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IN OPPOSITION TO THE RAJ:
ANNIE BESANT AND THE DIALECTIC OF EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

When Annie Besant landed in India she disavowed all political intent, but she soon became a militant nationalist - the only western woman ever elected President of Congress. This essay explains her entry into politics by tracing the way her secular and socialist heritage informed her intellectual challenge to the ruling discourse of the Raj. In Britain, her theosophy acted as an alternative religious discourse combining aspects of a secularist critique of Christianity with a defence of eastern religions. In India, it acted as a religious and social discourse that asserted the legitimacy, even superiority, of the indigenous culture. More generally, a study of Besant's opposition to the Raj illuminates the logic of a view of India shared by many nationalists. It shows how this view of India arose in dialectical opposition to the legitimating discourse of empire.

IN OPPOSITION TO THE RAJ:
ANNIE BESANT AND THE DIALECTIC OF EMPIRE¹

I

When Annie Besant first arrived in India in 1893, and again when she emigrated there for good in 1898, she assured everyone that she had no intention of engaging in any political activity whatsoever. India's genius, Besant explained, "is for religion and not for politics, and her most gifted children are needed as spiritual teachers, not as competing candidates in the political arena."² She had come to India on a spiritual mission, from which politics would constitute an unwanted distraction. Besant's assurances must have been especially welcome to the colonial authorities given her reputation as a trouble-maker. She was probably the most infamous woman in the British Empire. Not only had she been a leading secularist, and worse still a secularist at the forefront of the campaign for the spread of information about birth control, she then had turned to socialism, trade union reform, and finally theosophy. Actually, however, Besant's assurances to the colonial authorities ignored the way in which her theosophy necessarily involved her in the promotion of Indian culture in what was an inherently political manner. The legitimacy of the Raj, as of the British Empire as a whole, rested on a distinctive, Christian discourse. To promote Hinduism and condemn Christianity in the way theosophists typically did was to challenge this discourse and so the legitimacy of the Raj. Before long, therefore, Besant was a militant nationalist who led the All-India Home Rule League, and, in 1917, became the only western woman ever to serve as President of the Indian National Congress.

The purpose of this essay, however, is not just to unpack the context and content of Besant's nationalist thought. Rather, it is to use a study of Besant to point to a more general argument about the dialectical relationship of nationalism to empire within India. Several recent and influential studies of orientalism and indology have emphasised the way in which western constructs of the east disempowered eastern

peoples.³ The broad picture painted by these studies seems reasonable, even if we want to quibble about details. What these studies ignore, however, is the way in which any discourse that legitimises any set of power-relations also provides some resources for those who would challenge those power-relations.⁴ The indology that legitimised the Raj, in other words, did not just disempower Indians, it also provided them with resources that they and their allies could use to oppose the Raj. When we study Besant's political thought, therefore, we will show how her theosophy stands as a form of indology that overturned the legitimating discourse of empire. Here Besant provides an ideal example for our argument because her British upbringing and her theosophy place her firmly in the tradition of indology whose negative effects are so widely acknowledged. Her background puts her not in an indigenous Indian tradition, but rather in that of western indology with its characteristic construction and dismissal of the east.⁵ Nonetheless, by taking the themes of this indology out of their usual Christian context and putting them in one developed by secularists, spiritualists, and socialists, she promoted the cause of Indian nationalism. In a British context, Besant's theosophy was an alternative religious discourse that rejected Christianity for an overt commitment to spiritualism and eastern religions. In an Indian context, it became a religious and social discourse that asserted the legitimacy, even superiority, of the indigenous religion and culture in a way that inspired a nationalist critique of the Raj.

II

In order to appreciate how Besant overturned the ruling discourse of the Raj, we need first to see how her theosophy related to the Christianity of the Victorian age. Annie Besant (nee. Wood) was born in 1847 to a middle-class, Irish family living in London.⁶ She had an evangelical upbringing under the guidance of Miss Marryat, a spinster with whom she lived after the death of her father in 1852. After leaving Miss Marryat, she married Frank Besant, an evangelical clergyman who was working as a school teacher, and, although the marriage was not a good one, she doted on their two

children. Besant spent her formative years, therefore, at the evangelical centre of a Victorian Christianity that was based on Biblical literalism and atonement theology.⁷ During the middle of the Victorian era, however, a widespread crisis of faith began to undermine this evangelical Christianity. Discoveries in geology, historical criticism, and evolutionary theory challenged Biblical literalism.⁸ And a new moral conscience - especially a widespread ethical positivism - challenged the individualist social and personal ethic derived from the doctrine of atonement.⁹ In 1871, Besant collapsed, suffering from both physical exhaustion and a spiritual crisis of faith that ended with her rejecting Christianity for deism. Although she reached a compromise with her husband whereby she would participate only in services directed towards God, people noticed the change in her behaviour and their reactions embarrassed him. When he insisted she take communion or leave his household, she left him. Although Besant's descent into doubt resembles that of many of her contemporaries, few of them were forced outside of the bounds of respectable society in quite the way she was after she had left her husband.¹⁰ Numerous Victorians thought that social order, even morality itself, depended on good habits as defined by the church and enforced by the family. Besant's life challenged everything they believed in. In Victorian society, middle-class women generally were confined to the roles of obedient daughter, wife, and mother in accord with the evangelical conviction that these were the roles God himself had prescribed for them.¹¹ In rejecting these roles, Besant lost her position in society; she became an outcast who from then on found her home in movements that promoted new ways of living, and especially movements that encouraged women to experiment with new social roles. She became a leading champion of a series of causes - secularism, socialism, theosophy, and then Indian nationalism - that challenged the conventions of Victorian society. No doubt Besant retained a very Victorian concern with evangelical notions of truth and duty, believing a meaningful order of things defines one's purpose and one's responsibilities - a Truth requires Sacrifice. Nonetheless, her conception of what this Truth was challenged the

dominant, Christian view of her time. By accepting geology, historical criticism, and evolutionary theory against the Bible, she committed herself to a purely natural view of the universe that incorporated all scientific knowledge. And by accepting an ethical positivism against atonement theology, she committed herself to an ideal of human brotherhood.

Initially Besant satisfied these commitments by championing secularism and socialism. As a secularist, she attacked Christianity by appealing to a purely natural view of the universe and especially to the theory of evolution. She appealed to the Victorians' trust in science to challenge their religious beliefs. As an atheist, she did not say there is no God, but only that God has no meaning, so we can not say whether or not there is a God. In addition, however, she pointed out that to describe God as unknowable is to make a claim to know something about God, which we can not do, and anyway all attempts to define God become immersed in contradictions that show them to be nonsense.¹² Science has killed off the very idea of a God. It enables us to give sufficient explanations of all entities and all events solely in terms of facts about nature. As a socialist, Besant also attacked evangelical Christianity for its excessive individualism. She defined socialism not only as a science of economy and society based on a theory of evolution, but also as the embodiment of an ethical positivism. The socialist movement is an expression of "a profound moral impulse" of "unselfish brotherhood."¹³ Besant even complained that her fellow socialists placed too much emphasis on the need for economic reform at the expense of a new social morality. To counter their materialism, she formed "a new Brotherhood, in which service of Man should take the place erstwhile given to service of God"; she formed a "Church of the future" to undertake "the teaching of social duty, the upholding of social righteousness, the building of a true commonwealth."¹⁴

By the time Besant arrived in India, she had turned from secularism and socialism to theosophy. The Theosophical Society, an offshoot of the spiritualist movement, was formed in 1875 with Henry Olcott as its President and the mysterious

Madame Blavatsky as its inspiration and prophet.¹⁵ The Society has three explicit aims: to explore the psychic powers latent in us, to promote the study of comparative religion, and to defend human brotherhood. Beyond these aims, the Society stands for Blavatsky's modern occultism, according to which spiritualism derives from an ancient wisdom - the universal religion - taken from the east. Crucially, Besant found in theosophy a worldview that eschews all reference to the supernatural - as had her secularism - and that also promotes an ethical positivism - as had her socialism. For a start, she argued that theosophy repudiates supernaturalism, incorporates a theory of evolution, and even provides the basis of a scientific psychology. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, her theosophy really does avoid supernaturalism; it rejects Christianity from the perspective of the monistic pantheism of the spiritualists, not the monistic materialism of the secularists. Thus, although Besant accepted Blavatsky's bizarre teachings about a brotherhood of adepts in Tibet who possess extraordinary occult powers, these Mahatmas are part of the natural order; they are highly spiritual beings at the end of the evolutionary cycle who choose to help the less advanced. As for evolution, Besant's cosmology portrays the whole universe as a unity unfurling and returning to itself in an evolutionary process.¹⁶ At first, God limited himself so as to manifest himself and become the universe. Next this manifested absolute began to unfold from its initial unity towards a duality of life and form, spirit and spirit-matter, that constituted the world of nature. This duality then unfolded into a trinity with the universal mind appearing alongside life and form, and thereafter the universe further unfolds away from the unity of an undivided absolute, through the seven planes, until it reaches the nadir of an almost totally physical existence, after which it will begin the long trek back through the same seven planes to end once again as the undivided divinity. According to Besant, theosophy not only embraces the truths of science, it also provides a natural explanation of mental phenomena that western science can not account for. It explains both peripheral aspects of consciousness, such as dreams, and psychic phenomena, such as mesmerism.¹⁷ The importance of universal brotherhood

in theosophy is much more readily apparent than is its rejection of the supernatural. As we have said, one of the three basic principles of the Theosophical Society is to defend human brotherhood. Moreover, one of Besant's first theosophical articles provided other members of the Society with a series of practical measures by which they might do just this, measures such as buying shares in a company and using one's position as a shareholder to promote improved working conditions.¹⁸ Her theosophy propagated a social morality based on solidarity as an alternative to the individualism of Victorian evangelicalism.

III

When, in the 1890s, Besant began to make her home in India, she found that her theosophy made her suspicious to the Imperial authorities. It did so just because Christianity lay at the very centre of the legitimating discourse - and also many of the institutions - of the Raj. Christianity, of course, played different roles in the lives of different individuals in British India: for some, it was little more than the organising principle of public ceremonies; for many, it was an unexamined ethos that defined standards of public and private behaviour; and for some, it was a faith giving meaning to their individual lives and to the British Empire as a whole. In general, however, the colonial authorities relied on an evangelical Christianity to define and legitimise their role. The key idea was that in a Christian society alone can the individual develop as a properly rational being in accord with the will of God. Thus, the Raj was creating the conditions under which the Indians could realise their God-given capacities. This key idea inspired a ubiquitous critique of Hinduism.¹⁹ The legitimating discourse of the Raj constructed Hinduism in a partial and restricted way before then going on to denounce it. Within this discourse, Hinduism was denounced, first, for embodying a fatalistic pantheism unable to sustain a proper sense of the worth of the individual, and, second, for portraying the world as an illusion, and so promoting asceticism at the expense of a proper concern with the facts. In the first place, Hinduism reduces

individuals to mere parts of a greater whole into which they eventually will be reabsorbed. The situation of the individual in this world, moreover, is supposed to be determined by his actions in past lives, and so beyond his control. Hinduism undermines the dignity of the individual by encouraging people to see themselves as the unimportant slaves of destiny. In the second place, Hinduism represents the world as maya, an illusion to be overcome by ascetic withdrawal. Believers should detach themselves from the world, and even seek spiritual merit by performing self-imposed penances. Hinduism undermines a rational concern with the facts by encouraging people to see reality as insignificant and superficial. The Raj was needed, therefore, to provide Indians with the cultural pre-requisites for liberal self-rule. The British, with their Christianity, were teaching the Indians how to respect the individual and how to govern themselves in accord with a disinterested rationality.

Crucially, Besant's thought stood in a dialectical relationship to this Christian justification of empire. On the one hand, Besant's theosophy reproduced the central features of the account of Hinduism that legitimised the Raj. Her theosophy, as part of western indology, portrayed Hinduism as placing the individual firmly within the context of both a caste-system and a series of rebirths, and also as incorporating a spiritual form of pantheism according to which the material world is unimportant. On the other hand, Besant - like many theosophists - located this account of Hinduism in the context of a vehement rejection of Christianity.²⁰ She drew on the resources of indology to develop a critique of the Raj that mirrored her earlier socialist and secularist/spiritualist critiques of Victorian society. A Hindu faith in caste and rebirth became an antidote to Victorian individualism, while a Hindu pantheism became a way of accepting scientific theories such as evolution without falling into a barren materialism.

Besant used theosophy to turn upside-down the Christian denunciation of Hinduism as a fatalistic pantheism undermining the dignity of the individual. Where the ruling discourse of the Raj complained of Hinduism reducing the individual to a

mere part of a greater whole, Besant rejected Christianity for fostering an unhealthy individualism. She argued Christianity emphasises the salvation of the individual in a way that prevents people seeing themselves aright as brothers. Her ethical positivism had convinced her of the need to develop a social morality able to sustain individual sacrifice for the common good. A recognition of "the immanence of God," she now explained, has as its "inevitable corollary" acceptance of a "Solidarity" based on "universal Brotherhood."²¹ As theosophy taught, and as Hindus recognised, all beings are manifestations of the one divine form and so interlinked with one another. More particularly, Besant complained that Christianity actively encouraged immorality by suggesting one's past behaviour did not matter provided only one later repented. The root of this problem lay, of course, in the detested doctrine of vicarious atonement with its suggestion that Christ had paid the penalty for our sins. Besant did not just attack Christianity, however, she also championed Hinduism as a positive alternative. Theosophy, she explained, follows the Vedas, so in becoming a theosophist, one necessarily adopts Hinduism. Hinduism puts the individual in a proper relationship to the social whole: it recognises that the good of the individual is bound inextricably to that of society. Indeed, it teaches us, "the primary truth of Morality, as of Religion and of Science, is the Unity of Life."²² The unity of life does not imply a lack of respect for individual differences, nor does it imply a flat, western-style equality defined in terms of the rights of man; rather, it implies that individuals should use their diverse talents and abilities for the good of the whole. As Besant explained, "brotherhood means that everyone holds his power for the common good, uses his faculties for the common service."²³ Hinduism, therefore, provides the basis of an admirable social morality. Indeed, its very cosmology shows sacrifice to a greater whole to be integral to all that there is. Here Besant divided the evolutionary process into various stages, each of which begins with an act of sacrifice in which the previous form perishes so "the life" in it may pour "itself out to take birth in a higher form."²⁴ The origins of the universe, for instance, lay in an act of self-sacrifice by

God in which he voluntarily limited his infinite being in order to become manifest. Even today, if only we rightly identified ourselves with the life that persists after our sacrifice rather than the life that perishes in it, we would exult in the outpouring of eternal life instead of mourning the passing of the transient form. Hinduism shows us how sacrifice and service are built into the very structure of the universe. Moreover, because Hinduism recognises the place of the individual in the social whole, and also the joy of sacrifice, it encourages us to reject an unhealthy, individualistic concern with rights for a proper emphasis on duty. It teaches us that "we live not to assert our rights but to do our duties, and so to make one mighty unit where each shall discharge his functions for the common good of all."²⁵ According to Besant, the European theory of rights provides a poor basis for society since it is not true: people are born neither free nor equal, but rather absolutely dependent on others and with widely differing capacities. The idea of the independent individual with private ends is an illusion: individuals are not free to choose their own good since the good for man is determined by the spiritual nature of the evolutionary process. Besant concluded, therefore, that we should found society on a theory of duties, not rights. A society built on personal duty would correspond to the facts of human existence: although babies are helpless they have parents who have a duty to them; indeed, a society is a giant organism in which every individual has a particular function to fulfil for the good of the whole. But, Besant asked, what do we mean when we talk of performing one's duty? We mean, she answered, the discharge of one's dharmā (duty) as taught by Hinduism. India, in other words, possesses the key to the ideal society. Certainly Britain would do well to learn from India "the ideals of self-discipline, self-control, and the subordination of the individual to the larger self"; ideals "based on the truths of the Immanence of God and the Solidarity of Mankind."²⁶

Besant also used her theosophy to turn upside-down the Christian denunciation of Hinduism as a hindrance to a rational attitude to facts. Whereas the ruling discourse of the Raj rejected Hinduism for encouraging an ascetic withdrawal

from the world conceived as an evil illusion, Besant complained that western science pays insufficient attention to the inner spiritual self, and so gives no real guidance on how we should conduct our lives. Her studies of dreams, mesmerism, and spiritualist phenomena had convinced her that a mechanical view of the world could not account for the facts then being uncovered by the infant science of psychology.²⁷ Western science, she insisted, needs to recognise that everything embodies a spiritual element. A purely mechanical theory of evolution, for example, can not explain why organisms should react to the environment at all, whereas a proper, spiritual understanding of evolution does so by evoking the divine consciousness embedded in all matter as the mainspring of the movement of the organism. More particularly, Besant argued that because western science neglects the spiritual nature of reality, it can not give a true account of ethics. Western science has undermined a Christian belief in revelation without finding an alternative to the Bible as a source of morality: it has undermined supernaturalism without giving us a natural account of ethics. Here too, however, Besant did not just denounce western science, she also championed Hinduism as a positive alternative. Hinduism, she explained, embraces a spiritual cosmology that not only incorporates western science, but also goes beyond it to provide us with a suitable metaphysics and to explain mental phenomena. Indian magic, Ayurvedic medicine, and the like are neither fraudulent nor supernatural, but rather the result of people exercising natural powers of the mind that remain as yet unacknowledged by western science. In addition, Hinduism offers us a purely natural account of ethics as the ruling force of human life. According to Besant, the cosmology that theosophy took from the Vedas leads inexorably to both the doctrine of reincarnation and the law of karma. Her immanentism postulates an indestructible ego that must go somewhere after death, and since she ruled out the possibility of the supernatural, this somewhere must be either a return to the physical plane or ascension to another plane. Here her evolutionary theory implied that the indestructible ego has to reappear on the physical plane simply because each individual needs several different lives in order to evolve

in the requisite manner. Ultimately, Besant explained, "the clearest conviction of the truth of reincarnation" lies in "the obvious necessity for many lives" for the ego to ascend through all "the ascending stages of consciousness."²⁸ Reincarnation, in other words, extends the theory of evolution from the physical world to the spiritual one. A law of karma follows from belief in reincarnation. When an individual passes through physical death, the ego sheds its physical, astral, and mental bodies, leaving only the inner person, which then takes on a new outer body so as to reappear on the physical plane. Because this process is natural - and Besant rules out supernaturalism - there must be a law of cause and effect to make things happen as they do in actual instances of reincarnation. The law of karma is just such a law. When the inner person sheds its outer bodies, the indestructible ego is left with a record of the experiences it had while clothed in these bodies, and because the inner person thus retains a record of its experiences, these experiences influence the way it acts. Past lives influence future ones: each individual has a karma. The law of karma provides ethics with a basis in a natural law of cause and effect: current evils are the necessary consequences of past actions. Finally, because Hinduism recognises the spiritual nature of the universe, and gives a natural basis to ethics, it encourages people to live active and also rational lives. In Besant's theosophical writings, the concept of karma acts as a call to action; it requires us to strive to make a better life for others and so for ourselves. To act to improve the present is not to deny the karma caused by the past, but only to modify this karma so as to influence the future. Besant insisted, "above all, let it never be forgotten, whether details are understood or not, that each man makes his own karma"; that each man creates "his own capacities and his own limitations," and "working at any time with these self-created capacities, and within these self-created limitations, he is still himself, the living soul, and can strengthen or weaken his capacities, enlarge or contract his limitations."²⁹ Although Hinduism teaches us we can escape from a cycle of rebirths only by ridding ourselves of desire, we should take this teaching as an injunction to renounce only selfish desires, not a desire to do good

unto others. Besant told her fellow theosophists: "the word of freedom" is "Sacrifice - that which is done for the sake of carrying out the Divine Will in the world, that which is done because you feel yourself part of One Life found in everyone around you equally dwelling."³⁰ She told them: "that which you do for the whole, not for a part, that which you do as living in God and doing God's work - that action alone does not bind the man, for it is an action that is sacrifice, and has no binding power; and that sort of action is what we call Service."³¹ The law of karma emphatically does not mean we have a fate to be endured. It means we are called on to act selflessly for the good of others. Hinduism, and its concept of karma, therefore, provide an impetus to rational, moral behaviour in a way neither Christianity nor materialism does. Besant identified two ideals between which individuals and nations choose: there is "material wealth" and the gratification of innumerable, spurious wants, or there is "knowledge of the intellect," "wealth of wisdom," "the growth of art," "cultivation of beauty," "the realising of man's higher nature."³² The asceticism of the Hindu represents, therefore, a rational choice in favour of the true, spiritual life, rather than a superficial, material one.

IV

The way in which Besant's theosophy overturned the Christian justification of empire set the scene for her analysis of the history and current plight of India. As we have seen, the legitimating discourse of the Raj incorporated a historiography based on the idea that the British Empire was the instrument of God's purpose. The empire was bringing Christianity to heathen peoples so as eventually to enable them to rule themselves in a rational, liberal manner. India had been an unchanging land in which individual liberty lay crushed beneath religious superstition and traditional custom. Now the British were bringing Christian, political virtues, such as respect for the individual, to the Indian people. Debates among the colonial authorities typically arose not because any of them rejected this basic assumption, but only because people

disagreed about the extent to which the Indians already had come to accept the relevant virtues or the speed at which they might be expected so to do.³³ Besant's theosophy, in contrast, implied traditional Indian society embodied an ideal religion and ethic. The Indian nation, in essence, was an organic community bound together so as to pursue spiritual enlightenment through a recognition of personal duty. Sometimes Besant's theosophy even led her to claim that the Aryan society of ancient India was the work of higher beings - the Mahatmas - whose wisdom ensured it had been ideal.

Besant argued that the Aryan state with its caste system was designed to serve the religious purpose of advancing the universal process of spiritual evolution. For a start, Aryan society aided the growth of the soul by subordinating man's lower nature to his higher one. The hierarchy of castes showed that the Aryans prized the spiritual life over material luxury: "the highest caste in the older days, the Brahmans, were a poor class, and the wealth of the Brahman lay in his wisdom, not in his money-bags"; indeed, "the Brahmana might possess only two cloths, one in wear to-day, one drying for to-morrow, but social consideration was paid to him, kings would descend from their thrones and touch his feet, if he was a known Brahmana, a teacher of truth."³⁴ The Aryans lived pure, simple lives dedicated to the conquest of their lower selves as a means to contact with the divine. In addition, Aryan society promoted spiritual advancement by defining, and so encouraging performance of, one's dharma. The location of individuals in a caste indicates that they are part of a greater whole; each individual occupies a specific place within a social whole, and has a duty to act in accord with that place. The Aryans recognised that religion pervades every area of life, so no behaviour can be left solely to the individual conscience. Thus, Hinduism tolerates widely different religious beliefs, whilst also insisting on strict standards of conduct: orthodox Hindus can believe more or less what they like about God, but they can "not inter-marry with another caste or eat polluted food."³⁵ By insisting on strict social standards, the Aryans ensured everybody acted as required by their dharma.

Moreover, Besant continued, because the caste system encouraged the performance of one's duty, it promoted one's spiritual development. It did so because the individual evolves through a series of reincarnations designed to ensure his progress through the essential stages of life as represented by the four pure castes. Each soul evolves from serving as a shudra (cultivator caste) to exercising the charity of a vaishya (merchant caste), to being willing to sacrifice one's life as a kshatriya (warrior caste), and finally on to serving as a brahmin (priestly caste). Each individual is at a particular stage of evolution; his caste reflects the stage he is at; and the caste system helps him to live as required at this stage and so progress on to the next one. Caste indicates the nature of people's dharma; it encourages them to do their duty and so facilitates their spiritual development.

According to Besant, the emphasis the Aryans placed on social duty and spiritual development produced an organic community in which religion ruled social conduct and in which each cared for his neighbour. Aryan society was an association of individuals bound together in pursuit of shared spiritual goals; it was not a neutral arena in which atomistic individuals fought for competing, private goods. So upright were the Aryans that contracts were made by word of mouth rather than pen and paper, whilst valuable items were left with strangers without any need for a receipt. The institutional embodiment of the organic nature of Aryan society was the self-governing village. The village, Besant argued, had been the fundamental, enduring feature of Indian society through the ages: emperors came and went, but the village remained as a self-sufficient community providing stability and continuity in the lives of ordinary people. Each village consisted of a core of buildings for living, working, and resting, surrounded first by arable land, then pasture land, and finally a natural or planted forest. The village itself owned the land on which it was situated. Sometimes and in some places villagers worked the land in common, dividing the produce among themselves, whilst at other times and in other places they periodically reallocated the land among themselves. Even in the latter case, however, the villagers always treated

the land as a common possession on loan to the family that cultivated it. The villagers had a common right to both the pasture land, where they grazed animals under the watchful eye of a shepherd, and the forest, where they gathered wood for fuel and building. Each village supported craftsmen, such as carpenters and potters, and also professionals, such as astrologists and priests, by granting them a share in village lands, or, more usually, village crops, and by making gifts to them during religious festivals. In return the craftsmen and professionals rendered their services free to the members of the village as and when necessary. Each family in the village had a house with a yard and a vegetable garden. The life of the community revolved around the temple as a centre of religion and moral culture. Learned men offered a free system of education for those who wanted to attend, and every village contained a school to provide a rudimentary education for all. Everybody willingly devoted time and effort to work on communal projects such as digging a well. Each village was governed by a panchayat (village council). In small ones, the panchayat might consist of all adult males, but in larger ones, it was composed of elected representatives - a primitive form of democracy that spread to Europe only there to be overwhelmed by feudalism. Although panchayats sometimes made new rules, usually they had only to administer customary laws and do things such as distribute water. Some villages chose to form larger federations, and a few even chose a king to resolve disputes between them and to act as their general protector. Although the villages then paid the king between a twelfth and a quarter of their produce, Besant insisted such payments did not resemble the rent paid to landlords and capitalists in the west - the king did not own the land so the payments were more or less voluntary. India, Besant concluded, is an organic community, with "no classes, separated from each other by dividing gulfs, such as exist in the West."³⁶

A view of Indian society as organic and spiritual left Besant needing a very different historiography from that incorporated in the dominant discourse of the Raj. She could not accept that India was a land of unchanging superstitions being liberated

and made rational by the British. Instead, she needed to explain how Indian society had fallen away from the Aryan ideal. She did so by pointing to the disruptive effects of foreign rule. The glories of the Aryan polity had begun to wither after the invasion of the Muslims, since when "India has been sleeping."³⁷ The effects of British rule, however, had been still more shattering. Although many Indians took on the outward customs of their Muslim invaders, only with the arrival of the British did they begin to adopt the mental habits of their rulers. Cultural interchange, such as had occurred between Hindu and Muslim, can be beneficial, but the British crushed the indigenous culture, leaving the Indians with no self-respect. Earlier invaders rarely touched the soul of India; indeed, India typically captured the invaders, turning them into Aryans whilst also being enriched by their culture. The British, in contrast, had destroyed the great religious basis of India by pushing western ideas and habits on to her people. Crucially, because the British came for profit alone, they despised Hindu culture and learning, so they trampled over Hindu art and religion. The real difference, according to Besant, was, therefore, that the British had been the first foreigners to come to India for profit with no intention of learning from her culture. The British invaded India not to spread Christianity, nor to free a subject people, nor to find adventure, but to trade, and, in particular, to find new markets for the products they produced in vast quantities after the industrial revolution. They even conquered India by the dishonest means typical of the merchant class, rather than the more honourable ways of both the Indians themselves and British soldiers. The East India Company paid scant heed to treaties; it initiated quarrels among the Indians, playing one ruler off against another by, say, hiring troops to one until he became too powerful when they would help his foe. Indeed, almost every quarrel in eighteenth-century India was encouraged, or actively started, by Europeans fighting over trade. "England," Besant concluded, "did not 'conquer her [India] by the sword' but by the help of her own swords, by bribery, intrigue, and most quiet diplomacy, fomenting of divisions, and playing off one party against another."³⁸

Once the British conquered India, they systematically discredited Hinduism by teaching not indigenous literature and religion, but subjects designed to produce the clerks needed by first the East India Company and then Imperial rule. Besant argued that the British had sapped Indian self-respect; they had "found a nation of warriors," but were "reducing them to a nation of clerks."³⁹ Worse still, the British had instilled in Indians a European concern with rights. Indians now regarded caste as a mark of privilege and status that indicated how much respect an individual should be shown. The brahmins had started to demand greater consideration than others and also to neglect their duties and responsibilities. Once the brahmins had begun so to neglect the spiritual life, the other castes too had started to ignore their dharma. Today each caste repudiated its true nature: brahmins sought wealth and luxury, shudras wanted to do the work of the twice-born. Caste stood for social distinction, not social duty, so the lower castes naturally had become angry and jealous of higher ones. The existing caste system divided Indians into different groups instead of uniting them in a greater whole. The resulting conflicts ruined Indian society, for "out of the base marriage of Caste to Separateness, instead of the true wedlock of Caste with Service, there sprang a huge and monstrous progeny of social evils, which preyed, and are still preying, on the life of India."⁴⁰ As well as corrupting the great religious culture of India, British rule had destroyed her economy and denied her people the right of self-government. For a start, Besant complained, as did many Indian nationalists, of the drain on Indian wealth needed to pay for the India Office, pensions to retired civil servants, and an army only allegedly needed to defend India's frontiers. She pointed out that the speed of modern communications enabled Britons to come to India for a short stay and take home the wealth they acquired, whereas earlier invaders, such as the Muslims, had had to spend the wealth they gleaned from India in India. British rule, therefore, had led to increased taxation of the Indian peasant, and so, in turn, to recurring famines, and a neglect of the public works, such as irrigation, needed to promote economic development. In addition, the British ruined the self-governing village of the Aryans

by, first, introducing peasant proprietors instead of common ownership of the land, and, second, replacing elected officers responsible to the village itself with appointed officials responsible to higher echelons of government. The British had failed to use the genius of the Indians for democratically managing their affairs. They ruled India through an administrative bureaucracy that paid no attention to the voices of Indians, but relied instead on executive fiat reinforced by large doses of repressive legislation. How, Besant asked pertinently, can India believe "in England's love of liberty in face of the Arms Act, the house searchings, the espionage, the autocracy, the frustration of her dearest hopes."⁴¹

According to Besant, therefore, the British were not creating the basis for a liberal and rational form of government in India. The key political question was not how long it would take the Indians to adopt the Christian values needed for self-rule. On the contrary, the British had brought to India a corrupt individualism and decadent materialism that had done much to destroy the glories of the Aryan polity. The key political question, therefore, was how to return India to its true self. Besant argued, somewhat paradoxically, that the replacement of the East India Company by the Crown ruling through Parliament ushered in a "New Era" in Indian affairs. The New Era was enshrined in Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858, which Besant described as "the Magna Carta of India."⁴² This proclamation committed Britain to the creation of self-government in India. Its impact had been reinforced by the study by Indians of British history, a study that had awakened them from the stupor induced by Company rule, and led them to rediscover their love of liberty and so form a National Congress. With the British and Indians alike committed to home rule, Besant continued, the only remaining issue is how best to bring it about. Here her pantheism led her to argue that all genuine change must come from within: the revitalisation of India must begin with a religious renaissance, and flow out through moral and social renewal to its political end. Because spirit infuses all matter, the revival of the Indian nation depends on the Indian people returning to the moral rectitude and simple living of the ancient Aryans.

Besant asked the Indians, therefore, to recognise that national liberation could occur only after they recognised their duty to the greater whole, only after they returned to their true Hindu roots. "The unifying of India," she explained has to be both "founded on and permeated by a spiritual life recognised as the supreme good, as the highest goal."⁴³ The first task of nationalists, therefore, is to win over the hearts and minds of the Indian people, to restore their pride in their Aryan heritage, to inspire them to remodel their lives in accord Aryan ideals and Aryan customs. Indian nationalism, properly understood, is a religious movement.

V

In a sense, therefore, Besant was quite right to claim that her nationalist activities grew logically out of her earlier religious and social work, or at least that her earlier activities had been vital spadework for her nationalism. From the moment she first arrived in India, she worked to promote a religious and moral renaissance based on traditional Hindu ideals. She propagated theosophy, founded the Central Hindu College in Benares, worked to turn the College into a National Hindu University, and formed the Brothers of Service; she did all these things in order to revive the glories of the Indian nation. Once she thought the longed for religious renaissance was under way, she naturally looked for its political effects. She came to think that the time was ripe to combine her religious and social work with more overtly political work. Thus, she wrote to Pherozshah Mehta and Dadabhai Naoroji to ask if the Indian National Congress would head a fourfold campaign for religious, educational, social, and political reform.⁴⁴ When they declined to do so on the grounds that Congress should be a purely political organisation - something she could not accept - then she turned to politics. She formed the All-India Home Rule League, worked successfully for the transformation of the Indian National Congress, was chosen as its President in 1917, and did much to create the circumstances in which Gandhi rose to power.⁴⁵

The purpose of our study, however, has not been merely to recover the set of beliefs that led Besant into the nationalist movement. Rather, we suggested a study of her thought would illustrate the way in which the indology that did so much to justify the Raj also provided resources for its critics. Here indology represented India as an unchanging land based on Hinduism with its dismissal of the phenomenal world as unreal and its caste system. The ruling discourse of the Raj read this indology in the context of an evangelical Christianity. Hinduism could not sustain either a rational attitude to the facts or a suitable respect for the individual personality. The British, in accord with divine providence, were bringing a Christian culture to India in a way that eventually would enable the Indians to rule themselves. Besant, in contrast, read the same indology in the context of the criticisms of evangelical Christianity that arose in response to things like evolutionary theory and ethical positivism. Just as secularists and spiritualists denounced evangelical Christianity as unscientific, so she argued Hinduism incorporated a true, spiritual science incorporating the discoveries that had undermined the Bible. And just as the socialists denounced evangelical Christianity for its excessive individualism, so she argued Hinduism incorporated a social morality promoting universal brotherhood. Besant, in other words, exemplifies the dialectical relationship of much Indian nationalism to the ruling discourse of the Raj. Certainly, we found in Besant ideas that recur time and time again in the thought of other Indian nationalists, including Gandhi and Nehru.⁴⁶ We found: a spiritual and organic India contrasted with a materialistic and individualistic west; an emphasis on the source of empire being a search for profit, and, more particularly, the need to sell commodities; a reduction of conflicts between Indians to the machinations of the British; a critique of the economic impact of the Raj on India; and so on. These ideas, our study of Besant suggests, represent a sort of mirror image of the Christian discourse with which the British justified their rule. Whether or not they also provide us with an adequate account of the world is, of course, an entirely different matter.

¹ I thank the Nuffield Foundation for awarding me a grant with which to pursue my research.

² A. Besant, "India's Mission Among Nations", in India: Essays and Addresses (London: Theosophical Publishing, 1913), p. 3.

³ See especially E. Said, Orientalism (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); and R. Inden, Imagining India (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁴ Given Said's debt to Michel Foucault, it is interesting to note the latter insisted all power creates opportunities for resistance. M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in H. Dreyfus & P. Rainbow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), partic. pp. 222-23.

⁵ Perhaps, however, we need not have been so cautious in our choice of example. After all, the religious and cultural background to Indian nationalism lay in a Neo-Hinduism that Sanskritists typically identify as a break in the Hindu tradition, a break, moreover, produced by the impact of the west, its Christianity, and its indology. See A. Bharati, "The Hindu Renaissance and Its Apologetic Patterns", Journal of Asian Studies 29 (1970), 267-88; P. Hacker, "Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism", in Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta, ed. W. Halbfass (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 229-55; W. Halbfass, India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988), partic. pp. 219ff; and, more generally, K. Jones, Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁶ Besant published two versions of her autobiography, one before and one after she became a theosophist. See respectively A. Besant, Autobiographical Sketches (London: Freethought, 1885); and A. Besant, An Autobiography (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1983). The most detailed biography is A. Nethercot, The First Five Lives of Annie Besant (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1961); and A. Nethercot, The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1963). A more reliable study is A. Taylor, Annie Besant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). A shorter one is R. Dinnage, Annie Besant (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

⁷ On Victorian Christianity, see B. Hilton, The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and G. Rowell, Hell and the Victorians (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

⁸ O. Chadwick, The Victorian Church, 2 Vols. (London: A. & C. Black, 1971), partic. vol. 2, chap. 2.

⁹ J. Altholz, "The Warfare of Conscience with Theology", in J. Altholz, ed., The Mind and Art of Victorian England (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 58-77.

¹⁰ On Victorian doubt, see L. Butler, Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses (London: Harvester, 1990); and F. Turner, Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian Britain (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).

¹¹ On these roles, see C. Dyhouse, "Mothers and Daughters in the Middle-Class Home, c. 1870-1914", in J. Lewis, ed., Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940 (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 27-47. On the evangelical basis of the discourse justifying them, see C. Hall, "The Early Formation of

Victorian Domestic Ideology", in S. Burman, ed., Fit Work for Women (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), pp. 15-32.

¹² A. Besant, Why I Do Not Believe in God (London: Freethought, 1887), p. 4.

¹³ A. Besant, The Socialist Movement (London: Freethought, 1887), p. 21.

¹⁴ Our Corner, February 1888.

¹⁵ M. Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition", Journal of the American Academy of Religion 62 (1994), 747-67; and B. Campbell, Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

¹⁶ A. Besant, The Ancient Wisdom (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1939). Besant, of course, followed Blavatsky's teachings, for which, see H. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy, 2 Vols. (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1888).

¹⁷ National Reformer, 30 June 1889.

¹⁸ Lucifer, 15 June 1889.

¹⁹ Compare G. Studdart-Kennedy, British Christians, Indian Nationalists, and the Raj (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁰ Although many theosophists, like Blavatsky and Besant, opposed Christianity, some were more neutral, and a few even tried to tie theosophy to a tradition of Christian mysticism.

²¹ A. Besant, What is Theosophy? (Adyar, Madras: Theosophist Office, 1912), p. 9. One of her earliest theosophical articles considered the relationship between karma and social action. See Lucifer, August 1889.

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- ²² A. Besant, The Basis of Morality (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1915), p. 26.
- ²³ A. Besant, "Eastern Castes and Western Classes", in India: Essays, pp. 48-49.
- ²⁴ Besant, Ancient Wisdom, p. 308.
- ²⁵ A. Besant, "The Place of Politics in the Life of a Nation", in India: Essays, p. 131.
- ²⁶ A. Besant, The East and the West (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Office, 1908), p. 9.
- ²⁷ Besant developed a spiritual, occult, and theosophical science as an alternative to the materialist one that dominated western culture. See A. Besant & C. Leadbeater, Occult Chemistry (Adyar, Madras: Theosophist Office, 1909).
- ²⁸ Besant, Ancient Wisdom, p. 229.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 274.
- ³⁰ A. Besant, The Duties of the Theosophist (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1917), p. 25.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 25.
- ³² Besant, "Place of Politics", p. 152.
- ³³ Compare Studdart-Kennedy, British Christians. On the way Besant's Indian activities transformed such debates, see P. Robb, "The Government of India and Annie Besant", Modern Asian Studies 10 (1976), 107-30.
- ³⁴ Besant, The East and The West, pp. 22-23.
- ³⁵ A. Besant, Four Great Religions, (London: Theosophical Publishers, n.d.), p. 10.
- ³⁶ New India, 26 December 1915.
- ³⁷ Besant, India: Essays, p. 19.

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- ³⁸ A. Besant, How India Wrought for Freedom, (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing, 1915), pp. LV-LVI.
- ³⁹ A. Besant, India: A Nation, (London: Home Rule for India League, 1917), pp. 12 & 11.
- ⁴⁰ A. Besant, "East and West", in India: Essays p. 78.
- ⁴¹ A. Besant, India and the Empire (London: Theosophical Publishing, 1914), p. 16
- ⁴² Besant, How India Wrought for Freedom, p. XXXV
- ⁴³ A. Besant, "The Means of India's Regeneration", in India: Essays, p. 119.
- ⁴⁴ Besant gave a normal account of her entry into nationalist politics in, A. Besant, The Future of Indian Politics (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing, 1922). Later she added the occult explanation that she had acted under the orders of the Rishi Agartya, the Mahatma responsible for guiding the Indian nation. See Theosophist, November 1929.
- ⁴⁵ H. Owen, "Towards Nation-Wide Agitation and Organisation: The Home Rule Leagues, 1915-18", in D. Low, ed., Soundings in Modern South Asian History (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), pp. 159-95.
- ⁴⁶ M. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Karyalaya, 1938); and J. Nehru, The Discovery of India (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1956).