") which are employed in order to explain what is seen as a life full of contradictions.[12] No less hesitant in making psychological diagnoses is Paxton, who views Besant's life and texts as documents of a feminist consciousness, which lacked consistency due to a "internalized gynephobia" (PAXTON, 1992: 174).[13] Another way to reduce

10 While focussing on Besant's life in India, CHANDRA, 2001: 19, without further explanation, neatly divides her work in four phases ("religious", "educational", "social" and finally, from 1913 onwards, "political").

11 See SHAW, 1947, and the comments by VISWANATHAN, 1998: 179, BEVIR, 1999: 62, note 1, and MACKAY, 2001: 130–134.

12 See also BEVIR, 1999: 62, note 1, and MACKAY, 2001: 99.

13 In his "Varieties of Religious Experiences" (1902) William James made Besant an example of the "divided self" or the "heterogenous personality"; see VISWANATHAN, 1998: 177–179.

complexity and dissolve the coevalness of biographical layers is the use of unifying labels, such as "prophet" (BESTERMAN, 1934) or "pilgrim" (WILLIAMS, 1931), as have been employed by sympathetic biographers (often connected with Theosophy) who view Besant moving along a spiritual pathway. Viswanathan points out that "expectations of Victorianism" still pervade the biographies which results in seeing "truncations rather than continuity" in Besant's life, and therefore "the writing of her biography has never managed to surmount the age that she herself defied so assiduously" (VISWANATHAN, 1998: 178–179).

A more complex picture emerges when Besant's life is embedded in larger historical and cultural contexts, and the focus is on Besant's intellectual quest and on her political engagement. In this way, her life appears as following the logic or profile considered typical of the historical constellation. In this connection, the notion of "conversion" plays an important role in suggesting a peripatetic event that structures her biography. Theosophy becomes the ideological framework explaining not only Besant's positions and as well as her life, but that of other "dissidents" and "heretics" in their struggle with larger political, social and religious issues and marks "conversion" as a typical biographical element. Viswanathan (1998) gives "conversion" an expanded meaning as a "cultural ideology" in the larger context of modernity and colonialism. She suggests viewing it less is terms of an individual decision to be explained "biographically", but rather to connect it to larger contexts to which individuals at that time typically responded. Thus, Besant's conversions "illuminate the successive ties between British secularism and orientalism, between dissent from Christianity and imperialism, and between British support for Indian nationalism and race theory" (VISWANATHAN, 1998: 192). In this connection Theosophy functions as an "alternative religion" allowing Besant to move seamlessly from heretical, to anti-colonial and then imperialist positions (ibid.: 185). Bevir (1999) emphasises that the "unity" of Besant's life lies in "a stable set of intellectual commitments and questions" implied in "a reasoned quest for truth" caused by the Victorian crisis of faith. Her life mirrors two historical processes, secularisation and the rise of New Age thought; it "embodies the relationship between secularism and theosophy" (ibid.: 66). In her study on feminism and Theosophy, Dixon emphasises that issues which are often regarded as absolutely separate in fact belong together for many of the individuals concerned: "what historians have viewed as separate campaigns –

The American Indologist H.H.D. Ingalls condescendingly diagnoses a "touch of insanity" in Besant; INGALLS, 1965: 86.

animal rights, socialism, feminism, and theosophy – were often viewed by their adherents as different aspects of the same struggle" (DIXON, 2001: 123). Dixon demonstrates how Besant transposed important aspects of her feminist activities in Britain to the TS Society she shaped as its President from 1907 onwards.

While all these studies offer important insights into Besant's embedment in the cultural and historical constellations of her time, her own perception of her entanglement as well as of her agency in these constellations tends to recede into the background. Besant did not only react to different intellectual trends and cultural spheres but also produced her own interpretations. Therefore, the analysis of the complex relationship between individual biography and such constellations shall be further enhanced by studying Besant's self-perceptions and self-explanations as instances of positioning herself within a pluriform intellectual, political as well as (auto-)biographical discourse. Several texts voice such self-perceptions and self-presentations *vis-à-vis* the different arenas of engagement.

Conversion(s) or multiple selves? – "Annie Besant" in autobiographical texts

After having gone through a divorce, faced trials, lost custody of her daughter, and turned to atheism and socialism, Besant published in 1885 her first autobiographical work entitled *Autobiographical Sketches*. After joining the Theosophical Society and moving to India, another autobiographical text was published in 1893, namely *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*. Although both texts share certain textual parallels, they show marked differences in structure and style. When cited as sources in biographies as well as in the few existing textual studies, they are usually used interchangeably or seen as testifying to a "development", with the second work seen as the "riper" one, providing something like a closure prompted by a "conversion" to Theosophy.[14] Only recently Besant's autobiographical texts have been studied more closely. In her comparative study on Victorian autobiographical writing by women, MacKay points out that these texts share a "strategy of self-expression" which allowed

14 See MACKAY, 2001: 110–15, and 2009: 20–27, and MILLER, 2009: 247f. Miller asserts that the two texts display a different understanding of the self; while the earlier text imagines the self as an autonomous subject which can be described by rational exposition, the latter one suggests a self in communion with the universe.

the female authors to "construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct themselves" within a negative and negating environment.[15] This results in the creation of "serial selves", and allows "morphing from one fictional self to another, and the activity never stops, is never allowed to crystallize" (MACKAY, 2001: 3.) In case of Besant, MacKay detects a series of "de-conversions"[16] which forms the unifying pattern of Besant's life, and drives Besant "to increasingly larger and more encompassing belief systems". This process allegedly also continued after her joining Theosophy (ibid.: 99). This interpretation is based on an essentializing pattern similar to the conventional plot of autobiographies as an "Entwicklungsroman", which only lacks the idea of a "unified self" as not being applicable to women's autobiographies in the Victorian age. Moreover, it tends to efface Besant's political and trans-cultural agendas as well as her self-presentation.

This can be seen in the way Besant's autobiographical self-perception is represented, when MacKay adduces evidence for her thesis that "Besant had the will to convert from a very young age" (ibid.: 101). The passage cited by MacKay deals in fact with something different. Besant describes here the Evangelical environment of her education under Ellen Marryat, and emphasises the lack of an experience of an "hour of 'conversion'":

> Under Miss Marryat's training my religious feeling received a strongly Evangelical bent, but it was subject to some distress to me that I could never look back to an hour of 'conversion'; when others gave their experiences, and spoke of the sudden change they had felt, I used to be sadly conscious that no such change had occurred to me." (BESANT, 1895: 30.)

It seems important to notice that Besant here talks of conversion in the (original) sense of an experience of an immediate realisation of faith, that is, of suddenly being able to feel saved and have a 'sense of sin' as the other children were reporting. Furthermore, Besant puts the word conversion in inverted commas, indicating a distance to the word as something used not by her, but in her environment. Strangely, MacKay overlooks the fact that something like a "will to convert" is indeed reported by Besant earlier in the text, namely, in the paragraph preceding the passage under discussion. However, Besant does not speak of a will to convert or of being converted, but of her imagining being the

15 MACKAY calls this strategy "negative creativity" (2001: 3–13); in a later essay, however, she warns against reducing biographical complexity, MACKAY, 2009: 45–46.

16 This is based on BARBOUR, 1994, who analyses the impact of "de-conversion" or "loss of faith" experiences in various autobiographies.

one who converts others: "I would spend many an hour in day-dreams [...] one day I saw myself preaching some great new faith to a vast crowd of people, and they listened and were converted, and I became a great religious leader" (ibid.: 29).

The close reading of the texts makes it questionable whether "conversion" and "de-conversion" are terms that matter to Besant in the way they are employed in almost all studies and biographies. Rather, when the word is used at all by Besant, it is always she who converts others and puts herself in a position of leadership. It is not she who converts or is converted. This is also corroborated in the following passage from her "Autobiographical Sketches". Here, she comments on the trial in which she was denied custody of her daughter:

> neither prosecution nor penalty will prevent me from teaching both Atheism and Malthusianism to all who will listen to me, and since Christianity is still so bigoted as to take the child from the mother because of a difference of creed, I will strain every nerve to convert the men and women around me, and more especially the young, to a creed more worthy of humanity. (BESANT, 1885: 165.)

Furthermore, in her own account of her becoming a member of the Theosophical Society, Besant does neither speak of a conversion nor of a past full of "de-conversions".[17] She rather connects this decision to a long-standing intellectual process of "thinking oneself out of and into", a process which is marked by doubts, scandals, trials and errors being carried out "absolutely alone". This view is included in the autobiography by way of quoting a text of "self-defence" that Besant wrote after having been attacked by "some of the Radicals of the Freethought party" for her championing socialism. She was accused of being "like most women", that is, of being "at the mercy of her last male acquaintance for her views".[18] While now, at the time of her writing the autobiography, she views the earlier self-defence as "a waste of time", she nevertheless cites it extensively and thus makes it to remain with her. Says Besant:

17 The passages in the autobiography describing the circumstances of this decision have not received any close reading by those who represent it as a "conversion". VISWANATHAN detects, without explanation, a "slipperiness" in Besant's account and regards it as "deliberately vague and inconclusive" (1998:184; see also below for a further analysis of Besant's account).

18 This stereotype was thus applied to Besant long before G. B. Shaw made his waspish comments; see above.

> The moment a man uses a woman's sex to discredit her arguments, the thoughtful reader knows that he is unable to answer the arguments themselves. […] I may add that such shafts are specially pointless against myself. A woman who thought her way out of Christianity and Whiggism into Freethought and Radicalism absolutely alone; who gave up every old friend, male and female, rather than resign the beliefs she had struggled to in solitude […]; such a woman may very likely go wrong, but I think she may venture, without conceit, to at least claim independence of judgement (ibid.: 286).

At the time when Besant wrote her second autobiography, Theosophy indeed provided a point of crystallisation of this "thinking out and into", and thus lends an important referential framework of meaning to the narrative. However, as her life in India demonstrates, it was neither an end-point nor followed a pattern of further "internal" de-conversions as MacKay claims without giving evidence.[19] Rather, other constellations of biographical, political as well as ideological-cultural boundary-crossings and entanglements set in, which were, however, based on her being anchored in Theosophy and the TS (see below).

Though somehow accepting the idea of conversion(s) as a pattern in Besant's life, Miller offers still another view on Besant's biographical multiplicity. She places Besant's autobiographical writing in the context of 19th century feminism, when women began to use this "genre of self-representation" as well as the new print media in order to create a public presence that was otherwise still largely denied to women (MILLER, 2009: 244). Besant's texts mirror the political struggle for women's rights which includes the right to have a voice, that is, an embodied public presence. Not only in her pamphlets and newspaper articles, but also in her autobiography, Besant challenged "the established discursive convention that political autobiography – and relatedly, political speech – was a 'male' genre" (ibid.: 246). According to Miller, Theosophy allowed the convergence of feminism and socialism and thus "Besant's autobiography emerges as an effort to reconcile feminist individualism with socialist collectivism by means of a theosophical doctrine that allowed for mystical union between self and other" (ibid.: 249f). According to Miller, it was not the denial of a true subject position or a "master self" to women, but rather Theosophical doctrines that fostered the emergence of "multiple selves" in the

19 Instead, there is evidence to the contrary, for instance Besant's statements in the Preface to the third impression of her autobiography in 1908. When Besant recalls the 19 years she worked for the TS, she notes: "It is right that I should here place on record the fact that during these nineteen years […] Theosophy has been to me an ever-increasing strength, peace, and joy. Never once, for a single instant, has my faith in it faltered […]" (BESANT, 1908: ix).

text as can be seen in the many quotations from previously published texts in the autobiography. As a consequence Besant does not claim the position of being the author of her life recounting a "crowning development" of her past, but is rather adding "one more self". Miller suggests that Besant's text reflects Theosophical ideas of reincarnation and astral bodies which defy chronological succession and the confinements of space and time. This interpretation touches upon the more general question of the impact of cultural notions of self and body on autobiographical as well as biographical writing, and in particular, of the repercussions of a theory of reincarnation on the idea of a "master self" or "autonomous subject" often deemed as a prerequisite for modern (auto)biographical writing.[20] It seems, however, that Miller's claim that Besant's text mirrors her belief in reincarnation misses the distinct feature of the doctrine of reincarnation adopted in Theosophy from Indian religions. It does not imply the idea of "multiple selves" of the past being still available in the present, but rather of "multiple bodies" which were in the past taken by a single "transmigrating self". The notion of "astral bodies" allows for the presence of such a self in a different type of body, but does not imply the same self being present in different bodies at the same time. Furthermore, the transmigrating "true self" can also not be equated with the "unified subject" often implied in modern ideas of individuality, but rather needs to be understood as a "self-consciousness", in other words, as an entity is eventually recognized in its true state of being when striving for "self-knowledge". This "self" is construed as an entity whose true state of being is only recognized after many lives in different bodies.[21] Neither Indian religions nor Theosophy can be seen as the framework allowing for "multiplicity" as the standard view on a present existence, not to speak of having "multiple selves" in one life. Yet, the doctrine of reincarnation can be used and has been used by Besant for a view on one's present existence as being con-

20 In this respect there is a consensus, at least, among the critics of this model who would view such subject-position as that of the privileged white, male author of the "classical", "hermeneutic" autobiographies; see, for instance PETERSON, 1999.

21 The interpretation of the "transmigrating self" and of the notion of *karman* that goes along with it varies in Indian philosophies and religions. In her book *Reincarnation* Besant offers the following general definition for her treatment of the concept across cultures and religions: "Reincarnation and Metempsychosis are words which denote a theory of existence, according to which a form of visible matter is inhabited by a more ethereal principle, which outlives its physical encasement, and, on the death of the latter, passes on, immediately or after an interval, to dwell in some other frame" (BESANT, 1910: 7). The Theosophical view on the "ethereal principle" and its journey through the cosmos and its history is explained in the rest of the book which cannot be dealt with here.

nected not only to its past lives, but also to a cosmic hierarchy of different regions inhabited by different forms of beings. While the doctrines of reincarnation and *karman* as well as Theosophical cosmography and cosmic history play an important role in many of Besant's texts, they do not seem to have much influenced her autobiographical self-perception and self-construction in the text of 1893. If one looks for the repercussions of the doctrine of reincarnation at an (auto) biographical level one needs to turn to other types of texts (see below).

In her autobiography, Theosophy rather plays a unifying role, perhaps not in the sense of a unifying "pattern" or a "unified self", but providing an organising perspective on her life as a "path" or a "journey", occasionally also as an "evolution", which has taken a course which she overlooks at the moment of writing, but which has certainly not come to a close. In the original preface, Besant offers a justification for telling "the story of a life" (which, she feels, has often the "savour of vanity") in that it may reflect some of the "typical problems" of contemporaries. Besant states:

> it may well be that the story of one may help all, and that the tale of one soul that went out alone into the darkness and on the other side found light, that struggled through the Storm and on the other side found Peace, may bring some ray of light and of peace into the darkness and the storm of other lives. (BESANT, 1893: xiv.)

This demonstrates that there is indeed an organising framework in the account.[22] Rather than just adding "one more self", as Miller suggests, Besant composes a narrative in which metaphors structure the narrative as can be seen from the chapter headings and in particular at the end of the text.[23] They suggest progress as well as temporary points of rest or accomplishments, for instance, when she feels in the final chapter that she has moved from "storm to peace". "Peace" here refers to her joining the Theosophical Society and moving in with Blavatsky and marks indeed the end of the text, but not of Besant's life, which moves on to India, and once again into politics. Also, it is made very clear that Besant had already obtained some peace before she met Blavatsky when she describes her

22 This is also corroborated by the short preface to her *Autobiograpical Sketches* in which she notes that the text was written in reaction to enquires asking for "some outline of my life" and also may "serve, in some measure, as defence against unfair attack" (BESANT, 1885: 3). Miller very succinctly analyses the programmatic impact of the illustrations which were added to the autobiography (MILLER, 2009: 250f).

23 See also MACKAY, 2001: 112f., for a discussion of the trope of "light" in Besant's autobiography.

hesitancy to once again face a "storm of protest" her becoming a member of the TS would cause. Besant's frequent citing of previously published texts has thus perhaps less to do with reincarnation theory, and more with bringing her past into her present for review and assessment, but also with providing testimony of her earlier attitudes and arguments which she would no longer adopt (at least not in the same way). In other words, she is documenting them as stages of her development which remain with her.

Tropes of Self-Perception

Neither "conversion(s)", nor "de-conversions", or the idea of "multiples selves", seem to match Besant's perception of her past and her involvement with Theosophy. Rather, Besant describes herself as being the one who converts others, who teaches a new faith. In the following, her self-perception will be further analysed with respect to some tropes of self-perception used by Besant in order to present herself to a pluriform public. These tropes of self-perception not only crystallise transgressions of boundaries, but also mark attempts at translating herself and her biography into different cultural registers and public spheres.

Lucifer

The figure of "Lucifer-Satan" is significant in Besant's biography not only with regard to her working for several years as editor of the Theosophical journal "Lucifer", but also as an emblem of her rebellion against intellectual narrowness and unfounded authorities. The latter aspect emerges in Besant's autobiography, wherein she refers to "Lucifer" in several instances. The occurrence of the Lucifer trope is connected to her religious education in childhood, her view on her failed marriage, and to her meeting H. P. Blavatsky. "Lucifer" is thus connected not with only one phase of her life,[24] but is a thread in the text which links it to her Theosophical activities beyond the autobiographical account. Without signifying "unity", it marks the interconnectedness of Besant's

24 This is the case with her taking "Ajax" as a pseudonym in her early publications. Besant herself views it as her "nom du guerre" (BESANT, 1893: 158); on the convention of anonymity, see MILLER, 2009: 250–52.

thoughts, feelings, perceptions and intellectual positions with respect to the different layers of her life.

The first reference to the trope is in a chapter entitled "Early Childhood" wherein Besant reports that her favourite book at that time was Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "I liked to personify Satan, and to declaim the grand speeches of the hero-rebel, and many a happy hour did I pass in Milton's heaven and hell with for companions Satan and 'the Son', Gabriel and Abdiel" (BESANT, 1893: 20).[25] The chapter closes with a passage on the "evangelical bent" her religious education received under the training of the private teacher, Ellen Marryat. Milton provides young Besant with a soothing resistance against evangelicalism, the "stern religion", especially with regard to the idea of "hell":

> the stern religion cast somewhat of a shadow over me, though, strangely enough, hell never came into my dreaming except in the interesting shape it took in 'Paradise Lost'. After reading that, the devil was to me no horned and hoofed horror, but the beautiful shadowed archangel, and I always hoped that Jesus, my ideal Prince, would save him in the end. (BESANT, 1893: 32.)

While Satan-Lucifer is the negative figure, the embodiment of evil in his disobeying God in "official" accounts of the Christian faith, Besant adopts the "alternative" reading according to which Lucifer appears as a heroic figure, the archangel who fell from God's grace because he would not submit to his will. No less significant is the reappearance of the heroic Lucifer trope in a passage describing the "mismatch" of her marriage. It underscores the gender dimension implied in her appropriation of Lucifer as a trope of self-perception associated with resistance, pride, and self-respect:

> We were an ill-matched pair, my husband and I, from the very outset; he, with very high ideas of a husband's authority and a wife's submission, holding strongly to the 'master-in-my-own-house theory' […]. I, accustomed to freedom, indifferent to home details, impulsive, very hot-tempered and proud as Lucifer. […] Harshness roused first incredulous wonder, then a storm of indignant tears, and after a time a proud, defiant resistance, cold and hard as iron. (BESANT, 1893: 64.)

It comes as no surprise that neither her husband nor other sections of society were welcoming towards a female, luciferic hero-rebel; in particular, when her "defiant resistance" is paired with doubts about the foundations of "orthodox" Christianity and with the use of "cold reason" against central doctrines. After her

25 The passage is also in BESANT, 1885:14.

breach with Church and husband, she starts campaigning for atheism and rationalism and thus becoming public figure. Her luciferic self-perception is echoed in the comments on her public activities. The following passage from a newspaper article by Rev. Joseph Parker on one of Annie Besant's public lectures may serve as an example: "There is a woman going up and down the country lecturing [...] and she proudly cries out that there is no God [...]; and working men run after this woman, and pay for listening to this ginger-beer blasphemy, and the ravings of half-drunken woman."[26] Besant is here depicted as woman who – affected by satanic blasphemy – declaims dangerous speeches and seduces "working class", i.e. "non-respectable", audiences. Her fondness of rebellious heroes intersects with public perceptions of her as a dangerous, seditious woman as tropes of discourse used by Besant and her critics alike result in diametrically opposed assessments.[27]

The third time in her autobiography that she refers to Lucifer is connected to her first meeting with H. P. Blavatsky in 1889. This meeting was arranged after Besant published a sympathetic review of Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*. Besant reports that her first reaction to Blavatsky was of a feeling of "re-cognition", which was at first not welcome, but caused a "fierce rebellion, a fierce withdrawal, as of some wild animal when it feels a mastering hand" (BESANT, 1893: 310). The threat was momentarily dispelled:

> She [Blavatsky] talked of travels, of various countries, easy brilliant talk, her eyes veiled, her exquisitely moulded fingers rolling cigarettes incessantly. Nothing special to record, no word of Occultism, nothing mysterious, a woman of the world chatting with her evening visitors. We rose to go, and for a moment the veil lifted, and two brilliant, piercing eyes met mine, and with a yearning voice: 'Oh, my dear Mrs. Besant, if you would only come among us!' I felt a well-nigh uncontrollable desire to bend down and kiss her, under the compulsion of the yearning voice, those compelling eyes, but with a flash of the old unbending pride and an inward jeer at my own folly, I said a commonplace polite goodbye, and turned away [...] 'Child', she said to me long afterwards, 'your pride is terrible; you are as proud as Lucifer himself.' But truly I think I never showed it to her again after that first evening, though it sprang up wrathfully in her defence many and many a time... (BESANT, 1893: 311).

26 *Northern Ensign* 17.5.1877, cited after NETHERCOT, 1961: 1089, who has collected a lot of material in this respect as he used newspapers as a major source for his biography.

27 The perception of Besant as "satanic" seemed to have lingered on; VISWANATHAN, 2004: 17 notes with respect to a lecture Besant gave in Dublin in 1908 that "most young Irishmen of the time" were instructed that "Besant was an agent of the devil".

This passage plays not only on the polyvalence of the compulsion exerted on Besant by the unveiling of the veiled eyes, and by the voice of Blavatsky, but also on the polyvalence of Lucifer as the uncompromising, proud figure never submitting to compulsion. With her joining Theosophy, Lucifer the rebel blends with Lucifer the "torch-bearer" as he is interpreted in Theosophical circles. The latter is also indicative of the "rebellious", "heretical" dimensions of Theosophy as an "alternative" religion. In contrast to former husband Frank Besant (champion of "master-in-my-own-house-theory") who is a mismatch for his luciferic wife, Besant describes her meeting with Blavatsky as if encountering a "mastering hand". While Besant's acceptance of Blavatsky as her spiritual "master" is the end of Lucifer *vis-à-vis* Blavatsky, it is not the end of Lucifer as the champion of Blavatsky and Theosophy. The decision to join Theosophy was also not an easy one, as she elaborates, but rather a struggle as it meant giving up "a smoother road [that] stretched before me", since at that point Besant had "largely conquered public prejudice" against her (ibid.: 311).[28] She clearly saw that this step would not only again provoke hatred, but – perhaps even worse – ridicule and alienation from her "strongest and truest friend", Charles Bradlaugh (ibid.: 312). When she nevertheless returned to Blavatsky to learn more about the TS, the latter asked her to read the report on the charges of fraudulence that had been raised against Blavatsky's alleged communications with "the Masters". This report was the result of an inquiry conducted by the Society for Psychical Research, and supported the charges against Blavatsky.[29] For Besant, however, the case against Blavatsky was built on rather thin evidence, and thus did not prevent her from joining the TS. According to her own testimony, she entered what she describes as a teacher-disciple relationship with H.P.B. or H. P. Blavatsky.[30] While acknowledging that she might have been carried away by an "enthusiasm", she nevertheless views it as the culmination point of a long

28 BEVIR's observation (1999: 74–75) that Besant was driven out of "conventional society" anyway, and would turn to circles allowing her "to experiment with new social roles" is much too general and does not include Besant's own views, nor the struggles women had to face even in these "alternative" circles, see DIXON, 2001, nor the social embedment that these circles allowed in respects similar to that of "conventional society".

29 On the controversy and the report, see DIXON, 2001: 41–58.

30 While the abbreviation is in Theosophical circles taken as a reference to Blavatsky's identity as one of the Masters, H. P. Blavatsky is its physical presence. On the gender aspect of Blavatsky's claims to represent a "reconciliation" of opposites, DIXON, 2001:23f., comments: "Awkwardly situated with regard to both 'true womanhood' and 'true manhood', Blavatsky exploited that situation to claim spiritual authority as a man (HPB) and spiritual powers as a woman (Helena Blavatsky)."

development. This neither resulted in a "conversion" nor in adding "another self", but in the realisation of "the dreams of childhood on the higher planes of intellectual womanhood" (ibid.: 314). This implied having answers to questions atheism and socialism could not address. These concerned in particular the issue of afterlife. Now, Besant had obtained "a certainty of knowledge" with respect to the Soul and teachers living in more subtle bodies.

After joining Theosophy, Besant continued with her previous activities though she had also to face the criticism that her decision aroused among her socialist and freethought combatants. She deals with this not only in several essays, but also in her autobiography (ibid.: 315–326). Although she saw no contradictions between Theosophy and the principles of the National Secular Society, she was expelled from it and forced to resign from the editorial board of the society's journal. The step she had taken implied an acknowledgment of "Lucifer" at a personal level and, at the same time, it gained a new public aspect in that *Lucifer* was also the name chosen by Blavatsky for the Theosophical journal she had started in 1887. The *Lucifer* journal was an important medium for voicing the message of the TS. The significance of the name is made sufficiently clear on the front page of the first volume which contains the following programmatic statement: "Lucifer. A Theosophical magazine, designed to 'bring to light the hidden things of darkness`. The light-bearer is the morning star or Lucifer, and Lucifer is no profane or satanic title. It is the Latin Luciferus, the light bringer, the morning star [...] the name of the pure pale herald of daylight."[31]

The Lucifer figure stayed with Besant at a new level as she became the co-editor of the journal together with Blavatsky and, after the latter's death in 1891, she continued to be in charge of the journal until 1897. In this way she carried "Lucifer" to her new Indian home, if only for a short while. When she handed over the editorship of the journal to G. R. S. Mead he immediately changed the, apparently still contested, name of the journal to *The Theosophical Review*. Lucifer had now "officially" vanished as heralding Theosophical teachings. Having been a cipher for the dimension in Besant's personality that set her in opposition not against this or that issue, but more fundamentally against "orthodoxy", "narrow-mindedness" and hollow authority, Lucifer receded also

31 See also the discussion of the name in the first number of the journal entitled "What is in a name?" (LUCIFER, Vol. 1, 1887: 1–7). Interestingly, a journal connected to the anarchist movement was also called "Lucifer, the light-bearer". It was issued from 1883–1907 in Chicago and championed the same interpretation of Lucifer as Venus, the morning star, as the Theosophical journal.

as trope of self-perception. Though perhaps not completely, as the quest for freedom and independence as well as her resistance against "wrong" authorities pleading for the "right" ones – intrinsically connected with the "Lucifer" trope – remained with her. Yet, new terms and names moved centre-stage, and with these a changed self-perception emerges, less as a rebel and more as a leader and teacher claiming connections to higher levels of existence and invisible forces shaping history. What she calls "intellectual womanhood" is transposed to new roles and translated into new spiritual and political agendas.

Home Ruler

The new terms and names that crystallise Besant's perception of herself and her role in India continue as well as transpose the blending of her life with political and spiritual discourse. As the idea of a series of "(de-)conversions" or "selves" structuring Besant's life seems reductive, so is the idea that her "passage to India" implies a break with the past. Rather, it can be seen as adding another layer to the texture of her life as well as a logical step on the path she had chosen. Seen from a biographical perspective, her life in India is thus not the beginning of a "sixth life", as Nethercot (1963) would have it, but rather the continuation of her earlier activities which resulted in her initiating, in India, several educational institutions, establishing newspapers, founding of a first Home Rule League as well as being the author of translations, tracts, books, and articles. As she took the styles and techniques of political campaigning to India, she opened up new audiences and had some innovative impact on Indian politics which even her critics acknowledge.[32] Furthermore, it should be noticed that her intense interest in India and the East did not arise due to Theosophy, but was already part of her political engagement and of the "heretic" positions she held. The connection between the oppression and denial of equality she experienced as a woman in Britain and in her observations of colonial rule was established many years before her moving to India.

This was also fuelled by the conflict with Ireland in which she saw herself as personally involved. There is a biographical aspect to this as well due to her "Irish" family background: "It has always been somewhat of a grievance to me that I was born in London …, when three-quarters of my blood and all my heart are Irish" (BESANT, 1893: 3). The interconnection between her "feeling" Irish

32 See MORTIMER, 1983: 71ff.

and her political positions becomes apparent in her drawing parallels between Ireland and India as being subject to British rule. Besant's India was also entangled with her idea of Ireland as the imagined "home" present through her family background. This also resonated when she made "home-rule" not only her agenda, but declared it to be connected to her "inner sources of action". She described this in a passage in the autobiography dealing with her engagement in Charles Bradlaugh's campaign for atheism from 1874 onwards.[33] She saw this move as being anchored in "the inner sources of action", namely, her being a "Home Ruler":

> I was a Home Ruler, too, of course, and a passionate opponent of all injustices to nations weaker than ourselves, so that I found my self always in opposition to the government of the day. Against our aggressive and oppressive policy in Ireland, in the Transvaal, in India, in Afghanistan, in Burmah, in Egypt, I lifted up my voice in all our great towns [...]. Against war, against capital punishment, against flogging, demanding national education instead of big guns, public libraries instead of warships – no wonder that I was denounced as an agitator, a firebrand, and that all orthodox society turned up at me its most respectable nose. (BESANT, 1893: 153.)

Even before travelling to India and initiating a Home-Rule league there, Besant identified herself as a "Home Ruler" and called for self-rule for India. Emphasising the violence implied in establishing a colonial regime that only serves the economic interests of England, she calls for dropping the "hypocritical mask" of the Empire's civilisational mission. Besant demands that we "acknowledge that we seized India from lust of conquest, from greed of gain, from the lowest and paltriest of desires. The means we took to reach our ends were worthy of the motives which prompted us." (BESANT, 1878: 12) It is time to "remedy our crimes in the past" and the only means for it is "liberty":

> Train India for freedom; educate India for self-government. Do not only proclaim that Indians shall be eligible for the high places of the State: place them there [...] the endeavour to keep all highly paid places in English hands must be defeated. [...] I would let the

33 Bradlaugh was also supportive of anti-colonial movements, see BAYLY, 2000: 392, which is, apart from a persistent personal bond Besant felt even after she joined Theosophy, also one of the reasons why she felt connected to him even in her later political campaigns in India. On the last pages of her autobiography she writes that Bradlaugh, in spite of his ill-health, sailed in 1890 for India "to attend the National Congress, where he was enthusiastically acclaimed as 'Member for India'" (BESANT, 1893: 327). In the reincarnation record "Man: Whence, how and whither" atheist Bradlaugh is also, in a reversal of gender, included in the group of friendly reincarnation-companions under the name "Lutetia".

> supreme power gradually pass, not into the hands of the princes of India, but into the hands of the Indian people, so that a mighty self-governing nation should slowly arise from the ashes of the dead native and foreign despotisms. (BESANT, 1893: 50f.)

As has been demonstrated by Bayly, Ireland and Irish activists played an important role not only in establishing of the Indian National Congress (BAYLY, 2000: 392ff.). Furthermore, "Theosophy and Anglo-Celtic radical politics" were important ideological elements of the newly formed party, and Besant's views on history became heavily loaded with the Theosophical interpretation of history (see below). Besant had her share of both and thus belongs to those who "illustrate the persistent connections" between Ireland and India.[34] The "Home Rule League for India" that Besant established in 1916 was "deliberately based on mass organisations of Irish politics" (ibid.: 394). The construction of nationalism in both countries was also influenced by literary and religious agendas, as has been analysed by Viswanathan (2004) in the case of James Cousins, who was deeply influenced by a lecture on "Theosophy and Ireland" which Besant gave in October 1908 in Dublin.[35] The Theosophical interpretation of history established a direct connection between Ireland and India on the basis of the doctrine of the so-called "root races" that structure the reincarnations of collectives in the course of cosmic evolution. Indians and Irish, reconfigured as the Celts, are considered as belonging to the currently dominant "fifth root-race", the Aryans. The Celts are "identified by the theosophical movement [...] as not only opposed to the Anglo-Saxon but being in fact Aryan" (VISWANATHAN, 1998: 191).[36] In this way, anti-colonial positions were articulated by drawing on conceptual frameworks that otherwise supported imperialism and ideas of cultural-racial supremacy, which Besant continued to castigate. What connects her call for "liberty" for India in 1878 with her later,

34 BAYLY, 2000: 393; see also the comprehensive study on India and Ireland by SILVESTRI, 2009. Whether she was perceived or perceived herself as an "Irish karmayogin" as WICKREMERATNE, 1982, claims awaits further substantiation.

35 On her incentive he settled in India and joined the editorial board of her newspaper *New India* (VISWANATHAN, 2004: 9–10). She withdrew her support, though, when Cousins published overly radical articles which alarmed the colonial administration.

36 On Theosophical interpretations of history and cosmos see WESSINGER, 1988. SANTUCCI, 2008, emphasises the non-racist character of the notion of race in Theosophy. Viswanathan uses "racialist" for Besant's deployment of the idea of "races" in general and "Aryan" in particular. For the larger context of theories of "Aryan" in colonial and orientalist texts, see LEOPOLD, 1974, and on its role in Indian nationalism, see LEOPOLD, 1970, and FISCHER-TINÉ, 2011.

Theosophically reconfigured, Home Rule campaigns is the idea of re-compensation – an inevitable redress of balances between nations[37] which is seen against the background of doctrines of *karman* and cosmic evolution (see below).

The ambiguities discernible in Besant's support of Home Rule and Indian Nationalism seems to belong to the difficulties that emerge in Besant's attempts to establish herself as a public figure in India. In spite of all continuities and ties with British discourse, Besant's position in India as well as her political-spiritual mission differed in important respects. First of all, she settled in India as a representative and then, from 1907 until her death in 1933, as president of the TS. In this position she committed herself initially to "neutrality" in political issues, and put a greater emphasis on the "esoteric" aspects of Theosophy.[38] Nevertheless, very soon after her arrival in India she instigated a major education project (the Central Hindu College) which could be seen as the "exoteric", if not politically tinged, extension of her championing of Hinduism. Also indicative of this is that Besant founded, in 1908, "The Theosophical Order of Service" which allowed "theosophists to organize around social and political issues without violating the TS commitment to neutrality" (DIXON, 2001: 139). In this connection Besant also used Theosophical doctrines for advocating social reforms, Indian independence and female education. From the very start, Hinduism played the central role in Besant's perception of her own role as well as of the ways in which ancient traditions should be combined with modern ones.[39] With regard to her aiming at a political-spiritual leadership position in the Indian context, Theosophy became further Sanskritized and "Hinduized" in that she increasingly used terminology, as well as characters, from the Brahmanical texts for construing the Indian nation and India's role in the future world against the background of what she views as "Indian ancient wisdom".

The combination of politics and spirituality with a claim for leadership positions in both spheres brought Besant in India, as a British woman turned

37 See, for instance, Besant's depiction of this process in 1915 when she speaks of the necessity "to redress the balance between East and West, between Europe and Asia. That redressal could only take place by checking the conquering march of Europe, and giving back to Asia some of its ancient independence" (BESANT, 1915: 3).

38 DIXON, 2001: 68–78, points out that after her much contested election, Besant put a renewed emphasis on the Esoteric sections, which Dixon interprets also as a reaction against the male "clubland" culture that dominated the TS in England.

39 WICKREMERATNE, 1982, notes that Besant's emphasis on Hinduism contrasts with the official conversion of H. S. Olcott, the co-founder of Theosophy, to Buddhism.

Hindu, into complex, and in many respects, new constellations that time and again resulted in dilemmas and conundrums difficult to solve.[40] In her championing of Hinduism she was increasingly regarded by colonial administrators as a woman betraying the colonial mission, and this put her in the familiar role of opposing the "government of the day". For her critics, Besant had only changed her dress from habitual black to a white sari while being no less "seditious" and "dangerous" as ever. Yet, her occult, esoteric engagements added a new facet to the prism of perceptions: abstruseness and irrationality (especially after the affairs surrounding the "discovery" of the "world teacher", and the idea of an invisible realm of sages, the so-called Mahatmas or Masters). With respect to her position *vis-à-vis* the Indian public, her situation was more complex and less familiar. One reason for this was that she initially sought alliances amongst the Indian varieties of "orthodox society" which were reluctant to accept Besant's claim for leadership in matters relating to Hinduism, while at the same time they welcomed this support for political reasons. The social reform movements, however, criticised Besant for her initial refusal to comment on social reforms and for her conservative, if not reactionary views of "Indian values".[41]

No less complex and ambiguous was her position when she became an active supporter of Indian nationalism and the home rule campaigns. On the one hand, she took sides with the so-called "moderates" who would seek the realisation of this goal within the constitutional framework of the British government and the British Empire. On the other hand, due to the spiritual dimension of her political activities Besant was also with those who would see in "ancient wisdom" a promise for the future, and advocated different forms of religious nationalism. This group comprised a broad spectrum of positions, such as so-called Neo-Hindu movements (such as the Ārya Samāj), orthodox parties (so-called Sanātanis), Hindu-nationalist groups as well as powerful personalities such as M. K. Gandhi.[42] Although being critical of the excessive materialism of

40 While PAXTON, 1992, views such dilemmas and the ways Besant addressed them as betraying a lack of "feminist consciousness", ANDERSON, 1994, offers a close analysis of Besant's attempts to establish herself in the contested arenas of the Indian public, which was not only welcoming, but also openly rejected her claims with respect to Hinduism and being a Hindu; see also WICKREMERATNE, 1982: 248ff.

41 See ANDERSON, 1994: 567–570.

42 The complex relationship between Besant and Gandhi has hardly been studied in any detail as is pointed out by CHANDRA, 2001: ch. 8, who offers a helpful overview of the issues on which the two agreed and disagreed.

Modern Western culture, like some of her combatants, in particular M. K. Gandhi, Besant did not call for abandoning "modern" achievements in general. This is an important aspect of her idea of "merging" Eastern and Western achievements, which was a recurrent topic in her texts. Both Britain and India would profit if they would learn from each other the most valuable products of their civilisations. Due to the oppressive structure of colonial rule, the first step for achieving this goal would be to thoughtfully revive and acknowledge the Indian tradition by educating future generations of Indian men and women accordingly. She viewed education as the fundament for solving a more fundamental political and spiritual crisis affecting India and Britain likewise, though in different respects. Although she warned against "quick" Westernisation, she also insisted that Indians should not reject the valuable achievements of the modern age, in particular the modern sciences. Conversely, she demanded educating the British, as well, in some aspects of Indian culture, and urged them to critically reflect upon their attitudes and prejudices. In particular, India's "scientific religion" should be learned about as an antidote to the one-sided materialism in the West:

> Religion over here [in England, AM] is often blind belief or emotional ecstasy. Religion in India is intellectual and scientific. […] because the West is concrete in her science, with a science restricted to the physical world, and India is scientific in her religion and carries her science into the realms of psychology – not much yet into the realm of physics – because of that England and India be two halves of a single whole; each might give to each what the other lacks. India can make religion here a power to which intellect shall bow; England can teach India the science which will give material prosperity, material welfare. (BESANT, 1911: 151.)

In a series of articles she points out that the current asymmetry implied in colonial rule is primarily based on "racial prejudice" on the side of the British, as well as on a fear of having to compete with Indians once they were allowed to unfold their potential as a free nation.[43] On the other hand, she also admonished Indians for their "forgetfulness" with regard to their values as well as their tendency to simply accept Western values. All this amounted to what she viewed as "Hindu values" that needed to be taught to the young generation in order to give India the future it deserves as the ancient "repository" of wisdom, and thus its proper place among the Nations of the world.[44]

43 See in particular BESANT, 1911: 40ff., and BESANT, 1914: 76ff..

44 See BESANT, 1901, and BESANT, 1911.

In this way, Besant, like other political and religious leaders of the time, connected the Indian quest for home-rule to a revival of the ancient religious and spiritual traditions.[45] In so doing, she reinterpreted these traditions and claimed that they should also be open to modern achievements in order to preserve their impact in the future. In this connection, she reinterprets key-terms of Indian religions, such as *dharma*, reincarnation and *karman*. She propagates an idea of *karman* which lends it a political and historical dimension absent in the Indian texts dealing with the concept, in which it is viewed in highly individualistic terms. It is the idea of "national" or "collective *karman*" which is connected to a larger scheme of Theosophical teachings on world-history. The latter allows interpreting the role of each nation or "race" according to the "fruits" of its previous deeds as a collective.[46] Her self-perception at a biographical, political and spiritual level converge in her employing these reinterpreted concepts within a Darwinian-Hegelian framework of the evolution of mankind which is interpreted according to messianic ideas of the future "Brotherhood of Humanity", and is blended with nationalistic ideas of struggles as well as of mixtures between nations and races as necessary elements of evolution.[47]

45 Bevir explains Besant's views on Hinduism as being based on contemporary Indology used against the grain. In contrast to "the indology that legitimized the Raj", Besant's Theosophy "stands as a form of indology that overturned the legitimating discourse of empire" (BEVIR, 1999: 62). Bevir's analysis is much too general, without giving any evidence that Besant used Indological literature. The Theosophical reinterpretations of Indian concepts are connected to certain orientalist and Indological views of Indian culture and religion, but also differ from them, not only in their being generally welcoming towards them. Rather, while reifying the idea of "East" and "West" as was done in academic discourse of the time, Theosophy has also a strained relationship with academia and vice versa. The references to academic literature in Besant's texts usually serve to corroborate Theosophical doctrines. As far as I can see, Besant refers only rarely to Indology and Indologists. One example is her referring to German Indologist Richard Garbe and his book *Die Sāṃkhya-Philosophie* in her *Ancient Wisdom* (1897). Among the texts from the Indian tradition Besant has translated and interpreted the Bhagavadgītā, the epics, the Yogasūtra, the Upaniṣads, the Manusmṛti and other Dharmaśāstras (law-books) as well as Purāṇas.

46 BEVIR, 1998: 70f., notes Besant's acceptance of the doctrines of *karman* and rebirth, but does not deal with her re-interpretations. VISWANATHAN, 1998, demonstrates convincingly how Besant is connected to a long-standing element in British discourse, namely, "the racial foundations of British anticolonicalism" (VISWANATHAN, 1998: 190), but also does not address the impact of Besant's ideas of reincarnation on her political as well as personal agenda.

47 See WESSINGER, 1988, and VISHWANATHAN, 1998: 193ff., on some of the elements of this combination of ideas.

Herakles and Collective karman

As has been pointed out by Dixon, Besant as president of the TS not only placed an emphasis on the "Esoteric" teachings, but also aimed to connect the esoteric knowledge to the present world. The intention "to bring the material realities of the 'physical plane' into harmony with the Cosmic Plan" (DIXON, 2001: 121) finds expression both at a political as well as personal level. Theories of reincarnation and *karman* employed in an evolutionary framework play an important role in the interpretation of Besant's own situation, and also of the political situation. These theories shaped Besant`s views on one's present existence as being connected not only to its past lives, but also to a cosmic hierarchy of different regions inhabited by different forms of beings. While the doctrines of reincarnation and *karman* as well as of Theosophical cosmography and cosmic history did not seem to have much influenced her self-presentation in her *Annie Besant: An Autobiography* (1893; see above), they do so many years later in two other texts. These are the accounts of Besant's past existences included in *Man: Whence, How and, Whither* (1913), in which the reincarnations of a group of members of the TS are treated, and in *The Lives of Alcyone* (1924), the book that deals with the past lives of the world-teacher-to-be, "Alcyone", that is, J. Krishnamurti.[48] These books demonstrate that reincarnation theory does not preclude a strong sense of the self and individuality, but rather offers an expanded notion of a self vastly extending into the past.[49] The subtitle of the first book *Man: Whence, How and, Whither* is programmatic in its claim of a scientific endeavour, it is *A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation*. This is explained as follows:

48 On the discovery of Krishnamurti as the world-teacher by C. W. Leadbeater in 1909 and the following controversies regarding his alleged homosexuality see DIXON, 2001: 76–118. For the doctrinal background see WESSINGER, 1988: 263–298.

49 These texts have only rarely been taken into account in studies on Besant, perhaps being too abstruse, as Besant and Leadbeater had already foreseen in the preface. NETHERCOT, 1963: 202–210) deals with them rather ironically in the closing chapter on Besant's "sixth life" entitled "Interlude: The six hundred odd lives of Herakles Besant". Besterman, a biographer with Theosophical affiliations, however, states: "Clearly, no biographer of Mrs. Besant would be complete which restricted itself to one life only" (BESTERMAN, 1934: 211). He refuses either to "blindly accept" the record and start his biography with an account of her extended reincarnation genealogy, or to "dismiss the claim in a satirical footnote" (ibid.: 212). Instead, he states "a view held sincerely and with conviction by Mrs. Besant about herself, and embodied by her in a series of volumes, while it need not necessarily be accepted, does at least deserve to be fully described in a biography of her" (ibid.: 121).

> The research work was done at Adyar in the summer of 1910; in the heat of the summer many of the students were away, and we shut ourselves up, as to be uninterrupted, for five evenings every week; we observed, and said exactly what we saw, and two members, Mrs. Van Hook and Don Fabrizio Rupoli, were good enough to write down all we said, exactly as we said it. (BESANT / LEADBEATER, 1913: 2.)

In order to identify the "transmigrating selves" in their various existences as being the very same "self" in different bodies, names were distributed in order to recognise "the continuing individuality":

> As a history cannot be written without names, and as reincarnation is a fact and therefore the reappearance of the same individual throughout succeeding ages is also a fact, the individual playing many parts under many names we have given names to many individuals by which they may be recognised throughout the dramas in which they take part. (BESANT / LEADBEATER, 1913: 3.)

As her identification name in the long history of reincarnations, Besant took the name of another heroic figure, "Herakles". The record of his/her reincarnations contains dates, locations, the names of mothers and fathers as well as of husbands and wives. The biographical rendering of past lives in this case amounts to construing a self as participating not only in the larger history of the evolution of mankind, but also as a self whose past lives amount to its present existence. Furthermore, the record of the forty-eight lives of Herakles-Besant are marked by simultaneous reincarnations of her personal and Theosophical friends and is thus also a record of "group *karman*". This idea is based on the assumptions that *karman* works like a stream of energies attracting energies of similar or familiar kind.[50] As a type of text, these records can perhaps be considered "autobiographical science fiction" created by a mixture of modern evolution theories and classical holistic cosmographies. The narrative is based on the Theosophical teachings about cosmic history, which embeds the sequence of reincarnation in the adventurous settings of historical events. In this way, a tale on the past lives of a group of people is narrated who interact throughout history in various roles of being friends, lovers, wives, husbands, sons and daughters, defying certain ideas of a fixed "natural order" or "ties of blood" for the individual as are implied in normative kinship structures, genealogies, sexes as well as social or gender roles. Rather, these individuals have met each other,

50 "We are brought by karma into touch with people whom we have known in the past, to some of whom we owe debts, some of whom owe debts to us. No man treads his long pilgrimage alone" (BESANT, 1912: 62).

lived with each other in many a different roles and constellations forming "karmic links of love" (BESANT, 1912: 64). In this way "we build up a true family, outside all ties of blood, and return to earth, over and over again to knit closer the ancient bonds." (ibid.).

Settling on one life or role only, or on a single identity, would not only be a misconception of what "life" implies when thought of in more extended temporal and spatial frameworks. In contrast to Virginia Woolf's celebrated novel *Orlando* (1928) which plays with and on the past lives of Vita Sackville-West, and which defies in its own ways fixed social and gender roles as well as "unifying" ideas of individuality, the two books work with serious endeavour and investigation in order to produce a truthful record of multiple existences in a progressive framework of spiritual evolution being spearheaded against conventional ideas of single lives with clear-cut roles. Furthermore, the two volumes thus can be seen as an interesting instance of the way in which Indian reincarnation doctrines were interpreted in, and adopted to modern contexts, in particular, in the framework of Darwinian theories of evolution and Hegelian patterns of historiography which are transformed by the adoption of ideas of reincarnation and *karman*. The latter are also not simply taken from Indian sources, but have also been transposed in order to match evolution theories. As a consequence, the account of the past existences of Besant et al. differs considerably from conceptualisations of the "remembrance of past existences" in classical Indian texts, such as the *Yogasūtra* and its commentaries. In these texts the ability to gain access to former lives is one of the "extra-ordinary" powers (*siddhi*, *vibhūti*) a Yogin gains at the highest stages of meditational practice (not in the course of an "investigation"). According to the Yoga tradition it is a power to be given up, not to be cultivated in order to obtain an extended, "historically" fully self-conscious self. Rather, these former existences shall only be remembered in order to feel detachment towards them, and to leave them behind for good. The one famous Indian example of a corpus of collected stories of former existences are the *Jātakas*, tales of former lives of the Buddha Śākyamuni (ca. 5.–4. century BCE), probably composed in the first centuries of the Common Era. As is to be expected, intention and audience are different as well as the conceptualisation of rebirth, time and space. While in the *Jātakas* each tale is complete in itself and contains a (Buddhist) lesson that had to be told, there is also an element of a "group narrative" in that at the end of each story, the protagonists are identified as being the Buddha, his disciples or relatives like brother or wife. The group is here not one of friends connected through individual *karman*, but rather a group accompanying the Buddha as the

central figure also in former existences. This has the effect of stabilising identifications in changing narrative constellations rather than dissolving boundaries of gender or kinship structures. Furthermore, in his previous existences the Buddha was born in different social strata and animal bodies, but never as a woman. This corroborates the Buddhist doctrine that woman have to reborn in a male body in order to gain liberation or obtain "Buddhahood".[51]

Apart from what can certainly be seen as fantastic and preposterous in Besant's texts, they invite reflection on the possible impact of reincarnation theories on the shape of a biography or (auto)biography. The fact that records of an individual's reincarnation require a different textual form indicates that the notion of reincarnation cannot as such be brought into play in interpreting the "multiplicity" of an individual without qualifying one's understanding of "biography" and of the ideas of "subject" and "individuality" that go along with it. In any case, the records of "clairvoyance" lend Theosophical reincarnation theories a biographical dimension as they produce for the individuals concerned a peculiar perspective on the present life. Time, space and history are interpreted in two opposite yet interconnected ways: namely, as a history of successions and stages as well as a hierarchical geology of layers allowing progress towards ever higher levels of consciousness. At the same time, progress also has a "downward" trajectory, where it is threatened by the ignorance of beings moving "downwards" in consequence of their negative *karman*. Besant would claim to have access to the forces shaping this process, on the basis of her connection to inhabitants of cosmic regions invisible for the "untrained". In this way she views herself as being endowed with a task based on her knowledge of cosmic history, in which she saw herself being personally and biographically engaged during her past embodiments.

It is thus important to include in the analysis of her ideological affiliations not only the Victorian religious and political struggles and ideological trends, but also her being informed by and informing the entangled intellectual history between the "East" and the "West". Besant's views are shaped by the racialist dimensions of British anti-colonialism (VISWANATHAN) and ideas of Hinduism as a "scientific religion" as well as by the adoption of *karman* and reincarnation theories applied to both herself as well as to history. Besant's ideas of her past as well as of her past lives seem to built up for her as an affirmation of notions of life and of the self in which Indian concepts of reincarnation and *karman* are

51 DERRIS, 2008, analyses an "apocryphal" birth story transmitted in medieval Buddhist texts in which such a previous incarnation as a woman is recounted.

combined with Darwinian-Hegelian notions of evolution and history. With respect to her larger spiritual and political concerns, both books can be regarded as offering an individualised, even personalised, narrative of human evolution according to the Theosophical interpretation of history and the "racial mythology" implied in it, which also fuelled Besant's political activities in India. Besant applies this interpretation for both her past and present as well as in order to explain the history of nations and the place of individuals in it. In this way, "individual *karman*" is connected to "national *karman*", and the Hegelian framework of history as "the spirit" unfolding itself is expanded by including the agency of reincarnating individuals in the "great world drama" unfolding as an evolution.[52] In a lecture on "The Destinies of Nations" (1915) Besant explains:

> Life becomes enormously more interesting when we recognise that it is shaped not only in the physical world but in other worlds as well, and that when we trace the destinies of nations we find that those destinies stretch backward, and that the working out in the present is largely conditioned by the energies of the past. [...] The story of the world, and the various parts of the actors on the stage, are all therein written. What is not laid down is who the actors shall be, and with regard to this a large amount of what is called choice comes in. (BESANT, 1915: 16.)

This "choice", however, is on the side of the individuals again dependent on their *karman*, which attracts them to be reborn in this family and nation rather than in another.[53] Besant turns this into an argument for the amelioration of the conditions of living[54] and of nation-building:

> Thus it is that the Occultist looks on human history, and sees preparing around him on every side the men and women who are to be the players of the future in the more prominent parts of the world-drama. For none forces upon us any part, nor imposes upon us special place in

52 As Besant puts it: "The great world-drama is not written by the pen of chance, but by the thought of the Logos, guiding His world along the road of evolution" (BESANT, 1915: 15).

53 The mechanism of *karman* and reincarnation is explained in detail in BESANT, 1895, and BESANT, 1912. The details and provenance of this interpretation cannot be dealt with here.

54 Cf. BESANT, 1915: "as we make our conditions better, higher and more evolved souls shall be born amongst us." This is based on the overall (classical Indian as well as Theosophical) argument that the physical body matches the state of the transmigrating self in terms of their capacities of self-knowledge. "Good" and "bad" *karman* are interpreted accordingly, in Besant's texts: "good" is, for instance, non-violence, non-oppression etc.; see also below. Similarities and differences in the interpretations of the "state of the self" in classical Indian texts and Theosophy need a separate study.

> the world-drama. We choose for ourselves. Hence it follows that for a nation to be great its citizens must slowly build up greatness in themselves. (BESANT, 1915: 26–27)

Since the reincarnating individuals are attracted to each other in the present life due to the history of their past lives, they establish long-standing relationships not only of friendship (as was the topic of the records of "group reincarnation" discussed before), but also enter constellations of "collective" *karman* in the context of family and nation. In fact, a nation is nothing but a "larger individual […] having a past behind it, the creator of its present, each with a future ahead of it, now in course of creation" (BESANT, 1912: 65). The historicist stereotype of the "rise" and "fall" of empires and nations is turned into a process of karmic retribution for "good" and "bad" deeds. The Spanish enslavement of the Latin Americas, for instance, is an act of national "criminality" for which the nation had to pay the price. In a similar way, Britain has to face its *karman* and re-establish not only self-rule in India, but also learn some of the "Eastern" values.[55] India as well needs to take on a karmic load: "The Indians were not the original possessors of this country; they came down from Central Asia, conquering the land, subduing its then peoples, and reducing them to servitude" (ibid.: 65). As a consequence they were themselves conquered by a series of other nations. Furthermore, there is no prospect of true freedom for India as long as the discrimination of the so-called "Untouchables" continues:

> the lesson of karma has not been learned, though the millions of the untouchables are a standing proof of the wrongs inflicted on them. Now the Indians ask for a share in the government of their own country, and they are hampered by this bad national karma. Let them, then, while asking for the growth of freedom for themselves, atone to these untouchables by giving them social freedom and lifting them in the social scale. […] India must redeem the wrong she has done, and cleanse her hands from oppression. (BESANT, 1915.)

In this way Besant demarcated what became from the 1920s onwards a major rift in the Indian political struggle, the attitude towards the question of the political and social status of the "Untouchables" which resulted in the bitter controversy between M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the "Untouchables". There is, however, also another side to the place of India in history and on the "road of evolution". This place is intrinsically connected to the beneficial combination of "Eastern" and "Western" values discussed before. The particular

55 Cf. BESANT, 1915; esp. "Destinies of Nations".

contributions of India in this respect are, for instance, a "scientific religion", the value of "simple life", the preference for duties instead of rights as well as of the "teacher" instead of the "millionaire" and, most importantly, the teaching of the unity of all humanity though its doctrine of the "unity of Self".[56] These may mark India's contribution to the next stage of evolution, in which this unity will be acknowledged and the current emphasis on competition will be transformed. However, in order to play that role, Indians have to solve several severe problems, "untouchability" being one, education another.[57]

Many aspects of the previous discussion converge in the self-identification she adopted in India when she inscribed herself into India via a reconstruction of the Indian discourse on the "sages" (Rishis[58]), and by presenting herself as an embodiment of that union of opposites, of India and Britain, she thought necessary for the material and spiritual progress of mankind. In this way she represented herself as a messenger of the sages and masters in a manner that could be read as presenting herself as being the one giving them a voice. This meant, in particular, Rishis such as the Manus, a group of sages in classical Hindu literature, who teach society law and order in each world age. She clearly presented herself as being connected to them; at a later point she claimed to follow in particular the Rishi Agastya.[59] In following these Rishis, Besant increasingly saw herself in this role of leading and teaching India into a glorious future and of embodying the merging of the best in the East and West as the model for a future commonwealth of nations. While the impact of her personality was widely acknowledged, both within the factions of the Colonial administration as well as amongst the Indian parties, it was also contested. Part of the problem was that the structure of leadership and her connection to the Rishis and Masters was abhorred by conservative circles and the orthodox Brahmanical establishment. This was perhaps less because of its (in the West much ridiculed) occult dimensions, but of the position of power she claimed as being the one who would teach Indians their values. There was a limit to being taught by a white woman in a white sari claiming to voice the message of the Sanskritic Rishis in late Victorian English. On the other hand, the brahmanical Rishi trope

56 See BESANT, 1901: 10ff, BESANT, 1911, esp. "England and India", BESANT, 1915: ch. "East and West".

57 See BESANT, 1901, and BESANT, 1913.

58 Following the convention of the publications discussed in this article I do not use diacritics. For the role of Rishis in Indian history and for Indian values see BESANT, 1901: chapter one, and BESANT, 1911: chapter one.

59 See WESSINGER, 1988: 211–13, NETHERCOT, 1963: 216f.

combined with the role as "Home-Ruler" alienated both the anti-brahmanical and leftist fractions of the Independence movement as well as the nationalists who envisioned a Hindu India without or at least with less brahmanical "values".[60] Vishwanathan argues that the connection between nationalist and racialist ideologies in the spiritual-political doctrine of a "universal brotherhood" is a key element in Besant's support of the Indian independence movement and in her vision of India and England united in an "empire without colonial subordination" (1998: 205). In this regard, Besant is seen as being connected to a long-standing element in British discourse, namely, "the racial foundations of British anticolonicalism" (ibid.: 190). Therefore, the acknowledgment of her engagement in the Home Rule campaigns should not result in effacing the imperialist dimensions, i.e. claims of cultural superiority legitimizing colonial agendas, implied in her ideas of history, human evolution, the "universal brotherhood" and spiritual hierarchy.

Imperial elements and gestures implied Besant's positions can be seen as one of reasons why she was increasingly marginalised in the independence movement, in particular, after her presidential address as President of the Indian National Congress in 1917, in which presented herself as the exemplary hybrid, embodying the promising ties between Britain and India. She became elected as President after the colonial administration put her under house-arrest in a cabin in the Nilgiri Mountains.[61] This, in turn, was one of the reasons why she was in the same year elected as the first woman in the history of the party as the President of the Indian National Congress. In her presidential address at the thirty-second meeting of the party in the same year in Calcutta, Besant outlined not only the "case for India" and demanded home-rule, but also presented herself as the embodying both cultures and nations which she regarded as a special qualification of her leadership position. Her interpretations of biography and history discussed before converge once more in the way she presented herself at this occasion. Evoking the liberal tradition of the "little island", which she views to have been "in the West the builder-up of liberal institutions", she claims this as that dimension of her biography suitable for being united with her being Indian by choice:

60 GEETHA / RAJADURAI, 1995, analyse the role Besant's "brahminitude" in the formation of a non-brahmanical, non-sanskritic, Tamil nationalism.

61 This experience seems to have been a very distressing and disturbing one for the seventy year old Besant as pointed out by NETHERCOT, 1963: 260–263. For an analysis of the attitudes of the colonial government towards Besant and the Home-Rule movement in general see ROBB, 1976, and MORTIMER, 1983.

> the England that is the enemy of tyranny, the foe of autocracy, the lover of freedom, that is the England I would fain here represent to you to-day. To-day, when India stands erect, no suppliant people, but a Nation, self-conscious, self-respecting, determined to be free; when she stretches out her hand to Britain and offers friendship not subservience; co-operation not obedience; to-day let me: western-born but in spirit eastern, cradled in England but Indian by choice and adoption: let me stand as a symbol of union between Great Britain and India: a union of hearts and free choice, not of compulsion: and therefore of a tie which cannot be broken, a tie of love and mutual helpfulness, beneficial to both Nations and blessed by God. (BESANT, 1917, "A Case for India"; preamble).

However, this attempt at publically and performatively inscribing herself into Indian history as the blending of East and West resulted in an almost immediate alienation from her political allies, and she was soon marginalised in the National Congress.[62] She increasingly withdrew from political arenas, but continued her activities in the TS and also remained a champion for women's rights as can be seen in her support of the Women's Indian Association (established with her support in 1917). From the 1920s onwards, Indian woman began to play a significant role in the TS, in particular Rukmini Devi Arundale. In 1928, one year before Krishnamurti officially dissolved the "Order of the Star of East" (the organisation dedicated to him as the future "world-teacher"), Besant launched the "World Mother Movement" (an idea discussed since 1925) with Rukmini Devi as its head.[63] Five years later, in 1933, Annie Besant died in Adyar. Her body was cremated, one part of the ashes were brought to Varanasi and disposed of in the river Ganges, another in the garden of the headquarters of the TS in Adyar.[64]

Conluding Remarks

Annie Besant`s life can to a considerable extent be seen as a self-referential blending of political, spiritual and trans-cultural endeavours. While the combination of the political and spiritual is a feature of Besant's biography that is shared with other contemporary intellectuals and leaders, it gains an additional complexity as it dove-tails with an explicit trans-cultural endeavour concerned

62 See NETHERCOT, 1963: 270–291.

63 See DIXON, 2001: 218–225.

64 See NETHERCOT, 1963:453–455 for the details; the funeral speech was held by Bhagavan Das and later published as "Annie Besant and the Changing World" (1934).

with translating ideas and terms from one culture into another, and proposing it as a solution to what she regarded as a crisis of colonialism and materialism, as well as of ancient values. In this connection, Besant entertained a triangular translation project which intended to translate India to Europe, Europe to India and past India into present and even future India, in this way bridging "ancient" and "modern". In the structurally unstable role of a being British woman, the President of the TS and a Hindu by choice, fighting the case of Hinduism and of Indian Home-Rule both in India and in Britain, she experienced many of the ambiguities and the ups and downs of support and desertion an individual may go through in such a constellation. This implied regarding a place as her home that was not her home, professing a religion that was not her religion, while claiming to embody the beneficent merging of East and West. In this she was respected as well as ridiculed. Her navigating between imperialist perspectives on history, anti-colonial and feminist politics as well as "alternative spirituality" has received controversial assessments. One reason for the ambiguities is the strong presence of the biographical dimension in Besant's political and spiritual agenda, in which the personal and the public converged time and again as did the "esoteric" and the "exoteric" levels of engagement. Besant's views on the self and on history intersect with her perceptions of herself and her biography, in which teachings of *karman* and reincarnation play an important role.

The complexity of the constellation she has entered as well as created can be seen as resulting from her criticising and crossing boundaries at different levels. Her critique of bars and borders is often fuelled by the claim to interconnect realms that are usually kept apart. These different levels produce not only a multilayered discourse, but also a biography no less complex. Rather than it being made up of a sequence of neat steps or phases, it seems to consist of co-existing fields of engagement, enactments, scriptural and vocal interventions as well as private and public trials and trysts amounting to "Annie Besant". Here, tropes of discourse meet the dynamics of activism and produce the criss-crossed trajectories that make up a life entangled in translating and interpreting boundaries and oppositions. And as dialectic would have it, in so doing, she created new boundaries and, at a certain point in her life, voiced irritatingly conservative and even imperial views which left quite a few of her contemporaries as well as later biographers and scholars with a sense of paradox and ambiguity. This may indicate that individuality is something modern discourses seem constantly to encourage, but when it comes to facing its opaqueness, it tends to be dissolved either in psychological judgements or larger historical, social and cultural contexts. While the latter is certainly necessary in

order to delineate the particular place such individuality occupies in such contexts, the idioms of self-referentiality are equally important. They link self-perception with public roles, individual biography with larger interpretations of history, and thereby give the individual not only a place but also a voice in the larger constellations of his or her time.

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