

Annie Besant, Theosophy and The Liberal Catholic Church

From "[Annie Besant: Her Passions and Her Relationships](#)", Ernest Pelletier draws out the argument, based on testimony from herself and others, as well as corroborating elements from her palm, that Annie Besant's "naïvete on Theosophical/occult matters, combined with her ability to convince the general membership, gained her enough support to do what she wanted, but her actions eventually split the Society into many parts."¹ Besant is exposed for the charismatic politician she was, changing the Society into a political vehicle suited to swaying the membership to believe those truths that she had intellectually and logically deduced from voracious and ill-digested reading.

Truth and logic are funny partners. Logic takes a collection of premises and deduces conclusions from them. The truth of the conclusions rest entirely on the truth of the premises. People love to convince themselves through argument that what they have argued for, must be true. People, and some people more than others, love to pontificate and tell others what they should do or what they should believe. Annie Besant was particularly gifted at telling others what to believe. She could take a group of premises (her personal beliefs) and use these premises to draw new conclusions. The premises were made acceptable to the audience by playing on their sympathies.

Sympathy is a dangerous tool in the hands of an orator. As a tool to draw an audience's attention to the fact that all humanity suffers, that we are all in the same boat and that we are all seeking relief from suffering, sympathy has a legitimate use. As a tool to obfuscate the weaknesses in one's arguments, sympathy becomes a weapon, a weapon that is used against the weak-minded. To see this use of sympathy at work, an example would be appropriate.

In a September 20th, 1919 letter to the President of TS in America, A. P. Warrington, Annie Besant writes the following concerning the ongoing dispute around the [Liberal Catholic Church](#) and its apparent endorsement of a particular religion:

As regards the Liberal (Old Catholic) Church: I do not give that Church any more "personal support" (I quote your words in your article) than I give to any other Church or religion. I do not belong to it. But as P.T.S. [President of TS] I give it just the same "encouragement" that I give to every religion. It has the approval of the Lord Maitreya, who is the Head & support of every great religious movement. That it should be a cause of strife in the T.S., which embraces members of every religion, is lamentable. It only shows how much sectarianism exists among us, in those who join & those who reject it.²

Now this apology is pregnant with devices designed to engender an undeserved sympathy towards the work of establishing the Liberal Catholic Church.

First of all, there is a difference between a religious movement and a church. Annie Besant confuses and identifies the two throughout this short paragraph. The Christian movement is founded upon the teachings of Jesus. There are some who read his teachings and try their best to understand and follow his example. We could call these followers of Christ or Christians. When these teachings are interpreted and codified into dogma by a priesthood for control of the followers, we then have

¹"Annie Besant: Her Passions and Her Relationships," *Fohat* Volume IV, no. 4, Winter 2000.

²*Krotana of Old Hollywood: 1914-1920, Volume II*, by Joseph E. Ross, 2004, p 355.

a church and instead of Christians, we have Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and so forth. These followers are wedded to a certain rigid materialized interpretation of the teachings of Jesus, often coupled with outright nonsense whose only purpose is to wed the follower to that church for life. This prevents most followers from growing as their understanding of the teachings deepen. There will be no deepening as the Roman Catholic has everything interpreted for him so that he only has to memorize. One path leads to change and evolution, the other to stagnation and spiritual death.

Besant starts her paragraph with “As regards the Liberal (Old Catholic) Church: I do not give that Church any more ‘personal support’ (I quote your words in your article) than I give to any other Church or religion.” Why are the President of TS in America and the international president talking about “personal support”? Why would any self-responsible theosophist care about what the president “personally supported”? What she officially supported is important, as it affects all members, but her personal feelings are just that, personal. Although such topics as personal feelings would have been ruled out of bounds with the founders of the movement, as they were trying to create a body of self-responsible individuals who thought for themselves, the topic eventually became important as the office of the president gradually took on more and more popish powers. This can be seen clearly in Besant’s 1911 change of the ES pledge from a pledge to one’s Higher Self (develop and follow one’s intuition) to:

I pledge myself to support before the world the Theosophical Society, and in particular to obey, without cavil or delay, the orders of the Head of the Esoteric Section in all that concerns my relation with the Theosophical movement; to work with her, on the lines she shall lay down, in preparation for the coming of the World-Teacher, and to give what support I can to the Society in money and work.³

Here is an easily identifiable move from reliance on one’s own inner intuition to a reliance on the leader of the ES, and the introduction of a dogma of a coming World-Teacher, an idea that again appeals to an outside source of authority. Besant can be seen here creating a new type of Society member, one not unaccustomed to obedience to outside authorities, one who is concerned about the personal beliefs of their leader. With a disapproving look, an appropriately veiled comment, Besant is able to direct her ES army along whatever lines she deems worthy as they look to her for guidance.

Thinking-theosophists have to understand that it is their duty to stand against the dogma of churches and learn to differentiate the church and the religion. Blavatsky rails against the hypocrisy of churches all over her writings. In “The Beacon of the Unknown” she writes:

I repeat: it is only Theosophy, well understood, that can save the world from despair, by re-enacting the social and religious reform once before in history accomplished by Gautama the Buddha; a peaceful reform, without one drop of spilt blood, permitting everyone to remain in the faith of his fathers if he so choose. To do this, one would have only to reject the parasitic plants of human fabrication which at the present moment are choking all religions and cults in the world. Let him accept but the essence, which is the same in all; namely, the spirit which gives life to man in whom it resides, and renders him immortal. Let every man inclined to good find his ideal—a star before him to guide him. Let him follow it without ever deviating from his path, and he is almost certain to reach the “beacon-light” of life—TRUTH; no matter whether he seeks for and finds it at the bottom of a cradle or of a well.⁴

³Taken from “Annie Besant: Her Passions and Her Relationships,” *Fohat* Volume V, no. 1, Spring 2001.

⁴“The Beacon of the Unknown”, *Blavatsky: Collected Writings*, Vol. XI, p. 262.

This says it all! It is correctly argued that we “reject the parasitic plants of human fabrication” which is none other than church dogma. We are asked to “accept the essence, which is the same in all” which is simply look at the words of whatever religious reformer you follow and figure out what it means for yourself as these words will lead you to understand that your religion is in essence identical with all others. Look for your “ideal”, that Truth that you understand and let it lead you to understand all the rest. This is simple. Why do theosophists get confused over this? We are not tolerant of churches, churches enslave the minds of their followers. How can anyone be tolerant of an institution of enslavement? How can anyone be tolerant of the Liberal Catholic Church?

Remember , we are talking about the principles that the Society was found upon. To make this more clear, what does H. P. Blavatsky have to say about the principles of the original program? In an article published posthumously, “The Original Programme of the Theosophical Society,” Blavatsky again touches upon church dogma in her rendition of the objects of the Society. This article put together around 1886 states as a fourth object:

4. To oppose materialism and theological dogmatism in every possible way, by demonstrating the existence of occult forces unknown to science, in nature, and presence of psychic and spiritual powers in man Superstition had to be exposed and avoided; and occult forces, *beneficent and maleficent*—ever surrounding us and manifesting their presence in various ways—demonstrated to the best of our ability.⁵

The TS was not investigating the occult in Nature and Man in order to create a Society of magicians, it was following a more brotherly path, trying to provide humanity with the antidote to mental dependency and slavery. How does lending support, financial, moral, or otherwise to the Liberal Catholic Church and its Roman sounding dogmas, reflect an opposition to “theological dogmatism” and “superstition”? Clearly, Annie Besant and her officers were introducing a new set of principles into the Society, one of which might be called the principle of mental dependency. This, in fact, is the tolerance to which all modern Adyar apologists refer when they gush on about tolerance within the Society. Tolerance is a euphemism for the acceptance of mental dependency into the Society.

Annie Besant goes on to tell us that she “does not belong to” the Liberal Church. Well, I should hope not. Why would anyone in a leadership role in the Theosophical Society belong to a church? Theosophy battles against churches, they are an hypocrisy! The Society is tolerant of religions and would welcome any good Christian, any good Hindu, any good Buddhist, and so on into its ranks, but it is not going to accept bishops and priests bringing all their dogmatic nonsense into the Society. At best such an acceptance would be to acknowledge the acceptance of wishy-washy minds unable to decide what path to follow, at worst it is inviting Trojan Horses into your camp. What deluded leadership would allow such a thing? History shows there was at least one deluded leader who did!

Once we get past the ludicrous idea of Annie Besant belonging to the LCC, we can appreciate her immense tolerance—a Hindu-leaning westerner showing tolerance and acceptance of a nominally Christian institution being championed by theosophists, and indeed whose leadership is being selected from the ranks of theosophists. Leaving aside the logical inconsistency of such a situation, we can see this as pure politics. On the one hand she describes herself as Hindu, thereby securing support from the Indian populace, on the other a Christian Church is being set up by theosophists, thereby securing for her Western support. The only support she is lacking is from true theosophists, and it

⁵H.P. Blavatsky, *The Original Programme of the Theosophical Society*, TPH, 1966, p.2.

is clear, by her actions and edicts, that she would eventually like to have these members leave the Society anyways. They can only cause trouble.

Next Annie tells us that “as P.T.S. [President of TS] I give it just the same ‘encouragement’ that I give to every religion.” As we have mentioned, the LCC is not a religion, it is a church. So as an officer of the TS she is telling us that she is equating the LCC with a religion and allowing it to bring its dogmas into the Society. This sentence is supposed to speak to her tolerance and magnanimity, accepting a religion/church into the Society that is not her own. Lead by example. If your respected leader, an avowed Hindu, can do this then what is the problem? Not only is she bringing the dogmas of the LCC into the Society, but by extension every other priesthood’s dogmas, including the Brahmins for whom she professes so much sympathy.

Next the TS Reverend Mother tells us that: “It has the approval of the Lord Maitreya, who is the Head & support of every great religious movement.” Here we have an appeal to a higher authority, an authority that only Ms. Besant and a few close advisors apparently had access to. (Remember, this authority was already introduced in the new E.S. pledge.) This should be enough to make any TRUE student of theosophy sick. Apparently not so with most of the Adyar membership? To be fair, this is a private letter, and most of this nonsense would be passed among the true believers, ES members, etc. The Society members who avoided contact with such groups only saw the fruits of such beliefs, and like Mr. Smythe in Canada they made as much noise as possible to let Adyar know of their displeasure when such fruit was displayed. Ted Davy in [“The ‘World Religion’ that Wasn’t”](#) details much of the backlash by prominent theosophists in Canada and abroad after Annie Besant announced the coming Messiah publically to the world in 1925.

Besant then writes: “That it should be a cause of strife in the T.S., which embraces members of every religion, is lamentable.” Of course it is not lamentable; it necessarily follows that such a logically inconsistent policy should cause strife. However, from point of view of the “True Believer” Besant is directing the audience to her own tolerance (as a sympathizer with the Hindu tradition) and to the source of this theosophical mission, Lord Maitreya, himself. The audience, in this case Warrington, is being told to follow their lead, keep quiet and work with those who are willing to work. Remind the ES’ers of their pledge, and basically plead the “tolerance card” to the rest.

Finally, Besant seals the paragraph by pointing out that: “It only shows how much sectarianism exists among us, in those who join & those who reject it.” Ever the consummate politician, Besant is advising Warrington not to get entangled in the sectarian mess by openly rejecting the church or joining the church. Stand apart, and ask for tolerance to be shown on both sides. What Besant seems to be saying is that the traditional theosophists following the Blavatsky program who are likely to complain against the church are demonstrating sectarianism. Also, the flocks joining the LCC are demonstrating sectarianism. Who is left? The leadership, a new Brahminic class, who have made themselves lords over all by setting one class against another? Is this reality why the modern leadership of the Adyar Society is afraid to do anything? They risk antagonizing one of the many politicized groups of which the Society now is comprised?

In this letter Besant uses Warrington’s sympathy for tolerance within the Society, sympathy for his obvious respect of Besant, and sympathy for the work of the brotherhood, to ease Warrington’s concerns and help him think more like an Adyar politician. The fact that the tolerance for which he is being asked to *have* sympathy, the leader for which he is being asked to *show* sympathy, and the work for which he is being asked to *give* sympathy are all lies, does not ever enter into his confused

mind. In this way, Besant undermined the Society in order to get the political apparatus that she wanted to make the Society over in her likeness.

With the above in mind we can look at the protest to the development of the LCC within the Society. Carlos Cardoso Aveline in his *Fohat* article, [“The Making of an Avatar”](#), describes how the finding of a 14 year old Krishnamurti and the writing of a book that many still attribute to him, *At the Feet of the Master* launches in earnest the craze of the World Teacher. This book is diametrically opposed to the “central pedagogical *Principle of the Autonomy of the Learner*”⁶, one of theosophy’s central and foundational principles. This book, generally accepted by most reasonable historians to be the product of C. W. Leadbeater, lends Adyar’s authority to the ecclesiastical lie that one must give unquestioning obedience to the words of one’s Master in order to succeed on the path to adeptship. Carlos argues so that theosophist and non-theosophist alike are made aware of the theosophical principle that is being undermined by this book. Clear to the strain of theosophical student that follows HPB, other nominal students of theosophy would rather throw out the principle than deal with argument as to why this principle is so important for the development of a spiritual mind.

Moving ahead from the publishing of *At the Feet of the Master* in 1911, we find some early theosophists taking up the cause. In 1917, H. N. Stokes, editor of *The OE Library Critic* writes in [“Theosophy and Pseudo-Theosophy”](#) about this new irresponsible brand of theosophy being promoted from Adyar. Alarmed by the establishment of the Liberal Catholic Church and its overt use of ritual magic by its Bishops and Priests, and how this was being piggybacked into the Society through the Church, he came out with a hard-hitting article denouncing the acceptance of the Church and its practices by the Society. He could see the Society that he knew and valued being undermined by this new wave of ritualistic nonsense. At one point Stokes sums up that:

This is what Theosophy stands for today at Adyar—baptism, holy water, the presence of Christ in the eucharist, apostolic succession, the absolution and remission of sin, the mass, the practice of magic, the infallibility of a woman.

I don’t think too many could be surprised that Adyar’s new direction was giving those capable of thinking for themselves fits. They joined an organization that stood for one thing, and this organization was being transformed into an organization diametrically opposed in principle to the Society they joined.

Next in an article first printed in *The O. E. Library Critic*, Stokes argues that if it talks like an ass and acts like an ass, then despite wearing a lion’s skin, it is undoubtedly an ass. [“The Ass in the Lion’s Skin”](#) investigates the lie that Adyar was not championing the Old Catholic Church (soon to be Liberal Catholic Church), and that the Church was not a limb of the Society. At one point Stokes observes that:

⁶“The Making of an Avatar”, *Fohat* Vol. XI, no. 3, p 68.

Members of the Theosophical Society who desire to see real Theosophy flourish should recognize the fact that there appears to exist a determined effort on the part of what in politics would be called a “ring” to run the American Section in the interests of the Old Catholic Church. . . . The new set of by-laws imposed on the Section is clearly adapted, if not actually designed, to place autocratic powers in the hands of the sectional President, whose affiliations are well known, and to suppress freedom of discussion.

Again we see how, by gradual changes freedom is lost, and autocratic rule becomes the norm. Like most freedoms lost, they are lost because members are too lazy to think the matter through. Stokes points out:

that while they [many members] have no use for the Old Catholic Church themselves, they consider it none of their business what is done or thought by other members. . . . What this church . . . may do outside the Society may be none of their affair. But to say that one does not care what is done within the Society, that is to express indifference to the cause of Theosophy itself.

Here we see how Besant’s and therefore Adyar’s pleading for tolerance is being sympathetically accepted by many members of the Society. Tolerance, here, is just a euphemism for the undermining of the principles that the Society was founded upon. However, few seem to notice, and many don’t care.



Mrs. Besant and Priests of the Liberal Catholic Church. Examining the photo of Besant and the Priests of the LCC it appears as though she is dressed in some kind of ritual garment for the occasion. She is also holding, with her left hand, the Christian Cross which hangs from her neck. All the men in priestly robes appear to have this cross as well, except the little boy.

Again, Stokes in a 1918 article, [“Why I am an O. C.-Phobe,”](#) goes back to many of the points outlined in “Theosophy and Pseudo-Theosophy” and treats them at greater length. He looks at the LCC’s doctrines with respect to apostolic succession, and determines the ritual itself empowers the next generation of priests, even if the priest passing on the orders is himself a moral reprobate. This of course brings up the whole question of moral fitness of spiritual guides and teachers. Apparently it is preferred priests be good men, but it is not necessary. Again the LCC, like other churches treats women differently, denying them admittance to the priesthood. It teaches against the doctrines of karma as previously espoused by the TS. The LCC is to introduce the use and practice of ceremonial magic, according to its bishops. The LCC teaches a material philosophy as opposed to a spiritual philosophy. The LCC is being advanced by the theosophical government, despite denials to that effect. Stokes picks the church apart point by point, and again the question remains, why does the leadership of the Theosophical Society have anything to do with this thing?

In 1919, T.H. Martyn, the recent General Secretary of the Australian Section was in America. While there he involved himself in the LCC debate and had three pamphlets printed. The pamphlets had some effect on the membership as a resolution was passed at the annual convention dealing with Martyn’s arguments. Joseph E. Ross in *Krotona of Old Hollywood*, writes:

Since the three pamphlets, “The World-Teacher and Democracy,” “Tsarism or Reconstruction in The Church,” and “Should We Reconstruct?” had been sent out into the Section, a resolution adopted at Convention also was sent out to the Lodges for the approval of members. It was proposed to exclude priests of the L.C.C. from holding office or positions of trust in the American Section T.S., as it might result in complete dominance of the Society by the head of the L.C.C., and threaten the T.S. with lack of impartiality towards all religions and sects. This would have serious effects on several of the members who had become priests in the church.

In true autocratic style, Annie Besant denied the resolution, made plain in the short cable that follows:

WARRINGTON
DISAPPROVE ANY DISABILITIES IMPOSED ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS
BESANT

If the Convention was following Martyn’s argument, then the grounds for the resolution were not religious. In [“TSARISM OR RECONSTRUCTION in the CHURCH”](#), the grounds are on principle. The Church by exacting vows of obedience from their bishops, priests and general lay members, had made itself the autocratic ruler over the minds of Church members. This was a clear attack on the autonomy of the members in particular and the Society in general should it choose to use this power for political advantage, a choice that was bound to be made by someone at some point, if it hadn’t already by this time.

Next, out of Sydney in 1921, comes an interesting little pamphlet called [“The Validity of Orders in the Liberal Catholic Church examined by a member of The Theosophical Society.”](#) This pamphlet looks into the whole question of apostolic succession as it pertains to members of the clergy of the LCC. By all accounts, it appears that there is no proper apostolic succession, and the orders for this Church are not valid as there is a broken link. This seems to have been a hot topic of this time as we see an article in *Dawn* magazine called [“Sacerdotal Pretensions”](#) that relates back to another article in *The Canadian Theosophist*, questioning the validity of the church’s orders.

Finally, looking back at the period from 1925, Ted Davy, as we said before, describes the fallout from Annie Besant’s announcement of an impending Messiah. [“The World Religion that Wasn’t”](#) ably details some of the fallout from Annie Besant’s incredible announcement and reminds us that

there have been theosophists all along trying to stem the tide of the development of a naive spiritualism within the Society.

This naturally leads to the question, how does a Society ensure that the principles upon which it was founded remain true, during the course of its life. The guarding of principles is left in the hands of a society's members. It is important that the members at all times are familiar with the principles and are aware of any arguments that other members might bring forth that demonstrate the eroding of those principles. This, like it or not, is a duty to any member of any Society. Once the principles are changed, and new members are brought into that society, they are likely to protect the new principles of which they are familiar, not some old set of principles that they know nothing about, and rightfully so. If this is the case, then there is nothing that can be done concerning Adyar. Its members will understand theosophy entirely differently than the Masters, or H.P. Blavatsky, at least according to their writings. It is important that today's independent Theosophical Societies accept new members wisely, and ensure those members know exactly to what they are committing themselves. History tells us that if we don't, their efforts are likely to lead in time to Schools of Ritual Magic.