

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF MRS. ANNIE RESANT:

"

THE ENGLISH YEARS (1847 - 1893)

by

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Though we must expect in the case of our late President [of the Theosophical Society] a crop of so-called biographies irritating in their stupidity, and sometimes revolting in their cruel ignorance . . . [the biography ought to be written by someone who] knows something both of the spirit of the warrior and of the seer, and who therefore is able to enter into the spirit of Annie Besant. But the task is herculean, and Herculeses are few and far between.

G. S. Arundale, 1934

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Finally, to my parents to whom this dissertation is affectionately dedicated.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps a little hard on Annie Besant that the various phases of her public activity should be explained by others who cannot in the nature of things possibly know as much about them as she knows herself, and whose right to determine the order of their importance for her is very questionable.<sup>1</sup>

This writer risks this "sort of impertinence"<sup>2</sup> in his attempt to explain her political thought in England (1847-1893) in as coherent a manner as possible, a task rendered formidable by the extreme profundity and ambiguity of her writings and speeches. In an age which did not lack for "prophets," Mrs. Besant was born ten years after the young Queen ascended the throne in 1837. This study will limit itself to the political thought and activities of Mrs. Besant in England exclusively as she undertakes her argosy from a rigid Evangelicalism through Theism, Atheistic Free-thought and Reform, Fabian Socialism to Theosophy. As in the age of classical Greece, the 19th Century was resplendent with great minds and dominant personalities. It is hoped that this writing will accentuate to a greater degree than has been

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant's Passage Through Fabian Socialism, "Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work" (London: The Leighton Printing Company, 1924), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

hitherto attempted the role and political thought of Mrs. Besant in England in a magnificent age. To W. T. Stead she represented,

. . . one of the three remarkable women of the apostolic type of this generation. Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Butler, and Mrs. Besant constitute a remarkable trio of propagandists militant, whose zeal, energy, and enthusiasm have left a deep impress upon our time.

In 1893, Mrs. Besant left for India, a convinced Theosophist until her death in 1933. Dr. Rabindranath Tagore is moved to remark, "The only European who has shared our sorrow, incurring the anger and derision of her countrymen, is Mrs. Annie Besant."<sup>4</sup> To the poetic fancy of Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. Besant was "this dazzling pilgrim from the West" and without her and her enthusiasm, "one could not have seen Mr. Gandhi leading the cause of Indian Freedom today. It was Mrs. Besant who laid the foundation of modern India. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

As a Theosophist in India, Mrs. Besant worked in quite a different intellectual and political framework from that of England, and she both influenced and was influenced by other intellectual and political currents. There existed as many aspects of her activity in India as in England, if not more, as she played a role quite distinct from her English experiences. After her arrival in India as a Theosophist, she set into motion the great movements of National Education and Social, Educational, Religious, and Political Reform and breathed a new and dynamic spirit into the movement of Indian Independence. Her work and

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<sup>3</sup>W. T. Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch. 1891 (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1946), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, A Woman World-Honoured: Annie Besant, Warrior, Vol. XI (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1943), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup>Sarojini Naidu, Ibid., pp. 66-67.

thought in India cannot be compartmentalized; religion, education, politics, and reform, each formed an important aspect of Theosophic truth which, appearing diverse, had an underlying harmonious unity and purpose. The objectives supreme in her mind were the achievement of a new Renaissance of India which was to lead inevitably to the ideal of Indian Self-Determination and Self-Government as an equal partner with England in a new concept of an Empire embodied in her "Commonwealth of India Bill." To Mrs. Besant, the idea of Swaraj or Independence within the context of her concept of the Empire was inevitable. The "Commonwealth of India Bill" drafted under her guidance by a National Convention organized by her and composed of the members of Provincial Assemblies and other distinguished Indians contained a system of graded franchise in step with Mrs. Besant's concept of the Indian political heritage but adapted to the linking of England and India in a partnership for the good of humanity. To fully appreciate the extent of her activity, her impact, and her thought, they must be seen in the context of the growth and development of the Indian National Congress from its early beginning in 1885, the British impact on India, and the gradual constitutional progress towards Self-Government in the hey-day of British dominance, particularly from 1861 onwards, as seen in the passage of the Indian Councils Act of 1861, the Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905, the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1918, and the Simon Commission and Round Table Conferences in the late 1920's and early 1930's. Across the Indian stage strode Tilak, Gandhi, Gokhale, Motilal Nehru, and his son, Jawaharalal, and many more; and her interaction with such men is of the essence in evaluating the measure of her contribution and the nature of

her thought. Out of Theosophy arose a new concept of political thinking, of liberty, rights, nationalism, traditionalism and modernity, democratic growth, Caste and its role, the State and citizen, as she set in to effect her plan for an intellectual and spiritual revival of India. Through Mrs. Besant's thought ran the thread of reform and a new concept of nationalism and an Empire rooted in Theosophic ideals. Mrs. Besant in India breathed a new and dynamic spirit into Indian political thought of the early 20th Century.

To her task of bringing about a new Renaissance in India, she wed Eastern and Western thought in a consistent pattern peculiarly her own. P. S. Muhar divides Indian Political Thought into three distinct schools--the "Occidentalists" such as Ranade, Gokhale, and Surenranath Bannerjee who sought their inspiration from John Stuart Mill; the "Romanticists" as Tilak and Gandhi whose spiritual home was the East; and the "Synthesists" or "Culturists" as Tagore and Pal who sought to assimilate Western ideals with traditional Indian culture and civilization.<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Besant, it may be suggested, belonged to the last category, and a full and complete evaluation of her thought in India deserves far better than a fleeting glimpse, particularly her ideological conflict with Gandhi and his philosophy which was responsible for her loss of popularity in India. It is hoped that another writing will deal comprehensively with her thought and work in India. Her regeneration of India along Theosophical ideals was largely instrumental in bringing about the growth of reform and political reconstruction and

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<sup>6</sup> P. S. Muhar, "Synthesists or Culturists; A Study of Indian Political Thought," in Studies in Political Science, ed. by J. S. Bains (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 207.

adding a new dimension to the study of Modern Indian Political Thought.

Mrs. Besant, whether in England or in India, left her impress upon the times in so many spheres of life that, writes Sri Prakasa, ". . . a careful study of her could easily put one in touch with most of the problems of human existence."<sup>7</sup>

The Rev. Dr. John Haynes Holmes is right when he says that, ". . . when all the documents are available, all the facts known, Mrs. Besant's life will be found to present one of the most fascinating biographical studies of all times."<sup>8</sup> While it is very true that ". . . political science without biography is a form of taxidermy"<sup>9</sup> and that the study of political thought is incomplete if it neglects the biographical aspect; yet the major thrust of this dissertation is neither to limit its nature exclusively to a "political biography" nor to attempt a psycho-pathological analysis of a complex and varied personality.

Mrs. Besant has written profusely about herself in her Annie Besant: An Autobiography (1893) and Autobiographical Sketches (1885) which demand attention even if their scholarly and literary qualities leave much to be desired. The writings seem to combine the autobiography of the "confessional" type with that of the "processional" with a fair amount of the "intellectual."<sup>10</sup> She exposes the reader to

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<sup>7</sup>Sri Prakasa, Annie Besant: As Woman and As Leader (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1941), p. xii.

<sup>8</sup>John Haynes Holmes, A Woman World-Honoured: Annie Besant, Warrior, Vol. XI, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>Harold D. Lasswell, Psychopathology and Politics (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Max Lerner, "Preface to the Autobiography," in Essential

the innermost recesses of her emotions and mind. In the manner of St. Augustine and Rousseau, her inner sufferings and torments are vividly dramatized, leaving the reader with a feeling of complete exhaustion. It is "processional" inasmuch as it tells of those, like Charles Bradlaugh, with whom she fought for a cause unpopular in an age of Christian ardor. The "intellectual" or the "autobiography of the mind"<sup>11</sup> is not nearly as pronounced as that of John Stuart Mill, but the influences which shaped her thought are not ignored. Its similarity to the Autobiography by Mill lies in ". . . the life of thought and action in the cause of reform."<sup>12</sup> Yet she can write with unexpected modesty, "It is a difficult thing to tell the story of a life, and yet more difficult when that life is one's own."<sup>13</sup>

Much as the political thought of John Stuart Mill or Rousseau is inexplicable without references to their personal life, a mere analysis of the thought of Mrs. Besant without any references to her intellectual and spiritual odyssey would be unpardonable. But this must be approached with some caution. Crane Brinton reminds us, "To study the ideas of a given man involves the student in the whole life of his subject. But not all a man's life is pertinent to his ideas." Also, there is no express formula to distinguish what is significant from the irrelevant, for

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Works of John Stuart Mill, ed. by Max Lerner (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), pp. 2-3.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>Annie Besant, An Autobiography (2nd ed.; London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), p. 5.

We must ask ourselves whether a given biographical fact seems to enter into the man's political ideas, and if it does not, cast it aside no matter how it may seem to enliven our text.<sup>14</sup>

This is particularly so with Mrs. Besant whose moralistic exuberance often leads the unwary reader into many a strange by-way.

Moreover, even if her accounts of herself may be "developmentally significant,"<sup>15</sup> this writing is not concerned with the deeper psychic manifestations of Mrs. Besant's psyche and soma.<sup>16</sup> There is no attempt to invoke the methodology of Erik H. Erikson's "psycho-historical" approach, the nature and significance of any "identity-crisis" or "transference."<sup>17</sup> Erikson did, however, demonstrate,

. . . a keen awareness that the role of a major innovator in religion or politics must be explained concurrently on two distinct levels: the personal or psychological and the social or historical.<sup>18</sup>

A study of the thought of Mrs. Besant is impossible without an understanding of the "climate of opinion" of the times. To divorce the situational factors from her thought would be an essay in obscurantism. To understand Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, or Mill, one must be aware of the historical, social, political, economic, and religious conditions of their times. "Political issues, after all," writes Black,

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<sup>14</sup>Crane Brinton, English Political Thought in the 19th Century (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), pp. 9-10.

<sup>15</sup>Lasswell, Psychopathology and Politics, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>See Sigmund Freud and William Bullitt, Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967).

<sup>17</sup>See Erik H. Erikson, Young Man Luther (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1958) and Erik H. Erikson, Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1969).

<sup>18</sup>Dankwart A. Rustow, "Introduction to the Issue 'Philosophers and Kings Studies in Leadership,'" Daedalus, Vol. 97 (Summer, 1968), 688.

"derive from economic, social, ideological, even psychological elements, none of which should be assessed in a vacuum."<sup>19</sup> And Carl Becker suggests that, "Whether arguments command assent or not depends less upon the logic that conveys them than upon the climate of opinion in which they are sustained."<sup>20</sup> As George S. Sabine so aptly suggests, political theory is always put forth in "reference to a pretty specific situation," which needs to be understood in order to clearly grasp what the writer is concerned about. Thus,

. . . to reconstruct, as nearly as we can, the time, the place, and the circumstance in which it was produced is always an important factor in understanding a political philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

This is particularly true of Mrs. Besant who reacted with passionate intensity to the times in which she lived, whether in England or in India. The Rt. Hon. Philip Snowden says, "No woman of this generation has devoted supreme gifts of oratory and intellect to great humanitarian causes with such energy and disinterestedness as Mrs. Besant."<sup>22</sup> To evaluate her thought in England up to the time she left for India is, perhaps, to see through a glass darkly the currents of change of the 19th Century.

Political thought is also responsive to personalities and in-

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<sup>19</sup>Eugene C. Black, ed., British Politics in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Walker and Co., 1969), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Carl L. Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>George H. Sabine, "What Is Political Theory?" in Contemporary Political Thought: Issues in Scope, Value, and Direction, ed. by James A. Gould and Vincent V. Thursby (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), p. 10.

<sup>22</sup>Philip Snowden, A Woman World-Honoured: Annie Besant, Warrior, p. 60.

stitutions. This is particularly so with Mrs. Besant, and no fruitful account of her thought can ignore those persons, such as the Fabians, and institutions with which she came into contact and with which she reacted with passionate zeal and eloquence. Plamenatz writes,

The artist ploughs his own furrow; the scholar, even in the privacy of his study, cultivates a common field. He is responsible to others for what he does; he feels the need to explain his purpose, to justify his efforts.<sup>23</sup>

It is hoped that the pages that follow will do so, for no introduction can fully justify the rationale of the work. It is also hoped that it will provide a greater understanding of the thought of Mrs. Besant, culled largely from her own writings, particularly as a Secularist, Reformer, Fabian Socialist, and Theosophist.

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<sup>23</sup>John Plamenatz, "Introduction," Man and Society: Political and Social Theory: Bentham through Marx, Vol. II (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1963), p. ix.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A PRELUDE

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct the other way. . . .

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

Political thought pays scant regard to chronological niceties. The Victorian Age (1837-1901) is inexplicable without reference to that which preceded it. The thought of the 19th Century is marked by "the speed and variety of social and political change."<sup>24</sup> Belief and unbelief, liberalism and conservatism, reform and reaction, biological determinism and Evangelicalism, each left its impress in an age also marked by great intellectual fertility and a dynamic humanitarianism. There was, according to Gertrude Himmelfarb, a distinct "Victorian ethos" in its ability to absorb contrary ideologies and ideas,<sup>25</sup> and regardless of the efforts of Lytton Strachey whose brilliant prose clouds Victorian splendor, its "whole meaning is lost if it is thought

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<sup>24</sup> Wilfred Harrison, Conflict and Compromise: History of British Political Thought, 1593-1900 (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 157.

<sup>25</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Introduction," Victorian Minds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. xi.

of as a country of stuffy complacency and black top-hatted moral prig-  
gery."<sup>26</sup> It was heir to the cataclysmic impact of the Industrial  
Revolution and the events in France of the 18th Century.

The Industrial Revolution highlighted ". . . the technological  
changes that occurred between 1700 and 1850,"<sup>27</sup> eroded the established  
patterns of a village economy with its traditional ties. The belief  
was generated that industrialization and technological change were  
beneficent, and ". . . change in itself often came to be regarded as  
desirable."<sup>28</sup> The city bred its slums and its poor, while the country  
landlords, resplendent with the power and wealth that came of Whig  
patronage, continued the "enclosure" of open or common land which had  
been denounced by More and Latimer as far back as the early Tudor  
Period. Mrs. Besant in The Redistribution of Political Power (1885),  
written during her Fabian experience, is not unaware of the "power of  
the great houses" which "controlled the elections of so many boroughs  
that the peers practically made the government."<sup>29</sup> The new breed of a  
rising middle class refused ". . . to accept their position as only one  
among several components of a permanently hierarchical order, they

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<sup>26</sup>David Thomson, England in the Nineteenth Century (1815-1914)  
(Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 33.

<sup>27</sup>Arvel B. Erickson and Martin J. Havran, England: Pre-history  
to the Present (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1968),  
p. 328.

<sup>28</sup>Mulford Q. Sibley, Political Ideas and Ideologies: A History  
of Political Thought (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970),  
p. 433.

<sup>29</sup>Annie Besant, The Redistribution of Political Power (London:  
Freethought Publishing Company, 1885), p. 4.

felt peculiarly representative of the whole society"<sup>30</sup> and challenged the "Old Tory" cosmology of a Whig oligarchy, inspired by Pope's "the great chain of being."

"There is," writes Crane Brinton, "in the Victorian cosmology a strong economic component."<sup>31</sup> The rising entrepreneur discovered in The Wealth of Nations (1776) an economic creed and a philosophy suited to the growth of trade, manufacture, and commerce. Mercantilism gave place to a belief in Laissez-faire, laissez-aller, va du lui-meme inspired by the French physiocrats. Adam Smith assumed that,

Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men.<sup>32</sup>

He "discovered" that "self-interest and benevolence were in pre-established and harmonious accord."<sup>33</sup>

With the enfranchisement of the middle-classes, laissez-faire and free trade became more firmly anchored and were to reach their zenith by the middle of the century. After 1830, "The preaching of non-intervention as the supreme duty of the State, internally as well as externally--seems to have passed."<sup>34</sup> The trend was now from in-

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<sup>30</sup>Samuel H. Beer, British Politics in the Collectivist Age (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 36.

<sup>31</sup>Crane Brinton, The Shaping of Modern Thought (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 154.

<sup>32</sup>George J. Stigler, ed., Adam Smith: Selections from The Wealth of Nations (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957), p. 87.

<sup>33</sup>John H. Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), p. 138.

<sup>34</sup>Ernest Barker, Political Thought in England: From Herbert Spencer to the Present Day (New York: Henry Holt and Co., n.d.), p. 20.

dividualism to collectivism, and soon after 1880 the revolutionary socialism of H. M. Hyndman, William Morris, and others, together with the evolutionary socialism of the Fabians, sought to re-organize the means of production of wealth. Regardless of the passage away from individualism and laissez-faire, there remained in mid-19th Century England a curious anomaly. Free-trade, as a viable economic practice, remained at peace with "a whole set of government regulating acts relating to factories, child labor, chimney sweeps, trade unions, and the like."<sup>35</sup> To Mrs. Besant it was proof that the class that won power in 1832 "was not unworthy of the freedom it had gained." And the Act of 1832 seemed "Republican at the basis."<sup>36</sup> However, it may be mentioned that the "newly arrived" segments of English society, in their fight for representation, were not motivated by any ideals of justice or equity or the democratic principle---but simply resented aristocratic Whig privilege. The fact remains that Reform in England gained momentum as in the passage of the Factory Acts of 1842 and 1850.

In the glow of economic well-being where "Progress and perfectibility appeared to be the destiny of men,"<sup>37</sup> the faith of the Enlightenment in the "self-sufficiency" of reason and the ability of man to "establish paradise on earth by their own powers and in their own image"<sup>38</sup> was rudely interrupted by a tale few enjoyed hearing. Human ills were not, as Godwin had declared, the product of a defective

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<sup>35</sup>Brinton, Shaping of Modern Thought, p. 155.

<sup>36</sup>Besant, Redistribution of Political Power, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup>Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, p. 89.

<sup>38</sup>Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought, p. 118.

environment and faulty institutions. Human misery lay in a "principle of population." The Essay on Population (1798) stated "that population, when unchecked increased in geometrical ratio, and subsistence for man in an arithmetical ratio."<sup>39</sup> Since both food and sexual passion were indispensable to man, the result was, "Among mankind, misery and vice. The former, misery, is an absolutely necessary consequence of it."<sup>40</sup> Further, whether by the application of "preventive checks" which implied late marriages; or by "positive checks," which is limited "chiefly, though not perhaps solely, to the lowest orders of society,"<sup>41</sup> and resulted in great mortality; population is inevitably reduced to the level of food available. It is one of the ironies of history that "Malthusianism" should have come to mean the kind of birth-control that Malthus found so "reprehensible."<sup>42</sup> It was not to appear so to Mrs. Besant in her Neo-Malthusian crusade with Charles Bradlaugh.

The ideology of the French Revolution was for many a new epoch in the "history of man." For others it represented the undermining "of all the principles upon which any order must be built."<sup>43</sup> Its impact across the English Channel was not negligible, and it was to generate a conservative reaction which was a threat to political liberty and reform for a generation. To Burke, the French Revolution was an

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<sup>39</sup>Thomas Robert Malthus, Population: The First Essay (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 7.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>42</sup>Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, p. 103.

<sup>43</sup>Sibley, Political Ideas and Ideologies, p. 432.

outrage. His Reflections on the Revolution in France "probably did not do much to form public opinion in England, which was already turning against France."<sup>44</sup> Imbibed with a reverence for "prescriptive change" and for history, Burke felt the Fall of the Bastille with the "freedom" it promised was anarchy which should not be allowed to infect his countrymen. The French revolutionists were impractical zealots. Also, the Revolution "was to set a new value upon national traditions and the customary pieties which the revolutionists flouted."<sup>45</sup> Few were immune to its significance, and Hegel sought

to come to grips with the spirit of the Revolution, the problems of social change and interdependence, and the question of the national state. Hegel initiated intellectually that central tendency of nineteenth-century thought which saw collective life as forever in flux and human history as progressively enlarging liberty.<sup>46</sup>

There were those in England in whom the Revolution struck a responsive note. Thomas Paine and Dr. Joseph Priestley espoused a cause which ran "counter to the conservative apotheosis of tradition and established authority."<sup>47</sup> Reform Clubs were in evidence; however, many, such as the London Corresponding Society, The Society of Friends of the People, and the Society for Promoting Constitutional Information were interested more in Reform than Revolution. In 1793 when England and France went to war, the climate of intolerance was dis-

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<sup>44</sup>J. Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish, The Western Intellectual Tradition: From Leonardo to Hegel (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 425.

<sup>45</sup>George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory (3rd ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 621.

<sup>46</sup>Sibley, Political Ideas and Ideologies, p. 433.

<sup>47</sup>Francis W. Coker, Recent Political Thought (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1934), p. 27.

played by the ransacking of Priestley's home. But it was the persecution of the Deistic Paine who was "the virtual founder of modern democratic free-thought in Great Britain and the States"<sup>48</sup> that best portrayed the repressive policies of Pitt. Like the philosophes, Paine was a Deist.<sup>49</sup> As yet Deism halted mid-way between an avowed Theism<sup>50</sup> and an outspoken Atheism. Becker does remind us that even the philosophes were close to medieval thought, "They had put off the fear of God, but maintained a respectful attitude toward the Deity. . . . They renounced the authority of church and Bible, but exhibited a naive faith in the authority of nature and reason."<sup>51</sup> But change was inevitable, and the "rationalist cause" which

. . . was checked for a generation by the reaction against the French Revolution grew only the deeper and more powerful through the check; and the nineteenth century closes on a record of freethinking progress which may be said to outbulk that of all the previous centuries of the modern era.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner writes that it is

useful to keep in view that Bradlaugh's Atheism, in the evolution of English Free-thought, is only a generation removed

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<sup>48</sup>J. M. Robertson, A Short History of Freethought: Ancient and Modern (New York: Russell and Russell, 1957), p. 379.

<sup>49</sup>Deism. "1. belief in the existence of a God on the evidence of reason and nature only, with rejection of supernatural revelation (distinguished from theism). 2. belief in a God who created the world but has since remained indifferent to his creation (distinguished from atheism, pantheism, and theism." Clarence L. Barnhart, ed., The American College Dictionary (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 319.

<sup>50</sup>Theism. "1. the belief in one God as the creator and ruler of the universe, without rejection of revelation (distinguished from deism). 2. belief in the existence of a God or gods (opposed to atheism). Ibid., p. 1255.

<sup>51</sup>Becker, Heavenly City, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup>Robertson, Short History of Freethought, p. 383.

from the Deism of Thomas Paine, which is much the same as the Deism of Voltaire.<sup>53</sup>

Paine, a product of the Enlightenment, was the "inspiring force of working-class Radicalism for the next half-century."<sup>54</sup> He diffused a critical scepticism of the Established Church, Biblical Authority, and Monarchy. To him, "The French Revolution promised a rediscovery of innocence, a restoration of the golden age."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the 18th Century rationalists had ". . . comprehended a system of political, social, economic, and cultural philosophy that, in the nineteenth-century, received the name 'liberalism.'<sup>56</sup> For the "rationalists," Science was to replace the revealed laws of God, and the world was seen to be governed by impersonal natural laws which could be investigated by the methods of scientific investigation. Locke and Newton replaced Augustine, and man was seen as capable to fathom the world devoid of any supernatural revelation, thus enabling him to master his environment. This faith in the rationality and goodness of man and the belief in science which led the way to man's earthly perfection, "gave birth to the idea of Progress," and, continues Hallowell, "That confidence was bequeathed to the nineteenth century as possibly the greatest legacy which the eighteenth century could bestow upon the nine-

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<sup>53</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, with an Account of His Parliamentary Struggle, Politics and Teachings, by John M. Robertson, Vol. II (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), p. 115.

<sup>54</sup> S. MacCoby, ed., The English Radical Tradition: 1763-1914 (New York: New York University Press, 1957), p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> John W. Derry, The Radical Tradition: Tom Paine to Lloyd George (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> J. Salwyn Schapiro, Liberalism: Its Meaning and History (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1958), p. 16.

teenth."<sup>57</sup>

Richard Carlile's Republican continued in the tradition of the Rights of Man, and Mill recalls in his Autobiography, "The prosecutions of Richard Carlile and his wife and sister for publications hostile to Christianity, were then exciting much attention. . . ." <sup>58</sup>

In an age not unknown for its moralizing fervor, the anarchist William Godwin (1756-1836) sought to "moralize politics."<sup>59</sup> Emphasizing duty rather than rights, this rugged, responsible individualist pursued justice and a new social order based on a faith in man and the capacity for his perfectibility. His belief echoed Hume and Locke that man, being born without any innate ideas, could be influenced by his surroundings in his development. Thus the road to improvement is to rid man of the causes of their evil--mainly, property. Mary, the daughter of his first wife, was married to Shelley, the "poet of Free-thought,"<sup>60</sup> who was to be deprived of the custody of his children by his first wife, largely owing to his Atheistic views. As Mrs. Besant was to learn much later, the 19th Century was not one to welcome heretical opinion regardless of the justice of its cause and the honor and virtue of its advocate.

With the coming of peace in 1815, the government of Lord

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<sup>57</sup> Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought, p. 132.

<sup>58</sup> John Stuart Mill, "Autobiography," in Essential Works of John Stuart Mill, p. 58.

<sup>59</sup> John Bowle, Politics and Opinion in the 19th Century: An Historical Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 137.

<sup>60</sup> D. M. Bennett, The World's Sages, Thinkers, and Reformers: Being Biographical Sketches (2nd ed.; New York: The Truth Seeker Co., 1876), p. 719.

Liverpool (1812-1827) was reactionary to an extreme. The influence of liberal thought, an inheritance of the Enlightenment, ground to a halt. Economic distress led to the passage of the Corn Law of 1815 which was a boon to the landowner, but caused misery to the urban laborer who had to pay higher prices for bread. Radical unrest followed upon economic distress, and the answer was "not Reform but the infamous 'Six Acts' of Lord Sidmouth"<sup>61</sup> and the "Peterloo Massacre." It was not until after the death of Castlereagh in 1822 that reform would begin anew.

William Cobbett now renewed the working-class agitation for greater economic and political rights "which Paine had begun and Pitt suppressed, and he revived it not as a Republican or Jacobin movement but as a Parliamentary movement."<sup>62</sup> His was a defense of the rights of Englishmen, usurped by a small class of landed gentry. Perhaps, Trevelyan continues, he might have had little impact if he had not been a "journalist of genius in the early youth of journalism," and thus was born a

. . . very unphilosophic Radicalism which affected so much in Nineteenth Century Britain. It was not a doctrine but a spirit-indignation at the wrongs of the poor. . . . Bentham and Mill were wiser men than Cobbett, but they would not without this aid have so transformed England from their study-chairs.<sup>63</sup>

To Cobbett, the strength of a nation lay in its people, in those who toil since it is the worker that creates all that is the object of taxation; land would be worth little without the toil of the laborer, and Cobbett ascribed the cause of misery to the

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<sup>61</sup>Besant, Redistribution of Political Power, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup>G. M. Trevelyan, History of England, Vol. III (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1955), p. 158.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 159-160.

"enormous amount of the taxes"<sup>64</sup> unjustly leveled on those who labored.

The forces of English dissent were gathering momentum, aimed at the injustices of an aristocratic society and seeking the good of the working man. Dissent was not native to the 19th Century, for it took root in the struggle against George III in his determination to overshadow Parliament, and two centuries earlier the Levellers had sought their political rights. However, regardless of the repressive measures of the early 19th Century--or, perhaps, because of them--radical movements grew afoot and had fair augury for the Age as in the Anti-Corn Law League of Cobden and Bright, and the Chartist Movement.

Richard Cobden, the "man of ideas,"<sup>65</sup> detected in John Bright a passionate and eloquent advocate in the cause of free trade. A severe critic of the Victorian "establishment" of the House of Lords, the Anglican Church, The Times, Guardian, and the Foreign Office, his belief in free-trade, of cheap bread, and the repeal of the Corn Law was related to his belief in liberty. A Quaker, he was to carry his struggle into the House of Commons as a champion for the oppressed in England, and an opponent of English imperialistic ventures abroad. To Bright, free trade was not merely an economic doctrine, for it "seemed to him to stand out in the pages of Adam Smith and his successors as one of the triumphant achievements of the human mind comparable to the

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<sup>64</sup>William Cobbett, "To the Journey and Labourers of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, on the Cause of their present Miseries," Weekly Political Register, Vol. 31 (November 2, 1816) in The English Radical Tradition: 1763-1914, ed. by S. MacGoby, p. 87.

<sup>65</sup>Herman Ausubel, John Bright: Victorian Reformer (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966), p. 5.

work of Galileo and Newton."<sup>66</sup> He urged Cobden to found a free-trade newspaper in Manchester, since the Guardian was "too unreliable" and the Anti-Corn Law Circular had a limited appeal.<sup>67</sup> Peel was forced to repeal the Corn Laws in 1845-1846, but regardless of the "moral reformism"<sup>68</sup> of the League, it was the Great Famine in Ireland which was the decisive factor. The Irish potato blight of 1845 forced upon Sir Robert Peel the absurdity of the Corn Law. Bright, always a "Little Englander," was neglected in the coming of the Socialist Age. However, his idealistic economic radicalism was not to be ignored by Mrs. Annie Besant.

It was now the Chartists, composed of working classes, who mounted a mass democratic struggle in the early years of the reign of Victoria. Thomas Attwood (1783-1856) presented to Parliament their petition seeking universal manhood suffrage (even if it excluded women), vote by ballot, elimination of property qualifications to members of Parliament, payment of stipends to its members, equal electoral districts, and annual elections. It was an urban phenomena, a product of the Industrial Revolution; but it lacked middle-class support. Englishmen feared the threats of Chartist violence, and it became associated with "incendiary oratory, and mob processions."<sup>69</sup> Attwood, in the House of Commons, condemned the principle of primogeniture and the sufferings of the workers, and voiced a demand for a fair subsis-

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<sup>66</sup> Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 104.

<sup>67</sup> Ausubel, John Bright: Victorian Reformer, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Beer, British Politics in the Collectivist Age, p. 45.

<sup>69</sup> MacCoby, English Radical Tradition, p. 116.

tence to labor which produced more than it reaped as the reward. Although the early Victorians feared revolution, none was to come, and the Chartist movement was a failure by 1848. However, it did achieve some

. . . social education of the middle and upper classes, and it also achieved some political education of the working-classes. The members of the last turned after 1848 towards the consolidation of the trade union movement, the development of the cooperative movement, and a firmer belief in the need to look to Parliament for reform and betterment.<sup>70</sup>

In a century which lacked a "unified scheme of social reconstruction, a universal faith,"<sup>71</sup> it was now the turn of Owen to reconstruct England in the light of his "New Society." "For ten years, from 1834 to 1845," writes Joseph Clayton, "Owenism was a crusade."<sup>72</sup> The exploitation of labor in a competitive society dominated by the aristocracy and the capitalists was the evil to be cured. Co-operation must replace competition and, according to Pease, if his Socialism had made a "profound impression on the working people of England half a century earlier . . . the tradition of it was confined to those who had heard its prophet."<sup>73</sup> Man's character was a product of his circumstances, and Owen's educational ideal was based on the need and capacity of society to consciously develop the training of the child by a system of education, carefully planned and consciously inculcated in the blank tablet of the infant mind. Also, since men were not responsible for their actions, it followed "that the common opinion,

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<sup>70</sup>Harrison, Conflict and Comromise, p. 169.

<sup>71</sup>Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 72.

<sup>72</sup>Joseph Clayton, The Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, 1884-1924 (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1926), p. 2.

<sup>73</sup>Edward R. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society, (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1953), p. 23.

enforced by organized religion, that men are morally responsible for what they do is erroneous."<sup>74</sup> An ardent Deist, his attack on Christianity and Religion made him one of the "important figures in the history of English rationalism."<sup>75</sup>

Neither the Chartists nor the Owenites contributed greatly to political theory; yet

. . . their ultimate effect was very considerable. The existence of "the two nations" was made apparent to Disraeli. Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens were moved to denunciation. Frederick Denison Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and others were moved to advocate a Christian Socialism in their short lived journal Politics for the People (1848) and their Tracts on Christian Socialism (1850).<sup>76</sup>

The "Established Church" had remained passively indifferent to the events in France. Those who wrestled with contemporary questions found in the Church empty platitudes and a self-indulgent complacency. To be a member of the Church was expected of the sons of the well-born; it was the "gentlemanly" thing to do. As Lytton Strachey so delightfully puts it,

Portly divines subscribed with a sigh or a smile to the Thirty-nine Articles, sank quietly into easy livings, rode gaily to hounds of a morning as a gentleman should, and, as gentlemen should, carried their two bottles of an evening.<sup>77</sup>

The Church, since the Reformation, was a privileged institution and was described as "the praying section of the Tory party."<sup>78</sup> Even if

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<sup>74</sup>Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 45.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>76</sup>Harrison, Conflict and Compromise, p. 169.

<sup>77</sup>Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., n.d.), p. 11.

<sup>78</sup>D. C. Somervell, English Thought in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), p. 16.

this was too sweeping a generalization, for exceptions like Paley existed, the devout were not to be found in the House of Lords or in the mansions of the Bishopry.

But the voice of dissent was to shake the complacency of the Established Church. John Wesley's Methodism was, in its inception in the late 18th century, a reaction against Deism and 18th Century Rationalism; but the Evangelical movement it generated, with its ardent spirit of moral and religious fervor, "infiltrated both the dissenting and the established churches, so it also infiltrated the several layers of society."<sup>79</sup> Yet, Wesley, by his influence on the revitalization of religion was very significantly "the most important single figure . . . to inoculate the English people against the virus of revolution."<sup>80</sup> The Evangelical base was Nature and Grace, not eighteenth-century rationalism, and the reformist zeal of the Wesleyans sought to rid man of materialistic values, to reform society as a Christian duty. In a ". . . moralizing society they had made social disapproval a force which the boldest sinner might fear."<sup>81</sup>

In 1808 when Jeremy Bentham met James Mill, Bentham was sixty years old. Primarily a legal reformer, his debt to Hume and Adam Smith is obvious, and "His optimism reflected the dominant outlook of the French Enlightenment, as well as the English Deists,"<sup>82</sup> but unlike

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<sup>79</sup>Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, p. 280.

<sup>80</sup>Somervell, English Thought in the Nineteenth Century, p. 21.

<sup>81</sup>G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 4.

<sup>82</sup>Bowle, Politics and Opinion, p. 52.

them he had an eminently practical frame of mind--he had a "characteristic concern with the possible."<sup>83</sup> Somervell states that "practically all the legislative reforms of the middle period of the nineteenth century, a period of unprecedented activity in legislation, can be traced to his influence."<sup>84</sup> Blackstone is his primary target. The attitude that prevailed among the English jurists of the early 19th Century was to be found in Burke's dictum that "prescription is the most solid of all titles, not only to property, but to that which is to secure that property, the government."<sup>85</sup> The juristic concept of customary law derived from immemorial usage was attacked with ferocity by Bentham to whom the whole purpose of the law was "censorial"--to critically evaluate the legal system with a view to its improvement. Equally repugnant were the aristocratic trappings of privilege, and the orthodoxies of the Church. Churchmen, in fact, were guilty of perjury for swearing to the Thirty-nine Articles. He provided the men of his time with a new philosophy based on "utility" which he felt was not only reliable but was indispensable to progress. "His attack was radical."<sup>86</sup> To this "Newton of the moral sciences,"<sup>87</sup> pleasure and pain provided not only the standard of value essential to "censorial" jurisprudence, but were also the sole determinants of human behavior

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>84</sup> D. C. Somervell, English Thought, p. 46.

<sup>85</sup> Coker, Recent Political Thought, p. 27.

<sup>86</sup> Bowle, Politics and Opinion, p. 62.

<sup>87</sup> Sabine, History of Political Theory, p. 678.

"by which the skillful legislator can control and direct it."<sup>88</sup> His principle of utility which was to be the basis and measure of a new foundation of action was founded on the postulate that,

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what<sup>89</sup> we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.

Both pleasure and pain can be measured with a fair degree of accuracy. In the tradition of Hume, Bentham ignores as irrelevant all metaphysical notions of an ultimate reality, of God and the cosmos, and grounds his thought on a rationalistic empiricism. The true standard of 19th Century Utilitarian liberalism was not "natural right" or the state of nature but a utilitarian hedonism capable of measurement. Laissez-faire is raised to a virtue and the role of government is to secure the greatest happiness of the greatest number of persons. To many Englishmen of his time, appalled by the excesses of the French Revolution, his principle of "utility" was more attractive than the Revolutionary creed based on "rights of man."

Mill writes in his Autobiography, "It was my father's opinions which gave the distinguishing character to the Benthamite or utilitarian propagandism of that time"<sup>90</sup> and that James Mill "exercised a far greater personal ascendancy."<sup>91</sup> The creed of progress and reform was

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 677.

<sup>89</sup> Jeremy Bentham, Principles of Morals and Legislation, The Utilitarians (New York: Dolphin Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), p. 17.

<sup>90</sup> Mill, "Autobiography," Essential Works, p. 66.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

articulated by an almost unEnglish dogmatism by the Utilitarians and Philosophic Radicals. Few in the early part of the century could evade their influence; they were "a potent for the times then frigid and scholastic, as a party they fade from view."<sup>92</sup> Looking to the elder Mill for leadership, a small "intellectual coterie" of Philosophic Radicals emerged in the 1820's demanding fundamental changes in "the constitution of the government."<sup>93</sup> It was James Mill who transformed Bentham's legal and utilitarian theories into a fighting creed.<sup>94</sup> The Philosophic Radicals were both philosophers of Utilitarianism and active politicians, many of whom became members of Parliament. It was, writes Sabine, "the Philosophical Radicals that provided intellectual structure of early liberalism and therefore its program."<sup>95</sup>

But "liberalism" also owed much to Evangelical Christianity and their combined effect was seen in the many reforms from 1832 to the 1870's which "made Britain the very model of nineteenth-century liberalism."<sup>96</sup> The quality of individual freedom, once grounded in the utilitarian ethic, was later to be associated with increasing

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<sup>92</sup>Young, Victorian England, p. 10.

<sup>93</sup>Joseph Hamburger, Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 15.

<sup>94</sup>Elie Halevy in The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism (1949 ed.), p. 251. writes, "Bentham gave Mill a doctrine, and Mill gave Bentham a school; quoted in Currin V. Shields, ed., An Essay in Government by James Mill (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1965) p. 15 in "Editors Introduction: The Political Thought of the British Utilitarians."

<sup>95</sup>Sabine, History of Political Theory, p. 673.

<sup>96</sup>J. Salwyn Schapiro, Liberalism: Its Meaning and History (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1953), p. 43.

state regulation after 1880. Regardless of the move away from a strong individualism, the cardinal liberal concept remained.

The permanent spiritual heritage of Liberalism was, after all, a state of mind and an attitude towards arbitrary or unjust political (or, for that matter, any kind of) power.<sup>97</sup>

To Mrs. Besant, however, who was also to seek inspiration in a type of ethical utilitarianism, the reforms of the century were the workings of a collective principle. She writes (as a Socialist) that they

. . . recognised as a definite principle the right of the community to interfere, by means of law, for the protection of the workers from the greed of those who employ them. . . . We also find that the community recognises its interest in the wholesome housing of its laboring class, in the health of those producers on whom the wealth of the nation depends.<sup>98</sup>

It was the tragedy of John Stuart Mill that, despite his attempts to do so, he was never wholly free from the uncompromising Utilitarianism infused in him by his father. At fifteen in the first flush of Benthamism, he sought to be "a reformer of the world."<sup>99</sup> But a spiritual experience diluted the pure milk of the Utilitarian ethic. It was now becoming apparent that happiness is not an end in itself, but is more a state of feeling, a condition of the spirit which is to be had only as a result of the pursuit of some other goal. The harshness of the "felicific calculus" was undermined by his understanding that there were qualitative variations in the pleasures sought by man. "The cultivation of the feelings," he writes, "became one of the

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<sup>97</sup>William Y. Elliot and Neil A. MacDonald, Western Political Heritage (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1949), p. 691.

<sup>98</sup>Besant, Redistribution of Political Power, p. 15.

<sup>99</sup>Mill, "Autobiography," Essential Works, p. 83.

cardinal points in my ethical and philosophic creed."<sup>100</sup> No longer was "pushpin as good as poetry"; rather, it was better to be "Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." The emotional crisis and the reading of Wordsworth impelled him in the direction of a "qualified socialism."<sup>101</sup> Thus, writes Barker,

He is a transitional force; and in his hands utilitarianism begins to be less individualistic, and assumes more and more a socialistic quality. Social utility, he thinks, is the goal; to this, he feels, it may be the supreme duty of the individual to sacrifice himself; for this, he allows, it may be necessary to entrust the state with large functions of controlling the distribution of wealth.<sup>102</sup>

While Mill is an elitist, fearful of the "tyranny of the majority" and the tendency of states towards a mediocrity; yet his "socialism" envisages a time when

. . . society will no longer be divided into the idle and the industrious; when the rule that they who do not work shall not eat, will be applied not to paupers only, but impartially to all. . . . The social problem of the future we considered to be, how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action, with a common ownership in the raw materials of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labor.<sup>103</sup>

To Mill a scientific study of society was possible, and in his intellectual odyssey his influence by Comte's writings became apparent. He had "already regarded the methods of physical science as the proper models for the political,"<sup>104</sup> and in his Auguste Comte and Positivism, he proclaimed, "The time, therefore, seems to have come, when every philosophic thinker not only ought to form, but may

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>102</sup> Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 20.

<sup>103</sup> Mill, "Autobiography," Essential Works, p. 137.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

usefully express, a judgement respecting this intellectual movement."<sup>105</sup> The attempt of the Positivists to study human phenomena with the tools and methods of the natural sciences deprived from Galileo implied the belief that man and society were governed by certain inexorable laws of nature which could be determined by empirical investigation. It was the later Comte of the Systeme de Politique Positive who invested his "New Religion of Humanity" with a "corporate hierarchy" reminiscent of Popery that Mill is moved to denounce as the "Completest system of spiritual and temporal despotism which ever yet emanated from a human brain, unless possibly that of Ignatius Loyola."<sup>106</sup> Mill and Mrs. Besant both deplored what they felt to be the end of a viable philosophy of thought and an erudite man.

In an age which sought the comfort of a universally accepted creed, men looked to science for "understanding and salvation, as men in the Middle Ages had turned to theology and the Church."<sup>107</sup> Comte was no academic scholar who sought truth with a scholarly objectivity. Essentially a reformer, his new science of "sociology" and his positivist creed--in a pre-Darwinian age--replaced theological speculation and belief by providing a new way of understanding and changing society. Nothing existed apart from that which could be empirically determined; all knowledge was limited only to that of the phenomenal. Science qua science was only interested in the "How" of things, and as "No divine

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<sup>105</sup> John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte and Positivism (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> Mill, "Autobiography," Essential Works, p. 127.

<sup>107</sup> Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought, p. 289.

source of values is either commonly accepted or accessible to scientific proof,"<sup>108</sup> it was irrelevant. Comte died in England in 1857, and Elliott-Binns is certain that Comte's influence was "too artificial a system to retain its influence indefinitely."<sup>109</sup> Pease believes:

It is difficult for the present generation to realise how large a space in the minds of the young men of the eighties was occupied by the religion invented by Auguste Comte.

And he continues, even more significantly, ". . . most of the free-thinking men of that period read the "Positive Polity."<sup>110</sup> Mrs. Annie Besant was no exception.

The Oxford Movement was a reaction to the spirit of Utilitarianism, Reform, Rationalism, and Liberalism. "Infidelity was stalking through the land,"<sup>111</sup> and the Church had foresaken the mysteries of the sacraments. When John Keble, a fellow of Oriel, delivered his Assize Sermon in 1833, and his pupil Froude "impregnated Newman with the ideas of Keble,"<sup>112</sup> the movement for the regeneration of the Church's apostolic mission and priesthood was set afoot. To Newman and Keble, the Church of England was the only true Church, and while it had not gone to Rome, yet its pristine purity was sullied in its departure from the principles of apostolic priesthood. They envisaged

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<sup>108</sup> Arnold Brecht, Political Theory: The Foundations of Twentieth-Century Political Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 169.

<sup>109</sup> L. E. Elliott-Binns, English Thought, 1860-1900, The Theological Aspect (New York: Longman's Green and Co., 1956), p. 65.

<sup>110</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, pp. 14-18.

<sup>111</sup> Strachey, Eminent Victorians, p. 13.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

. . . a transcendent manifestation of Divine power, flowing down elaborate and immense through the ages; a consecrated priesthood, stretching back, through the mystic symbol of the laying on of hands, to the very Godhead. . . .<sup>113</sup>

Newman recognized the need for dogma as fundamental to faith, of a personal God incarnated in Christ; and soon he was to journey to Rome in 1845. Gooch writes that their leaders never realized that the movement would "lead men back to Rome,"

. . . but their emphasis on tradition and continuity, their love of the Fathers and the Middle Ages, their exaltation of the authority of the priest, and their detestation of the critical spirit were bound to carry them, and their followers far away from their Protestant moorings.<sup>114</sup>

The Anglo-Catholic revival dominated the tenor of English religious thought, and its sense of ornate ritual and love of the Sacrament were to infuse the being of the young and impressionable Mrs. Besant. Also, the ideal of securus indicat orbis terrarum was to conflict violently with the ideas of natural selection and evolution for many.

The Origin of the Species (1859) "inaugurated an intellectual revolution such as the world had not known since Luther nailed his Thesis to the door of All Saints' Church at Wittenberg."<sup>115</sup> Positivism and the new science of "sociology" of Comte had made science a part of the 19th Century landscape. Science and technology had grown immeasurably, and evolutionary ideas were not unknown prior to

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>114</sup>G. P. Gooch, "Introductory: The Victorian Age, 1837-1901," in The Social and Political Ideas of Some Representative Thinkers of the Victorian Age, ed. by F. J. C. Hearnshaw (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1950), p. 21.

<sup>115</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 17.

1859. But Darwin's contribution was to generate a controversy in what could still be regarded as an age marked with religious belief. Churches continued to hold their congregations even if, often, it meant mere "lip-service" to the Deity. The growth of the Salvation Army and the spread of the Evangelical faith by missionaries even towards the close of the century point to the importance of faith. Now a new factor had to be taken into account.

Darwin's theory of "natural selection" destroyed confidence in a harmonious world ruled by an omnipotent Deity. Each living organism was seen to compete for existence, and only those best adapted to their environment survived. Such adaptations to the environment were merely a question of chance, simply the result of inherited traits. But the fact that man, like all other living organisms, evolved from a single common prototype conflicted with the account of creation in the Book of Genesis. Even if Darwin drew no Atheistic conclusions from his premise, i.e. that "life developed from matter";<sup>116</sup> yet it seemed to destroy the orthodoxy of Christian belief based on the essential "divinity" of man. Man was in no way different from other forms of animal life; each was a product of evolution--except that man could indulge in the fancy of metaphysical thinking and fabricate something called God.

The effect was immediate, and the ranks were drawn. The British Association met at Oxford, and Bishop Wilberforce championed the orthodoxy. Others sought to harmonize Genesis with evolution, but it became obvious that "it was no longer possible to silence men

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<sup>116</sup>Brecht, Political Theory, p. 84.

of science as the Church of Rome tried to silence Galileo."<sup>117</sup> Also, gradually the cause of "rationalism" was to be associated "in public opinion with the methods and results of physical research."<sup>118</sup> Pease recounts that the "older folk" ignored Darwin, and he recalls the instance of a Fellow of the Royal Society who, in 1875, told him that he had no opinion on Darwin. However, he adds, "The young men of the time I am describing grew up with the new ideas and accepted them as a matter of course."<sup>119</sup> He mentions Herbert Spencer, but he might equally have added Mrs. Besant. Yet in 1882, twenty-three years after the publication of the Darwinian thesis, "evolution was regarded as a somewhat dubious theorem which respectable people were wise to ignore,"<sup>120</sup> and Elliott-Binns can say that by the 1870's a reaction against "stark rationalism" was already gaining momentum and religion was "venturing to raise its head."<sup>121</sup> Gladstone himself was a High Churchman, and Leslie Stephen writes in a letter to Wendel Holmes, "in this country we are still compassed around with the most noxious and bumptious orthodox people."<sup>122</sup> Mrs. Besant was to be locked in combat as a Free-thinker with just such "noxious" people, with Darwin, Comte, and Hume as her guides.

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<sup>117</sup> Janet Elizabeth Courtney, "T. H. Huxley," Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century (New York: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1967), pp. 150-151.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>119</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>121</sup> Elliott-Binns, English Thought, 1860-1900, p. 17.

<sup>122</sup> Courtney, Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century, p. 179.

On May 1, 1851, the Great Exhibition was declared open by the Queen in a dazzling spectacle of Victorian plenitude. England bared her wealth and industrial progress to the world. The years of affluence were to continue until the last decades of the century. The evolution of political democracy proceeded without the violence of the European Revolution of 1848, and the extension of the franchise by the Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884 increasingly concentrated power in the House of Commons. Political parties began to be organized. The power of the Crown began a slow decline after 1861, and while the popularity of Queen Victoria reached its nadir at the close of her reign, Bagehot could write in the English Constitution (1867) that her role belonged more to the "dignified" than the "efficient" part of the Constitution.<sup>123</sup> Regardless of the chagrin of the Queen, the powers of Government were increasingly wielded by the Cabinet. With the death of Palmerston in 1865, it was the age of Gladstone and Disraeli, for they dominated the political scene from 1868 to 1881. The cries of imperialism grew strident.

The Victorian Age did not lack its critics. It was not an age marked by complacency, and a "romantic reaction" had begun. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), "one of the pioneers of idealism," passionately rejected the ethics of utilitarianism and laissez-faire, Evolution and Darwin, and the growth of commerce and commercialization; and "against these he passionately asserted the spirited nature of man and the world."<sup>124</sup> Conscious of history, he looked to his "heroes"

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<sup>123</sup>Harrison, Conflict and Compromise, p. 159.

<sup>124</sup>Robert S. Dower, "Thomas Carlyle," in The Social and Political Ideas of Some Representative Thinkers of the Victorian Age, p. 42.

for leadership in human affairs. To Somervell, he was "essentially a prophet, a preacher; he was too passionate and impatient to be a thinker."<sup>125</sup> Despising the crass materialism of his age, he believed that society, as did de Maistre and Coleridge, "must be inspired not by calculation but by common beliefs."<sup>126</sup>

The gentle Matthew Arnold saw in the materialism of the age a "spiritual" anarchy. Educated in the more intellectually progressive climes of Oxford, to Courtney, "his importance for freethought is that he combined a recognition of the receding tide of faith with real reverence for tradition."<sup>127</sup> The life of culture to Arnold was one of a gentle reasonableness, where beauty, intelligence, and order prevailed. Imbued with a passion for the human good, his mission was to civilize man, particularly the "Philistines." Within the ranks of the "Philistines," the "Barbarians" and "Populace" that composed the population, there were a few who, propelled by a genuine spirit of humanity, would make "sweetness and light" shine on a crass age.

Coleridge, "Through his influence on Maurice and hence on Kingsley," was "one of the founders of Christian Socialism in England."<sup>128</sup> It is the moral law of God that dictates man's humanity to man, and salvation lay in the teachings of Christ and a social consciousness. Men were in need of spiritual guidance to bring the

<sup>125</sup>Somervell, English Thought, p. 142.

<sup>126</sup>Bowle, Politics and Opinion, p. 97.

<sup>127</sup>Courtney, Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century, p. 65.

<sup>128</sup>Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 76.

knowledge of God to man for the ends of Christian service. The creed of the Christian Socialists was "co-operation," but

Neither Maurice nor Kingsley desired to endorse the scientific economics of Karl Marx, or anticipate the Marxian Socialist; the forcible expropriation of landlord and capitalist was not in their minds.

It was because of this that the Socialist movement in England was never hostile to the clergy.<sup>129</sup>

England in the mid-Victorian age was not only more prosperous, but the people had progressed rapidly in both thought and intellectual stature. The development of the daily newspaper was one of the outstanding qualities of Victorianism. The Times retained its eminence, and writes G. P. Gooch:

The speeches of the protagonists were fully reported and eagerly read. For forty years Delane spoke with oracular authority in The Times, The Morning Post, The Standard, The Daily Telegraph, and The Daily News assumed their readers to be intelligent citizens. The Spectator under Hutton and Townsend the best of the weeklies, catered for thoughtful Liberalism; the Edinburgh and the Quarterly maintained their authority; and the new monthlies, the Fortnightly, the Contemporary, and the Nineteenth Century facilitated responsible discussion of public affairs.

Also, petitions, mass meetings, and Parliamentary debates set the tenor of a time when the Economist continued its function of a "peripatetic university,"<sup>131</sup> and in a thoughtful age writers assumed a stature hitherto denied them.

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<sup>129</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism, p. 49.

<sup>130</sup> Gooch, "Victorian Age, 1837-1901," in Social and Political Ideas of Some Representative Thinkers of the Victorian Age, p. 19.

<sup>131</sup> Beer, British Politics in the Collectivist Age, p. 48.

In such times of contrary beliefs where men sought a vision of a new Jerusalem on English soil, each according to his own lights, Mr. and Mrs. Wood gave birth to a daughter, Annie, on October 1, 1847.

### CHAPTER III

#### EARLY LIFE: 1847 - 1874

No comets streaked across the skies, and even The Times ignored the birth of Annie Wood Besant. It was left for Mrs. Besant to dramatically announce in her Autobiographical Sketches (1885) that she had made her appearance in this "vale of tears,"<sup>132</sup> and to rejoice that though born within earshot of Bow Belis, "three-quarters of my blood; and all my heart are Irish."<sup>133</sup> The Wood family were of solid yeoman stock, one branch of which produced a Lord Chancellor (Lord Hatherley); another kinsman was Field Marshall Sir Evelyn Wood, V.C., and yet another was to become Lord Mayor of London. Her mother, of Irish descent, was adopted by a maiden aunt whose influence on both Mrs. Wood and her daughter was considerable. Proud of their descent from the "Milesian Kings," an impressive parchment over the mantelpiece attested to their noble ancestry. Such a background offered a base of Victorian respectability, but it appeared to St. John Ervine that her almost entirely Irish origin had "only enough English blood in her veins to preserve her sanity."<sup>134</sup> While the stormy petrel, Mrs.

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<sup>132</sup>Annie Besant, Autobiographical Sketches (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1885), p. 3.

<sup>133</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 13.

<sup>134</sup>St. John Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work, and Friends (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1956), p. 132.

Besant, sought her eventful destiny, her brother was to become Sir Henry Trueman Wood and a man of considerable stature in the world of commerce.

Her father, upon whom fortune smiled less fondly, died while his daughter was yet at an impressionable age. Mr. Wood was trained as a doctor in Dublin, but seldom practiced his profession. A man of keen intellect, a capable mathematician and classical scholar, he ejected the priest from his bedside as he lay dying. While his wife did not share in his scepticism; yet it modified her extreme doctrinaire orthodoxy. The loss of her husband turned Mrs. Wood's hair white overnight, and Stead writes,

The first glimpse we have into the peculiar psychical temperament which has impelled Mrs. Besant to join the Theosophists occurs in an anecdote she tells about her mother in connection with the death of her father.<sup>135</sup>

There occurred, writes Mrs. Besant, "a curious psychological problem which has often puzzled me."<sup>136</sup> Unable to attend the funeral and prostrate with grief, Mrs. Wood "followed" the funeral with "vacant eyes and fixed pallid face" until--suddenly crying "It is all over!"-- she fainted.<sup>137</sup> Some weeks later she was taken to the cemetery for the first time, and unerringly followed a tortuous path leading from the Chapel to the site of the grave.

Mrs. Besant bore her mother a passionate devotion until Mrs. Wood's death in 1874, the year she met Bradlaugh and after the end of her marriage. She was, writes Mrs. Besant, "the tenderest, sweetest,

<sup>135</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 10.

<sup>136</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 10.

<sup>137</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 25.

proudest, purest, noblest woman I have known . . . who made my girlhood sunny as dreamland, who guarded me until my marriage from every touch of pain that she could ward off."<sup>138</sup> To Mrs. Wood, no taint of dishonor was to be tolerated. The world had to be faced bravely with a stoical fortitude.

The elements in the young girl's nature combined a strong Celtic strain of the world of the spirit, where the cries of the banshee aroused as much apprehension as a cup of strong tea; together with a fervent religious spirit. She admits that she was "of the stuff from which fanatics are made."<sup>139</sup> Her father's sceptical influence removed, "Annie's mother and aunts weltered in the macabre folklore of death and the supernatural."<sup>140</sup> Besterman writes,

Thus we can imagine the mental atmosphere in which Annie was brought up as a mixture of urbane scepticism and emotional, "supernatural" piety. Naturally imaginative, impulsive, a blend of the two influences was impossible for her. All or nothing was always her watchword.<sup>141</sup>

It was a time of struggle for Mrs. Wood; yet with perseverance and devoted self-sacrifice, her son was sent to Harrow. Henry was to be superbly educated, but the Victorians felt little need to expose their women to the qualities of thought. It was, nevertheless, in the pleasant town of Harrow that Mrs. Besant spent those happy years from

<sup>138</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 24.

<sup>140</sup> Gertrude Marvin Williams, The Passionate Pilgrim: A Life of Annie Besant (New York: Coward-McCann, 1931), p. 6.

<sup>141</sup> Theodore Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1934), p. 12.

8 to 18 which she "left always with regret, returned to always with joy."<sup>142</sup> It was a life strangely at odds with the turbulence of her later years. The Idea of a University by John Newman appeared in 1841, and theology became an essential part of the University. In this atmosphere of classical learning and High Church orthodoxy where the sons of the privileged were schooled in the ways of the gentleman and the joy of the classics, Henry was trained. Such influence on Mrs. Besant, who as a girl stood outside the intellectual pale, is difficult to gauge. However, she writes that when only eight years old she had read Paradise Lost in pleasant isolation. Milton, who in stately verse, sought to justify the ways of God to man, caught the imaginative fancy of an impulsive and emotional young girl. The verses were a joy to her, and she loudly intoned the poetry. "I liked," recounts Mrs. Besant, "to personify Satan, and declaim the grand speeches of the hero-rebel."<sup>143</sup>

But fate in the form of Miss Marryat was waiting in the wings. Mrs. Wood reluctantly accepted Miss Marryat's offer that Mrs. Besant be taught by her. She had "a perfect genius for teaching," writes Mrs. Besant, "and took in it the greatest delight." Mrs. Besant continues:

No words of mine can tell how much I owe her, not only of knowledge, but of that love of knowledge which has remained with me ever since as a constant spur to study.<sup>144</sup>

Her education was not fashioned in the manner James Mill gave his son,

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<sup>142</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 14.

<sup>143</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 33.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., p. 36 and Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, pp.

even if they both discovered and loved Plato and deplored mere memorization and learning by rote. Her training was not geared to the study of abstract thought, in an atmosphere keenly intellectual, for the emphasis of Miss Marryat lay in the development of the qualities of keen observation and lucid expression. Her educational experience was not to be forgotten in the years ahead. The Evangelicalism and militant piety of Miss Marryat reinforced the spiritual ardor of an intense young girl whose two greatest ideals were Christ and a devotion to her mother. A strain of Calvinistic piety tended her towards an introspective morbidity and a sense of the heroic. It was to her greatest regret that "Christians did not go about as in the 'Pilgrims Progress,' armed to do battle with Apollyon and Giant Despair," and this "sensitive, dreamy and enthusiastic child"<sup>145</sup> manifested both the scars and signs of a saving Grace.

She recalls that the "remorseless materialism of the day--not the philosophic materialism of the few, but the religious materialism of the many," smothered the "delicate buddings" of thought.<sup>146</sup> What Mrs. Besant means is not quite clear; one can only surmise that the vulgar ostentation and materialism of the age of Victorian plenty were damaging to the growth of her mystical thought and experience. At any rate, her fancies carried her "into the fascinating world where boy-soldiers kept some outpost for their absent Prince," and her regret was that the age of "Christian martyrs" had passed her by, as that was a time

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<sup>145</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 20.

<sup>146</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 40.

. . . when suffering for religion was practicable; I would spend many an hour in day-dreams in which I stood before Roman judges, before Dominican Inquisitors, was flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake.<sup>147</sup>

It was then, writes Nethercot, that a "martyr complex took root."<sup>148</sup>

According to Stead, the "germ" of Socialism was to be found in the teachings of the Evangelical Miss Marryat who served the poor and needy.<sup>149</sup>

She accompanied Miss Marryat to Europe in 1861 along with the other charges of her tutor, who looked upon men as "wolves to be kept away from her growing lambs."<sup>150</sup> Mrs. Besant was enthralled by the beauty of Notre Dame, the splendor of La Sainte Chapelle, and La Madeleine. The color and brilliance of the Champs Elysees, in the heyday of the Empire, caught the young fancy of the girl who already "liked big Empires in those days, there was a solid satisfaction in putting down Russia, and seeing what a large part of the map was filled thereby."<sup>151</sup> She received confirmation in Paris in the spring of 1862 by the Bishop of Ohio on a visit to the city. This was a matter of great solemnity and awe. The color, fragrance, ritual, and pomp of the religious service heightened her Evangelicalism with the more brilliant hues of Anglo-Catholicism. Keble replaced Milton, and the Oxford Movement found a willing young devotee.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>148</sup> Arthur H. Nethercot, The First Five Lives of Annie Besant (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 12.

<sup>149</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 17.

<sup>150</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 21.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

In the spring of 1863 she returned to Harrow and her mother. Life for the next few years became idyllic, spoiled by an indulgent mother whose protective instinct allowed no worries to touch her. She now turned to the readings of the Fathers of the Early Church, together with Augustine. The writings of Pusey, Liddon, and Keble made her rejoice in the "great conception of a Catholic Church, lasting through centuries, built on the foundations of apostles and of martyrs."<sup>152</sup> It brought about the first of many transformations of faith--the meaning of life was spiritual meditation and an aesthetic communion with God and Christ were the purpose of existence. She flagellated herself and fasted.

The contrast I found between my early Evangelical training and the doctrines of the Primitive Christian Church would have driven me over to Rome, had it not been for the proofs afforded by Pusey and his co-workers,<sup>153</sup> that the English Church might be Catholic although non-Roman.

She was, writes Geoffrey West, "as intolerant as any--the stuff of martyrs is the stuff of which inquisitors are made."<sup>154</sup> And Stead poses an interesting question, that had the "half-way home of Anglicanism" not prevented her from going all the way to Catholicism,

Would the most immobile of churches have been able to fix the faith of this most mobile of creatures, who has indeed plenty of vim, but to whom the saving solid security of the vis inertiae seems to have been entirely denied?<sup>155</sup>

1866 was a vital year for Mrs. Besant, for it saw her meet and conquer

<sup>152</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 56.

<sup>153</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 26.

<sup>154</sup>Geoffrey West, Annie Besant (New York: The Viking Press, 1928), p. 37.

<sup>155</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 21.

her first religious doubt. It was also the year she met her future husband. "The whole story of the circumstances," says Geoffrey West, "leading to the marriage is a typical comedy of Victorian rectitude; like too many such comedies it was to end tragically."<sup>156</sup> Frank Besant, a curate, proposed marriage and took her consent for granted. She "drifted into an engagement with a man I did not pretend to love"<sup>157</sup> and was married in December, 1867. She entered a world for which she was ill prepared. Her husband, cold, precise with an exaggerated sense of order and masculine dominance, "did not understand the character and emotions of the young woman he had vowed to love and cherish until death did them part."<sup>158</sup> Had she been a Catholic, "she would have been a nun," writes Stead, but "As she was an Anglican, she married a curate."<sup>159</sup> He continues that since she "could not be the Bride of Heaven," she became the bride of a curate, but "He was hardly an adequate substitute."<sup>160</sup> Besterman writes on Frank Besant:

His eldest brother had been a Senior Wrangler; another brother, Walter, later Sir Walter Besant, the novelist, was eighteenth Wrangler; he himself was twenty-eight Wrangler in his year. Nevertheless he was too unenterprising to elect for one of the more active professions, and he took orders. His later life was totally undistinguished. . . .<sup>161</sup>

Women brought up in the traditions of Miss Pirkerton's academy in

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<sup>156</sup> West, Annie Besant, p. 31

<sup>157</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 69-70.

<sup>158</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 28.

<sup>159</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 24.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>161</sup> Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 32.

Vanity Fair had little in common with the restless Mrs. Besant, and one, perhaps, can feel a degree of sympathy for the wretched curate at this time.

It was in 1866, while she was still enraptured by her Anglo-Catholicism, that she discovered contradictions in the four Gospels. Terrified, she "quickly recognised it as the temptation of the devil and shrank back horror-stricken and penitent for the momentary lapse of faith."<sup>162</sup> Repeating Tertullian's phrase Credo quia impossibile she stifled and rejected a blinding eclipse of faith. But doubt had left a mark. She was, as yet, barely twenty.

The forces of English reform and reaction had not even touched her cloistered existence. She confesses that she took little interest in politics and "had unconsciously reflected more or less the decorous Whiggism which had always surrounded me."<sup>163</sup> Just prior to her marriage, she visited Manchester as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Roberts (the "poor man's lawyer"), and was startled by a question asked of her by her host. "What do you think of John Bright?"; to which she carelessly responded, "Isn't he a rather rough sort of man who goes about making rows?"<sup>164</sup> It was Roberts, she later recalls, who was her "first tutor in Radicalism and I was an apt pupil."<sup>165</sup> She admits that until then she had displayed a sense of noblesse oblige towards the poor. To Roberts, the poor were more than mere producers

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<sup>162</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 34.

<sup>163</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 72.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

of wealth, having a legitimate claim to economic justice. Beneath the glitter of Victorian prosperity lay the misery of poverty and want. Kingsley's Alton Locke (1850) had revealed the horrors of the sweat-shop and exploited labor in an era of laissez-faire. While the period prior to 1867 was not devoid of reform, i.e. Public Health Act and Factories Act, reform was barely sufficient to meet the demands of a rapidly industrializing society, and Parliament was yet to be fully representative of the nation.

It was during this same visit to Manchester that Colonel Kelly and Captain Deasy, both Fenian<sup>166</sup> leaders were arrested and brought to trial. The Irish seethed with resentment, and the prisoners were rescued from the prison van, in the course of which a sergeant guarding the Fenians was inadvertently shot to death. "Then Manchester went mad," declares Mrs. Besant,<sup>167</sup> and passions flared between the Irish and English. The rescuers, brought to justice before "the hanging judge," Mr. Justice Blackburn, could expect little mercy and got none. Pronounced "Guilty," they met their fate. The angry passions of the Irish were to be her first real contact with the multitude, and her

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<sup>166</sup>The Irish had never fully accepted English rule by the Act of Union of 1801, and the Irish problem was to be a significant factor in English politics during the century. The misery of the Irish peasantry was a major cause of Irish hostility to the English. Following the Civil War in the United States, the Fenian Brotherhood was established in that country by O'Mahony, an Irish revolutionary. It was designed to win Irish independence at any cost, rather than to alleviate economic distress. In Ireland it was based upon the efforts of ardent revolutionists who received assistance from Irishmen in the United States who had fought in the Civil War. "Many of them crossed the Atlantic to stir up disaffection in Ireland and spread secret terror in England." See Edward Raymond Turner, Ireland and England: In the Past and at Present (New York: The Century Co., 1919), pp. 150-152.

<sup>167</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 74.

plea for the doomed men aroused her wrath at legal malfunction. She declares,

Had they striven for freedom in Italy England would have honoured them; here she buried them as common murderers in quick-lime in the prison yard.<sup>168</sup>

Many years later, while in India, Mrs. Annie Besant was to recall that her great love for liberty was awakened by the plight of the "Manchester Martyrs." She read in the National Reformer for November 24, 1867, that Charles Bradlaugh had pleaded for the lives of the doomed men. It later gave her a sense of pleasure that, while they had not as yet met, both had been compatriots in a common cause. The Fenian episode was to become an intense personal experience, which in years to come was to assume a more practical form.

A brief and rather fanciful attempt at literary writing was cut short by the arrival of a son and daughter in 1869 and 1870. The girl, Mabel, lingered close to death, and Mrs. Besant struggled to keep her daughter alive. The child survived but the experience was to leave on her mother a permanent effect, a change of mind and an angry resentment against a God who remained indifferent to the sufferings of a child. Once Mabel was out of danger, Mrs. Besant collapsed, physically and mentally exhausted, and then rose out of bed "to face a struggle which lasted for three years and two months, and nearly cost me my life, the struggle which transformed me from a Christian to an Atheist."<sup>169</sup> It was not an easy one; this coming eclipse of faith was anguish to an intensely religious person. "There is," she confesses, "in life no

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

other pain so horrible, so keen in its torture, so crushing in its weight."<sup>170</sup> Stead is right when he says that, "It was from a baby's cradle that the impulse came which drove Mrs. Besant from the Christian fold."<sup>171</sup> It led, irrevocably, to a break with both her husband and Christianity. To this misery was added the knowledge that the mother she adored was defrauded by a lawyer she had trusted. To Mrs. Besant, Christ had not been a mere metaphysical abstraction but a "living reality," and now she revolted against this Person in whom she saw

. . . my baby's agony, my own misery, the breaking of my mother's proud heart under a load of debt, and all the bitter suffering of the poor. . . . All the hitherto dormant and unsuspected strength of my nature rose up in rebellion; I did not yet dream of denial, but I would no longer kneel.<sup>172</sup>

In 1871 there seemed no other way but self-destruction. She recounts her attempt at suicide in her An Autobiography written as a Theosophist, but there is no mention of it in her Autobiographical Sketches, penned in her Secularist phase.

Once more her health broke down, but on recovery, she resolved to examine critically each dogma of the Christian faith so that "I should never again say 'I believe' where I had not proven."<sup>173</sup> If an outraged moral conscience impelled doubt, yet a rational justification had to support an emotional reaction. And she insists on her conversion to Atheism,

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>171</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 29.

<sup>172</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 91.

<sup>173</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 55.

I cannot but see how orderly was the progression of thought, how steady the growth, after that first terrible earthquake, and the first wild swirl of agony.<sup>174</sup>

But if she questioned dogma, the more profound questions of the Deity of Christ, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul remained unquestioned<sup>175</sup> at the time. She was, as yet, a Theist.

Owing to the help of Lord Hatherley, Frank Besant obtained a Crown living at Sibsey. The questions that perturbed Mrs. Besant concerning dogma had to be solved. She turned to the works of Matthew Arnold, an undogmatic theologian who denied the common anthropomorphic ideas of God and the occurrence of miracles; to Frederick William Robertson, an opponent of Evangelicalism; and to Arthur P. Stanley, a liberal theologian. But it was in more liberal writers like Arnold that she discovered that any return to Anglo-Catholicism was impossible. "The more she read the more she doubted."<sup>176</sup>

She found a release from her tormenting doubts in the nursing of the sick, and it was then that she came into contact with the plight of the agricultural laborer. The movement of the Agricultural Union begun by Joseph Arch was gaining ground, and "Thus Annie's political and economic education proceeded along with her theological re-education."<sup>177</sup> The cause of labor was to play a significant role in her later years. The poverty of the poor galled her moral sensitivity and she tells with feeling:

<sup>174</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 99-100.

<sup>175</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>176</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 39.

<sup>177</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 43.

I learnt then some of the lessons as to the agricultural labourer and the land that I was able in after-years to teach from the platform. . . .<sup>178</sup>

Also, she writes,

In one cottage I had found four generations sleeping in one room. . . . Other cottages were hovels, through the broken roofs of which poured the rain, and wherein rheumatism and ague lived with the human dwellers.<sup>179</sup>

In the early autumn of that year (1872) "a ray of light broke the darkness."<sup>180</sup> She met the Rev. Charles Voysey and his wife, and discovered, to her delight, that their Theism was free from the "defects that had revolted me in Christianity."<sup>181</sup> Voysey was found guilty of "atheistic" beliefs tantamount to heresy and was unfrocked. Perhaps "The insurgency of this ordained priest furnished a precedent for her own revolt."<sup>182</sup> But having by now renounced all dogma so offensive to her, being merely the delusions of ignorance, yet she clung to the Deity of Christ. The bonds of Christianity were not so easily destroyed, for renouncing the divinity of Christ was to her tantamount to a complete rejection of Christianity.

There was so much that was soothing and ennobling in the idea of a union between man and God, between a perfect man and a Divine life.<sup>183</sup>

In the course of her studies she had already come across the idea of the Avataras in Eastern religious thought and realized that the

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<sup>178</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 104.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-105.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>182</sup> Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 35.

<sup>183</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 103.

"incarnate God" was a principle of faith by "all ancient religions."<sup>184</sup>

There was no sudden eclipse of Christian faith for Mrs. Besant, but a compulsive inner striving for an answer was insatiable. Yet she made one last attempt to erase the break with all that was noblest to her in her brief life. She went to see Dr. Edward R. Pusey, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford. The interview was short, for she was soon to discover that "no sort of enlightenment could possibly result from our interview."<sup>185</sup> She was, she writes, treated like a "penitent going to confession"<sup>186</sup> and not a searcher after truth. The question of the Deity of Christ could brook no argument; the thought of any imperfection in the doctrine was blasphemy. He bid her to be penitent, to pray, to accept without question; he had "no conception of the feelings of the sceptical spirit,"<sup>187</sup> and writes Geoffrey West, "In him and her the Catholic spirit and the Protestant spirit faced each other,"<sup>188</sup> each failing to understand the other. Slowly and saddened, she left the renowned Tractarian, realizing that her last chance of "escape" was over. She recognized in Dr. Pusey the great qualities of his spirit, his reverence to the "revealed truth," but, perhaps uncharitably, she writes,

Out of such men were made the Inquisitors of the Middle Ages, perfectly conscientious, perfectly rigid, perfectly merciless

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<sup>184</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>185</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 65.

<sup>186</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>188</sup>West, Annie Besant, p. 67.

to the heretic.<sup>189</sup>

But the challenge for proof would not be denied. It was during the same year (1872) that she met Mr. and Mrs. Scott. Scott was a truly remarkable man, an athlete, hunter, thinker, reformer, and a heretic; and

To a magnificent physique he united great brain power; his intellect was as cultivated<sup>190</sup> as his muscles, and the mighty hunter was a profound scholar.

A Republican and Freethinker, he issued Fraethought tracts and Mrs. Besant writes gratefully of him for his support and encouragement in her days of trial. "To no living man or woman--save one--do I owe the debt of gratitude I owe to Thomas Scott."<sup>191</sup> This remarkable man, independently wealthy, was the center of a group of men who met at his home, each driven by a searching for Truth and "a desire to spread Freedom among men."<sup>192</sup> It was for this man that Annie Besant published her many pamphlets under a pseudonym, "By the wife of a beneficed clergyman."

Returning to Sibsey and Frank, she no longer doubted, and to take Communion was sacrilege. She found relief in nursing the sick stricken by a typhoid epidemic. The spring of 1873 was eventful for it brought to her knowledge of a power she possessed which was to play a powerful role in her life ahead. Finding herself alone in the Sibsey

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<sup>189</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 67.

<sup>190</sup>Adolphe S. Headingley, The Biography of Charles Bradlaugh (London: Remington and Co., 1880), p. 314.

<sup>191</sup>Annie Besant quoted in Headingley, Biography of Charles Bradlaugh, p. 315.

<sup>192</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 113.

Church, she was driven by a need to express herself, albeit to a row of empty pews. Ascending to the pulpit, she delivered her first "lecture" on the Inspiration of the Bible.

I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight--but especially of power--that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles. . . . And, indeed none can know, save they who have felt it, what joy there is in the full rush of language that moves and sways; to feel a crowd respond to the lightest touch.<sup>193</sup>

In 1873 her marriage was broken. The choice given her was conformity to the observances of the Church or expulsion from home. She chose the latter. Returning to her mother, who sadly realized "how harshly an 1870 England would judge her beautiful, impulsive daughter, separated from her Vicar husband,"<sup>194</sup> she could not allow even a mother's anguish to dim her resolve. Granted the custody of Mabel, a time of trial lay ahead. The next year her mother lay mortally ill. It was the dying woman's wish that her daughter take the Sacrament with her, which was administered by an understanding Dean Stanley for whose courtesy she remained ever grateful. She stated boldly that "I was not a Christian,"<sup>195</sup> but that it was her mother's desire. To Dean Stanley, conduct was more important than doctrine, and the Sacrament was never meant to divide men but to be a "symbol of unity."<sup>196</sup> The loss of her mother produced days of agony. The help of Thomas Scott was inestimable. The trials and sorrow also witnessed the growth of feeling of intellectual freedom, the joy of frankly expressing her thought. She

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<sup>193</sup>Ibid., pp. 116-117.

<sup>194</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 41.

<sup>195</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 122.

<sup>196</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

attended the lectures of Moncure Conway at South Place Chapel. Her Theism was slowly beginning to erode. Conway, whose spiritual change from Methodism to Unitarianism and to Theistic rationalism, was a Virginian, educated at Harvard. He was at the time the leader of a group of Dissenters who met regularly at the Chapel. Mrs. Besant's readings now turned to Mill and Comte's Philosophic Positive. Prayer was slowly forsaken.

At last, she asked Thomas Scott whether she might write a Tract on the nature and existence of God, and it was while the last of the Scott pamphlets (On the Nature and the Existence of God written in 1874) was in manuscript that she met Charles Bradlaugh. On reading the last of the Scott pamphlets, (others being On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth, 1873; Natural Religion Versus Revealed Religion, 1874; On Eternal Torture, 1874; On the Religious Education of Children, 1874; On Inspiration, 1874; On the Atonement, 1874; On the Mediation and Salvation of Ecclesiastical Christianity, 1874; Euthanasia, 1874; and On Prayer, 1874) Bradlaugh remarked to her, "You have thought yourself into Atheism without knowing it," adding a slight change in the essay by the correction of the error that the Atheist says "There is no God."<sup>197</sup>

Mrs. Besant had already become a member of the National Secular Society prior to her first meeting with Bradlaugh and had heard him speak at a meeting and declared of him, "his knowledge was as sound as his language was splendid."<sup>198</sup> A few days after their first meeting, he offered her a place on the staff of the National Reformer. Adopting

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

the nom de guerre of "Ajax," suggested by the famous statue "Ajax crying for light," she found that it "awoke the keenest sympathy of response from my heart:

If our fate be death,  
Give light, and let us die.<sup>199</sup>

Bradlaugh was keenly aware of the value to his cause of this new recruit. "Who can say," asks Nethercot, "how much the hatred of her husband had impelled her along this route."<sup>200</sup> But perhaps Stead is closer to the truth when he says that Mrs. Besant "gravitated naturally and of necessity into Atheism."<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 91.

<sup>200</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 59.

<sup>201</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 61.

## CHAPTER IV

### MRS. BESANT, BRADLAUGH, AND THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

When Mrs. Besant first met Charles Bradlaugh in 1874, she was twenty-six years old while the redoubtable fighter for the Atheistic and Freethought cause was in his early forties. His wife, the daughter of an ex-Chartist and freethinker, was living apart. Bradlaugh's daughter writes of her father and Mrs. Besant,

They were mutually attracted; and a friendship sprang up between them of so close a nature that had both been free it would undoubtedly have ended in marriage.<sup>202</sup>

At the time when Mrs. Besant joined the Freethought movement, it was gradually gaining ground, and while "not so complete an organisation as it was soon to become, was nevertheless to be found in all the great centres of population."<sup>203</sup> Her conversion to Atheism now complete, she espoused the Freethought doctrine as Bradlaugh's most valued disciple until Fabianism beckoned. It would be imprudent to chronicle exactly her span of years as an Atheist. She herself admits, this "creed" and "morality" ruled her "life and thoughts from 1874 to 1886, and with some misgivings to 1889."<sup>204</sup> She became a Fabian in 1885.

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<sup>202</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, p. 13.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>204</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 169.

It is to be recalled that Bradlaugh did not convert her to an Atheistic position. An act of private rebellion spurred its growth; she had in herself the inner resources sufficient to make the transition from a strict Evangelicalism. Also, the sufferings of the landless in England and Ireland had already pervaded her sensitive moral consciousness. Geoffrey West writes, "he came to her as the vehicle by which she might rise to fame if not to fortune;"<sup>205</sup> to Theodore Besterman, "Her association with Bradlaugh led Mrs. Besant into the field of politics and into that of social reform."<sup>206</sup> There seemed little doubt that his influence and guidance were to be a powerful force in her life, and his encouragement may certainly be said to have contributed to her writings and speeches in the cause of Freethought. "My father's sympathies were all his life on the side of the weak and oppressed," writes his daughter.<sup>207</sup>

To Bradlaugh, conduct and integrity were the vital principles of life. Even if he was "in no sense a great thinker, in no sense a seminal mind,"<sup>208</sup> this uncompromising atheist who had "nothing Hellenistic"<sup>209</sup> about him provided the stormy petrel with a sense of guidance, or even, yet, a focus and direction towards radical action. It was this self-taught uncompromising Atheist who battled with "as finely

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<sup>205</sup>West, Annie Besant, p. 60.

<sup>206</sup>Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 3.

<sup>207</sup>Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. I, p. 65.

<sup>208</sup>Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 240.

<sup>209</sup>Courtney, "Charles Bradlaugh," Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century, p. 97.

tempered a Hebraic spirit as any of the Old Hebrew prophets" against the "superstition and the tyranny of public opinion"<sup>210</sup> who, Mrs. Besant acknowledges, ". . . found in him the restful strength it needed, and learned from him the self-control it lacked."<sup>211</sup>

She freely admits her debt to him, "I could serve under no lesser man."<sup>212</sup> He had wisely warned her never to voice an opinion on any issue until she was aware of the strongest case that could be made against it. Mrs. Besant recalls his "grave, quiet, strong look" when she first heard him speak, the "eloquence, sarcasm, fire" he brought to bear on Christian superstition.<sup>213</sup> She continues:

From that first meeting in the Hall of Science dated a friendship that lasted unbroken till Death severed the earthly bond, and that to me stretches through Death's gateway and links us together still.<sup>214</sup>

She is, of course, writing later when a Theosophist.

To both Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, creed and action were indissoluble. The bonds of Atheism, reform, and a striving for earthly perfection were to knit together a man and a woman in a matchless companionship, a tie that grew all the more strong as a Christian land heaped upon them insult and slander. It was with Charles Bradlaugh that Mrs. Besant was to engage in the two great battles for freedom of publication and the right of the individual to take his seat as

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>211</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 178.

<sup>212</sup> Annie Besant, A Fragment of Autobiography, 1875 to 1891 (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1891), p. 4.

<sup>213</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, pp. 89-90.

<sup>214</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 137.

an elected member of Parliament regardless of his religious beliefs. She was, writes Stead, "his most trusted, most unselfish friend, whose confidence and affection supplied the chief part of the poetry and charm of his somewhat austere and militant life."<sup>215</sup> But one can also appreciate the response this chivalrous man evoked in a woman whose earlier experience was marked by both frustration and pain. With the passage of the years and the parting of their ways, hers was the name more often pronounced.

The early life of Bradlaugh was cast in a different mould from the genteel upbringing of Mrs. Besant. The son of a solicitor's clerk and a nursemaid, the young Bradlaugh knew want. An errand boy at 12, a clerk at 14, he compensated for his lack of formal schooling by reading avidly. As a boy he had copiously transcribed and memorized a good part of the essay on "Self-Reliance" by Emerson. The Chartists were active at the time, and the young Bradlaugh frequented their meetings at Bonner's Fields. Also teaching Sunday School at the time, he found the Bible to contain certain discrepancies. Unlike Mrs. Besant, who uttered Tertullian's phrase, he turned to the parish priest, the Rev. John Graham Packard, for guidance. The well-intentioned gesture was met with clerical wrath which resulted in expulsion from his home and his job. Penniless at 17, he was befriended by G. J. Holyoake and Mrs. Sharples-Carlile, and the way to Atheism and Freethought lay open. Crane Brinton says of him: "He early showed a fondness for argument--a fondness rather for lawyer-like disputation than for philosophical dialectic. . . ."<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 76.

<sup>216</sup> Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 240.

An attempt at being a "coal merchant" was soon aborted when his only customer discovered that he was an "heretic." It was Mrs. Sharples-Carlile who did more than save him from starvation; their association

. . . brought him also into the direct line of English free-thought, which begins with the eighteenth-century and continues through Tom Paine and The Age of Reason, Carlile, Thomas Cooper the Chartist, and G. J. Holyoake.

After a brief period in the 7th Dragoon Guards as a private, during which he observed the plight of the Irish peasantry, he returned to civilian life in 1853 on a scanty salary. In the 1840's and 1850's, the Secularists

. . . barely existed as an organization. The Freethinkers of England were scattered; and though far more numerous than generally imagined, it was impossible to fully estimate their strength. It was only when some effort was made to group them together in distinct organization that the force of the party became a little more apparent. To achieve this end no one had contributed more than Bradlaugh, though his work was for so many years a work of love.

As "Iconoclast," a pseudonym he assumed from the beginning of his Atheistic propaganda work until he became a candidate for Parliament in 1868, he founded the National Secular Society in 1866 with a provisional program. The movement took shape and at the Conference at Nottingham in 1877, Mrs. Besant played an important role along with Charles Bradlaugh in drafting the "Principles and Object of the National Secular Society" (See Appendix A). She was now only second to Bradlaugh in importance in the Freethought Movement, and her contribution as a propagandist for the cause was inestimable. By 1880 (the year Charles Bradlaugh was first elected to Parliament), there was "a

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<sup>217</sup>Courtney, "Charles Bradlaugh," Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century, pp. 100-101.

<sup>218</sup>Headingley, Biography of Charles Bradlaugh, p. 66.

flourishing branch in nearly every important centre of population in the United Kingdom."<sup>219</sup> Except for the year 1872, Charles Bradlaugh was President of the N.S.S. from 1866 to 1890.

The National Reformer, the official organ of the N.S.S., announced its arrival with a flourish. Edited by Charles Bradlaugh, it proclaimed its policy with a candor which the "respectable" were not to find comforting. The issue of September 7, 1861, contained an editorial which outlined the journal's purpose. Atheism and Radical Politics were the major supports of the Secularist movement. It put forth that all religions were myths fabricated to enslave the mind, that "humanity is higher than theology; that knowledge is far preferable to faith." Advocates of adult suffrage, equality before the law, shorter Parliaments, and the repeal of all laws against blasphemy, the National Reformer further sought the complete separation of Church and State and the reduction of "our enormous and extravagant national expenditure."<sup>220</sup> From August, 1874, to Bradlaugh's death in April, 1891, Mrs. Besant was a regular contributor, rising quickly from being only a writer to a sub-editor, co-editor with Charles Bradlaugh, and finally a co-proprietor.

To Bradlaugh, Atheistic Freethought provided the "first platform from which to reach the public."<sup>221</sup> Atheism was a means to social and political amelioration. It was ". . . but the necessary preface to

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<sup>219</sup> J. P. Gilmour, general ed., Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, Centenary Vol. (London: C. A. Watts and Co., 1933), p. 80.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>221</sup> Chapman Cohen, "Bradlaugh the Freethinker," in Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 76.

his politics."<sup>222</sup> "The poor," he declared, "do not inherit the earth."<sup>223</sup> His attack was on dogma and stagnant religious beliefs and in their destruction lay the way to progress and the human good. The core of his politics was embedded in the Republican principle, and the Impeachment of the House of Brunswick (1872) was an abrasive attack on the Four Georges and the principle of hereditary monarchy. Reason and rationality in man demanded a Republic, which was to be brought about without use of "pike aid"<sup>224</sup> and was based on the ideal of Robespierre. Like Paine, he was nominated to the French Assembly but politely declined any active role in French politics.

His love of liberty found expression in English mis-rule in Ireland and India, and he was an advocate of Home Rule for both countries. An Englishman to the core, he voiced the finest ideals of English nineteenth century libertarianism, of the duty of England "to understand the needs of those he ruled, and to do justice willingly."<sup>225</sup> Equally, he resented the equation of Atheism with immorality, and the Utilitarian principle of the greatest good of the greatest number remained for him the standard of right and wrong. This could only be achieved by the freeing of men's minds from imposed clerical and aristocratic shackles. More virulent in his politics than his atheism, his political doctrine is best described

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<sup>222</sup> Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 242.

<sup>223</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, Jesus, Shelley, and Malthus: or Pious Poverty and Heterodox Happiness (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1861), p. 5.

<sup>224</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. I, p. 255.

<sup>225</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 179.

as a demand for the fullest admission of the people to the rights of self-government, and further, the application of the powers thus acquired to the removal<sup>226</sup> or reform of all laws framed in the interest of the upper few.

On the basis of his Atheism and Radical politics, he created in England an active and energetic party composed largely of working men. The Freethinkers of the N.S.S. were not urbane and sophisticated young men, products of Harrow and Oxford. They were largely "thinking men who had been thwarted by the system. . . . Atheism still represented the reddest and most aggressive challenge to the authority of the established system," writes Gertrude Marvin Williams,<sup>227</sup> and she feels that Mrs. Besant's entry into the N.S.S. "was primarily an expression of sympathetic interest in any form of rebellion against the status-quo."<sup>228</sup> The movement she had joined was dominated by this man who evoked among the working mass "a devotion of the intensest kind."<sup>229</sup> His appeal to the middle-class was slight, particularly as compared to Gladstone and John Bright, and even if there were Atheists in the ranks of the gentry, they were hardly prone to theological disputation. It was a time in which Dean Burgess could write, "The Bible is none other than the word of Him that sitteth upon the throne,"<sup>230</sup> and none could take a degree at Oxford or be a member of the Senate at Cambridge without subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles until 1871.

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<sup>226</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, p. 168.

<sup>227</sup> Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 52.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>229</sup> Robertson, Short History of Freethought, p. 33.

<sup>230</sup> Cohen, "Bradlaugh the Freethinker," in Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 68.

The gentry were chary of Atheism with its inevitable concomitant of social ostracism and economic loss. Also, the feeling persisted in the working-class mind "that middle-class church goers were snobs and parsons hypocrites."<sup>231</sup> In what was an ardently theological age--even if the outward manifestations of faith were more apparent than a firm belief--the Secularists were subjected to abuse and hatred. Nor were the Unitarians, or even the more "liberal" Matthew Arnold, inclined to take a tolerant position to this new phenomena which was seen as an attack totally radical on English piety and immemorial custom.

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<sup>231</sup>Walter L. Arnstein, The Bradlaugh Case: A Study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 12.

## CHAPTER V

### FROM THEISM TO ATHEISTIC FREETHOUGHT

The erosion of a personal faith was begun by an intense personal agony that was to lead Mrs. Besant away from Christianity to Atheistic denial and Freethought. "Her revolt against Theism," writes Pal, "was not the fruit of any deep reflection on the meaning and rationale of the Christian doctrine."<sup>232</sup> The struggle "outside the Christian pale" was

. . . a long one, and its first steps are very rough and very painful; the feet tread on the ruins of the broken faith, and the sharp edges cut into the bleeding flesh; but further on the path grows smoother . . . and in the distance we see the promise of the autumn, the harvest that shall be reaped for the feeding of man.<sup>233</sup>

An outraged moral conscience led to Atheistic martyrdom and that which lay beyond. Perhaps if Christianity had provided the solace and comfort she so desperately needed, she might have gone to Rome and a martyrdom. But dogma and "The Church established by law transformed me," she writes, "into an unbeliever and an agnostic."<sup>234</sup> Her repudiation of faith and the embracing of the Secularist philosophy were as

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<sup>232</sup>Bepin Chandra Pal, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Psychological Study (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1917), p. 48.

<sup>233</sup>Annie Besant, "Preface," My Path to Atheism (London: Free-thought Publishing Company, 1877), pp. v, viii.

<sup>234</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 24.

fervent and intense as any belief in the Anglo-Catholic creed by its most ardent disciple. To Jinarajadasa, it was "the awakening of her character" that made her challenge Christian dogma;

It was not the challenge of unfaith, but rather of a highly spiritual nature that desired intensely not only to believe but also to understand. The impossibility of making logic out of Christian traditions made her leave the Church and become a Freethinker.<sup>235</sup>

Once the inner conflict was generated, she renounced Christian dogma in her passage from Theism to Atheism. The first of the Scott Pamphlets, on the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth was written just prior to her leaving the Church and "marks the point where I broke finally with Christianity."<sup>236</sup> but even before its writing she had begun to examine and reject dogma. Prayer was found to be antithetical to any "dignified" idea of God and opposed to the results of scientific investigation. It was at the hands of the "biologist and chemist"<sup>237</sup> that Mrs. Besant was to seek the answer to man and phenomena; Darwin, Mill, Comte, and Hume became the grist for the mill of this "passionate pilgrim" in search of her concept of a loftier morality than that provided by a "Revealed Religion." "Surely," she writes, "I thought, the only safeguard is that of experiment, and the remembered agony of doubt made me very slow to believe where I could not prove."<sup>238</sup> Science and positivistic thought came to the support of her Atheism. It did not

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<sup>235</sup> Kuruppumallage Jinarajadasa, A Short Biography of Dr. Annie Besant: President of the Theosophical Society (Adyar, Madras, India: Vasanta Press, 1952), p. 4.

<sup>236</sup> Besant, "Preface," My Path to Atheism, p. v.

<sup>237</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 147.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

generate Atheistic doubt, but reinforced the eclipse of faith set loose by an emotional crisis. But the questions still remained to be answered; if science explained much, could it explain all?

Even if one is forced to agree with Besterman that her development through Deism and Theism into an Atheistic Freethought was "far too immature and fluctuating to allow for analysis,"<sup>239</sup> yet some attempt must be made. Her Atheism becomes complete with the publication of On the Nature and Existence of God (1875), presented to Bradlaugh. Theism is never really defined, but becomes marked by its vehement attack on Christian dogma, which, naturally, was designed to produce as large an affront to Victorian orthodoxy as possible. Moreover, if the Evangelicals were never "conspicuous for depth or originality of thought, being prone to attack greater value to the instinctive and emotional than to the products of reason,"<sup>240</sup> Mrs. Besant in her attacks on Christianity often falls into the error of their ways.

In her attacks on dogma, there is no surrender of the ethical truths of Christianity. Out of an outraged moral conscience was to rise a new faith and morality where the ground of faith shifts from God and dogma to man. Stead writes,

Grotesquely absurd as the observation appeared to those who saw in Mrs. Besant only the high priest of infidelity, it was the religiousness of her irreligion that alone made the latter formidable.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup>Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 62.

<sup>240</sup>Elliott-Binns, English Thought, 1860-1900, p. 313.

<sup>241</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 58.

To Mrs. Besant, "Those who study the Bible are in a fair way to become heretics,"<sup>242</sup> and Christ is condemned for being a "weak person," noted for his "Harshness to his mother,"<sup>243</sup> and as he did not resemble the Messiah of her expectations she questions the transcendent mystery of God! While, as yet, she retained a faith in the human Christ, she damns the Gospel of John as a "slander on his memory and an insult to his noble life."<sup>244</sup> Any belief in the mediation of Christ is an affront to man, since ". . . these ideas colour men's thoughts and lives . . . cripple their intellects . . . and we rise to trample down these superstitions."<sup>245</sup> But it is the Atonement, "the central doctrine of Christianity," which raises her to frenzy for it represents God as

. . . a Being so awfully cruel, so implacably revengeful, that pain AS pain, and death AS death, are what he demands as a propitiatory sacrifice, and with nothing less than the extremest agony can his fierce claims on mankind be brought off.<sup>246</sup>

The Atonement is also an affront both to man and to human morality since man has no need of God in Christ to absolve him from sin. Man, being perfectable, and possessed of the attributes of morality not derived from any supernatural agency, is responsible for his own actions. "Propitiation," she declares, "cannot be through

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<sup>242</sup>Besant, "Preface," My Path to Atheism, p. vi.

<sup>243</sup>Besant, "On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth," My Path to Atheism, p. 13.

<sup>244</sup>Besant, "A Comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the Three Synoptics," My Path to Atheism, p. 28.

<sup>245</sup>Besant, "The Mediation and Salvation of Ecclesiastical Christianity," My Path to Atheism, p. 57.

<sup>246</sup>Besant, "A Comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the Three Synoptics," My Path to Atheism, p. 35.

substitute."<sup>247</sup> But of all the doctrines of Orthodox Christianity

. . . marshalled by bishops and priests, arrayed in the splendour of prescriptive rights, armed with mighty weapons of authority and thunderbolts of Church anathemas,<sup>248</sup>

the idea of an "Eternal Hell" is as "blasphemous towards God as it is injurious to man."<sup>249</sup> It compels obedience to God rendered out of fear; it is not an appeal to man's nobler nature or his human aspirations but excites terror and apprehension.

"Morality" remains the guiding precept in Mrs. Besant's Theism. She did not, as yet, deny the Theistic formulae of St. Anselm that God is id quo maius cogitari non potest ("the being than which none greater can be thought"),<sup>250</sup> but the Theistic faith of Mrs. Besant soon placed "morality" before faith in Biblical infallibility and the God-head of Christ, which is nothing "but a repetition of an idea of Greek philosophy borrowed by early Christian writers."<sup>251</sup> Her "morality" is not dogma "petrified by authority"<sup>252</sup> but a feeling of man for man. True religion implies not only a faith in God, but a duty of a common human bond; in fact, the sharing of a common human concern is greater than a belief in God, in so far as the man who believes in God is

<sup>247</sup>Besant, "On the Atonement," My Path to Atheism, p. 5.

<sup>248</sup>Besant, "Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion," My Path to Atheism, p. 101.

<sup>249</sup>Besant, "On Eternal Torture," My Path to Atheism, p. 61.

<sup>250</sup>James Hastings, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. XII (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 261.

<sup>251</sup>Besant, "On Inspiration," My Path to Atheism, p. 83.

<sup>252</sup>Besant, "On the Religious Education of Children," My Path to Atheism, p. 99.

"selfish, cruel or unjust."<sup>253</sup>

The Deists of the eighteenth century had declared their belief in a "natural religion," but retained a God who was the architect of the world and those laws which governed it. The philosophes, as Becker has reminded us, were careful not to remove God from the human scene. Also, "In the eighteenth-century climate of opinion, whatever questions you seek to answer, nature is the test, the standard."<sup>254</sup> A Systeme de la nature ruled man's actions. There were moral laws which, "universal and changeless,"<sup>255</sup> could be discovered by all independent of a sudden illumination of grace, believed once to be repositied solely in the clergy. In the place of the revealed word of God, the philosophes had enthroned reason; and in Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion, the Church, Mrs. Besant declares, is pitted against nature and natural science. Even the Bible must be re-examined and explained so as to be in keeping with the laws of nature. Reason, not revelation, is the key to the understanding of phenomena and man. Moreover, asks Mrs. Besant of those who placed their faith in Biblical orthodoxies, how could Christ ascend to heaven from a revolving earth? Hardly an argument the philosophes would have used in their salons! Also the belief in the "Holy Ghost" is no different from the "idea of the Hindoo, that the world rested on an elephant and the elephant on a tortoise."<sup>256</sup> Such

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<sup>253</sup>Besant, "On the Religious Education of Children," My Path to Atheism, p. 99.

<sup>254</sup>Becker, Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers, p. 53.

<sup>255</sup>Frank E. Manuel, The Age of Reason (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), p. 40.

<sup>256</sup>Annie Besant, Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion (London: The Scott Pamphlets, 1875), p. 5.

being the truths of "revelation," they were untrustworthy and of no consequence. All that man required for "his guidance in this world he can gain through the use of his natural faculties."<sup>257</sup> Yet, if reason, or "natural faculties" are essential, she had not, as yet, deserted God for:

Personally, I believe that God does teach morality to man, and is, in very deed, the Inspirer of all gracious and noble thoughts and acts. I believe that the source of all morality in man, is the Universal Spirit dwelling in the spirits He has formed.<sup>258</sup>

But God no longer is an anthropomorphic Being. The Socratic gnothi seauton is Mrs. Besant's commandment. Not unlike Kant who retained "God as a necessary postulate of moral action but demolishes all of the traditional proofs for the existence of God as no proofs at all."<sup>259</sup> God, to Mrs. Besant, is the "moral law" within man which supplies the inspiration and guide for ethical conduct. God now "rests in man."<sup>260</sup> Man becomes almost God-like in conception with infinite possibilities of moral growth open to him. Thus, it is that good and evil, sin and crime are not revealed in scriptural authority but are a reflection of "Nature's revelation of morality, as exemplified in the highest human lives."<sup>261</sup>

Now comes Auguste Comte, and his first influence is visible in

<sup>257</sup> Annie Besant, Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion (London: Thomas Scott, 1874), p. 14.

<sup>258</sup> Besant, "Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion," My Path to Atheism, p. 110.

<sup>259</sup> Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought, p. 243.

<sup>260</sup> Rev. Charles Voysey in Annie Besant, "Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion," My Path to Atheism, p. 114.

<sup>261</sup> Besant, "Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion," My Path to Atheism, p. 114.

her On the Nature and Existence of God (1875). God disappears, and a new "science of morality" appears, which

. . . must be content to grow like other sciences; first an hypothesis, round which to group our facts, then from the collected facts reasoning up to a solid law. Scientific morality has this great advantage over revealed, that it stands on firm, unassailable ground, new facts will alter its details, but can never touch its method; like all other sciences, it is at once positive and progressive.<sup>262</sup>

Mrs. Besant's service is consecrated to the service of man, guided by positivist science. It would appear that, as yet, positivism is merely a state of mind, a new rationale to replace theological-metaphysical doctrines. Its role is to provide Mrs. Besant with the basis of an ethical reconstruction of society to be guided by certain laws having "Truth" ("for your mistress"); "Freedom" ("for your General"); "Love" ("for your inspirer") and "Man for your Master not in heaven but on earth."<sup>263</sup> Life becomes an existential fact, divorced from any cosmic reality and guided by the new "science of morality" based on Comtian positivism. If to the sophisticated positivist, moral problems defy scientific analysis since the "Scientific method" is incapable of positing what moral goals should be, and "reaching them requires moral decisions, which are not scientific ones,"<sup>264</sup> Mrs. Besant's "positivism" begins with an a priori ethical postulate having man's need and welfare as a moral end. Her ethical beliefs had to have some support from reason, science, and logic. Quite clearly, God has faded out of the picture, and man has taken his place. Perhaps man, after all, was not

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<sup>262</sup> Besant, "On the Nature and Existence of God," My Path to Atheism, p. 139.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>264</sup> Brecht, Political Theory, p. 171.

the creation of God but His creator, God being simply an image of the mind. God is neither miraculous nor omnipotent. It is man that possesses a "noble morality"<sup>265</sup> and has no need of divine communication.

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<sup>265</sup>Besant, "Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion," My Path to Atheism, p. 112.

## CHAPTER VI

### ATHEISM AND FREETHOUGHT

"Nothing," Lipson reminds us, "that is socially significant can be politically irrelevant."<sup>266</sup> Also, the concepts of liberty and equality together with moral freedom are related. As Hobhouse pointed out, "The struggle for liberty is the struggle for equality."<sup>267</sup> It implies the freedom of man and his capacity to realize his best self. The political theory of liberalism which, in a "positive sense," is derived "from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master,"<sup>268</sup> is based largely on the capacity of man to convert selfish desires into a concern for the general good. The question of human values has persisted through time, and the liberal faith, however defined, often rests not only upon the upholding of a constitutional principle or of intellectual freedom but also directs attention to an ethical end expressed in terms of the moral dignity of man. Even if the ideas of liberty have been relative to time and historical context, the ideal of the value of the human personality is often stressed.

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<sup>266</sup> Leslie Lipson, The Democratic Civilization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 69.

<sup>267</sup> L. T. Hobhouse, Liberalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 21.

<sup>268</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1968 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 16.

Freedom, whether "moral" or "political," seldom flourishes in a climate of political or religious authoritarianism; also, the criteria of "freedom" is defined in many ways. To the Secularist it is to be derived from reason and experience, and "its ground and guarantee exist in human nature independently of any theological belief."<sup>269</sup> It has no God, it sees the universe only in the knowable--to believe in proven facts.

"I have examined Theism, and have found it to be illogical self-contradictory, and absurd,"<sup>270</sup> Mrs. Besant declares as she embraces the Secularist ideal. Mrs. Besant was dedicated to man's liberty, and the way to individual liberty and progress was now to be in Freethought and Secularism. She does, however, write as an Atheist that she cared little for politics "as such"--

for the necessary compromises of political life were intolerable to me; but whenever they touched on the life of the people they became to me of burning interest.<sup>271</sup>

Regardless, with Atheism inevitably went Radical politics, and her views on such questions as land and labor, Republicanism, anti-Imperialism, Ireland, and the House of Lords were soon to condemn her as "an agitator, a firebrand,"<sup>272</sup> which seemed to add zest to her crusade against the conventional beliefs and thought of Victorianism. The "perpetual carrying of the fiery cross"<sup>273</sup> was not likely to enamor her

<sup>269</sup>G. W. Foote, The Philosophy of Secularism (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889), p. 6.

<sup>270</sup>Annie Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals: A Debate Between Annie Besant, Atheist, and the Rev. G. F. Handal Rowe (of Halifax) Clergyman of the Church of England (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1887), p. 15.

<sup>271</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 174.

<sup>272</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>273</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

among those who viewed both Atheism and Radical politics as the work of the devil. Her Atheism, she continues, provided the "inner sources of action,"<sup>274</sup> which supplied the inspiration for her political activism. In an age where religion and politics were inseparable, to Mrs. Besant as to Charles Bradlaugh, Atheistic creed and Radical action were two parts of a single whole. Atheism and Secularism provided the rationale which fed the "outer life"<sup>275</sup> of political and social radicalism and reform.

Rejecting God, she turned to a new vision of man, and her Secularism was inspired by the belief that the individual be set free of imposed shackles and act according to his own reason and conscience-- particularly against the clergy. Imbued with a faith in science, her Secularism soon envisaged a conception of Utilitarian morality indispensable to progress. Existence to Mrs. Besant and the Secularists had nothing in common with the medieval world view that man played his part assigned to him by an infallible God, and where Grace and Redemption were the goals most worthy of seeking.

Mrs. Besant's intent is clearly to remove "morality" from religion and to give it a base in Secularist Science. Gripped with a "Passionate desire for the bettering of the world,"<sup>276</sup> she now asserts "the gospel of Freethought, the banner of Secularism . . . against the gospel of Christianity."<sup>277</sup> Science replaces revelation, it being the

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>277</sup> Annie Besant, The Gospel of Christianity and the Gospel of Freethought (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1877), p. 5.

way to "Truth," and the creed of a Utilitarian morality takes the place of the Revealed "laws" of God and a divine inscrutability. The gospel of Secularism is without God; it only sees the Universe and knows what exists. It professes no belief in its origins "because there is no reason for such belief."<sup>278</sup> Morality and theology are things apart. According to Mrs. Besant, "If we can find morality on a basis apart from theology, we shall do humanity a service which can scarcely be over-estimated."<sup>279</sup> Mrs. Besant is dedicated at this time:

. . . to free the souls of men as we have freed their bodies. Instead of religion we will give them science. Instead of credulity we will give them knowledge. Instead of fear we will give them love. . . . We will build a nobler temple and we bring a grander creed. Our morality is based on experience not revelation; on man's need not on God's command.<sup>280</sup>

The debate with the Rev. Mr. Hatchard in which she rang out her phrases was met with "ringing applause and waving of handkerchiefs."<sup>281</sup> She knew her audience well.

Both Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh envisioned themselves--as did the other "cultivated intellectuals" of the time, which soon was briefly to include Aveling--as "witnesses of a turning-point in history

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<sup>278</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>279</sup>Besant, "Constructive Rationalism," My Path to Atheism, p. 15.

<sup>280</sup>The Jesus of the Gospels and the Influence of Christianity On the World. The Besant-Hatchard Debate: A Two Nights' Discussion Between Mrs. Annie Besant and Rev. A. Hatchard (New York: The Truth Seeker Co., n.d.), p. 72.

<sup>281</sup>"Introduction," Jesus of the Gospels and the Influence of Christianity On the World, p. 4.

and civilization."<sup>282</sup> However, there were those, like Charles Bradlaugh's daughter, who felt that although Mrs. Besant

. . . was not an original thinker, she had a really wonderful power of absorbing the thoughts of others, of blending them, and of transmuting them into glowing language. Her industry her enthusiasm, and her eloquence made her a very powerful ally to whatever cause she espoused.<sup>283</sup>

Daniel H. H. Ingalls feels that regardless of an ability to "organize ideas" and to present them clearly, she displayed in all her writings a "curious lack of original imagination. Her lectures on atheism were pure Bradlaugh."<sup>284</sup>

In 1874 when the two met, Charles Bradlaugh's work as a Free-thought pamphleteer and expositor of the Atheist doctrine was largely over. His energies were largely directed towards gaining election to Parliament--together with his radical politics which sought social and political justice within the framework of the law and constitutional change. To the end of his life in 1891 he was to remain an individualist without God. Even during his years as an expositor of the Free-thought creed--largely between 1850 and the late 1870's--his writings rarely dwelt in depth "on the nature and evolution of religion."<sup>285</sup> His concern was more with practical issues, and a life of trial and persecution left little time for Atheistic contemplation. Bradlaugh,

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<sup>282</sup> Chushichi Tsuzuki, The Life of Eleanor Marx, 1855-1899: A Socialist Tragedy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 82.

<sup>283</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, pp. 15-16.

<sup>284</sup> Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "The Heritage of a Fallible Saint: Annie Besant's Gifts to India," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 109 (1965), p. 85.

<sup>285</sup> Cohen, "Bradlaugh the Freethinker," Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 63.

in fact, "supported atheism primarily along lines first popularized by Thomas Paine in his Age of Reason, on the basis of Biblical self-contradictions."<sup>286</sup> While he was not unaware of the theological implications of the work of Darwin, yet his atheistic inspiration was largely drawn from Locke, Newton, and Galileo. His attacks on Christianity in such writings as A Few Words on the Christian Creed (1850); New Life of Abraham (1860); New Life of Moses (1861); New Life of David (1860); Who was Jesus Christ (1860); A Plea for Atheism (written in the late 1870's) were a condemnation of Supernaturalism and a defense of the Atheist. "His writings fell into line with the great mass of freethinking work that issued from the press during the first fifty years of the nineteenth century."<sup>287</sup> He was no dialectician, who sought to expound the philosophic rationale of atheistic doctrine. His major concern was with the more pragmatic issues of contemporary politics and reform. In fact,

Long before Bradlaugh died he was able to note, although he never stressed the fact, that scientific investigations had supported his atheism from other than a mere dialectical point of view.<sup>288</sup>

Atheism was largely a means to a practical end. He was no abstract theorist.

The impact of Comte, Hume, and even Darwin are evident in Mrs. Besant's Atheistic rationale, to a far greater degree than in the works of Bradlaugh, and provided a far greater stimulant to Mrs. Besant's thought. Her atheistic works were written largely in the late 1870's

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<sup>286</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 12.

<sup>287</sup> Cohen, "Bradlaugh the Freethinker," Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 62.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

and early 1880's. Bradlaugh, who was finally elected to Parliament in 1880, was engaged in the struggle to gain and maintain his seat having unsuccessfully contested the elections in 1868, 1873, and 1874. It is Mrs. Besant who continued the Atheistic crusade by pen and pamphlet. And the view that she faithfully mirrored all of Bradlaugh's Atheistic thought is to be approached with much reservation. Even if she did adopt Bradlaugh's definition of Atheism and admits to have read his A Plea for Atheism, yet her references to Comte, Hume and even Darwin-- whose 2nd Edition of The Origin of the Species was published in 1871 in which he includes man in the evolutionary process--were evident to a greater degree than in the writings of Charles Bradlaugh. She attempts to provide a further rationale for her philosophic atheism, and even if she did owe a debt to Bradlaugh, new wine in an old bottle is quite a different thing.

Also, as the leader of the Secularists, Bradlaugh was in no way doctrinaire. In fact, G. P. Gilmour, who wrote numerous articles for the National Reformer, says of his experiences as a Secularist:

The chief source of that pleasure sprang from the sense of perfect freedom that one always enjoyed when writing for the National Reformer . . . he [Bradlaugh] believed in allowing the members of the National Reformer staff to develop freely along the lines of their own individuality.<sup>289</sup>

The foundation of Mrs. Besant's "philosophic atheism" was, moreover, laid prior to her meeting with Charles Bradlaugh. Mrs. Besant's Atheism is "monistic" in essence, positing that "matter" and "spirit" form one indivisible substance. From this position she deduces that God and the Universe are one. Thus, God becomes co-extensive

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<sup>289</sup>Gilmour, Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 59.

with nature and the universe. No longer is He an anthropomorphic Being with a separate individuality. The extension of this argument may lead to the hypothesis that since man is a part of nature, of which God is also a component, man in fact becomes God, or God man! Proceeding from this position to the question whether God exists at all, she denies his existence since He is incapable of proof. Man can only grasp phenomena, not the unknown which lies beyond. The influence of Hume is obvious. Belief is only the product of the testimony of man as found from observation and experience. The two major tenets of Mrs. Besant's Atheism are the refusal to accept without scientific proof and the fact that anything beyond phenomena perceived by sensory experience is an illusion.

She is at pains to explain her Atheist position, since without a clear understanding of it, "further evolution into Theosophist will be wholly incomprehensible."<sup>290</sup> Theosophy, in retrospect, was the final stage of an evolutionary process towards "knowledge, rendering rational, and therefore acceptable, the loftiest spirituality that the human mind can yet conceive."<sup>291</sup>

"Atheism" to both Charles Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant is "without God. It does not assert no God." The Atheist is without any conception or idea of God since it is a word which conveys "no clear or distinct affirmation." Nor can he deny God's existence since he cannot deny that of which he has no "conception."<sup>292</sup> To Mrs. Besant, at this

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<sup>290</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 139.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>292</sup> Annie Besant, The Gospel of Atheism: A Lecture (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1877), p. 5.

point; "no philosophy, no religion, has ever brought so glad a message to the world as this good news of Atheism,"<sup>293</sup> and she persists in her attempts to rationally prove its logical tenability. The question cannot be resolved by emotion--it is a matter for the intellect alone. Creation, the miraculous or the supernatural "cannot be conceived"<sup>294</sup> by the human mind and hence cannot exist. Science looks to Truth alone, and thus any conception of a "First cause" is "as illogical as that of creation, and as innocent of all attempts at demonstration;"<sup>295</sup> and it is in the manner of Hume that she condemns the miraculous. "A miracle," declared Hume,

is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.<sup>296</sup>

To Hume the laws of cause and effect were fictitious. Any attempt to establish a causal relationship between facts was only to indulge in metaphysical speculation. As an "empiricist," Hume felt knowledge arose exclusively from "sense experience" and could be verified against "future experience." Thus,

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<sup>293</sup> Besant, Gospel of Atheism: A Lecture, p. 3.

<sup>294</sup> Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals, p. 6 (pages appear incorrectly numbered).

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>296</sup> David Hume, "Essay on Miracles," ed. 1770, pp. 160, 161, 178 in The Jesus of the Gospels and the Influence of Christianity: Verbatim Report of the Two Nights' Debate Between Rev. A. Hatchard and Annie Besant, at the Hall of Science, 142, Old Street, on Wednesdays, November 25 and December 1st, 1880 (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1884) and in Annie Besant, Theological Essays and Debate (London: Freethought Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 15.

The alleged truths of metaphysical and theological speculation are neither logically necessary, nor derived from experience, nor testable in experience.<sup>297</sup>

Since they are not "knowledge," they lie outside human comprehension. Thus the doctrines of Christianity were denounced, being founded on mere faith and not reason, which was to say, ". . . in the climate of opinion of that time, almost the same as to say that it was founded on nothing at all."<sup>298</sup> God is not a part of "experience," being an a priori "truth" and hence incomprehensible to the scientific mind. Mrs. Besant adapts Hume to her curious logic. Having declared unequivocally that Hume is her guide in such matters, she goes on to say that,

Every effect must have a cause, therefore the universe must have a cause, is a favourite enthymeme, of which the suppressed minor is, the universe is an effect. But this is a mere begging of the question. Every effect must have a cause; granted: for a cause is defined as that which produces an effect, and an effect as that which is produced by a cause; the two words are co-relatives, and the one is meaningless separated from the other. Prove that the universe is an effect, and in so doing you will have proved that it has a cause; but in proof<sup>299</sup> of that quietly-suppressed minor is the crux of the dispute.

Nevertheless, it would appear that Mrs. Besant perceives that if cause and effect are perceivable in the region of the phenomena, no rationality can extend it into the "region of the noumenon."<sup>300</sup> The mysteries of existence are inexplicable by rational scientific analysis. Atheism is based on reason and knowledge; in fact, "God is the answer of the savage to every phenomena of nature, to everything

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<sup>297</sup> Lewis White Beck, Six Secular Philosophers (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 44.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>299</sup> Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals, p. 6.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

not understood."<sup>301</sup> A "self-existing" God who creates out of nothing-- for how could "Spirit" give birth to "matter"--provides no answer to the problems of human existence. Only "experience" is to be trusted. Christ is a fictitious entity; in fact, ". . . there are too many incarnate Gods in history" and the evidence of the Christian fathers would not be admissible even in a "County Court."<sup>302</sup> Her convictions had to be supported by an attempt at rational analysis.

Inspired by Comte, the Secularist faith of Mrs. Besant now sought to rid thought of the dry rot of metaphysical speculation. She writes that Comte is ignored and, like John Stuart Mill, seeks to make him known. Mrs. Besant is at pains to sketch his early life and trials, his break from M. de Saint Simon who wished to present Comte to the public as his "lieutenant" and, naturally, his unhappy marriage to Caroline Massin until "his nature blossomed into beauty under the magic touch of Clotilde de Vaux."<sup>303</sup> She "tacitly . . . implied a resemblance between the unhappy marriage of the French philosopher and her own,"<sup>304</sup> for she writes, "All and more than all that Beatrice was to Dante, and Laura was to Petrarch, was Clotilde de Vaux to Auguste Comte."<sup>305</sup> Comte, to Mrs. Besant, was a Freethinker who was far too honest a man to tolerate a marriage ceremony which he found repellent.

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<sup>301</sup> Besant, The Gospel of Atheism, p. 9.

<sup>302</sup> Besant, Jesus of the Gospels and the Influence of Christianity, p. 13.

<sup>303</sup> Annie Besant, Auguste Comte; His Philosophy, His Religion, and His Sociology (London: C. Watts, 188?), p. 7.

<sup>304</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 105.

<sup>305</sup> Besant, Auguste Comte, p. 19.

His struggles, his imprisonment, his attempts at suicide, and his persecution by the Church are dramatized by Mrs. Besant. This champion of Freethought bore the pain that was the fate of all Freethinkers.

Comte's "Positive Philosophy" is eagerly embraced by Mrs. Besant. She writes, "For the first time in the world an explanation of the world, society, and man is presented which is thoroughly homogeneous."<sup>306</sup> Its method is the "objective method," derived from "science" based on discovered facts and not speculative theories. Science qua science seeks to perform for his age the "unifying function which theology had performed in the Middle Ages."<sup>307</sup> Positivism was to become in the century a powerful force, and to Annie Besant its virtue lay not as "a creed but a Method of Thought."<sup>308</sup>

Also, quite obviously, Mrs. Besant feels herself well set in the third stage of Comte's "The Law of the Three Stages." The development of her mind, she obviously feels, has discarded the "theological" stage being "fictitious"; the "metaphysical" stage being "transubstantiation"; and is now firmly in the "scientific" or "positive" where one can discover "laws" and ignore the causes of phenomena.<sup>309</sup> No longer do men see the supernatural at every step, but man stands face to face with facts and laws. She writes,

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>307</sup> Lane W. Lancaster, Masters of Political Thought: Hegel to Dewey, Vol. III (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., n.d.), p. 75.

<sup>308</sup> Besant, Auguste Comte, p. 20.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

As theology reached its highest in referring all actions to the will of one God, and metaphysics its highest in ascribing all to one force, Nature, so Positivism would reach its highest if it could trace back all facts to one general law, one fact from which all others flow.<sup>310</sup>

In the Cours de Philosophie Positive, Comte was a scientist guided by precision and objectivity. But the role of the "scientist" soon gives place to a reconstruction of society, with himself as the "High Priest" of a new positivist faith with its own elaborate hierarchy. It is Clotilde de Vaux who is now held responsible by Mrs. Besant for damaging his "intellectual vigour."<sup>311</sup> In his Positive Polity he is no more a scientist, rather "a prophet, bringing a new revelation, a priest who is the messenger of a new gospel."<sup>312</sup> The ideal, now, is vivre pour autrui, but in doing so he becomes "an infallible Pope under a new name, with a new creed on his lips, with dogma in one hand, and excommunication in the other." The "scientist" becomes a "prophet"<sup>313</sup> with all the symbols repugnant to the Atheistic creed of Mrs. Besant. She is perhaps sounding a warning to the Secularists as she writes:

If the Rationalists take as their central creed that 'reason is supreme,' yet they would be destroying the future of Rationalism if they formulated into a creed any of the conclusions to which their own reason had led them.<sup>314</sup>

Positivism had its impact on Liberalism. The Liberal emphasis

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>314</sup> Besant, "The Church of England Catechism," My Path to Atheism, p. 238.

on freedom, equality, and individual rights took on a new perspective.

According to Hallowell,

For the natural law of reason the positivist sought to substitute social laws exactly analogous to the physical laws of the universe. . . . Freedom as conceived by classical liberalism was freedom to act in accordance with the dictates of right reason; freedom as conceived by the positivist liberal, was freedom to act in accordance with the innumerable laws of nature.<sup>315</sup>

Thus, the laws of nature, to the Positive Liberal, were not to be found by the exercise of "right reason" in the manner of Cicero, but to follow the dictates of the inviolable laws of nature. These laws were ascertainable by the methods of scientific investigation. Obedience to such laws led the way to human progress.

It was Mrs. Besant's intent to remove morality from its basis in Revelation and Religion and to give it a basis of its own in experience and science. By the founding of a new morality which "in the deepest sense means harmony with the natural order"<sup>316</sup> free of the dictates of imposed authority, humanity would be rendered a service. She reminds her reader that "In every revolution, be it political or religious, a grave responsibility rests on the leaders of the movement,"<sup>317</sup> and she is geared to lead the Secularists to a new enlightenment. Edward Maitland, himself a prominent Secularist, reminds us that in the 250 years since John Milton the "Reformation" still remains uncompleted,

Still are our Churches, whether established or independent, for the most part but servile repetitions of that old Romish system

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<sup>315</sup>Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought, p. 324.

<sup>316</sup>Besant, "The True Basis of Morality," Theological Essays and Debate, p. 3.

<sup>317</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

from the influence of which it was the express function of the Reformation to detach them.<sup>318</sup>

Mrs. Besant, accordingly, poses her "science of ethics," an atheistic system designed for the guidance of human conduct having no basis in a revealed divinity; but being in accord with the law of nature. It is, in fact, a system for the "guidance of human conduct" based on the "scientific method" and "on the assumption of the uniformity of nature" where "law signifies invariable sequence of phenomena, not the expression of a divine will."<sup>319</sup> Obedience to this law means virtue, harmony, and happiness; any disobedience to it spells misery. The destruction of the codes of Moses and Jesus leaves the Rationalist with the need to found a new code to replace the old. Perhaps Gertrude Himmelfarb is close to the mark when she declares that for the Victorian "unbeliever," his "transcendent belief was morality." It is

. . . as if the Victorians, by giving to mankind what they could no longer give to God, hoped to atone for the gravity of their sin and the pain of their loss.<sup>320</sup>

The standard of measure in Mrs. Besant's new morality is not God's command but the "general good" of men leading to their welfare and happiness. The need remained for a viable faith to replace the destruction of orthodoxy--a satisfactory "Atheistic system for the guidance of human conduct."<sup>321</sup> The "true basis of morality," for Mrs.

<sup>318</sup> Edward Maitland, "How to Complete the Reformation: A Lecture," Thomas Scott, Ramsgate (in Scott's Tracts No. 12, Harvard University Library), p. 5.

<sup>319</sup> Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals, p. 25.

<sup>320</sup> Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, p. 303.

<sup>321</sup> Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals, p. 1.

Besant, is "Utility," that is

. . . the adaptation of our actions to the promotion of the general welfare and happiness, the endeavour so to rule our life that we may serve and bless mankind.<sup>322</sup>

Only "Utility," so defined, can be an acceptable base since it promotes not only the "general good," but is also in accordance with "scientific" principles. Man, acting in accordance with the law of morality, is also in harmony with nature and its laws; it is found to be of universal appeal, since utility is of appeal to all men. Thus will greed and dogma dissipate before the onrush of her new science of morality and with it bring a new freedom for all men. God no longer has control over the lives of men; events are in accord with inviolable natural laws.

The true rules of her ethical morality with its "Utilitarian" implications--though essentially non-hedonistic--are to be discovered by the application of the "scientific method." Thus the

. . . first step towards building up a science of morality is to collect facts, and as in other sciences facts are collected by the observation of surrounding phenomena, facts in sociology, recorded in history.<sup>323</sup>

Utility--being the principle for achieving "general happiness"--is determined by a careful scrutiny of those actions which have proved beneficial to society as a whole. The criteria of morality is not the securing of personal happiness, in the manner of Bentham, but the "general good." Also, to Mrs. Besant, happiness induces "virtue," and the happiness the "utilitarians" (of the Besant persuasion!) speak

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<sup>322</sup>Besant, "The True Basis of Morality," Theological Essays and Debate, p. 9.

<sup>323</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

of includes "every form of physical, mental, and moral enjoyment attuned not for the gratification of sensuous "lower pleasures," but for the "higher ones."<sup>324</sup> Utility is man's only guide; human happiness its sole object, and virtue its justification.

Utility is the product of "experience" codified as to the "moral" and "physical" laws.<sup>325</sup> Since man's faculties cannot grasp God, they can study phenomena and record history, and from them derive laws which to the Rationalist do not imply God's command but

. . . nothing more than the observed and registered invariable sequence of events. Thus it is said "a stone falls to the ground in obedience to the laws of gravitation." By the "laws of gravitation" the Christian would mean that God had ordered that all stones should so fall. The Rationalist would simply mean that all stones do so fall, and that invariable sequence he calls the "law of gravitation." Obedience to the laws of Nature replaces, in the religion of Humanity, obedience to the laws of God.<sup>326</sup>

Thus, since nature has replaced revelation as the guide to conduct, man now speaks in terms of "nature's laws," not a "Divine will." There "laws of nature" would allow freedom of individual development. A rational co-operation with nature's laws spells the promise of the "clear light of freedom and science" on a "regenerated earth."<sup>327</sup> But, if denied, it can only spell ruin. Thus, "This rational co-operation with Nature" is that which "distinguishes the scientific from the religious person."<sup>328</sup> Laws which are disregarded

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>325</sup> Besant, Gospel of Atheism: A Lecture, p. 7.

<sup>326</sup> Besant, "Constructive Rationalism," My Path to Atheism, p. 171.

<sup>327</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 156.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

. . . strike the transgressor. If you are intemperate in drink and food, then shaking hands, enfeebled brain, ruined constitution, shall teach you that punishment invariably follows on transgression.<sup>329</sup>

Such to Mrs. Besant are the inviolable laws of nature, raised to the status of a science! But the true end of "general happiness" is the brotherhood of man and the elevation of the human race--this, too, being an inviolable natural law. The true basis of morality, its "Utilitarianism" and its principle of "general happiness" lead to a common fraternity of all men. The "laws of nature" seem to demand it; it is the "cultivation" of the "social feelings," the knitting of "man to man, and heart to heart, in loyal service to the common need, and general sacrifice to the common good"<sup>330</sup> that are really the basis of her "Utilitarianism." It sets an ethical standard for man to follow, supposedly in accord with the "laws of nature" which must be obeyed to secure the "general happiness," and discoverable by the methods of positivist science, but divorced from any concept of orthodox absolutes. It is, in fact, an atheistic system for the regulation and guidance of human behavior and conduct.

In The Basis of Morality (1915), published in India while Mrs. Besant was a Theosophist, she writes that utility had been a "hand-to-mouth" moral basis, and that it lacked definite investigation or the codification of experience.<sup>331</sup> Also, presumably commenting on Bentham, she says in her An Autobiography that duty is not a method of "selfish-

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<sup>329</sup> Besant, Gospel of Christianity, p. 8.

<sup>330</sup> Besant, "The True Basis of Morality," Theological Essays and Debate, pp. 13-14.

<sup>331</sup> Annie Besant, The Basis of Morality (Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1915), p. 15.

calculation."<sup>332</sup> Unlike the "felicific-calculus" of Bentham, there is no measure of pleasure or pain in Mrs. Besant's "utilitarianism"; it is essentially humanistic and aims at a universal brotherhood. Each, however, sought to free man from the imposed shackles of ecclesiastical authority, but the Benthamites did not base their theories on such abstractions as natural law, or natural science. To Bentham, Utility was the only guide, and while their Utilitarianism is hardly similar, Mrs. Besant, like Bentham, seems engaged in a "quasi-Evangelical sense of mission,"<sup>333</sup> regardless of their essentially irreligious doctrines. Mrs. Besant's basis did not lie in a kind of hedonistic, psychological egoism but both were equally positive that once men had seen the light, a new age would open and their theories would be accepted as a matter of course. Mrs. Besant seeks utility, as the "general happiness," largely in moral terms; she does not treat man, as Bentham does, "much as the economists treat him, as a competitor and collaborator with other men for the satisfaction of one desire after another."<sup>334</sup> Law to Bentham implied command; to Mrs. Besant the role of the government seems to be completely ignored. The rules of morality and utility are not imposed but discoverable by each man through the laws of nature. It was not only to produce the "greatest happiness" but the greatest virtue.

Apart from her Utilitarian morality, the "second great plank of her ethical platform" is nothing short of the "intellectual comprehen-

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<sup>332</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 160.

<sup>333</sup>Bowle, Politics and Opinion, p. 51.

<sup>334</sup>Flamenatz, Man and Society, Vol. II, p. 15.

sion of the sources of evil."<sup>335</sup> To discover the source of evil in man, it is now necessary to turn to her concept of Darwin and the evolutionary theory. The rapid development of the theory of organic evolution, which was based on a new comprehension of man and nature, is not lost to Mrs. Besant, even if she applies it in her own typically chimeric fashion. Science, being Atheistic, has confronted man with nature with the injunction, "Study, experiment, discover," and now men speak of "evolution where once they spoke of creation."<sup>336</sup> Her reason for rejecting Theism and embracing Evolution is that:

it postulates a perfectly wise, good, and powerful Being as the creator of a world in which there exists a number of very foolish and very evil things. Accepting Evolution, I cannot believe that an all-good and all-powerful God designed the struggle for existence, with all the suffering therein involved.<sup>337</sup>

Mrs. Besant saw in the "evolution" of the "social instinct" in man proof of his capacity for moral consciousness and the ability to attain greater "virtue." She states that if man has the capacity to subdue his environment, there is no reason why he cannot complete his regeneration by conquering the "anti-social," brute forces that lie within him. The evil in man is inherited from his brutish ancestry, and can be removed. This is possible, to Mrs. Besant, not through religion but by the recognition of man's duty to man, of his "social bond." It is science, not religion, which has traced man's evil to its true source. All that now remains is for man, in his further evolution from his brutish past, to rise to his true moral stature. To do so is to co-

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<sup>335</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 164.

<sup>336</sup> Besant, Gospel of Atheism: A Lecture, p. 9.

<sup>337</sup> Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals, p. 16.

operate with the immutable laws of nature. Evolution having traced evil to its source, it now remains for man to rise above the brute and assert his ethical humanity.<sup>338</sup> Also, man is no longer the puppet of a "celestial power." Evolution recognizes that all living things are moulded by a process of "slow adaptations" ". . . by reactions between organism and environment, by the killing out of the unadaptable and the persistence of the adaptable." This fact, and not the idea that God planned the "misery and bloodshed" in the world, explains these "blind unconscious forces" which can be studied and controlled. Man, recognizing that he is a product of his past and the moulder of his future, is no longer a toy of an "Almighty player."<sup>339</sup>

It is while her mind was full of the concepts of Darwin and Science that she writes The Natural History of the Christian Devil (1883) and Biblical Biology: A Contribution to Religious Non-Science (1884), neither of which can be recommended to the intelligent theological or scientific mind. In the former, evolution of the Devil is sketched in the light of "comparative mythology" by tracing his descent to his "embryonic form." The Devil is dethroned as a myth, and

Among the many dethroned monarchs of the world Satan claims a melancholy eminence, Napoleon had his Chiselhurst, Louis Phillipe his Claremont, but Satan now only finds a refuge in the most ill-furnished novels of the mind.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> See Annie Besant, "World Without God. A Reply to Miss Frances Power Cobbe" (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1885); also quoted in An Autobiography, pp. 164-165.

<sup>339</sup> Besant, Atheism and Its Bearing on Morals, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>340</sup> Annie Besant, The Natural History of the Christian Devil (1883), p. 1.

In Biblical Biology: A Contribution to Religious Non-Science, Annie Besant searches the scriptures only to discover that they are non-scientific! The events recounted in Genesis, in Matthew, and so on are unscientific. Her understanding of the parable is not apparent, and would scarcely be of interest to a mind schooled in theology. However, Mrs. Besant sees Darwin as the tool to attack theology and affirm science, however ill-conceived in thought. Perhaps she is aware of it as she admits,

To a woman of my temperament, filled with passionate desire for the bettering of the world, the elevation of humanity, and a lofty system of ethics was of even more importance than a logical, intellectual conception of the universe.<sup>341</sup>

Her "lofty system of ethics" had a very definite conception of her "ideal of man." Even in her "Atheist days," writes Pal,

She was constantly pointing to the unseen, the ideal, what may in fact be even called intuitive and spiritual, in her vigorous fights with popular theistic ideas and superstitions.<sup>342</sup>

She had what she called an "instinctive certainty" of "man's innate grandeur," however "inconsistent" she admits "that certainty was with my belief in his purely animal ancestry."<sup>343</sup> Science was now enthroned, capable of revealing the facts of nature. The survival of the fittest implied "the death of one is the life of the other,"<sup>344</sup> and the concept of the survival of the fittest conflicted with her a priori hypothesis of man's "innate grandeur." Moreover, the perfectability of the "race" was only possible by the spiritual and moral evolution of man. Man's

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<sup>341</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 153.

<sup>342</sup>Pal, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Psychological Study, p. 205.

<sup>343</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 162.

<sup>344</sup>Besant, Gospel of Christianity, p. 4.

character, it appears, is a product of the evolutionary process and of his fight against his "inner nature"; and his miserable surroundings.

Atheism to Mrs. Besant is characterized by "This joyous, self-reliant facing of the world with the resolute determination to improve

it. . . ."<sup>345</sup> Denying that Atheism was a cold, lifeless creed when compared to the beauty and splendor of Christianity, she points to the Immortality that the Atheist possessed, and an ideal far greater than any Theistic supposition could conceive. "True" religion is "morality

touched by emotion."<sup>346</sup> In both the Gospel of Atheism (1877) and A World Without God (1885) she points to the splendor and true immortality that is Atheism. Man's ideal lay on earth, and immortality is to be found in the magnificence of Beethoven's music or Shelley's poetry. To each is given this heritage "according to the measure of

his deeds."<sup>347</sup> There was an ideal which stirred man's feelings and motivated his actions--the longing for an immortality expressed in terms of human service and human brotherhood. "Joy and hope . . . are the inheritance of the Atheist,"<sup>348</sup> unlike the ideal humanity of the Christian which is

. . . the humanity of the slave, poor, meek, brcken-spirited, humble, submissive to authority, however oppressive and unjust; the ideal humanity of the Atheist is the humanity of the free man who knows no lord, who brooks no tyranny, who relies on his own strength, and makes his brother's quarrel his, proud, true-hearted, loyal, brave.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 168.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>347</sup> Besant, Gospel of Atheism: A Lecture, p. 12.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Her goal was man's good and his happiness. Yet, unlike Charles Bradlaugh, whom Pal once heard exclaim, "We all know, what little man can do,"<sup>350</sup> she never had that "deep sense of this impotence of man as Charles Bradlaugh had it."<sup>351</sup> Her "immortality," her ideal of man and service, was upon earth. There was a duty and destiny of man and a beauty found in a conscious harmony with the forces of nature. Perhaps a "heaven" could be assembled on a corrupt Theistic earth!

To achieve this end man must be free. The erosion of the authority of the scriptures dethroned the God who ruled the world. Freethought sought enlightenment in Reason, in Science, in Knowledge based on experience and testimony upon which all social progress and human happiness were based. Also, quot homines. tot sententiae (as many men, so many opinions), the way to truth lay in an "unbridled intellectual Freedom of inquiry."<sup>352</sup> Liberty arose from the revolt of reason and individual conscience against orthodoxies. "It is noticeable," Mrs. Besant writes,

. . . that dissent, which is always a step towards Freethought, is, in civil struggles, on the side of Freedom, while the orthodox creed is always on the side of passive obedience.<sup>353</sup>

Of those who waged the just war against the tyranny of the Church was Cromwell ("The Independent"--that is disputable, even if he did hold to freedom of conscience in matters of faith); Milton ("The

<sup>350</sup> Pal, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Psychological Study, p. 73.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>352</sup> A. Elley Finch, The English Free-Thinkers of the Eighteenth Century: A Lecture (London: Sunday Lecture Society, 1879), p. 9.

<sup>353</sup> Besant, Jesus of the Gospels, p. 4.

Socinian"--perhaps the Republican Milton was a follower of Socinus); and Martin (the "Atheist").<sup>354</sup> But the resounding phrases in the Debate with the Rev. A. Hatchard, the turn of phrase, was not always taken kindly by the entire audience. The National Reformer of December 5, 1880, does say, "we are obliged to record that a good deal of provocation was given by Mr. Hatchard."<sup>355</sup>

There existed a very necessary correlation between the ways of scientific thought and individual liberty. While the concept of "science" was hardly known to Platonic thought, the Greeks believed that "knowledge" could be separated from mere "belief." To do so was the task of the philosopher. Mrs. Besant seeks to separate "knowledge" based on science from opinion or unscientific irrational belief; Mrs. Besant, like Condorcet and the eighteenth philosophers, believed as did the early Comte that the remedy to man's irrationality and prejudice lay in bringing truth and the ways of science to his attention. Atheism held the key since it

. . . rejects all authority which pretends to conceal its roots in the sky, but it alone leads to liberty, reason, progressivism, knowledge of man and human nature (in one word, Humanism).<sup>355</sup>

Her devotion to liberty is vividly dramatized in the cause of the French Revolution and the life of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) whose ". . . life and death of lonely chivalry have won him his place as the

<sup>354</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>355</sup>Besant, Jesus of the Gospels, p. 4.

<sup>356</sup>Emile Accllas, "The Idea of God in the Revolution," published in the Droits De L'Homme, translated by Annie Besant in Theological Essays and Debate, p. 5.

typical martyr of modern Freethought."<sup>357</sup> The French Revolution, to Mrs. Besant, was a vindication of the rights of man, and she represents Robespierre as "one of the great pathetic figures in history, for he saw an ideal to accomplish, but had not the strength to do it."<sup>358</sup> "Her own rebellious impulses," writes Nethercot of Mrs. Besant in 1883, "were concentrated largely on the French Revolution. . ."<sup>359</sup> The part played by such "Freethinkers" as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot who, it appeared to Mrs. Besant, "made liberty a living ideal in France"<sup>360</sup> receive much attention. Their role was to spur thought, to make people seek liberty, and to overthrow tyranny in the shape of King and Church. Thus, she contends, "When, in any country which is not wholly free, there is a rapid spread of Freethought principles, then may the people look for political change."<sup>361</sup> The resultant excesses were not to be blamed on the Revolutionists but were the inevitable outcome of tyranny and the misery of the people since a great disparity existed between the privileged classes and the common people. Like Paine, she argued that the brutality of the revolutionists was a natural result of their inhuman conditions under tyranny of the ancien regime. The Atheists and Freethinkers were well represented by the Girondists who

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<sup>357</sup>Robertson, Short History of Freethought, p. 286.

<sup>358</sup>C. Jinarajadasa, "The Diamond Soul of Annie Besant," in Annie Besant: Centenary Book. 1847-1947, ed. by James H. Cousins (Adyar, Madras, India: The Besant Centenary Celebrations Committee, 1947), p. 10.

<sup>359</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 184.

<sup>360</sup>Annie Besant, History of the Great French Revolution (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1885), p. 11.

<sup>361</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

"rejected the idea of God."<sup>362</sup> It was the Girondists who lost to the factions of Robespierre (whom Mrs. Besant now condemns for his Theistic views) and the Jacobins—who were the "Atheistic party, the party of philosophic Freethought, the bases of which were laid by the Encyclopaedists. . . ."<sup>363</sup> Moreover, even if the Girondists disappeared as a party, it remained "the child of the sceptical philosophy of the eighteenth century,"<sup>364</sup> and they were notable for their work in overthrowing King, tyranny, feudalism, restoring the land to the nation and founding Republican institutions.

Mrs. Besant now resurrects the memory of Giordano Bruno—a martyr to Freethought, a philosopher and poet, and, if historical records are reliable, burned alive in February, 1600, in Rome in what is now the "Field of Flowers" adorned by his statue. Her writings on this man who, of all the men of his time, was most repelled by the Christian creed, provided another "chance for Annie's stabbing, glittering pen."<sup>365</sup> In Giordano Bruno (1877); The Story of Giordano Bruno; and Giordano Bruno, Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century which was first delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne on June 15, 1911, she recaptures his life of trial and persecution in the cause of Freethought. His was the "Life Heroic that leads to Human Perfection."<sup>366</sup> As a Dominican

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<sup>362</sup> Acollas, "Idea of God in the Revolution," p. 1.

<sup>363</sup> Besant, History of the Great French Revolution, p. 235.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>365</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 97.

<sup>366</sup> Annie Besant, Giordano Bruno, Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophist Office, 1913), p. 1.

monk he was damned for heresy for his rejection of Aristotle and the embracing of Pythagoras who taught that it was the sun that was the center of the solar system, of which the earth was only a part revolving around it. Fleeing persecution to Switzerland, yet Calvin's narrow theocracy was as intolerant as the creed of Rome, and he took flight wandering over Europe and teaching at the Universities of Toulouse, the Sorbonne, Oxford, and Wittenberg. But in an age dominated by "Hebraic cosmology and Aristotelian thought,"<sup>367</sup> his views were branded heretical. Between 1563 and 1585 Bruno was in England and debated at Oxford where the leading men of letters gathered to debate the Ptolemaic theory against the Copernican. "Oxford," writes Mrs. Besant, "chose her best men to combat for Aristotle and Ptolemy." The "earth is immoveable, the universe is finite and moveable," they said.<sup>368</sup> To this, Bruno responded that the universe was "infinite" and the earth revolved round the sun. Seized by the Inquisition, he met his fate, and it was proof to Mrs. Besant that until Christianity was liberalized by freethought, it was better, in a Christian country, to be a criminal than a heretic. Bruno was never an Atheist, even if his view of the universe was a negation of the accepted Christian doctrine. To Mrs. Besant, his creed was "Pantheism." Bruno, writes Mrs. Besant, admits the existence of one "supreme intelligence"--God:

This intelligence, which is perfect in God, is less perfect in inferior spirits; still less so in man; more and more imperfect in the lower gradations of created beings. . . . Man, who occupies the middle position in the hierarchy of creation, is capable of contemplating every phasis of life. He sees God

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>368</sup> Besant, "Giordano Bruno," Theological Essays and Debate, p. 3.

above him--he sees around him traces, which attest the immutable order of the universe, constitute the soul of the world. To collect them, and connect them with the Being whence they issue, is the noblest function of the human mind. . . .<sup>369</sup>

These words appeared in the National Reformer of 1876, while Mrs. Besant was the ardent champion of the Secularists. However, many years later when in India as a Theosophist, she identifies with the slain martyr as one of her former incarnations. The emphasis on a hierarchical cosmology with God at its peak, and of a universal consciousness, while attributed to Bruno, does yet signify that even in her atheistic days she had never wholly forsaken the vision of an unseen spiritual ideal. "She had," writes Pal, "never, for a moment lost hold of her inner conviction of the fundamental unity of the universe."<sup>370</sup>

Mrs. Besant's Atheistic philosophy was the springboard from which she was to launch her activistic political and social campaigns. "Finding it impossible to accept the service of a God in whom she could not believe, she consecrated her youthful life to the service of man,"<sup>371</sup> and this fearless advocate of Freethought was soon to become "the most popular lecturer, perhaps, in England."<sup>372</sup> England of the late Victorians was not unused to public speaking, for "(the platform, as it was called)--dominated contemporary thought, even more than the press which reported it, and even more than television does today,"<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>369</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>370</sup>Pal, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Psychological Study, p. 231.

<sup>371</sup>Ibid., p. 451.

<sup>372</sup>Bennett, World's Sages, Thinkers and Reformers, p. 1035.

<sup>373</sup>C. G. L. DuCann, The Loves of Bernard Shaw, (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1965), p. 101.

and Mrs. Besant was to put to splendid use the gift she discovered in that silent church at Sibsey. Her lecturing career as a Freethought advocate began in earnest in February, 1875, and the National Reformer followed her remarkable achievements as a platform orator with much pride. Tom Mann has written of her that,

Mrs. Besant transfixed me; her superb control of voice, her whole-souled devotion to the cause she was advocating . . . created such an impression upon me that I quietly, but firmly, resolved that I would ascertain more correctly the why and wherefore of her creed.<sup>374</sup>

Malcolm Quin wrote of her in his Memoirs of a Positivist:

. . . she still seems incomparably young and attractive, her face alive with emotion and expression, her voice full and sonorous, but musical and not unfeminine. She was perhaps too uniformly earnest and indignant in her denunciation of bigotry and obscurantism, rarely indulging in wit. She was, or we thought she was, a martyr; she had won freedom from domestic and clerical oppression at the cost of social proscription. She faced a hostile world on behalf of liberty and truth. We young men, who had the passion of these things in our souls, responded readily to the passion with which she pleaded for them. We were carried away. Mrs. Besant's portrait was for sale at the close of the lecture and I still have the copy which I bought at the time. Its colours are now faded, but the image of this young prophetess of religious and political progress as she appeared on her first lecturing tour is still fresh in my mind.<sup>375</sup>

"It is still debatable whether Annie Besant made more converts to her various causes by her pen or her tongue,"<sup>376</sup> writes Nethercot. And he continues:

If there was one thing of which the Secularists were thoroughly convinced, it was the power of the press as a weapon, both

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<sup>374</sup>Tom Mann quoted in Theodore Besterman, Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, pp. 76-77.

<sup>375</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 68; also quoted in Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 77.

<sup>376</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 70.

propagandistic and personal.<sup>377</sup>

Despite Mrs. Besant's eloquence and her appreciation of the role of the platform as a way to influence the public mind, in 1882 she began her own literary venture and edited a monthly called Our Corner. The National Reformer now received an added support, and this magazine which sold for sixpence advertized Mrs. Besant even further in the six years of its existence. In it she pursued her secularist ideal, an extension of her own ideals and personality containing fiction, essays, poems, with a "Political Corner" and a "Science Corner," also the recent appointments to professional positions at the University of Oxford. Her name was never to appear in that august list--one can surmise to her infinite chagrin!

The intrepid Freethought propagandist had now "found my work in the world."<sup>378</sup> The country had to be schooled in the ways of reason, not blind faith; to be shown that morality must be based on a firmer foundation than religious orthodoxies; and that the pure delight of science could free man from ignorance once he had learned to appreciate that liberty lay in an earthly salvation free of oppression of King or Church. To recapture her moralistic fervor is not an easy thing to do; and even if Mrs. Besant's Atheism was not the "product of a schooled and penetrating intellect,"<sup>379</sup> or her

. . . utilitarianism was philosophically false, it cannot be denied that in going up and down the country delivering lec-

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>378</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 193.

<sup>379</sup> Besterman, Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 71.

tures . . . she was doing much good.<sup>380</sup>

Despite her philosophic rationale, her motives were of the best, although it is reported that "She had facile judgments on every subject under the sun,"<sup>381</sup> and that both Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh had ". . . more than normal egotism and need for approbation of the artist type."<sup>382</sup> Her home, "Oaklands," was soon to be the hub of the Secularists as they applauded her crusades and the causes of religious, political, and social reform, undertaken by this articulate woman with unrivalled passion and zeal.

Mrs. Besant's Freethought crusade was not begun in a moment of abandon. The inner well-springs of humanistic concern which were to provide the motivating force for her atheistic crusade began rather "tentatively" in a speech on "The Political Status of Women," which was her first public lecture. However, she recalls, "Once on my feet, I feel perfectly at my ease, ruler of the crowd, master of myself."<sup>383</sup> She was aware of the perils that beset the Atheist--for "I knew that an Atheist was outside the law, obnoxious to its penalties, but deprived of its protection."<sup>384</sup> Yet the desire

. . . to spread liberty and truer thought among men, to war against bigotry and superstition, to make the world freer and better than I found it--all this impelled me with a force that would not be denied. I seemed to hear the voice of Truth ringing over the battlefield: "Who will go? Who will speak for me?" And I

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<sup>380</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>381</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 71.

<sup>382</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>383</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 182.

<sup>384</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

sprang forward with passionate enthusiasm, with resolute cry:  
 "Here am I, send me!"<sup>385</sup>

Regardless of the trials that beset her, she never regretted her decision to "devote to that sacred cause every power of brain and tongue that I possessed."<sup>386</sup> Her words came quickly, but in an age in which most Victorians were filled with reverent religious feelings, and an evangelical morality transcended religious denominations which "marked the religious outlook of a Quaker like Bright and of a High Churchman like Gladstone . . . a Presbyterian like Livingstone . . . and a man like Disraeli, who although Jewish by race was a practicing Christian,"<sup>387</sup> her lectures were to be rent by discord. She carried her message to the working-class and uneducated, and her experiences were not always pleasant. In Lancashire, she was pelted with stones; at Glasgow she faced a "Stern and critical audience;"<sup>388</sup> and at Leicester, accusations of immorality were flung at her by irate Christians. During a visit to Swansea, "the fear of violence was so great that a guarantee against damage to the hall was exacted by the proprietor, and no local friend had the courage to take the chair for me."<sup>389</sup> But often, Mrs. Besant was

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<sup>385</sup>Ibid., p. 188. Also, William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (New York: The New American Library, 1956), p. 58, writes with reference to Mrs. Besant that "When a superior intellect and a psychopathic temperament coalesce . . . in the same individual, we have the best possible condition for the kind of effective genius that gets into the biographical dictionaries. Such men do not remain mere critics and understanders with their intellect. Their ideas possess them, they inflict them, for better or worse, upon their companions or their age."

<sup>386</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 96.

<sup>387</sup>Thomson, England in the Nineteenth Century, p. 107.

<sup>388</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 193.

<sup>389</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

more than a match, for she could tame a hostile audience by a well-placed remark. Her incessant travels and speeches were conducted at such a rate that she was warned by a doctor that it would either cure her of a chest ailment or kill her. Mrs. Besant, as a Freethought lecturer, had come into her own.

## CHAPTER VII

### IN COURT: KNOWLTON AND MABEL.

The year 1877 was an eventful year for Mrs. Besant, for she was embroiled in an incident which was to have a lasting effect, particularly on the cause of Neo-Malthusianism. The defense of the Knowlton pamphlet, says Besterman, "may eventually prove to be Mrs. Besant's best claim to lasting fame,"<sup>390</sup> and there seems little doubt that when she plunged with customary ardor into her new adventure, she was but dimly aware of its far-reaching consequences. "This action of hers," reports Stead, "was one of the bravest of her life."<sup>391</sup> It was also contributory to a personal tragedy.

An American physician, Dr. Charles Knowlton, had published his The Fruits of Philosophy: The Private Companion of Young Married People in the 1830's, and it was freely sold both in the United States and England for over forty years. The author, though influenced by Malthus, believed that pure Malthusianism could be productive of little good unless people--largely the working classes--were urged to use contraceptive devices to limit families. While Malthus had urged late marriages and "moral restraint" prior to the married state,

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<sup>390</sup>Besterman, Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 81.

<sup>391</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 66.

Knowlton in his "psychological treatise"<sup>392</sup> advocated early marriages as a cure for the evils of prostitution and the restriction of the numbers of off-spring within the means of subsistence through the use of mechanical and medicinal devices. Only thus could the evils of poverty be eliminated while recognizing the need for sexual gratification when the desire was at its highest. Malthus had condemned such devices, but neo-Malthusians such as Richard Carlile and Francis Place (and even John Stuart Mill) had already reached the conclusion that birth-control as a necessary cure to the evils of over-population was well in keeping with "the optimistic radicalism of the era of the French Revolution."<sup>393</sup>

The work was being published and sold in England by a Free-thought publisher, James Watts, without incurring either English legal or clerical prohibition. When a rather disreputable Bristol bookseller interleaved some "improper pictures"<sup>394</sup> in the work, both he and the publisher were arrested by the police and charged with publishing obscene literature under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 which owed its inspiration to the Chief Justice, Lord John Campbell. What now seemed to be called into account was not only the newly inserted pictures but the work of Knowlton itself. Freethought had for long identified itself with the cause of a free press, and Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh leaped to the defense of Watts and arranged a plan of action which involved the raising of a fund for legal expenses. But Watts, to the great chagrin and horror of Mrs. Besant, preferred discretion to

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<sup>392</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 205.

<sup>393</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 20.

<sup>394</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 206.

Atheistic valor and decided to "throw himself on the mercy of the court, relying on his previous good character and on an alleged ignorance of the contents of the incriminating work."<sup>395</sup> The defection of Watts called for a change of plan. The cause of freedom of expression, however vital, was enhanced by the knowledge that the work had been sold for the past many years by such Freethinkers as James Watson and George J. Holyoake. Bradlaugh himself had little sympathy with the "style" of the work, but had declared "If I had once published it, I should defend it until the very last."<sup>396</sup> To Mrs. Besant, there was a greater issue at stake than Neo-Malthusianism, an interest which was of vital concern to the public, "One," she declares, "which we will spend our whole lives in trying to uphold."<sup>397</sup> The primary question was really the right to public discussion, of free speech, particularly as involving social questions which were of vital interest to the people. Even if Mrs. Besant was aware of the many "philosophical mistakes"<sup>398</sup> in the pamphlet, yet to her the path of progress lay in the open discussion of ideas, and no discussion was

. . . possible where differing opinions are suppressed, we claim the right to publish all opinions, so that the public, enabled to see all sides of a question, may have the materials for forming a sound judgement.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 113.

<sup>396</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, National Reformer, January 21, quoted in Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 114.

<sup>397</sup> Arnie Besant, In the High Court of Justice. Queen's Bench Division. June 19th. 1877. The Queen Vs. Charles Bradlaugh and Arnie Besant (London: Free Thought Publishing Co., 1878), p. 49.

<sup>398</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 121.

<sup>399</sup> "Publishers Preface to Dr. Knowlton's 'Fruits of Philosophy,'" quoted in Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 121.

Both Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were resolute in their determination to test the right of free publication and entered into a formal partnership by founding the "Freethought Publishing Company" which republished the pamphlet in order to bring into the open the right to freedom of discussion, particularly as it affected the population question. Thus, writes Mrs. Besant, perhaps rather whimsically for the coming events had not yet fully cast their shadow,

we found ourselves suddenly launched on a new undertaking, and with some amusement and much trepidation I realized that I was "in business," with business knowledge amounting to nil.<sup>400</sup>

If the publication of the Knowlton pamphlet identified her with the cause of Birth Control and Neo-Malthusianism, yet "at the time when she republished the pamphlet her ideas were not at all clear on the matter."<sup>401</sup> It was her passionate zeal for freedom of expression and the liberty of the press which "led her, almost without intending it, into the heart of the neo-Malthusian controversy."<sup>402</sup> In the tradition of Milton and of Carlyle who "not only resisted the fetters upon the press, but inspired others to resist. . . . Every British book-seller has profited by his trepidity and endurance,"<sup>403</sup> she opposed fetters on the absolute right of free publication. Bradlaugh's daughter pays her a somewhat grudging tribute:

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<sup>400</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 117.

<sup>401</sup>Jinarajadasa, Short Biography of Dr. Annie Besant, p. 9.

<sup>402</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 66.

<sup>403</sup>G. J. Holyoake, "Carlyle," in Courtney, "Charles Bradlaugh," Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century, p. 105.

To see a woman brave enough to stand by the side of a man in defense of the free publication of unpopular doctrines, was an incentive to the public to investigate these doctrines with a view to forming an independent judgement upon them; it was also an inspiration and a constant spur to the man--had he been the one to need spur or inspiration in such a cause.<sup>404</sup>

She was not unaware of the dangers to which this act of defiance was heir. Regardless, however, of the animosity which spilled forth from the apostles of Christian virtue, notably the Christian Evidence Society, the question she posed to herself was whether such teachers of a "lofty morality"<sup>405</sup> could show cowardice when a cause beckoned, regardless of the cost. "To me," she writes, "it meant the loss of the pure reputation I prized, the good name I had guarded--scandal, the most terrible a woman could face."<sup>406</sup> But for one whose "heart had been fired by devotion to an ideal humanity, inspired by that materialism that is of love and not of hate,"<sup>407</sup> there could be but one answer. Slowly, also, the truths of the neo-Malthusian doctrine began to permeate her consciousness. The cure for the degradation of the poor, prostitution, and other social ills lay only in early marriages and birth-control. She had witnessed "the misery of the poor, of my sister-women with children crying for bread," and asked herself, "Should I set my own safety, my own good name, against the helping of these?"<sup>408</sup> Bradlaugh records his debt to his incomparable ally,

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<sup>404</sup>Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, p. 17.

<sup>405</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 207.

<sup>406</sup>Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>407</sup>Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>408</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

And here--while my hand is yet free to pen these lines--let me record my deep sense of gratitude to the woman who has shared my fight, aided me by her help, encouraged me by her steadfastness, and strengthened me by her counsel.<sup>409</sup>

Having published the new edition of the Knowlton pamphlet, Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh courted arrest and prosecution. Both left copies with the chief clerk at Guildhall and notified him that they would sell their pamphlet at a given time. Similar notices were given both to the City Police office and the Solicitor for the City of London. The flung gauntlet was quickly accepted, and the two were arrested on April 6th of the year. Their publication, together with copies of the Free-thinker's Text-Book and the work of Bradlaugh on Jesus, Shelley and Malthus, was confiscated by the police. Committed to trial at the Central Criminal Court, Bradlaugh by a writ of certiorari had the trial removed to the Court of Queen's Bench before the redoubtable Lord Chief Justice of England. Sir Hardinge Gifford Q.C., M.P., the Solicitor-General of the Tory Party, led for the prosecution before a special jury. "One of the most significant trials in late Victorian English history"<sup>410</sup> was about to commence, and the issue became of burning concern to press and public alike. It did not pass unnoticed by an "anonymous nonentity" of twenty years recently arrived from Ireland, who, already convinced that Mrs. Besant "was greatness personified," having once heard her speak, now at the trial offered to help in the distribution of the banned book.<sup>411</sup> The trial became a cause celebre,

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>410</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 21.

<sup>411</sup> Stephen Winsten, Jestins Apostle: The Life of Bernard Shaw (London: Hutchinson and Company (Publishers) Ltd., 1956), pp. 32, 35.

and it is not to be thought that Mrs. Besant did not luxuriate in the publicity and the acclaim of her followers.

Even if Bradlaugh's daughter places upon her father the "whole responsibility of the defence,"<sup>412</sup> yet Mrs. Besant as her own counsel displayed keen forensic skill and legal acumen not unmarked by flashes of sardonic humor and appeals to humanitarian principles. Faced with the brilliant array of barristers for the prosecution, she could remark,

It will not seem strange to any of you if, in defending myself here to-day, I find myself slightly over-weighted by the amount of legal ability which the prosecution has thought it well to bring against me.<sup>413</sup>

Mrs. Besant, who "had burrowed into Bradlaugh's library with her usual zealous thoroughness and had mined some rich veins there, was the first to be called."<sup>414</sup> Her defense took two full days, and was received with much approbation in court. She ended with an impassioned plea to the jury:

Unless you are prepared, gentlemen, to brand me with malicious meaning, I ask you, as an English woman, for that justice which is not impossible to expect at the hands of Englishmen--I ask you to give me a verdict of "Not Guilty," and to send me home unstained.<sup>415</sup>

Her defense was both sincere and impressive. Lord Chief Justice Cockburn summed up strongly for an acquittal and declared that a "more ill-advised and more injudicious proceeding in the way of a prosecution was probably never brought into a court of justice."<sup>416</sup> But the verdict of

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<sup>412</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, p. 18.

<sup>413</sup> Besant, In the High Court of Justice, p. 27.

<sup>414</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 124.

<sup>415</sup> Besant, In the High Court of Justice, p. 151.

<sup>416</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 210.

the jury was certainly ambivalent; they declared,

We are unanimously of opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave public morals, but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any corrupt motive in publishing it.<sup>417</sup>

The Judge's verdict of "Guilty" was later reversed on appeal. Their victory was complete, and not only was the Knowlton pamphlet circulated widely but the trial produced a spate of writings from the pen of Mrs. Besant. A lengthy and detailed account of the trial was recorded in In the High Court of Justice. Queen's Bench Division. June 18th. 1877.

The Queen v Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant to be followed by Is the Bible Indictable?, The Social Aspects of Malthusianism, and finally, The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and its Bearing Upon Human Conduct and Morals which was soon to replace the Knowlton pamphlet in its popular appeal. The population question, once ignored by the great mass of people, had now become one of the "burning questions" of the day.<sup>418</sup>

Annie Besant had clearly shown that a low-priced work, clearly stating the outlines of the subject, fulfilled a great need. Also, comments Geoffrey West, the defense of the Knowlton pamphlet "advertised her as nothing else could have done, and, incidentally established the beginnings of the modern birth-control movement."<sup>419</sup> In the short span of less than three years as a Freethinker, Mrs. Besant had become a force to be reckoned with.

The prosecution of the Knowlton pamphlet was instituted under

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<sup>417</sup> Besant, In the High Court of Justice, p. 267.

<sup>418</sup> Annie Besant, The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and Its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1879), p. 4.

<sup>419</sup> West, Annie Besant, p. 67.

the Act sponsored by Lord John Campbell. The test of obscenity was whether a work was "written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth, and of a nature calculated to shock the feeling of decency in any well regulated mind."<sup>420</sup> Sir Hardinge Giffard, who "used every art of political and theological animosity against us,"<sup>421</sup> argued that the pamphlet in question was pornography "under the guise of philosophy and medical science."<sup>422</sup> The pamphlet, it was submitted, was such as would deprave and corrupt those minds open to immoral influences and into whose hands any publication of this type may fall. It was destructive of the character of the young--whether married or single--and Sir Hardinge, who read the "colourable" passages in court with much gusto and little brevity, submitted to the jury that the work was

. . . colourable, and that the object of the whole book, the scope of this book, is to permit people, independent of marriage, to gratify their passions, independently of the checks which nature and providence has interposed.<sup>423</sup>

Not only were the defendants charged with malicious intent, but the prosecution further argued that since it was priced at 6d and sold "about the streets of London and elsewhere,"<sup>424</sup> its easy availability enhanced its corrupting influence, whereas a medical text-book, which

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<sup>420</sup>Hansard Volume 146, p. 329. J. Lord Campbell quoted in Besant, In the High Court of Justice, p. 40.

<sup>421</sup>Annie Besant, Theosophy and the Law of Population (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904), p. 5.

<sup>422</sup>Besant, In the High Court of Justice, p. 9.

<sup>423</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>424</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

may "in a sense be obscene,"<sup>425</sup> would not be liable for indictment as it was aimed at mature and trained minds. Nor was it as easily available. Thus, it would appear that morality or immorality in such matters was largely contingent on the manner of publication and its availability.

Mrs. Besant rose to the defense, not only trusting to the "goodness of her cause," but as counsel "for hundreds of the poor, and it is they for whom I defend this case."<sup>426</sup> The issue was primarily the right to public discussion, and the pamphlet in question was symbolic of the cause at stake. She declares that

The right of discussion in theology is won, the right of publicly discussing politics is won; but as to discussion on social subjects, there is at present no right.<sup>427</sup>

The winning of this right was imperative, for without it, no scientific progress was possible. "Destroy the right of free discussion," she declared to an impressed judge but a biased jury, "and you dry up the sources of freedom."<sup>428</sup> She continues, it was free discussion which gave to Europe its "Reformation," which "I have been taught to believe the mightiest event in the history of the human race;"<sup>429</sup> it gave to England its "revolution" (presumably the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688), abolished tyranny, preserved the sanctity of the constitution, reformed English laws, and ennobled the arts, civilization and freedom.

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

Thus, she commands,

Would you undo the labours of science, extinguish literature, stop the efforts of genius, restore ignorance, bigotry, barbarism, then, put down free discussion, and you have accomplished all.<sup>430</sup>

It was for the principle that opinion, honestly given and freely published, could not be refused public expression that she fought. Mrs. Besant submits that the pamphlet itself was devoid of immoral intent as argued by Sir Hardinge Giffard. In fact, even if she did not fully agree with many of its theories, yet it was neither unlawful, improper, or inexpedient to disseminate among the people the manner and means of population control. The rate of the growth of the population in England and Wales from 10,000,000 in 1810 to 20,000,000 in 1860 left little doubt in her mind that, "it is the large families so common among the English poor that are the root of this overcrowding."<sup>431</sup> With remarkable foresight, she remarks, "India today is a microcosm of the world of the future."<sup>432</sup>

The definition of "obscenity" is called into account by this brave new advocate. She contends that the work in question was not "obscene" since there exists no "statutory definition" of the word.<sup>433</sup> The test of obscenity, to Mrs. Besant, was its impact on the normal "well-regulated mind." To the impure "ill-regulated mind," its impact may be such as to raise impure desires, since such a wretched mind

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>431</sup> Besant, Law of Population, p. 19.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>433</sup> Besant, In the High Court of Justice, p. 39.

would inevitably find "the reflection of the mind in the book."<sup>434</sup> To judge obscenity by its impact on the abnormal mind was tantamount to a condemnation of Congreve's dramas, Spencer, Sterne, Fielding, and even Shakespeare, since it would invariably have the effect of arousing "prurient thoughts" irrespective of the motive of the author.<sup>435</sup> The test of obscenity also seems to lie in the question of "intent," and certainly Knowlton was free of any malicious "intent." Moreover, "the law has been narrowed in order to emesh Freethought," declares the angry atheist, and she continues, "Ritualists circulate a book (the Bible!) beside which Knowlton is said to be purity itself."<sup>436</sup> In fact, by a strict application of the present ruling of Lord Justice Campbell, many of the chapters of Genesis, with its coarseness and indecency, would be declared "obscene." The right way to Mrs. Besant would be to prosecute none of these books. Apart from the obvious laws against libel and slander, she is an advocate of the absolute right of unfettered expression. As a Freethinker, she could be nothing less.

To accuse Mrs. Besant of immorality, as her critics were wont to do, was patently absurd. She was no advocate of illicit love, for she taught a lofty morality where, indeed, marriage, and not celibacy, was in keeping with nature's laws--"the asceticism which despises the body is a contempt of nature . . . to be in harmony with nature, men and

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<sup>434</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>435</sup>Besant, Is the Bible Indictable? in Theological Essays and Debate, p. 4.

<sup>436</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

women should be husbands and wives. . . ."437 Also, man, being a rational being, is capable of studying the laws of nature that lie "outside himself," and by so observing is able to harness nature's laws to his own advantage. Thus, "To limit the family is no more a violation of nature's laws, than to preserve the sick by medical skill."<sup>438</sup> Mrs. Besant's guiding principle of "morality," the "general good," is now reinforced by neo-Malthusianism, being a scientific basis of family limitation through the use of contraceptive devices. Thus, the work of spreading such information, now raised to the stature "of the great law of nature," is the greatest service to mankind that can be done.

Physiological "preventive checks" are not only in accordance with nature's laws but conducive to her utilitarian ethic and contributory to the greatest well-being of man. She urges parents to

resolutely determine to limit their family to their means, and stamp with moral disappropriation every married couple who selfishly overcrowd their home, to the injury of the community of which they are a part.<sup>439</sup>

Only by preventing the vice of over-population can social reform continue space. She reminds us of those like Carlyle who were both active neo-Malthusians and played important roles in the struggle for political and religious liberty. Social reform was, for her, indissolubly linked with political and religious reform, having for their common end the concept of her utilitarian morality. Creed and action remained indissoluble.

The joining of an iconoclastic materialism with neo-Malthusian-

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<sup>437</sup> Besant, Law of Population, p. 28.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

ism implied the extirpation of error and the shackles of an imposed asceticism, excess poverty, and human misery. C. V. Drysdale puts it well:

The union of iconoclasm with Neo-Malthusianism was singularly felicitous, as it combined the two greatest secular aims--the overthrow of superstition and the establishment of a rational scientific human religion, of which Neo-Malthusianism must always be the keystone.<sup>440</sup>

But it is Mrs. Besant who seeks to raise Neo-Malthusianism to the status of a natural law to be followed, indispensable to her concept of a utilitarian morality!

However fanciful may be her theoretical rationale, yet there seems little doubt of its practical utility, particularly as applied to the cause of women. Mrs. Besant is aware of the evils of child bearing at an early age, or "maternal martyrdom"<sup>441</sup> as she calls it, and brings their plight to the attention of a nation. Thus she engaged upon what she calls the "greatest social reform of the century"<sup>442</sup> to raise the masses from their present state of poverty. The duty of teaching the necessity to limit the family within the means of subsistence being "the logical outcome of materialism,"<sup>443</sup> she revitalizes Bradlaugh's Malthusian League to spread among the people a knowledge of the ways of birth-prevention and the evils that attend on society should such be ignored. In fact, reports Nethercot,

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<sup>440</sup> C. V. Drysdale, C.B., D.B.E., D.Sc., F.R.S.E., "Bradlaugh and Neo-Malthusianism," Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 287.

<sup>441</sup> Annie Besant, "The Social Aspects of Malthusianism," Essays, Political and Social (London: Freethought Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 3.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>443</sup> Besant, Theosophy and the Law of Population, p. 4.

The House of Commons was petitioned to make clear just how far the discussion of overpopulation might go, and plans were laid to agitate for a change in the law on teaching birth restriction.<sup>444</sup>

The League pursued its propaganda, with Mrs. Besant as secretary, by publishing and circulating half-penny tracts, together with "The Malthusian"--a monthly journal costing 1d or 1½d by post. It also urged the abolition of all legal penalties on the public discussion of the question.

Neo-Malthusian was seen by Mrs. Besant to be vital to the national interest since small families are a boon to society, whereas large improvident families were a burden--"the provident and the temperate" being taxes "to fill the mouths created by the thoughtless and the improvident." She continues rather significantly, "We have no more right to compel other people to feed and clothe our children, than we have to steal their purses; the one is as much robbery as is the other."<sup>445</sup> Mrs. Besant was as yet true to the Secularist idea of individualism.

The effects of the Knowlton trial were spectacular. One can say that,

To the heroic action of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant we owe the sudden dawn of a new biological era, in which mankind began definitely to sever its connections with and rise above the lower animals, by taking the greatest of all the forces which mould its destiny into its own hands.<sup>446</sup>

Apart from the wide popularization of neo-Malthusianism, the union of

<sup>444</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 127.

<sup>445</sup> Besant, "The Social Aspects of Malthusianism," Essays, Political and Social, p. 6.

<sup>446</sup> Drysdale, "Bradlaugh and Neo-Malthusianism," Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 294.

neo-Malthusianism with Secularism was singularly felicitous to the Free-thought movement which gained in numbers and recognition. Thousands heard the message of Secularism. Also, to Nethercot, it was not only a "turning point in the history of birth control" but also a resounding victory for the freedom of the press."<sup>447</sup> The principle of family limitation became all the more vital in a time when, with the growth of industrialization, primary education and child-labor laws, children were less of an economic asset than they had been in a predominantly agricultural economy or in the "industrial system of the early nineteenth century."<sup>448</sup> It took an act of courage for a woman to publicly fight for a cause which many refused to espouse--even Darwin excused attendance as a witness at the trial. Mrs. Besant's The Law of Population sold 200,000 copies within six years in Britain and the United States, and was rendered into Swedish, Italian, German, Dutch, and French. With the growth of the Freethought party even the Christian World proclaimed in August 1893 the right and duty of family limitation. "Thus," Mrs. Besant could write, "has opinion changed in sixteen years, and all the obloquy poured on us is seen to have been the outcome of ignorance and bigotry."<sup>449</sup> In fact, in 1878, the first birth control clinic in the world was begun by Dr. Aletta Jacobs in Holland. In the years following 1877, the birth rate began to decline, the rate of infant mortality was cut into half, and life expectancy increased from 40 years to nearly 60 years. It was, to Sir William Beveridge, "an epoch in human history as

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<sup>447</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 129.

<sup>448</sup>Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 20.

<sup>449</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 225.

important as those which witnessed the introduction of gunpowder or the printing press."<sup>450</sup> Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh had taken "The subject of family limitation, buried in the pages of economic treatises, and made it a living issue, that the mass of people read about and discussed."<sup>451</sup>

If the trial freed many a woman from the shackles of an imposed motherhood and dire distress, who expressed their "passionate gratitude"<sup>452</sup> to the woman of the hour, yet it was to bring about an intense personal agony. "The year 1878 was a dark one for me,"<sup>453</sup> she writes, for Frank Besant, viewing with both alarm and increasing frustration the association of his family name with causes repugnant to him, gave notice to deprive his wife of the custody of Mabel despite the original deed of settlement of 1873 whereby she was granted custody of her daughter and he of their son. "Her eternal damnation was not enough for him," writes Geoffrey West; "he desired for her also a taste of hell upon earth."<sup>454</sup> Soon her suffering was to be writ large for all to hear and translated into the cause of legal reform in a Victorian England where the common law of the land gave countenance to the authority of the man over the woman. The petition charged Mrs. Besant with the heinous crime of Atheism, of associating with the "infidel lecturer and author"<sup>455</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, and in publishing obscene books and pamphlets--notably The

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<sup>450</sup> Quoted in Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 92.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>452</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 224.

<sup>453</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 159.

<sup>454</sup> West, Annie Besant, p. 71.

<sup>455</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 159.

Law of Population and The Fruits of Philosophy--whereby the "truth of the Christian religion is impeached, and disbelief in all religion is inculcated."<sup>456</sup> She was declared unfit to be a mother and detrimental to Mabel's welfare in this world and also her salvation in the hereafter.

The petition was heard before the Master of Rolls, Sir George Jessel, "a man animated by the old spirit of Hebrew bigotry,"<sup>457</sup> whose antipathy to the defendant was accentuated by her insistence to conduct her own defense; and also, presumably to substitute "affirmation" for the oath. The exchange is worth recording:

"Is this the lady?"

"I am the respondent to the petition, my lord--Mrs. Besant."

"Then I advise you, Mrs. Besant, to employ counsel to represent you, if you can afford it, and I suppose you can."

"With all submission to your lordship, I am afraid I must claim my right of arguing my case in person."

"You will do so if you please, of course, but I think you had much better appear by counsel. I give you notice that, if you do not, you must not expect to be shown any consideration. You will not be heard by me at any greater length than the case requires, nor allowed to go into irrelevant matter, as persons who argue their own cases generally do."

"I trust I shall not do so, my lord; but in any case I shall be arguing under your lordship's complete control."<sup>458</sup>

The decision was never in doubt; the Master of the Rolls seemed more an ally to the prosecuting counsel Ince and Bardswell--who knew their judge well--than an impartial member of the Bench. It was put forth that Mabel, educated by her mother, would be "helpless for good in this world," and "hopeless for good hereafter." "I could have laughed," continues Mrs. Besant,

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

had not the matter been so terribly serious, at the mixture of Mrs. Grundy, marriage-establishment, and hell, presented as an argument for robbing a mother of her child.<sup>459</sup>

Sir George Jessel in his judgment, while acknowledging that Mrs. Besant was "kind and affectionate" towards Mabel,<sup>460</sup> declared against her on the grounds of her non-belief, her Atheism, and the espousal of Malthusianism particularly as to its effect upon the child. "His brutality," reports Stead, "was equalled by his inscience";<sup>461</sup> and, to Williams, it represented "the irony of a Jewish judge deciding against her because she did not believe in a Christian God."<sup>460</sup> The original deed of settlement was now abrogated in favor of the curate. Her experience was reflected in the coming years in the many vituperative pamphlets against Christianity, but more immediately, she penned an article on "Sir George Jessel" which is included in her Autobiographical Sketches "to place on record in permanent form, now that only his memory remains for me to hate."<sup>463</sup> It may, perhaps, have originally appeared in the National Reformer.

After describing Sir George Jessel as "rude, overbearing, and coarse; he has the sneer of a Mephistopheles,"<sup>464</sup> she comments that as a Jew, Sir George should have been aware that two centuries ago his own children might have been taken from him for his own faith. It seemed

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>461</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 73.

<sup>462</sup> Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 102.

<sup>463</sup> Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 165.

<sup>464</sup> Besant, "Sir George Jessel," Autobiographical Sketches, p.

somehow tragic to Mrs. Besant that while Sir George Jessel and his race have been largely relieved of their disabilities, yet "he now joins the prosecuting majority, and deals out to the Atheist the same measure dealt to his forefathers by the Christians."<sup>465</sup> But the experience strengthened her resolve that

. . . 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.<sup>466</sup>

Personal tragedy accentuated humanistic atheism. Its message was now to be carried to all who listen. Petitions, prepared by Mrs. Besant and Bradlaugh, had already been presented to Parliament suggesting repeal of all laws banning blasphemy. However, Parliament "was not yet ready to abandon its guardianship over English souls."<sup>467</sup> Nor were the opinions of the many in her favor, The Times even hinting in an editorial that Mrs. Besant was immoral in her private life.

The child was taken away, and Mrs. Besant gave notice that, if denied access, she would sue for restitution of conjugal rights. It was at this point that her health gave way, and while she was lying prostrate, an order was served on her from the same Master of the Rolls, on Frank Besant's application, restraining her from bringing any suit against him. She took steps to set this aside and even the unrelenting Jessel was angry when he learned that both access and money due under the deed of separation were refused her. However, the law was

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>467</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 135.

clear. The Court of Appeal held that the original deed of separation be revoked inasmuch as Mrs. Besant was granted custody of Mabel; but upheld so far as it prevented Mrs. Besant from proceeding against her husband. The absolute right of the father was upheld in law; the married mother had no legal claim over her own children.

The petition to deprive Mrs. Besant of the custody of Mabel resulted in a work entitled "Marriage. As It Was, As It Is, and As It Should Be"; Du Cann submits that it was a "painstaking and brilliant exposition of its subject which would have done credit to any divorce judge, barrister or solicitor. Obviously, Mrs. Besant had read widely, and pondered deeply, on the subject."<sup>468</sup> And Nethercot comments that, "Even though she wrote impersonally and never mentioned her own experience or situation, it was obvious to any reader that she was analyzing the problem with herself in mind."<sup>469</sup> It was in the main an exposition of the laws of England concerning marriage and divorce and the laws regulating married women's property and the rights of custody of the children. While her own harrowing experience, no doubt, lent wings to this detailed analysis of the inequities of the law concerning the right of married women, she continued to wield a somewhat platitudinous pen in defense of women's rights in such pamphlets as Women's Position According to the Bible (1885); God's Views on Marriage as Revealed in the Old Testament (1885); and The Political Status of Women (1885?).

She begins her demand for legal change with a rather quixotic appeal to the concept of "rights" and gives an account of the laws of

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<sup>468</sup> DuCann, Loves of Bernard Shaw, p. 111.

<sup>469</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 133.

marriage from the time of the Romans and the Old Testament to the present. The concept of "rights" is of recent vintage, she declares, a product of the 18th century; "The Rights of man have become an accepted doctrine, but, unfortunately they are only rights of man, in the exclusive sense of the word."<sup>470</sup> But the "rights" of man appear, in fact, not to be human rights at all but merely "sexual" rights; and women are also possessed of rights which are inalienable. To deny them to women is to deny them "humanity qua humanity."<sup>471</sup> It would then appear that a belief in "rights," as with all "great truths," passes through three stages loosely borrowed from Comtian thought--men who deny its truth, that it is contrary to reason, and that "every one knew it already."<sup>472</sup> The implication is clear that man, being still bound in the "first stage," that of the "Theological," being "fictitious," is yet far removed from the "scientific" and hence intellectually and rationally too immature to appreciate such inalienable rights as women are possessed of! Since men have "natural rights" and "Kings, presidents, governments, draw their authority from the will of the people; the people draw their authority from themselves,"<sup>473</sup> women also have a right to a voice in the regulation of government. At a time when England was slowly, but very surely, tracing a gradual evolutionary path to the principle of universal suffrage and women were to gain

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<sup>470</sup> Besant, "Marriage As It Was, As It Is, and As It Should Be: A Plea for Reform," Essays, Political and Social, p. 4.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>472</sup> Besant, "The Political Status of Women," Essays, Political and Social, p. 3.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

their vote by the Acts of 1918 and 1928, she demands that women as non-voters could only "ask" for reform, as voters "they could command it."<sup>474</sup> Given the right of representation in Parliament, they can then alter the inequitable laws of marriage which in their origin lay in the ancient marriage laws and practices of the Romans where women were merely chattel. Also, the "Old Testament" sanctioned polygamy. But the fervent Secularist defiantly affirms that the influence of the Bible is weakening, being "broken" by Freethought;

and soon she shall walk upright and unfettered in the sunshine,  
the friend, the helper, the lover, but never more the slave, of  
man.<sup>475</sup>

If Mrs. Besant spoke loftily of the emancipation of women, superficially of "rights," and sought the ends of a "higher life" where the individual would develop himself or with liberty, equality, and fraternity for all as splendid ideals; her attack on the particular anomalies of the law as it then stood was done with devastating effect.

Until the passage of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 which is, perhaps, what Mrs. Besant alludes to when she feels that a "more civilised view of woman as an individual has, however, now in matters of property become incorporated into the law,"<sup>476</sup> women, on marriage, were deprived of their rights to property. She was in the position of a minor, and her husband gained exclusive control over her personal estate. Moreover, under common law, the married woman was denied any actions for redress of grievances without the approval of

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>475</sup> Annie Besant, Woman's Position According to the Bible, (no title-page), 1883, p. 8.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

her husband and then only in their joint names. She was in fact a piece of "property" void of "legal existence," and Mrs. Besant quotes Broom's Commentaries that "A man may recover damages equally for the injury done to his servant or to his wife; in both cases he loses their services, and the law recompenses him."<sup>477</sup>

The laws as to marriage and divorce were slow to change, and Mrs. Besant points out that a wife, if separated from her husband either by deed or judicial decree, had no legal remedy for injury or libel. She quotes Lord Lyndhurst in the House of Lords, 1856:

A wife is separated from her husband by a decree of the Ecclesiastical Court, the reason for that decree being the husband's misconduct--his cruelty, it may be, or his adultery. From that moment the wife is almost in a state of outlawry. She may not enter into a contract, or if she does, she has no means of enforcing it. The law, so far from protecting, oppresses her. She is homeless, helpless, hopeless, and almost destitute of civil rights.<sup>478</sup>

The status of legal dependence of the married women brings forth a sense of moral outrage. It is neither fair nor honest, nor can it be "vindicated upon any principle of justice, of mercy or of common humanity."<sup>479</sup> In this particular instance, she demands that the law be changed to abide with the precepts of "morality." Moral idealism was indispensable to law and she bases her concept of legal justice, in the issue under consideration, on what the law ought to be. But apart from emotionally positing the inter-relationship of law and morality, there is no attempt on her part to base it on any philosophical, theoretical, or ideological premise such as natural law or positive

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<sup>477</sup>Besant, "Marriage As It Was," Essays, Political and Social, p. 13.

<sup>478</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>479</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

law.<sup>480</sup>

The cure to Mrs. Besant is to obtain redress through an act of Parliament ordaining that marriage would in no way alter the civil status of the women, that "marital control" should cease to exist and marriage be regarded in the nature of a "contract between equals, and not as a bond between master and servant."<sup>481</sup> It was not only necessary to do away with the "oak and ivy ideal"--in an age when "The stamp of masculine approval" was placed upon women noted for their "ignorance of the world, meekness, lack of opinions, general helplessness and weakness"<sup>482</sup>--but also to cure that strange legal anomaly by which an unmarried mother had a right over her children, but the law resolutely denied such right to the legally married spouse. Her method was to agitate for Parliamentary reform, to organize agitations and forward Petitions and, if necessary, to establish a "Marriage Reform League" which was, apparently, "de requeur"<sup>483</sup> in such matters. Essentially an activist reformer rather than a legal theorist engaged in intellectual debate, her approach was to demonstrate as forcibly as possible and to as wide an audience as possible the wickedness of English

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<sup>480</sup> See "Theoretical Bases of Law" by Friedrich Kessler in Landmarks of Law, ed. by Ray D. Henson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960) for an excellent account of these legal theories; also Morality and the Law by Samuel Enoch Stumpf (Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), which views the relationship between law and morality.

<sup>481</sup> Besant, "Marriage As It Was," Essays, Political and Social, p. 28.

<sup>482</sup> Sir Charles Petrie, The Victorians (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1960), p. 206.

<sup>483</sup> Besant, "Marriage As It Was," Essays, Political and Social, p. 32.

society--"the most bigoted and conservative society in the world"<sup>484</sup>-- and so bring about change. "Reforms have never been accomplished by Reformers who had not the courage of their convictions,"<sup>485</sup> she announced as she openly sought to oppose the present state of things. She urged her sex not to contract a legal marriage while such unjust laws remained, but to substitute a simple declaration made in public for the present legal forms. While she was careful not to abolish the "home," marriage was no longer to be a sacrament with legal sanction, but a form of "contract" or a "deed of partnership" to be duly stamped and registered.

England, at the time, recognized only two forms of divorce a mensa et thoro or "Judicial Separation" and a vinculo matrimonii, both granted by Ecclesiastical Courts. The first forbade re-marriage; the second, which was almost impossible to obtain, allowed re-marriage. Mrs. Besant wanted equality of the spouses in seeking divorce. The law as it stood did not allow adultery by the husband--unless accompanied by another offense--as sufficient grounds for the wife to sue for dissolution of the marriage. The husband could, with impunity, commit adultery if separated or keep mistresses if married. The wife could only sue for dissolution if such adultery was accompanied by extreme cruelty. However, it was open to a husband to sue for dissolution on the grounds of adultery committed by his wife, and he could also obtain damages in money from the co-respondent as a "solatium to his

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

wounded feelings."<sup>486</sup> A woman could, of course, commit adultery and so force her husband's hand, "but this was to condemn herself to social ostracism for the rest of her life."<sup>487</sup> Such legal discrepancies were to be done away with, and adultery on either side should suffice as a reason for divorce; thus

. . . they would be the happier, and society would be the healthier, if the divorce of life and interests were also a divorce which should set them free to seek happiness, if they will, in other unions--free technically as well as really, free in law as well as in fact.<sup>488</sup>

But in all cases, the care of the children should be carefully guarded, each parent contributing regardless of whether the guardianship be given to the father or mother.

Mrs. Besant sees the disease and prescribes the cure. While it is evident that much careful study went into the preparation of her brief, yet her legalism is essentially of an expository kind and involved mass agitation and propaganda. The N.S.S. obviously provided a popular and convenient forum. Bentham had been "one of the most active and successful of social reformers through the instrument of legislation,"<sup>489</sup> and Mrs. Besant also looked to Parliament and legislative action for the cure. But, unlike Bentham who defines the main function of law based largely on his hedonistic philosophy, Mrs. Besant's attitude and purpose is that of the pragmatic legalist who defines

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>487</sup> Petrie, Victorians, p. 207.

<sup>488</sup> Besant, "Marriage As It Was," Essays, Political and Social, p. 41.

<sup>489</sup> W. Friedmann, Legal Theory (London: Stevens and Sons, 1949), p. 206.

and exposes a particular legal grievance and seeks redress through Parliament and public opinion.

This episode in her life had its results, Nethercot points out that "Never again would the government take a child from a parent under similar circumstances."<sup>490</sup> The heresy and blasphemy laws were soon to be modified by public pressure, and the Dialectical Society made her a member of a special committee appointed to propose a codification of English criminal law--perhaps the remains of Bentham at the University of London raised a bony finger in salute! Also the Association To Promote Women's Knowledge of the Law discovered that, as yet, no woman had applied to be admitted to the Inns of Court--this was soon to be changed and the barrister's wig and gown no longer remained a male prerogative.

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<sup>490</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 144.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ENTER AVELING: MRS. BESANT, BRADLAUGH, AND PARLIAMENT

The "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" lent force to Mrs. Besant's cause of Freethought and reform. The loss of Mabel made her anti-clericalism more strident. "It is always a blunder," she writes,

from the tactical point of view for a Christian to use methods of illegal violence in persecuting an Atheist in this Christian land; legal violence is a far safer weapon, for courage can check-mate the first, while it is helpless before the second.<sup>490</sup>

There could be no return for Mrs. Besant to Church and home, and from 1878 to 1886 her Atheism was tied to radical reform as a champion of the oppressed whether at home or abroad. Religion having proved barren of meaning, she had turned to science. The nation, prey to prejudice and orthodoxy, had to be schooled in the ways of Secularists. Mrs. Besant did not take her mission lightly; a high moral purpose colored her perspective and vision as she plunged into the liberal issues of the day.

In 1878, despite formidable opposition, women were admitted to degrees at London University. Equally significant was the fact that religious tests had been lately discarded as necessary qualifications for degrees at Oxford and Cambridge, and education was becoming

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<sup>490</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 107.

"less of an aristocratic privilege and more of a middle-class and lower-class prerogative."<sup>491</sup> The benefits of an expanding technology had become known to the more affluent mid-Victorian, and scientists sought to explore the nature of the universe. Archaeology, anthropology, and psychology began to develop, and both the Royal Philosophical Institute (established in 1799) and the British Association for the Advancement of Science (established in 1831) encouraged scientific research. In a strongly Christian era, Englishmen began to trust "in the ultimate perfectibility of mankind through the application of science and technology, political reform, economic growth, and high moral standards."<sup>492</sup>

Mrs. Besant had sought the ends of human perfectibility and happiness in her utilitarian morality, resting on such supports as Comte, Darwin, and Hume. Perhaps she now realized that her scientific education under Miss Marryat had been perfunctory at best; or perhaps, her neo-Malthusian crusade had triggered a greater scientific curiosity. At any rate, she writes that in algebra, geometry, and physics and the "wrestling with formulae and problems"<sup>493</sup> she had found relief during her legal struggles. Of the newly founded Theosophical Society she was somewhat suspicious--its teachings being incompatible with either science or Atheism.

In 1879 she met Dr. Edward B. Aveling, a "D.Sc. of the University of London," and became his pupil with a view to matriculating at

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<sup>491</sup>Gerald B. Kauvar and Gerald C. Sorensen, eds., The Victorian Mind (New York: Capricorn Books, 1969), p. 13.

<sup>492</sup>Erickson and Havran, England: Pre-history to the Present, p. 446.

<sup>493</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 247.

London University, which was "duly accomplished."<sup>494</sup> Also, his subsequent entry into the ranks of the N.S.S., she remarks, brought to it "a strong impulse to the educational side of our movement."<sup>495</sup> At the time of their meeting, he was a lecturer in science at Kings College, London, and taught comparative anatomy at London Hospital. Aveling's career had been marked by academic brilliance, gathering "medals and awards like a child plucking flowers,"<sup>496</sup> but this agnostic and Malthusian, recently separated from his wife, was also noted in Free-thought and later in Socialist circles as a man utterly without scruples in matters concerning women or money. Gertrude Marvin Williams describes him as

handsome in a shadowy sort of way, as irresistible to women as he was susceptible to them. There was a fascinating touch of the diabolic about his handsome, intellectual face. He talked easily of the arts, the theater, the pictures at the Academy show, the newest books. His knowledge of the mysterious new sciences just then beginning their laboratory careers diffused about him an added glamour.<sup>497</sup>

Apparently Mrs. Besant found him irresistible. Tsuzuki comments that Mrs. Besant--"whose self-sacrificing devotion to successive causes verged on the pathological"--found in this new recruit among the Secularists a "knight of Liberty," and soon the "great Trinity in Unity," as they were called, extolled each other's faculties as they carried on their Secularist agitation."<sup>498</sup> The trio stormed the

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<sup>494</sup>Ibid., pp. 246-247.

<sup>495</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>496</sup>Tsuzuki, Life of Eleanor Marx, p. 77.

<sup>497</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 109-110.

<sup>498</sup>Tsuzuki, Life of Eleanor Marx, p. 82.

country, and some Secularists even "considered the pace of their advance within the movement too rapid."<sup>499</sup>

Mrs. Besant, now an undergraduate in science at the University of London, also helped to establish science classes at the "Hall of Science" under the direction of Aveling to prepare young people for the University. Her belief in greater educational faculties for all was taking concrete shape, and as a lecturer at the "Hall of Science," she published her lectures on physics in Light, Heat and Sound (1881) and Eyes and Ears (1882). A discussion of physiology is to be found in Physiology of Home (1882), and she even ventured a series of lectures on electricity. It was at this time that she published a pamphlet on vivisection which she was to later regret. Vivisection was a plea for freedom of science, and in her scientific zeal she resists a Bill introduced by Sir Eardley Wilmot calling for total abolition of vivisection, but limits her approval of this practice to the "well-skilled scientist" and not to be "performed for a needless demonstration of well-proved facts."<sup>500</sup> In her An Autobiography she confesses that it was the only publication she ever wrote for which "I feel deep regret and shame, as against the whole trend and efforts of my life."<sup>501</sup> Much later in India, while writing as a dedicated Theosophist, she published Against Vivisection in which she condemns the practice totally as being repugnant to morality.

However, the Degree of Bachelor of Science was to be denied to

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<sup>499</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 15.

<sup>500</sup> Besant, "Vivisection," Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

<sup>501</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 271.

her. Her repeated failure in chemistry owed itself to the antipathy of a single examiner who abhorred the atheist. Moreover, together with Bradlaugh's daughter, she had been refused permission to attend the botany class at University College or do work at the Botanical Gardens. But,

Rejected by the orthodox academic world, she would in the future have to make her own. Some day she would found her own college, where she could make her own rules, apply her own principles, and be granted an even higher degree. She could, and she would!<sup>502</sup>

The trinity in action was soon shattered by the appearance of the daughter of Karl Marx as Aveling transferred allegiance to Eleanor Marx and the Socialist movement which was "making its appearance"<sup>503</sup> in the early 1880's. According to Mrs. Besant, it was at the British Museum that Aveling unfortunately fell "into the company of some Bohemian Socialists, male and female, who flourish there."<sup>504</sup> And even when Mrs. Besant became a Fabian, her animosity was hardly stilled, and she reported on Aveling, who had taken part in a Fabian Conference as a member of the Socialist League, in a hostile manner:

The Marxian metaphysics occasionally throw a mist over his naturally clear and acute expositions. He would be more useful to Socialism in England if he trusted more to himself.<sup>505</sup>

Aveling, who has attained a degree of immortality in a typically Shavian fashion as Louis Dubedat in The Doctor's Dilemma, contracted

<sup>502</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 182.

<sup>503</sup> Eduard Bernstein, My Years of Exile: Reminiscences of a Socialist, trans. by Bernard Miall (London: Leonard Parson, 1921), p. 161.

<sup>504</sup> Besant, National Reformer, May 4, 1884, p. 310, quoted in Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 264.

<sup>505</sup> Besant, To-Day, July 1886, quoted in Tsuzuki, Life of Eleanor Marx, p. 131.

a "free marriage" with Marx's daughter, the young "Tussy," described by Bernstein in 1880 as

a blooming young maiden of twenty-four summers, with the black hair and black eyes of her father, and an exceptionally musical voice. She was unusually vivacious, and took part, in her sensitive and emotional manner, in our discussions of party matters.<sup>506</sup>

However, Aveling was to be "her evil destiny,"<sup>507</sup> for she was driven to take her own life. Aveling soon afterwards met a peaceful end, strangely incongruent for one whose lack of moral character had "made him extremely conspicuous in a movement where high character and disinterested motive were the rule."<sup>508</sup>

In 1880, Gladstone triumphed over Lord Beaconsfield, and Bradlaugh was finally elected to Parliament as a member for Northampton after a struggle of twelve years. The new government, which included John Bright, was faced with the issue of whether the new member, an avowed atheist, could be admitted to Parliament. For three weeks the problem was whether Bradlaugh would be permitted to substitute affirmation for oath, after which the debate revolved on the question whether an atheist would be permitted to take the oath at all, regardless of his "willingness to do so."<sup>509</sup> The fight was to last six years until Bradlaugh finally was permitted to take his seat in 1886. In the meanwhile, he had been re-elected five times from his constituency. Even the gentle Gladstone, whose piety forbade any sympathy

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<sup>506</sup> Bernstein, My Years of Exile, p. 159.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>508</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p.

<sup>509</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 3.

with the atheist, "defended Bradlaugh's claim to sit in the House in some of the most magnificent of all his speeches, but not even his oratory could persuade a majority of the Commons to his view."<sup>510</sup> Evans reports that "The case was trivial in itself, and should never have occurred, but it is important in the history of Parliament";<sup>511</sup> yet the debates before Parliament in June, 1880, over the issue eclipsed the question of Parnell and Irish Home Rule and the opening of the Suez Canal. It filled "one hundred pages of Hansard"<sup>512</sup> and did forcibly demonstrate the odium which enclouded the atheist in late Victorian England. Moreover, the case of Bradlaugh had a "dual background":

Not only was this the age in which the highest goal of almost any Englishman was to become a member of Parliament and public interest in Parliamentary affairs was at a zenith, but the age also saw the high-water mark of Victorian middle-class respectability. It is not surprising then that the personality of Charles Bradlaugh, in all his professions so un-Victorian an Englishman, should give both the man and his attempt to storm the citadels of respectability and statesmanship a surpassing notoriety.<sup>513</sup>

Mrs. Besant, who had taken only a very "silent part"<sup>514</sup> in the election in 1874, now plunged into the political campaigning in March, 1880, with characteristic vim in support of Bradlaugh, together with Aveling and Bradlaugh's daughters. "It was a goodly sight," reports Aveling with more than a degree of exaggeration,

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<sup>510</sup>J. L. Hammond and M. R. D. Foot, Gladstone and Liberalism (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 107.

<sup>511</sup>R. J. Evans, The Victorian Age: 1815-1914 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), p. 214.

<sup>512</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 124.

<sup>513</sup>Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 3.

<sup>514</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 183.

to see over two thousand people, many of whom were women, listening intently to the lightest word that fell from the lips of her who has made the name of woman more sacred to everyone across the path of whose life she has moved.<sup>515</sup>

Bradlaugh's election and the conservative reaction it generated diffused the cause of Freethought more than "Bradlaugh himself had done in the whole of his previous career,"<sup>516</sup> and in his fight to maintain his seat he was also aided by Mrs. Besant. While she was not the principal actor on the stage, yet in such pamphlets as Law Makers and Law Breakers and Henry Varley Exposed and in popular agitation, she helped sustain the right of the atheist to be seated in Parliament. While the storm and fury she generated contributed nothing in the way of any constructive thought, yet it aided the Freethought cause and perhaps diffused a critical re-evaluation of society and its ways.

A seat in Parliament for an atheist--and hence an "immoral" being--was anathema to the forces of Anglicanism and Conservatism. To many members of Parliament, the "key issue involved not constitutional technicalities, but Bradlaugh's character."<sup>517</sup> Also, there was the "honour . . . and the moral sense of Parliament to be considered" since "To admit an avowed atheist on terms of equality with the other members would lead the English people to doubt if their representatives believed in a deity at all."<sup>518</sup> Sir Henry Tyler warned that "If Liberals" were to read The Fruits of Philosophy "their cheers

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<sup>515</sup> Edward B. Aveling, quoted in Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 160.

<sup>516</sup> Robertson, Short History of Freethought, p. 388.

<sup>517</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 53.

<sup>518</sup> Hansard, colli (1880) 191, quoted in Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 54.

would turn into 'shudders of abhorrence'"; of the leading Liberals only John Bright came to the defense of Bradlaugh's character. Bradlaugh's entry into Parliament was the signal for an onslaught from the primates of York and Manchester, and Cardinal Manning spoke that Bradlaugh in Parliament "had undermined the Theism of the British Empire and the stability of all civil society."<sup>519</sup>

But it was "A Quondam butcher, named Henry Varley"<sup>520</sup> whose attack on Bradlaugh was the most effective of the many anti-Bradlaugh tracts of the early 1880's. Bradlaugh was damned as "socially lawless, devoid of moral sense, untruthful, morally unclean, a coarse blasphemer, and an avowed atheist."<sup>521</sup> Mrs. Besant sprang to the defense of Bradlaugh as she set out to prove that Varley "is a bearer of false witness against his neighbour, and is not fit for the society of any truth-telling man or woman,"<sup>522</sup> and in so doing, she resurrects the familiar themes of anti-Christianity, Malthusianism, Atheistic Liberty, the meaning of Atheism, and also the need for divorce laws. Nobody, apart from Bradlaugh, was better versed in such, and there is little doubt that personal experience colored her vision. Bradlaugh had been attacked by Varley, not only as being against God but also antagonistic to "national righteousness." Mrs. Besant, after explaining the Atheist position regarding the former--as being "without God," and hence in-

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<sup>519</sup> Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, pp. 55-56, 83.

<sup>520</sup> Annie Besant, Henry Varley Exposed (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1881?), p. 1.

<sup>521</sup> Henry Varley, "An Address to the Electors in the Borough of Northampton," quoted in Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 98.

<sup>522</sup> Besant, Henry Varley Exposed, p. 1.

capable of being antagonistic to that of which one knows nothing--asserts that it was Bradlaugh who fought for "national righteousness" when he attacked the Imperialist ventures of Disraeli's government. Henry Varley also made little protest, she exclaims; "When Lord Beaconsfield's paid roughs strive to wreck Mr. Gladstone's house and drive us into war; Charles Bradlaugh led the protest on behalf of national righteousness, and suffered for weeks from the injuries inflicted by the friends of crime."<sup>523</sup> Bradlaugh's denunciations of Christianity as an "eating cancer" and a "bloody faith" are defended by examples from history:

. . . in Armenia, under Theodora, 100,000 Paulicians were put to death; in Spain, 31,912 persons were burned alive for heresy; in the Netherlands, 50,000 heretics were put to death; at Bezieres, 60,000 perished; and in France, as a whole, the victims were hundreds of thousands.<sup>524</sup>

Neo-Malthusianism never implied immorality, continues Mrs. Besant, for the "highest ideal of human love" is the "loyal and faithful love between one man and one woman." She further states:

We also believe, with John Milton, that where two people are utterly miserable in their married life, where either has committed adultery, or when either has brutally ill-treated the other, divorce should be granted.<sup>525</sup>

On election to Parliament, Bradlaugh preferred to make an affirmation under Act 29 and 30 Vict c. 19 and the Evidence Amendment Acts of 1869 and 1870. His legal right to do so was clear and had been recognized in all places, including the Courts, except in Parliament. He then announced his intention to take the oath, which, too, was disallowed on the ground of his atheism. On June 23, 1880,

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<sup>523</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>524</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>525</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

Bradlaugh made his entry into Parliament claiming to be sworn and made an eloquent plea for legal justice in his First Speech at the Bar.

However, reports Mrs. Besant, "no eloquence, no plea for justice, could stay the tide of Tory and religious bigotry,"<sup>526</sup> and he was ordered to withdraw. Respectfully refusing to do so, he soberly accompanied the diminutive Sergeant-at-Arms, Captain Gosset, to the Clock Tower where he was imprisoned. While Bradlaugh was getting ready for what could be a long incarceration, Mrs. Besant swung into action. In Law Makers and Law Breakers, she makes an impassioned appeal--"Let the people speak."

Gladstone and Bright are for Liberty, and the help denied them within the House must come to them from without. No time must be lost. While we remain idle, a representative of the people is illegally held in prison. Northampton is insulted, and in this great constituency every constituency is threatened. On freedom of election depends our liberty; on freedom of conscience depends our progress. Tory squires and lordlings have defied the people and measured their strength against the masses.<sup>527</sup>

For the moment it appeared that the Tory Party in opposition, aided by many a Liberal, had triumphed in the House of Commons. Mrs. Besant's appeal to the English public against "the motley herd of renegade Non-conformists, Roman Catholics, Jews and Protestants"<sup>528</sup> who had helped deprive Bradlaugh of his rights supported and perhaps inflamed the growing anger of protest. Bradlaugh was set free the next day and was lustily cheered as Liberal associations and mass meetings gave vent to their feelings. The triumph of "law and right"<sup>529</sup> seemed certain over

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<sup>526</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 258.

<sup>527</sup> Besant, "Law Makers and Law Breakers," quoted in An Autobiography, pp. 257-258.

<sup>528</sup> Besant, National Reformer, July 4, 1880, quoted in Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 77.

<sup>529</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 260.

Tory bigotry and Parliament, to Mrs. Besant, was now supposedly once more the chamber representative of the people and no longer a seat of the privileged. But when Bradlaugh took his seat on July 2, he was served with a writ for voting without taking the prescribed oath. The Courts had joined the battle and a Judgment was to be given in March of 1881 against him. The triumph of law, for which Mrs. Besant strove, had yet to be accomplished, and the virulence of the Tory attack brought such Christian Socialists as the Reverend Stewart Headlam to Bradlaugh's side.

While Bradlaugh continued to attend to his Parliamentary duties despite the law-suits, the attack was turned on Mrs. Besant in language so foul that the Scotsman and Glasgow Herald even refused to print it.

The fight to deprive Bradlaugh of his seat continued into 1881. Regardless of the judgment and reinforced by the fact that he was re-elected for Northampton, he presented himself to be sworn on April 26 and was asked to withdraw. This he refused to do and the House adjourned. A "League for the Defense of Constitutional Rights" was formed with Mrs. Besant as one of the Vice-Presidents, and in Fair Means and Foul Mrs. Besant refutes slanders on Bradlaugh. When it became apparent that the proposed Affirmation Bill was being abandoned owing to Tory pressure, Bradlaugh decided to present himself once more in the House on August 3rd. The night before, a mass meeting was held at Trafalgar Square in support of Bradlaugh, and he cautioned Mrs. Besant, "The people know you better than they know any one, save myself; whatever happens, mind, whatever happens, let them do no violence; I trust

to you to keep them quiet."<sup>530</sup>

The stage was being set for Mrs. Besant's heroic moment. Bradlaugh entered the House alone on the appointed day. Outside, the crowd of partisans of "Charlie" grew until with a roar of "Petition, petition, justice, justice,"<sup>531</sup> they surged up the steps leading to Parliament. Her "chief's" parting words leapt into Mrs. Besant's mind, and

. . . as the police sprang forward to meet the crowd I threw myself between them, with all the advantage of the position of the top of the steps that I had chosen, so that every man in the charging crowd saw me, and as they checked themselves in surprise I bade them stop for his sake, and keep for him the peace which he had bade us should not be broken.<sup>532</sup>

Geoffrey West reports that if Mrs. Besant had not checked the surging mob, they would have

sacked the House, and thrown, if not the Speaker and his wig, at least Lord Randolph Churchill, and Sir Stafford Northcote, and Sir Henry Woolf, comrades three, into the Thames, that ancient river and unclean.<sup>533</sup>

Yet, had the crowd been aware of the happenings within the House, their ardor may not have been stayed by a woman's courage. A crash was heard, and Bradlaugh was found in the Palace Yard standing "still and white, face set like marble."<sup>534</sup> He had been forcibly ejected, and the indignity hastened the end of a proud and resolute man.

Finally, Parliament was to grant him his right in 1885, and the cause of Freethought stood high. The passage of the Oaths Bill, which

<sup>530</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 265.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>533</sup> West, Annie Besant, p. 76.

<sup>534</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 267.

gave Members of Parliament the right to affirm, discredited Blasphemy Laws, and removed the inequities on Atheist witnesses in court, was largely the result of Bradlaugh's struggle and of the woman who aided him. It became a part of the growth of constitutionalism and legalism in the country. Also, the example of Bradlaugh indelibly etched on Mrs. Besant's mind the precept of constitutional change and an abhorrence for violent action. The agitation for constitutional rights grew, and the Third Reform Bill was passed in 1884. The Liberal press began to support Bradlaugh, and the freedom to hold public meetings was established. Even if the episode is strangely incongruent in present times; yet "it does give point to speculations like those of Bagehot on the irrational inertia of society, on the reluctance of men to admit innovations in matters of faith,"<sup>535</sup> something which Mrs. Besant strove to remedy.

The year 1883 was also important to Mrs. Besant in another way, for her attention was called, "though only partially,"<sup>536</sup> to the growing Socialist movement.

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<sup>535</sup> Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 251.

<sup>536</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 299.

## CHAPTER IX

### RADICAL POLITICS AND REFORM: PROTEST SOCIAL AND POLITICAL

Disclaiming any belief in God, Mrs. Besant's Atheism had led her to the service of man and a firm resolve to face the world with a view to improving it. Her horizons were bound by life on earth. The duty of man to man, the growth of liberty, and the freedom of the individual were part of her visionary creed from 1874 to about 1889. She had formulated her ethical utilitarianism dedicated to ensuing the "general happiness" which included a "common good" for all men--a true brotherhood of man. The deep springs of these "inner sources of action"<sup>537</sup> supplied the force to her "outer life"<sup>538</sup> in the cause of man and was reflected in an attack on Disraeli's Imperialistic policy, a renewed attack on the Church, a plea for the cause of Ireland, and work on behalf of issues relating to land and labor, crime and punishment, and her Republican thought. Liberty was her dominating principle, and the correction of injustice wherever she saw it was dear to her heart. She herself had felt the lash and humiliation of intolerance and clerical wrath and all through her personal trials had upheld those liberal causes which sought to remove from man the imposed fetters of social, political, or clerical injustice as she saw it.

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<sup>537</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>538</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

THE CHURCH: ANTI-CLERICALISM

The loss of Mabel had caused Mrs. Besant to relapse into a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. But there was work to be done for the Freethought cause, and those articles written after 1878 are "marked with considerable bitterness, for it was Christianity that had robbed me of my child, and I struck mercilessly at it in return."<sup>539</sup> She was also aware that "Dr. Wordsworth, bishop of Lincoln, and his clergy, supplied a great part of the funds necessary for carrying out this persecution."<sup>540</sup>

Her attack on the Church is total and radical, which was somehow out of keeping with the spirit of the 1880's in England. The Church of England continued to be a state religion and would never be disestablished, and even if it remained a bulwark of the Tory Party, the Dissenters had made some significant claims to equality since the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts of 1878. It was also the age of Jewett, and England was alive with intellectual movements. Some sought their place in theology; others were attracted to the new horizons of natural science. Yet, while

. . . many were irritated, oppressed, and hampered by the strictness and prejudices of the religious and orthodox, few were in the mood to crusade for anti-religion. . . . England preserved its capacity for quiet social and moral adjustment.<sup>541</sup>

But the intensity of belief had been visibly demonstrated in the

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>540</sup> Annie Besant, "Threatenings and Slaughters, (England) 1," Disestablish the Church, or, Sins of the Church of England (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1886), p. 67.

<sup>541</sup> R. B. McCallum in Elie Halevy, A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century-IV: Victorian Years. 1841-1895, trans. from the French by E. I. Watkins (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), p. 436.

attack on Mrs. Besant and Bradlaugh, and it lends credence to the assumption that religion forcibly colored the life and morals of the late Victorians--even if it was, in many cases, a mark of respectability rather than a deep commitment.

In Threatenings and Slaughters, England, I (Part II was never written), Mrs. Besant calls for the "impeachment" of the Established Church, which, in its alliance with the Tory Party, had been guilty of cruelty and oppression for 300 years under a succession of monarchs. Also, since Bishops were peers of the realm with a seat in the House of Lords and having legislative powers, the Church "enjoyed a power of persecution that no other body in the realm could have any means of attaining" and thus, "the cruel spirit of the ecclesiastical law was breathed into Acts of Parliament."<sup>542</sup> The most effective way, to Mrs. Besant, of presenting the case for impeachment was to record its "sins" for three centuries commencing with the "birth of the Establishment" in 1531 when the King was acknowledged Supreme Head of the Church and clergy to the age of Victoria. This she does in much detail, and it is apparent that Mrs. Besant had studied; Bradlaugh's magnificent library was always open to her, but quite often her zeal is apt to get the better of a calm objectivity. She recounts the execution of Sir Thomas Moore in 1532 for his refusal "to accept the new Parliamentary Church and its lay Head,"<sup>543</sup> the Act of Supremacy (which abolished the power of the Pope) passed by Elizabeth I (1558-1603), and the persecution of Puritans and Catholics

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<sup>542</sup>Besant, "Threatenings and Slaughters, England, I," Disestablish the Church, p. 3.

<sup>543</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-4.

by the "Act of Uniformity"<sup>544</sup> under which "priests were hanged, cut down alive, and disembowelled while still living."<sup>545</sup> Heresy to the Established Church was reason, and the reign of Elizabeth I was "marked for ever with the blood of those who died for the liberty of conscience."<sup>546</sup> The greatness of the Elizabethan Age, with the Queen's role as the builder of a new England, is lost on Mrs. Besant. She sees only what she must with a flair for the dramatic. The reign of James I (1603-1625) witnessed statutes against "Jesuits, Seminary Priests, Recussants" and even Puritans who, however "narrow and bigoted," yet represented to her the only "hope of English liberty."<sup>547</sup> She quotes Neal's History of the Puritans (Volume I, pp. 478-479) in which the Puritans are described by Archbishop Parker of the Episcopal Party as "Schismatics, bellie-gods, deceivers, flatterers, fools . . . puffed up in arrogance of themselves . . . disturbers, factious, wilful entanglers, and encumberers of the conscience of their herers."<sup>548</sup> In like manner, the attack on Church and King continues through the Stuarts and the Hanoverians to her times, and she equally condemns the "Commonwealth" (1640-1660) as intolerant to "Papists, Prelatians, and Socinians." If the "Established Church" under Cromwell was Presbyterian,

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<sup>544</sup>Act of Uniformity of 1549 reinstated and enforced the first edition of the Book of Common Prayer of Cranmer. The Act of Uniformity of 1559 made the Prayer Book the "only legal form of worship," G. M. Trevlyan, History of England, Vol. II (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc.), p. 88.

<sup>545</sup>Besant, "Threatenings and Slaughters, England, I," Disestablish the Church, p. 16.

<sup>546</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>547</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>548</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

it was "equally persecuting."<sup>549</sup>

The beginnings of Victorianism were marked by the active persecution of Moxon, the publisher, for daring to publish the works of Shelley. George Jacob Holyoake was arrested for blasphemy and "led through Cheltenham and Gloucester in handcuffs"<sup>550</sup> to be tried and sentenced. Naturally, the cases of Knowlton and Mabel receive much attention. Thus concludes the enraged Freethinker, "We judge the Establishment by its fruits"; from the time of Henry VIII and Cranmer to Victoria, "it has borne the evil fruits of persecution and religious tyranny." The remedy is to "cut it down,"<sup>551</sup> This, of course, would imply not mere disestablishment of the Church but its complete abolition--Ecrasez l'infame.

Other pamphlets on this major theme posit other manifestations of the disease and equally condemn the Church as established by law. It is noted by Mrs. Besant that since the Reformation, the Church had sided with the Crown, and the Church and Crown are the major obstacles to human freedom. The "Homilies" of the Church issued in the 16th century laid down the doctrine of obedience to secular authority, and the belief of James I in the Theory of Divine Rights was to Mrs. Besant proof that it

. . . became in so many words the law of the Church, and the Church placed itself in antagonism to the whole tendency of Democracy, and ranged itself as an ally of the Crown in the

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

struggle between Crown and Nation which has been waged since the time of James I.<sup>552</sup>

No great movement for national progress was seen to be instituted by the Church during the past century and a half; and while Mrs. Besant somewhat grudgingly acknowledges that a few clergymen, mostly Dissenters, joined the struggle against slavery, yet she blames the clergy for opposing such movements of reform as national education, and even being responsible for the loss of the American colonies. "It is largely to the establishment that we owe the breach with America," she declares and quotes a letter written by Burke to Fox:

The clergy are astonishingly warm in this American business; and what the Tories are when embodied and united with their natural head, the Crown, and animated by their clergy, no man knows better than yourself.<sup>553</sup>

Molesworth's History of the Reform Bill is cited to show that the Church had set itself against the Reform Bill of 1832: "The clergy, especially, remembering the fate of the French priesthood and the spoliation of the French church were almost unanimous in their hatred of the proposed innovation."<sup>554</sup>

Thus are the evils of the Church laid bare. She had already called for its total demolition, and in A Creature of Crown and Parliament (1886) she further argues that the Church is "the mere creature of Crown and Parliament, an ordinary department of the State which may be either modified in any convenient fashion, or entirely abolished."<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>552</sup>Besant, "For the Crown and Against the Nation," Disestablish the Church, pp. 75-76.

<sup>553</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>554</sup>Ibid., p. 92

<sup>555</sup>Besant, "A Creature of Crown and Parliament," Disestablish the Church, p. 113.

Mrs. Besant clearly distinguishes between a "Free Church" and a "State Church." Catholicism is an example of the first, headed by the Pope and vested with its own rites, discipline, and doctrines free of civil control, a self-autonomous unit capable of entering into diplomatic formalities. A "State Church" such as the Church of England, on the other hand, has for its head the Queen (or King, as may be) with its rules, rites, ceremonies, and doctrines clearly outlined by Parliament, having its officials such as the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed by the Crown. Hence, Mrs. Besant argues in a somewhat disjointed, quasi-legalistic fashion, since it is not a "self-governing organization" but merely a "Department of State,"

Parliament can alter its creed at will, and the only terms on which the State permits its clergy to hold their benefices is that they shall <sup>556</sup>submissively yield whatever subscription Parliament may ordain.

Mrs. Besant continues to demonstrate a glib facility with words but a rather quixotic pattern of thought in yet another argument for the disestablishment of the Church. In Civil and Religious Liberty, with Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution (1883), the Church is found to be "a gigantic monopoly established by law" which is accorded privileges not given to "other religious denominations" (presumably the Dissenters). Her ministers are prelates in the House of Lords with the powers of legislation for the whole British Empire--"even the national graveyards are the property of her clergy."<sup>557</sup> As long as the State was both "Christian and orthodox," so long could the establishment

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<sup>556</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>557</sup>Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, with Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 21.

of a State-religion be defensible, but it is no longer entitled to its privilege as the growth of Non-Conformist denominations with a seat in Parliament has destroyed her claim to be the religion of the State.

Thus,

The moment that the Church ceased to be co-extensive with the nation, that same moment did her Establishment become an injustice to that portion of the nation which did not conform to her creed.<sup>558</sup>

It is Mrs. Besant's professed dictum that each man should follow the dictates of his own conscience; this being so, the Church Establishment is an "insult" to every Protestant Dissenter and Freethinker. Moreover, as the Church is only the "creature" of the State, it cannot set up any "absolute standard" of belief--"she is nothing now but a palpable anachronism."<sup>559</sup>

The attack is also centered on Church property. Since the Church is only a mere "Department of state," Parliament has ample authority to re-allocate the "Disposition of the revenues"<sup>560</sup> to more worthy causes such as the education of children and poor relief. Clergymen, being expendable, should be replaced by the schoolmaster in every parish, and the only compensation to be given to the disposed clergy would be "openings for useful work."<sup>561</sup> Also, the cleric has simply a "life-interest" in his benefice and hence cannot sell, alienate, or otherwise dispose of it. After his death, none can claim

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>560</sup> Besant, A Creature of Crown and Parliament," Disestablish the Church, p. 127.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., p. 128. Perhaps she has Frank Besant in mind!

the benefice as a right which can be disposed of by the State. Since the holding of clerical office is contingent on the satisfactory performance of his duties as laid down by an "Act of Parliament," he can be "deprived" of his revenue at will by Parliament or be assigned to any other position. "In truth,"

. . . if Parliament determined to attack the revenues now held by the clerics to the office of village schoolmaster, the cleric would have either to discharge those duties or give up his office. Property would not be touched; only the duties of a certain office would be changed, as they have so often been changed before.<sup>562</sup>

A Burden on Labor is devoted to the proposition that since the Church is not a "corporation" in the eyes of the law capable of holding property, no benefit, endorsement, or bequest can be made to a mere "fictitious" body which calls itself the Church of England. Also as the Church is made up of a number of different corporations--each a separate legal entity--any benefice is payable to a distinct church or cathedral constituting a distinct "corporation" and not to "The Church as a whole."<sup>563</sup>

It would appear from Mrs. Besant's rather curious legal reasoning that since the large part of the finances used for the support of the Established Church is raised by the State through taxation, the "State can change the purposes for which the money is assigned."<sup>564</sup> The taxing power has the right to determine how its resources are allocated. The Church, being a "fictitious body" in law and also subject to Parliamentary fiat, can be deprived of its revenue. The attack is,

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<sup>562</sup> Besant, "Burden on Labor," Disestablish the Church, p. 100.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

of course, not on the institution of private property per se, but on the holding of ecclesiastical estate. Finally, in a typical fashion, she makes a moving appeal to liberty, bearing Sir George Jessel and the loss of Mabel in mind:

And then, O men and women of England, then, when you have once clasped the knees of Liberty, and rested your tired brows on her gentle chest, then cherish and guard her evermore. . . .<sup>565</sup>

Regardless of her rhetoric, there seems little in her "legalistic" perambulations of appeal to the serious student of British constitutional law, legal theory, or jurisprudence. It comes obvious that Mrs. Besant turns to her line of legal reasoning to find justification for her already virulent anti-theism and anti-clericalism. Her legal performance in the Knowlton pamphlet and before the Master of the Rolls was of a higher order--but then, perhaps, she had the advantage of Bradlaugh's legal counsel and the solicitors for the N.S.S.

#### ANTI-IMPERIALISM

The two mighty colossuses, Disraeli and Gladstone, bestrode the land from 1818 to 1885. "For nearly twenty years," writes Churchill,

. . . no one effectively disputed their leadership, and until Disraeli died in 1881 the political scene was dominated by a personal duel on a grand scale. . . .<sup>566</sup> Every thrust and parry was discussed throughout the country.

Gladstone's first ministry from 1868-1874 was marked by his "mission" to "pacify Ireland" and by a reformist zeal. The great Liberal had

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<sup>565</sup>Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, with Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 24.

<sup>566</sup>Winston S. Churchill, A History of the English-speaking Peoples: The Great Democracies, Vol. IV (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1958), p. 223.

"entered politics, as he would have entered the pulpit, to serve the cause of Christian civilization,"<sup>567</sup> and the "sinister interests" of Bentham continued to give way as the civil service was based on competitive examinations, secret ballots were introduced, and the judiciary was remodeled. However, the Queen, who viewed Gladstone with "distrust and dislike," acclaimed the victory of Disraeli in 1874 with great joy and "after the chill of the Gladstonian discipline, she expanded to the rays of Disraeli's devotion like a flower in the sun."<sup>568</sup> Disraeli, like Burke, Pitt, and Peel, "drew on the ancient legacy of Toryism, conceiving authority as hierarchic, society as organic, and the social ethic as traditional rather than rational."<sup>569</sup> But the imperious leader recognized that, if his party was to survive, it should advocate social reform. Above all, this champion of Church and Crown beheld the vision of a new Imperial greatness. In 1872, while yet a leader of the opposition, he had outlined his concept of "Tory Democracy" in a speech at the Crystal Palace. Its greatest significance lies in its Imperialistic concept:

If the first great object of the Tory Party is to maintain the institutions of the country, the second is, in my opinion, to maintain the Empire of England. . . . Not that I for one object to self-government. . . . But self-government . . . when it was conceived, ought to have been conceded as part of a great policy of Imperial consolidation. . . .<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>567</sup>Hammond and Foot, Gladstone and Liberalism, p. 17.

<sup>568</sup>Lytton Strachey, Queen Victoria (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1949), pp. 231, 247.

<sup>569</sup>Beer, British Politics in the Collectivist Age, p. 267.

<sup>570</sup>Benjamin Disraeli, "Mr. Disraeli at Sydenham," The Times, London, June 25, 1872, quoted in Sydney W. Jackman, ed., The English Reform Tradition 1790-1910 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), pp. 140-141.

Disraeli had caught the mood of England, which in the ardor of an errant nationalism and imperialism had rejected Gladstone with his "passion for economy in all things military, his caution in Europe, and his indifference to the Empire. . . ." <sup>571</sup> The mystique of nationalism and imperialism was a powerful ideological force. With the extension of the franchise, more people began to identify with the nation state, and "For many nationalism became a kind of religion, somewhat like the civic cult suggested by Rousseau." <sup>572</sup> The sound of Kipling and the "white-man's burden" were soon to be heard in the land, and the voices of such anti-imperialists as Goldwin Smith (Professor of Modern History at Oxford) and John Bright were now drowned.

The government of Lord Beaconsfield (1874-1880) gained control of the Suez Canal and conferred on Queen Victoria the title of Empress of India--which delighted the Queen, championed Turkey against Russia since it was necessary to the safety of India, established control over Egyptian finances with France, annexed the Transvaal, and sought to conquer Afghanistan.

If Disraeli offered Imperialism a safe berth within the Tory Party, Mrs. Besant attacks the "Government of Jingoism" <sup>573</sup> with all the power of an outraged conscience. Disraeli saw the Empire in terms of power and prestige which to Mrs. Besant was a negation of man's right to liberty. Anti-imperialism was an unpopular cause, and few, apart from Bradlaugh and the Secularists, openly condemned the policy

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<sup>571</sup> Churchill, History of the English-speaking Peoples, p. 230.

<sup>572</sup> Sibley, Political Ideas and Ideologies, p. 432.

<sup>573</sup> Besant, "The Transvaal," Essays, Political and Social,

of "Imperial consolidation." In the winter of 1878 she launched a crusade against the government in power in support of Gladstone in a number of "peace demonstrations" in Hyde Park. She credits this outburst as being largely responsible for the victory of Gladstone in 1880 inasmuch as it mobilized public opinion. Thus, "The Freethought Party may well take credit to itself for having been first in the field against Tory policy,"<sup>574</sup> and in June of 1876 Mrs. Besant demonstrated against the projected visit of the Prince of Wales to India. A monster petition signed by her together with Bradlaugh and "102,934 others"<sup>575</sup> was rolled on a mahogany pole, placed in a carriage, and transported to Parliament. If Queen Victoria was now Empress of India and England was to reach Imperial heights, to Mrs. Besant there remained a doubt as to England's capacity for justice and humanism. She had nothing but contempt for the Tory chief's Imperialism, his "emphasis on Imperial symbols, his belief in the importance of outward display."<sup>576</sup> Her sympathies lay with Gladstone, a favorite of the working classes and a leading figure in nineteenth century liberalism. She was very conscious of her role in the 1880's--"To my share fell much of the educative work on questions of political and national morality in our dealings with weaker nations"<sup>577</sup>--and wielded a forthright pen against Disraeli. Her The Story of Afghanistan: Or, Why the Tory Government Gags the Indian Press and England, India, and Afghanistan. . . A Plea for the Weak

<sup>574</sup>Besant, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 158.

<sup>575</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>576</sup>Churchill, History of the English-speaking Peoples, p. 231.

<sup>577</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 263.

Against the Strong went to press in 1879 and sold widely. They brought to the fore the damage wrought to India by British rule, and they are a plea for Indian liberty and an attack on Disraeli's invasion of Afghanistan. This action, she writes with much justification, "laid in many an Indian heart a foundation of affection for me"<sup>578</sup> and was certainly preparatory to her work in that country.

She is emphatic that all adults in a nation bear responsibility for national policy--even if not all have votes, "all have influence,"<sup>579</sup> and it is the duty of each citizen of Britain to study the policy of their country in Afghanistan. Mrs. Besant, unlike Disraeli, felt that Afghanistan would be a good neighbor to India if left alone. A friendly Afghanistan would be an ally against Russian invasion, and she, like Disraeli, is aware of the utility of keeping Afghanistan as a "direct barrier" or buffer-state between India and an advancing Russia. But she is against the policy of Disraeli and of Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India, of dispatching General Sir Frederick Roberts at the head of a British force to Kabul and thereby forcing the Amir, Sher Ali, to flee to Russia for safety. This was done as a retaliatory measure since the Russian mission headed by General Stolietoff was well received at Kabul, but a British deputation was curtly refused admission. In May of 1879, Yakub, the son of the deposed amir, signed the Treaty of Gandamak with General Roberts and recognized the right of the Foreign Office to conduct Afghan foreign policy. The debate over "the wisdom

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<sup>578</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>579</sup>Besant, "The Story of Afghanistan; Or, Why the Tory Government Gags the Indian Press," in Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

of Lytton's Afghan policy still goes on,"<sup>580</sup> particularly in view of its bloody aftermath. But to Mrs. Besant it was an act of aggression not worthy of the integrity of her country, and she was sure if the British took Afghanistan, the Russians would come as deliverers. Mrs. Besant, in her typically chimeric manner, also saw the River Indus in India as the rational boundary of the Empire.<sup>581</sup>

However, it was clear to Mrs. Besant that the "unscrupulous betrayers" such as Lord Beaconsfield had "subverted" England from her true path. Her love for England implied not "approval and endorsement of the policy of some Oriental adventurer (presumably Lord Lytton!) whom chance and personal ability and unscrupulousness have raised to power," but

reverence for her past, work for her future; it means sympathy with all that is noble and great in her history, and endeavour to render her yet more noble, yet more great; it means triumph in her victories over oppression, delight in her growing freedom, glory in her encouragement of all nations struggling towards liberty.<sup>582</sup>

About India, she writes with feeling, and she traces the steps by which a merchant company became the lords of Hindustan. Already she is aware of the ancient foundations of Indian society, particularly the tradition of local self-government and the Panchayat (or village council). India was exploited for the benefit of restless English adven-

<sup>580</sup> Alfred Le Roy Burt, The British Empire and Commonwealth From the American Revolution (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1956), p. 458.

<sup>581</sup> Annie Besant, England, India, and Afghanistan and the Story of Afghanistan, Or, Why the Tory Government Gags the Indian Press: A Plea for the Weak Against the Strong (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931), p. 37.

<sup>582</sup> Besant, "The Story of Afghanistan; Or, Why the Tory Government Gags the Indian Press," Essays, Political and Social, p. 4.

turers and trade, and the activities of Clive and Hastings, who made fortunes and grew to power by fraud and duplicity, are vividly dramatized. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 was the "natural Nemesis treading on the heels of the crimes of Clive, Hastings, Wellesley, Cornwallis, and Dalhousie." She storms:

We have invaded their country, burnt their homes, slaughtered their men, outraged their women, plundered their treasure-houses, destroyed their laws, pulled down their rulers, given them famine for plenty, poverty for wealth--in a word, we have bestowed on them all the blessings of civilisation.<sup>573</sup>

The cure to Mrs. Besant was to give Indians liberty, to train India for freedom and self-government. In the years ahead, the way to Indian freedom or swaraj was to be articulated and expounded in great depth.

But fortune now began to smile on Gladstone, and the British electorate demonstrated a certain fickleness in thrusting Lord Beaconsfield from power. In the Midlothian Campaign of November, 1879, Gladstone sought a mandate and appealed to morality and justice. "Remember," he proclaimed at Dalkeith, "that the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan among the winter snows is as inviolable in the eyes of Almighty God as can be your own."<sup>584</sup> Disraeli's policies in South Africa had already come under attack as Mrs. Besant condemned the annexation of Transvaal by Sir Theophilus Shepstone on April 12, 1877, and Gladstone's appeal to high moral principles must have delighted her. She writes that the Tory policies of "immorality," "Jingoism," "folly,"

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<sup>583</sup>Besant, "England, India, and Afghanistan and the Story of Afghanistan, Or, Why the Tory Government Gags the Indian Press: A Plea for the Weak Against the Strong," p. 79.

<sup>584</sup>quoted in Winston Churchill, History of the English-speaking Peoples, p. 236.

and "waste of money" were

fertile themes for liberal eloquence, and so well was its work performed that the nation hurled Lord Beaconsfield from power, and placed at its head the man whose policy was<sup>585</sup> one of peace, of righteousness, and of respect for others.

She now calls upon Gladstone to reverse the policies of Lord Beaconsfield. If the Gladstone ministry of 1880-1885 did withdraw from Afghanistan and restore the independence of the Transvaal, yet "by one of the striking ironies of history," the second ministry of Gladstone, which had taken office pledged to a policy of withdrawal from any further imperialistic designs, "was already being drawn into new imperial commitments far more extensive than Disraeli had ever dreamed of."<sup>586</sup> The Empire, it was felt, had a high moral mission to perform, and Kipling, Tennyson, and Henley set the imagination of the decade. The Imperial scramble for colonial possessions was on, and Sir Robert Seeley's The Expansion of England (1883) said colonies were wealth. But whether the Empire grew by "absence of mind" or not, the question of Egypt served to dissipate the glow that Mrs. Besant had found in Gladstone. Rather sadly she writes that the present Cabinet, in effect, has "failed in fulfilling the mission it received from the nation."<sup>587</sup>

Gladstone, despite his liberal conscience, was forced to intervene in Egyptian affairs to quell the revolt headed by Arabi Pasha against the authority of the Khedive in which some foreign nationals were butchered. Failing to get help from the Concert of Europe or even

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<sup>585</sup>Besant, "Egypt," Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

<sup>586</sup>Burt, British Empire and Commonwealth, p. 466.

<sup>587</sup>Besant, "Egypt," Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

the French, who along with Britain had exercised a "Dual Control" over the dwindling Egyptian finances, the British fleet bombarded Alexandria. John Bright resigned from the Cabinet in protest, and Mrs. Besant, whose understanding of the situation was certainly obscured by her moral exuberance, proclaimed, "The war in Egypt proves that England is still a very Christian nation. A nation of Atheists would not have entered upon a war so wicked because so unjustifiable."<sup>588</sup> It was to Mrs. Besant a "war of aggression" even though "covered by the justly revered name of William Ewart Gladstone."<sup>589</sup> Mrs. Besant obviously mistrusted the reasons for intervention in Egyptian affairs, and when a small British expeditionary force under Wolseley landed in Egypt and destroyed the army of Arabi Pasha, it was blatant imperialism. Gladstone, in fact, saw "the occupation of Egypt as a temporary necessity, to secure the population from military excess and to safeguard the rights of the shareholders in the canal,"<sup>590</sup> but the entanglement in Egypt was extended to the Sudan in 1884 in an effort to crush the Mahdi-- a fanatical Moslem who revolted against the Egyptians. An army under Colonel Hicks was annihilated, and General Gordon was chosen to go to Khartoum to evacuate the outlying Egyptian garrisons in the Sudan. The tragic death of this gallant General saddened a nation, but to Mrs. Besant it was only evidence that the hero of the time, despite his courage, had "clay feet."

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<sup>588</sup>Besant, National Reformer, October 8, 1882, quoted in Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 266.

<sup>589</sup>Besant, "Egypt," Essays, Political and Social, p. 2.

<sup>590</sup>Hammond and Foot, Gladstone and Liberalism, p. 126.

## IRELAND

Mrs. Besant had never forsaken the cause of the Irish; the episode of the "Manchester Martyrs" was vividly remembered, and all through her Freethought crusade the Irish cause burnt with a strong light. Bradlaugh had witnessed the poverty of the Irish peasants during his tour of duty with the army in that strife-ridden country in the years 1849 and 1850 and had espoused its cause. In the autumn of 1880, during Gladstone's Second Ministry, Mrs. Besant made a determined effort to arouse the British conscience to the plight of the Irish. She stormed the country in an effort to raise English feeling in defense of Irish "freedom." The Irish problem was an old one, and some mention must be made of it.

For the first half of the 19th century the Irish had reluctantly accepted British rule, but the famine of 1845-46 and resultant poverty led to an active animosity. Yet, for "more than twenty years" following the famine, the English remained indifferent to "the wrongs of the Irish peasant in relation to his English landlord."<sup>591</sup> In 1847, Russel could write to Landsdowne,

The war between landlord and tenant has been carried on for eighty years. It is evident that this relation, which ought to be one of mutual confidence, is one of mutual hostility, nor do I see that they can be left to fight out the battle with any prospect of better results. Murder, on one side, ejection on the other, are as common as ever.<sup>592</sup>

The Irish peasant lay crushed under the burden of an archaic land-system where the landlord, wielding absolute power, could evict and rack-rent

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<sup>591</sup> Trevelyan, History of England, Vol. III, p. 235.

<sup>592</sup> Quoted in Evans, Victorian Age, p. 179.

at will. The landlords, largely English, made "no improvements and invested no capital."<sup>593</sup> The Fenian movement ignited Irish discontent. The Irish considered the land by right to be theirs and bore a "fierce, deep-rooted enmity"<sup>594</sup> to the absentee English landlord. Irish unrest and violence were met by forty-two Coercion Acts between 1830 and 1870. To Gladstone, the "behavior of the Fenians was especially painful," but he was ashamed that England should be upheld by the Fenians as the "prime example of oppression."<sup>595</sup> Making Ireland his "special concern,"<sup>596</sup> Gladstone disestablished the Irish Church and passed the Irish Land Law of 1870 which "marked the first recognition of the problem," but, continued Trevelyan, it "went a very little way."<sup>597</sup> Gladstone's concern for the Irish was not typical of English society, and regardless of the great agricultural depression of the 1870's which heightened Irish misery, the government of Disraeli ignored the problem. Not only had the English little sympathy with the Irish, but the system of Irish land tenure was dimly understood by English lawyers. In England the relation between landlord and tenant was solely contractual, whereas in Ireland, by immemorial custom, the Irish tenant claimed "customary rights" in the land. That is, while the ownership of the land did not rest with him, yet he "owned" the right to work on the

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<sup>593</sup>Hammond and Foot, Gladstone and Liberalism, p. 85.

<sup>594</sup>Churchill, History of the English-speaking Peoples, p. 270.

<sup>595</sup>Herman Ausabel, The Late Victorians: A Short History (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1955), p. 73.

<sup>596</sup>Churchill, History of the English-speaking Peoples, p. 270.

<sup>597</sup>Trevelyan, History of England, Vol. III, p. 236.

land. This right was supported by the fact that the Irish tenant made the improvements on the land, unlike in England where improvements were made by the landlord. In consequence, a tenant who had improved his holdings could be faced with increased rent on the ground that the land was now more valuable. If he refused to pay the increased rent, he could be evicted "as by law he was entitled to do."<sup>598</sup> The Home Rule League begun by Isaah Butt in 1873, dedicated to achieving Home Rule by peaceful and constitutional means, made little progress. It was soon to be led by the fiery Charles Stewart Parnell, the son of an Anglo-Celt father and American mother, who hated all things English. Following a course of obstructionism in Parliament in defiance of Parliamentary procedure (the Act of Union of 1801 allowed Irish representation in the House of Commons), he soon gained "such a position that an English politician said that 'dealing with him was like dealing with a foreign Power.'"<sup>599</sup> His power was appreciably strengthened when the Land League, formed in 1879 by Michael Davitt, was supported by Parnell. This united the causes of Home Rule and agrarian reform and further inflamed Irish terrorism.

Gladstone's response was to reform the land laws and to quell terrorist attacks. The Coercion Act of March, 1881, gave absolute power to the Irish Viceroy and was soon followed by a Land Act based on the "three F's--Fair Rents, Fixity of Tenure, and Free Sale." But however generous a measure this was, Parnell demanded more and began to obstruct its operation. Gladstone was left with little choice but

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<sup>598</sup> Evans, Victorian Age, p. 182.

<sup>599</sup> Churchill, History of the English-speaking Peoples, p. 271.

to imprison him in October of 1881 in Kilmainham prison together with some of his followers. Crime, arson, and violence burst afresh, and Mrs. Besant responds in her Coercion in Ireland And Its Result: A Plea for Justice in her typical fashion. She is disillusioned with Gladstone and even attacks the Land Act. It is the Coercion Act, however, which is subject to a devastating criticism. She damns Mr. Foster, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, for introducing a Bill giving the Irish Executive such sweeping powers as arresting and imprisoning those even "suspected" of treasonable practices and agrarian outrages. Mrs. Besant quotes Bradlaugh's speech against the Bill:

In Ireland criminals were few, the sufferers were many. And they proposed to suspend the Constitutional rights for all . . . making terms with fear and panic, with the influence of landlords and injustice.<sup>600</sup>

Her plea for the Irish, she confesses, was "uphill work,"<sup>601</sup> for the Irish had been bitter in their condemnation of England; nevertheless Mrs. Besant points to the plight of the Irish tenants, "unfortunate people," who, in the words of Bradlaugh, "had no law to appeal to, nor could they appeal to Parliament, for Parliament was deaf to their appeals," wretches of humanity existing in hovels "in which hon. members would not kennel their dogs nor stable their horses."<sup>602</sup> The solution was not to imprison men on "vague charges" of suspicion and intimidation but to bring the offenders to trial or set them free. Moreover,

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<sup>600</sup> Besant, "Coercion in Ireland and Its Results: A Plea for Justice," Essays, Political and Social, p. 3.

<sup>601</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 262.

<sup>602</sup> Besant, "Coercion in Ireland and Its Results: A Plea for Justice," Essays, Political and Social, p. 3.

the intimidation was not only on the side of the Irish, for it is "the misery of Ireland that is the cause of her disaffection."<sup>603</sup> A sentence of eviction was tantamount to starvation, and to Mrs. Besant the cause of the Irish grievance lay in the land-system whereby English landlords could evict and rack-rent with abandon. The Land Act was, obviously, insufficient, even though it allowed Fair Rents to be determined by a tribunal, Fixity of Tenure to all who had paid their dues, and Free Sale by the tenant.

But if the cause of Irish unrest was found in the evils of the land-system, together with the Coercion Acts which denied constitutional liberty, neither Mrs. Besant nor Bradlaugh had much sympathy with the tactics of Parnell. She notes, "At present Mr. Parnell and his friends are losing the respect and good wishes of English Radicals. . . . Mr. Parnell is wrong-headed, violent, abusive,"<sup>604</sup>

However much Mrs. Besant showed sympathy with the Irish cause, she was also English with a pride in her Parliament, a commitment to law and its traditions. Parnell's attacks on England touched her proud sensitivity, but nevertheless she sought to free Parnell and other Irish radicals since they had been unjustly and illegally imprisoned without trial.

It would appear that her tract was not lost on Gladstone who dispatched Lord Frederick Cavendish to Ireland to help find a solution.

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>604</sup> Besant, National Reformer, October 31, 1880, p. 332, quoted in Walter Arnstein, Bradlaugh Case, p. 86.

Parnell had been released, and the "Kilmainham Treaty" between the Irish revolutionary and Gladstone promised harmony. But scarcely had Lord Cavendish arrived in Ireland, he was brutally murdered together with his under-secretary, Burke, by the "Invincibles," a band of Fenians. England was both shocked and angry, conciliation was negated, and the murders "tore open the wounds that Gladstone had sought to heal."<sup>605</sup> In response to the public outcry for revenge, Parliament adopted further coercive legislation, and, in fact, "one of the severest of all coercive acts was passed" and "Ireland was ruled now with an iron hand."<sup>606</sup>

Mrs. Besant was at Blackburn lecturing on the "Irish Question" when the news of the "foul and cowardly murder"<sup>607</sup> was brought to her. The wrath of the Tories who demanded revenge and the coercive measures prompted a response. In Force No Remedy (1862), Mrs. Besant attempts to pour oil on the turbulent waters of English passion, and to demonstrate the "true character" of English retaliatory legislation. The murder of Cavendish and Burke, she declares, cannot be attributed to an entire nation, but to only a few. Thus the English response is arbitrary and unjust since the "measure of vengeance strikes the whole of the Irish people."<sup>608</sup> As a propagandist, she is forceful and dynamic and in her attempt to arouse English public opinion to the wrongs in-

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<sup>605</sup> Erickson and Havran, England: Prehistory to the Present, p. 484.

<sup>606</sup> Turner, Ireland and England in the Past and at Present, pp. 247-248.

<sup>607</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 278.

<sup>608</sup> Besant, "Force No Remedy," Essays, Political and Social, p.

flicted upon Ireland, she condemns the proposed coercion legislation as being contributory to further Irish unrest and alienating an entire people. "Secret societies" are not destroyed by repressive legislation but by the "destruction of the social wrongs in which they strike their roots."<sup>609</sup> The abolition of such constitutional privileges as the trial by jury, the right of public meeting, liberty of the press, and "sanctity of home" held at the will of the Lord Lieutenant--"the irresponsible autocrat of Ireland"--will provide no remedy.<sup>610</sup> It is hoped that when the English public learn of the true nature of this legislation, the battle will be half won.

The age of the late Victorians, if an imperialistic age, was also marked by the growth of the democratic principle as seen in the Reform Bills. Neither Mrs. Besant nor Bradlaugh was for the complete separation of Ireland from England. While Mrs. Besant is never explicit on the question of Irish "freedom," it may be taken to imply a measure of self-government, or Home Rule, but certainly not an independent Irish Republic. The workings of the English liberal principle, obviously, to Mrs. Besant, could not be divorced from the question of Ireland. It is a pity, perhaps, that in her zeal for land-reform and the alleviation of Irish distress, Mrs. Besant never articulated a scheme for Irish Home Rule as she later does for India. But this propagandist for the hapless Irish tenants, "men who see the life slowly drained out of their dearest by the pressure of the landlord,"<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

seemed far more involved in raising the froth of moral indignation than the exposition of any constitutional or agrarian remedy.

#### LAND REFORM

Ever since the young Mrs. Besant had learned about Joseph Arch, she had noted the fate of the English laborer with much concern. Arch has admirably recorded the trials of those long oppressed and forgotten men. This Nonconformist devoted to great liberal causes recalls, "We labourers had no lack of lords and masters."<sup>612</sup> Chartism had affected them not at all, and the years of mid-nineteenth century plentitude had left them abandoned to be "swept like a heap of rubbish into a corner."<sup>613</sup> The enclosure movement had resulted in land monopolization by a few wealthy farmers who let out their holdings to tenant farmers. Cobbett had learned of their sufferings in his rides through the English countryside, and Arch writes:

At the sight of the squire the people trembled. He lorded it right feudally over his tenants, the farmers; the labourers were no better than toads under a harrow. Most of the farmers were oppressors of the poor; they put on the iron wage-screw, and scrawed the labourers' wages down, down below living point; they stretched him on the rack of life-long, abject poverty.<sup>614</sup>

Soon the "trodded worms"<sup>615</sup> began to turn and as 1872 dawned,

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<sup>612</sup> Joseph Arch, The Story of His Life, Told by Himself, edited with a Preface by the Countess of Warwick (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1898), p. 34.

<sup>613</sup> Leonce de Lavergne, Rural Economy of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1854), p. 130, quoted in Pauline Gregg, Modern Britain: A Social and Economic History Since 1760 (New York: Pegasus, 1967), p. 353.

<sup>614</sup> Arch, Story of His Life, p. 35.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

the remedy lay in "Combination." The movement of the Labourers Union was begun by Arch, and both Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant lent willing assistance. Arch speaks of Mrs. Besant: "She often spoke, and most eloquently, on behalf of our cause," and he adds, "I think she lost a good deal of her influence when she took up with Theosophy, but I dare say she then influenced a different class of persons."<sup>616</sup>

The plight of the laborers worsened as a result of the depression in England, which began in the 1870's. Foreign competition was also largely responsible for declining prosperity, and the price of wheat lost half its value. "Worried about falling prices, farmers opposed organizations that sought to raise their expenditure on wages,"<sup>617</sup> and the "Black Year" of 1879 ruined the English harvest. The choice for some was clear: "Either agriculture must be protected by a tariff, or it must go down in ruin."<sup>618</sup> The landed gentry, farmers and industrialists, seriously considered the return to protection and the abandoning of free-trade. This, it was argued, was the only way to meet foreign competition, particularly from Germany, and check falling prices and profits. Calling this return to protection by the name "Fair Trade," the movement gained the support of some members of the Conservative Party. However,

The opposition to fair trade was especially pronounced among both rural and urban workers who feared that any departure from free trade would mean higher living costs. Joseph Arch's position was

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>617</sup> Ausubel, Late Victorians, p. 17.

<sup>618</sup> Evans, Victorian Age, p. 263.

typical of that of the working classes.<sup>619</sup>

In February, 1880, a conference on land reform was organized in London in which Mrs. Besant played an active role, and her speeches, together with those of Arch and Aveling, rudely jolted Tory listeners. Bradlaugh was instrumental in establishing the Land Law Reform League; Mrs. Besant seconded the motion for its establishment and became its secretary. In the early 1880's, Mrs. Besant's pen remained alive in the cause of land and labor in such tracts as Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Labourers (1880); Labor and Land: Their Burdens, Duties, and Rights (1881); England Before the Repeal of the Corn Laws (1881); What Is Really Free Trade? (1881); The Landlord's Attempt to Mislead the Land-ers (1881); The English Land System (1882); Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken From the French Revolution (1883). She had not, as yet, become a Fabian.

The attack on free-trade in the guise of "Fair Trade," or protection, meets with a severe rebuke by Mrs. Besant. The movement set afoot by landlords is seen as an attempt to stave off radical land reform and is destructive of the interests of the mass of the people. Indeed, "Only a few of the very rashest advocate a bold return to Protection; most veil their meanings under such terms as "Fair Trade," "Retaliation," and "Reciprocity."<sup>620</sup> A return to "Fair Trade" is a return to poverty for the many, and she recounts the fate of England prior to the repeal of the Corn Laws. By placing a duty on foreign corn, the agriculturist is favored at the expense of the consumer of

<sup>619</sup> Amsubel, Late Victorians, pp. 108-109.

<sup>620</sup> Besant, "England Before the Repeal of the Corn Laws," Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

bread; and the Napoleonic wars proved that those who profited were the landed interests who had a monopoly. A rise in the price of bread implies greater rents, competition, and crime, where only the landowner flourishes since he alone can charge exorbitant rents on land. The appeal is to Bright and Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League to "Repeal-or-Revolution," and their impassioned eloquence which "instructed a nation" in the ways of Free Trade. On the other hand, she reminds her readers, "The Duke of Norfolk assured the starving that excellent soup could be made out of hot water and curry powder,"<sup>621</sup> and the Church sided with the landlords in the corn law struggle to keep out cheap imported corn although many were starving. She quotes a letter from Cobden to Bright:

The Church clergy are almost to a man guilty of causing the present distress by upholding the Corn Law, they having themselves an interest in the high price of bread.<sup>622</sup>

The "sinister interests" of landed monopolists and their clerical allies are under attack, and in the manner of Cobden and Bright, Mrs. Besant wants to instruct a nation in the merits of free-trade and the dangers of protectionism under whatever guise.

Like Arch, Mrs. Besant sets out to establish that there is no conflict of interest between farmers and laborers, that their common foe is the land-owner, and to impel them to form "one strong union of the agricultural interests, in antagonism to the interests of the land-owners."<sup>623</sup> There also appears to be the makings of a possible revolu-

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>622</sup> John Morley, Life of Cobden, Vol. I, 1881, p. 231, in Besant, "For the Crown and Against the Nation," Disestablish the Church, p. 91.

<sup>623</sup> Besant, "Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Labourers," Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

tion; and people, she warns, who are "maddened by long oppression," as in France when newly set free, are apt to get out of hand. While England, she admits, is not as bad as the Ancien Regime, yet the lesson of Revolutionary France may well be learned. It is a lesson from the past to show that bloodshed and strife do not result from wise measures of reform

. . . but from the hopelessness of winning relief except by force, from overtaxation, from unjust social inequality, from the grinding of poverty, from the despair and from the misery of the people.<sup>624</sup>

Her "theory of Revolution"--if, indeed, it can be so called--is aimed at demonstrating to the "apathetic, selfish rich," who are indifferent to the plight of the poor, to pay heed because "if they knew their best friends; they would bless the popular leaders, who are striving to win social and political reforms, and so to avert a revolution."<sup>625</sup> There seems little doubt that she has herself in mind as one of the "popular leaders," and with some cause, for among segments of the masses of the people--the workers and farmers together with the Freethinkers--Mrs. Besant was hailed as a dominant personality whose power of eloquence and obvious sincerity were as much a source of comfort and aid as they were repellant to the Tories and the Established Church. She is now determined to rectify the remnants of Feudal abuse which, believed to be destroyed in France, still lingered in England. Mrs. Besant marvels that in view of the poverty, want, and brutal conditions of the laborer, not why the labourers are agitating now, but how it comes to pass that they have not agitated long ago; not why they claim justice

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<sup>624</sup>Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken From the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 5.

<sup>625</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

now, but why they have endured injustice silently so long.<sup>626</sup>

The laborer's fate is worse than the slave, who at least was cared for since his owner's interests required him to be in good-working condition; whereas the laborer, brutally treated while active, can look forward only to the workhouse and a pauper's grave. The inequity of land distribution, the "monstrous rights" claimed by the landowners, who as an "artificial class" draw a yearly rental of 200,000,000 pounds from their holdings and give in return "The fact that it exists" is an anomaly to be set right. Moreover, the rights claimed by the landlords of eviction and the appropriation of the labor of others are responsible for rising discontent and waste. The answer does not lie in emigration but that "Property" in land be subordinated to the "general good."<sup>627</sup> What is called for is a radical overhaul in the system of land-tenure--"the extinction of the present land-owning class, and the radical revolution of the present idea as to appropriating land."<sup>628</sup>

The distress among the workers, who are the "producers of wealth," is not the outcome of Free-Trade but of land monopoly held by an idle class. She quotes Cobden that no country is really free where the majority of its cultivators are "divorced from the soil they till,"<sup>629</sup> and her Land Law Reform League is activated to the end of

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<sup>626</sup> Besant, "Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Labourers," Essays, Political and Social, p. 3.

<sup>627</sup> Besant, "The English Land System," Essays, Political and Social, p. 16.

<sup>628</sup> Besant, "Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Labourers," Essays, Political and Social, p. 5.

<sup>629</sup> Besant, "The English Land System," Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

removing land monopoly.

The change in the condition of Land Tenure, devoted to the cause of the "general interest" and not private advantage, involved the abolition of Game Laws, first passed in 1815; these laws made it illegal for anybody save the owners of the great estates to buy or sell game and thereby encouraged poaching and poverty. Also, in the manner of Paine, "no dead hand should be permitted to strangle the living,"<sup>630</sup> and consequently, Primogeniture and Entail should be abolished. The prevention of the accumulation of large estates in the hands of a few would prevent the inordinate concentration of political, economic, and social power and influence. The present system where one individual has the right to appropriate land and will it to his heirs is also an injustice to the entire society. She quotes John Stuart Mill:

The essential principle of property being to assure to all persons what they have produced by their labor, and accumulated by their abstinence. . . .<sup>631</sup>

As with Bentham, lawyers receive adverse attention, and a simplification of land transfer is sought particularly as the registry of titles to land enriches legal coffers. Of much import is a system of graduated-tax on large holdings.

Land tax to be levied on a scale so graduated as to press most heavily on excessively large holdings: say, the normal tax on the first 5,000 acres, a double tax on the second 5,000 acres, again doubled on the next 5,000 acres, and a geometric progression of increase of tax on every succeeding 20,000 acres of holding.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>631</sup> Besant, "Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Laborers," Essays, Political and Social, p. 5.

<sup>632</sup> Besant, "The Landlords' Attempt to Misllead the Landless," Essays, Political and Social, p. 8.

The cure for low wages and unemployment is not late marriages but a change in the manner of distribution of wealth by placing a heavy tax on the monopolist landlord, and not on the product of labor. To tax the necessities of life is bad in principle as it undermines the nation. Equally unsatisfactory is a system of indirect taxation since this requires a numerous staff of tax-collectors, whereas a single large tax is more conveniently collected!! No relief can be had by placing more taxes on the shoulders of Labor, but by lessening Rent and taxing Land. Thus, a graduated Land Tax would break the monopoly where five persons in England owned over 2,000,000 acres of land. This monopoly, she declares, must be broken "either by law or by force," and "If the people are wise, they will compel the landlords to yield to law rather than resort to force."<sup>633</sup> This is a position strangely out of joint with her negation of violent change! But, perhaps, when thoroughly roused in a cause, she found her emotional exuberance and verbosity often dominating a calm sobriety, well in keeping with a somewhat radical outlook dominated by strong feelings.

All land, declares Mrs. Besant, should be under cultivation, and any land remaining fallow is "a crime against the state."<sup>634</sup> Thus it becomes a "misdemeanor to hold cultivable lands in an uncultivated state."

The penalty on conviction to be dispossession, but with payment to the disposed landowner of say twenty years' purchase at the average annual value of the land for the seven years prior to prosecution. . . . The land to be State property, and to be let

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<sup>633</sup>Besant, "Labor and Land: Their Burdens, Duties and Rights," Essays, Political and Social, p. 7.

<sup>834</sup>Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken From the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 17.

to actual tenant cultivators on terms of tenancy conditioned in each case to be longer or shorter according to the improvement made in the estate.<sup>635</sup>

To Mrs. Besant it was clear that since the few could not inherit the earth, the soil is owned by the whole people of England and is "inherited by the people by natural right as Englishmen--their birthright, in fact."<sup>636</sup> Thus, if this natural right is owned by all the people, there could be no private property in land; and the "raw materials" of the earth, which are converted into wealth by the application of labor, would in "a thoroughly healthy state" be counted among "the common stock of the whole nation."<sup>637</sup> As yet, Mrs. Besant has not mentioned Socialism and perhaps is unaware of the works of Marx or Henry George. But she seems acquainted with John Stuart Mill and uses, for example, his concept of "wealth" as that obtained by extracting "the instruments of human subsistence and enjoyment from the materials of the globe."<sup>638</sup> Something of Mill is tied to a "natural rights" philosophy, in a manner that would have appalled the Utilitarians, in order to prove that land is a "natural gift" which cannot be claimed as private property. Her line of reasoning is supportive of her basic premise that the time is nigh for a Radical Reform in the prevalent system of land tenure by which land is to belong to labor--the forces of production of wealth.

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<sup>635</sup> Besant, "The Landlords" Attempt to Misdlead the Landless," Essays, Political and Social, p. 8.

<sup>636</sup> Besant, "Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Labourers," Essays, Political and Social, p. 5.

<sup>637</sup> Besant, "Labor and Land: Their Burdens, Duties and Rights," Essays, Political and Social, p. 2.

<sup>638</sup> Besant, "What Is Really Free Trade?" Essays, Political and Social, p. 1.

There is no mention of land nationalization, and as yet, the thrust of her argument lies in an interference with the monopoly of land. Her belief in a new social order is casting its shadow.

#### CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The poverty of the poor, the plight of the disposed farmer and out of work laborer in the years of the depression, could not be ignored, and writes Besterman,

With such memories as these, and with memories also of the many lawsuits in which she had been involved because of her "advanced" teachings, it is no wonder that Annie Besant has devoted much attention to the problems of crime and punishment.<sup>639</sup>

Man, to Mrs. Besant, was a victim of his circumstances; he was what society made him. The criminal is the child who, out of frustration and hopelessness, sees law and society as his enemy until his final end in a criminal's grave. But she believes that society is becoming more humane and is beginning to realize its duty to the criminal. Punishment to such, declares Mrs. Besant, should neither be punitive nor vindictive, but "rehabilitary," much as "medicine given to cure a moral disease."<sup>640</sup> Others in that century also saw man as perfectable but corrupted by his circumstances.

To Besterman, Mrs. Besant's views on criminological reform "are dependent on her views and opinions on the nature of crime itself."<sup>641</sup>

In Sin and Crime: Their Nature and Treatment (1885) she defines "sin"

<sup>639</sup> Besterman, Mind of Annie Besant, p. 18.

<sup>640</sup> Besant, "The Ethics of Punishment," Essays, Political and Social, p. 3.

<sup>641</sup> Besterman, Mind of Annie Besant, p. 20.

and "crime." "Sin" is:

disregard of moral law. Some people take it as connoting God, or breach of supernatural law. I do not so use it. A word is needed to signify wrong-doing, outside, as well as including, the scope of the criminal law, and the word sin is useful for this purpose. It includes, but goes beyond, all crimes, and I define crime as breach of a special kind of moral law, of law which is enacted by some authority and enforced by penalty. A crime will, therefore necessarily be a sin, but a sin need not be a crime.<sup>642</sup>

Mrs. Besant continues to define "law" and "moral." Law is the "observed sequences of phenomena; all "natural" laws "mean this and nothing more," much as the law of gravity which cannot be "broken, though it may be disregarded." Law is also "an enactment, issued by some recognised authority," the breach of which imposes a penalty.<sup>643</sup> Used in this Hobbsian sense as the command of the state, it belongs to the Austinian school of "legal positivism" and is separated, to a large degree, from the idealistic philosophies of pure natural law theorists anchored in the Platonic concept of the absolute Good "as the ultimate source of self-evident, necessary maxims of conduct."<sup>644</sup>

"Moral" is defined by Mrs. Besant

in its narrowest sense, as "tending to increase the general happiness." In its wider sense it is applied to all philosophy which deals with conduct. Moral conduct is conduct which tends to increase general happiness. Moral science is science that deals with conduct; distinguishes the tendency of action on society, marks them with approval or disapproval as they tend to promote or injure the general welfare.<sup>645</sup>

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<sup>642</sup>Besant, "Sin and Crime: Their Nature and Treatment," pp. 3-5, quoted in Besterman, Mind of Annie Besant, pp. 20-21. Besterman has reproduced the writing.

<sup>643</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>644</sup>Kessler, "Theoretical Bases of Law," Landmarks of Law, p. 5.

<sup>645</sup>Besant, "Sin and Crime: Their Nature and Treatment," in Besterman, Mind of Annie Besant, p. 22.

Thus it would appear that "moral law" is a law that regulates conduct aimed at the "general happiness!" Apart from its having the "general happiness" as its aim, it is of two kinds. It is, first, an observed sequence of "moral phenomena" from which one can inductively discover general laws of human behavior. Secondly, it is a regulatory code for the proper functioning of society.

The connection between her definition of "law" and "moral" and the treatment of the criminal appears tenuous. However, it may be suggested that since crime is caused by a faulty environment, and law and morality point to the "general happiness," it becomes the duty of society to reform the criminal and thus ensure the general good. Her proposals of criminological reform, also contained in "Sin and Crime: Their Nature and Treatment," declare that when the offender is convicted of his first offense, the primary remedy is to educate him in a trade so that when he is set free he can utilize his training to reimburse society the amount it cost to keep him in prison. However, if the criminal committed his offense as a result of a "merely undeveloped brain," the training would be useful by inculcating in him sober habits and a "rational enjoyment," making any fresh relapse into crime improbable.<sup>646</sup> To those who commit crimes of a more brutal nature, "implying a low type in the committer," it is best to place him in the army and thereby to discipline his "lower nature!"<sup>647</sup> Also, society is in need of reform and bad housing conditions must be removed; thus "the lower strata of society must be uplifted ere criminals will

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<sup>646</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

lessen in number."<sup>648</sup> Later, Besterman writes rather facetiously, Mrs. Besant adds a "depth" to her theories of criminology "by basing them on the profounder truths of human psychology."<sup>649</sup> The congenital criminal with the "underdeveloped ego" is to be separated from the rest of society in pleasant surroundings.

The threads of her thought involving law, morality, the general happiness, sin, crime, and criminological reform are difficult to unravel. What seems to emerge from this potpourri of "jurisprudence," "morality," and "criminology" is a faith in human perfectability, the duty of society, and an abiding belief in her utilitarian ethic of the general happiness now supported by both "law" and "morality"; each of which is inextricably related to the other and neither of which is inconsistent with her faith in the scientific and inviolable laws of nature and society.

#### REPUBLICANISM

England, which had once suffered a Cromwell, saw a rekindling of the Republican spirit in the early 1870's. Bradlaugh had based much of his politics on the Republican premise. His Republicanism, much in the tradition of Paine and Richard Carlile,

was not in conception very different from the republic of Robespierre. Bradlaugh belongs to that now old-fashioned school of politics stemming from the revolutions of the eighteenth century. His republic was based on the ideology of liberty, equality, fraternity.<sup>650</sup>

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<sup>648</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>649</sup> Besterman, Mind of Annie Besant, p. 27.

<sup>650</sup> Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 245.

In May of 1873 a conference of British Republicans was held at Birmingham, and the National Reformer was agog with Republican enthusiasm. Those like Professor Fawcett and Sir Charles Dilke led a parliamentary movement with a view to a reform of the Civil List, and both John Morley and Joseph Chamberlain appeared on the Republican platform. On September 19, 1870, "The Phrygian red cap was hoisted on poles in Trafalgar Square to the singing of the Marseillaise,"<sup>651</sup> and Strachey reports that it would appear as if "an irremediable antagonism had grown up between the Queen and the nation."<sup>652</sup>

However, this oratory of Republicanism was fleeting; in 1874 the Tories returned to power. Public reaction to the monarchy had changed, and a "monarchical reaction set in before the republicans had time to get their campaign properly started."<sup>653</sup> The recovery of the Prince of Wales from a long illness awakened English sympathy to the royalty and the person of the Queen. An attempted assassination of Queen Victoria in February, 1872, finally routed the Republican movement in that country. Also, a new form of monarchy was evolving which rested not on constitutional prerogatives or political activity, but on the psychological needs of nationalism and imperialism and on the love of the masses of what Bagehot called "nice and pretty events."<sup>654</sup>

But not so for Mrs. Besant. The National Reformer of September 26, 1875, carried the "English Marseillaise" by "Ajax," to wit:

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<sup>651</sup> Petrie, The Victorians, p. 49.

<sup>652</sup> Strachey, Queen Victoria, p. 241.

<sup>653</sup> Petrie, The Victorians, p. 50.

<sup>654</sup> Thomson, England in the Nineteenth Century, p. 174.

Has England forgotten Cromwell's teaching?  
 Is Hampden's poured-out blood all in vain?  
 Shall the land which saw a King's impeaching  
 Now be bound by a Brunswick chain?  
 Our sires veil their faces in shame  
 For the sons who disgrace their name,  
 Who bow to a crowned thing,  
 To a puppet they call a King.  
 To arms! Republicans!  
 March on: march on: <sup>655</sup>Republicans!  
 We march to victory.

The inspiration for her Republicanism is supplied by the French Revolution; in fact, "that stormy time" held for her an "intense fascination."

I brooded over it, dreamed over it, and longed to tell the story from the people's point of view. . . . The French Revolution became to me as a drama in which I had myself taken part, and the actors were to me as personal friends and foes. <sup>656</sup>

Republican ardor was supplemented by the more English sources of Paine, Milton, and Algernon Sidney. The French revolutionary principle had apparently extolled liberty, "freedom," "justice," and "brotherhood." She reminds her audience that the Encyclopaedists were Freethinkers, and some, like Holbach and Diderot who were Atheists, had roused the French people to defiance of tyranny and "rang the tocsin which awoke France." <sup>657</sup> Its excesses are pardonable, being "the natural and the necessary fruits, not of the freedom which is won, but of the tyranny which is crushed," <sup>658</sup> and which is so clearly demonstrated by the inhuman practices of the chasse aux paysans ("the hunt of the peasants") and other such aristo-

<sup>655</sup> Besant, "The English Marseillaise," National Reformer, September 26, 1875, quoted in Brinton, English Political Thought, p. 243.

<sup>656</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 202.

<sup>657</sup> Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken From the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 6.

<sup>658</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

cratic sport! In English Republicanism (1878) her message is clear; it is to warn her land that Republicanism "is a feeling that is ever growing beneath the surface, but that only rarely shows itself above ground." Moreover, the Republican principle is "the very core of English progressive thought," and apparently "influences political action even among those who are most opposed to it."<sup>659</sup> However, England, in the main, had renounced its brief Republican interlude. The Crystal Palace Speech by Disraeli and the new role of the Queen as a symbol of imperial greatness belied Mrs. Besant's exuberance. Republicanism was no longer a popular cause, and even Bradlaugh had despaired of it and declared that "the mass of the people were not yet qualified to constitute a republican state."<sup>660</sup> Yet to Mrs. Besant, it seemed that the process of a "quiet, slow alienation of the people from the throne is going on unobserved."<sup>661</sup> Republican Clubs were evidently "signs of the times" that should be a warning to the government that the agitation was not only the work of a few but was widely dispersed, it being erroneous to imagine "that there is no widely-spread disaffection behind the Republican teachers."<sup>662</sup> Nor, proclaims Mrs. Besant, should the Government be led astray by the "superficial lip-loyalty of the crowds" for the Queen, the Princes, and the Royal Court, for it is

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<sup>659</sup> Besant, "English Republicanism," Essays, Political and Social, p. 2.

<sup>660</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, p. 2.

<sup>661</sup> Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty With Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 8.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

a "loyalty that springs from the thoughtlessness of custom and not from the true and manly reverence for real worth."<sup>663</sup>

Despite her appeal, "To arms! Republicans," Mrs. Besant's Republicanism was not to be gained by violence. "Republics," she writes, should be born of thought, not of suffering; of reason, not of despair; they should be slowly evolved through Reform, not burst, Minerva-like, full-formed and clad in mail, from the Jove of Revolution.<sup>664</sup>

"Self-reliance, self-government, decentralization" constituted the essence of Mrs. Besant's Republicanism. Republicanism was also typical of "English political genius" as exemplified by Milton and Algernon Sidney who had for their major object the removal of "one-man government."<sup>665</sup> Also, England was seen to be already tracing a gradual evolutionary path to this ideal during the past two centuries. The slow recession in the personage of Royalty was a realization of the Republican State which was to be shaped on the lines formulated by Milton. It may be pointed out that Milton's Defensio populi anglicani (1651) was an answer to the Royalist Salmasius of Leyden. Moreover, the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649) advocated regicide but not popular sovereignty. Milton's growing disenchantment with the autocracy of Cromwell was not a plea for "decentralization" but a rule by an oligarchy of the wise, something with which Mrs. Besant would be expected to have little to do at this stage.

Mrs. Besant outlines her ideal Republic. "The government," it appears, "shall be made and controlled by the nation"; also, all offices,

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>664</sup> Besant, "English Republicanism," Essays, Political and Social, p. 3.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

whether legislative or executive, should be based on the elective principle. Since a Republic was based on "Reason," inheritance or heredity had no place in its being founded on "irrationality." She quotes Paine,

One of the strongest proofs of the follies of hereditary right in kings is that Nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion.<sup>666</sup>

The name or title of the "chief magistrate" of a Republic is of little consequence. It is seen to be "unwise" to elect a chief executive for life and vest him with an "imperial title" since that leads to "tyranny." It seems no better to Mrs. Besant if he be elected to office and styled as "President" for a term of years as in the United States or France since that, too, "shares in the vice of royalty, making a master instead of a minister." A nation should never "give itself away" to any one man for a fixed term of office. Best of all, the "nation"

may elect its chief only through its elected Parliament, and styling him either President or Prime Minister, make him only the responsible head of the Executive Council, holding power while he keeps a Parliamentary majority.<sup>667</sup>

She views this as the safest plan of all since it forbids despotism and, moreover, is the natural outcome of British Parliamentary history and constitutional practice. Mrs. Besant further declares that since the power of the Monarch has decreased while that of the Cabinet has grown, the new name of "Executive Council" would not come as a shock or be too radical a departure from British traditions but would

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<sup>666</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

be "the orderly and peaceful completion of our national growth."<sup>668</sup>

But the absolute sine qua non of a "true" Republic is universal suffrage. Since it is seen to exist in France, Switzerland, Greece, and Germany, Mrs. Besant sees no reason why the English should consider it less worthy.<sup>669</sup> The Third Reform Bill of 1884--as yet in the offing--was to bring political representation to the agricultural and rural classes. The Bill of 1867, introduced by Disraeli, was effected in a bid to "dish the Whigs." It was not a recognition of the democratic ideal, and in order to placate the powers of property, Disraeli had assured them that the traditional "stake in the country" theory would not be neglected, and, as in 1832, a property test would be an important factor. Mrs. Besant was quick to denounce this state of things. "No country is free," she writes,

in which all adult citizens have not a voice in the government. A representation which is based upon a property qualification is radically vicious in principle.<sup>670</sup>

Her view could only alarm those who felt that a vote to propertyless men would jeopardize constitutional liberty. To extend the franchise to such, it was argued, would place England at the mercy of propertyless men, resulting in the removal of the privileges of the members of Parliament who often regarded their domain much as a "comfortable rich man's club." It is also true that this system by which a majority of citizens were not represented was soon to be cured by the Reform Bill of 1884, engineered by Gladstone and Chamberlain who felt that

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>669</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>670</sup> Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 18.

the "triumph of truth was the only cause worth fighting for."<sup>671</sup> It is not known to what extent Mrs. Besant may have contributed to this enlargement of civil liberty.

The stormy winds of change had threatened the hereditary principle of the House of Lords. The days of Palmerston and Derby had now gone, and with them, some of the regard and awe which had surrounded this sacrosanct chamber. If it retained its power, yet it failed to command its former reverence; and Mrs. Besant is quick to "strike" at what she considers to be a "dying institution," being merely

a House whose deliberations may be shared in by fools or by knaves, provided only that the brow be coronetted--such a House is a disgrace to a free country, and an outrage on popular liberty.<sup>672</sup>

The Lords seemed to lack the support of the people, and the hereditary principle upon which it was founded was distasteful to Mrs. Besant who was well in tune with the upsurge of the democratic spirit of the time. It was "a barbaric relic of feudalism"; peers by birth were an outrage, and "one great objection to our monarchical and aristocratic form of government is its enormous expenses and relatively small results."<sup>673</sup> Even Gladstone, regardless of his oratorical skill and the respect he commanded, could but lamely defend the Lords when addressing the Corn Exchange at Edinburgh: "It required something almost like an apology from him for finding anything favourable to say of the hereditary

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<sup>671</sup>"The Redistribution of Seats," Edinburgh Review, Vol. CLXI (January, 1885), p. 273.

<sup>672</sup>Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 19.

<sup>673</sup>Besant, "English Republicanism," Essays, Political and Social, p. 6.

House."<sup>674</sup> It was only with the destruction of that citadel on the Thames that, to Mrs. Besant, the "fair and glorious Republic for which we have yearned so long"<sup>675</sup> would be a fact. Also, "Our Cousins on the other side of the Atlantic set us a good example hundred years ago."<sup>676</sup>

Mrs. Besant's enthusiasm for the French Revolutionary principle of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" is further demonstrated in her attempt to assign to each word a specific meaning. "Liberty" implies a negation of such power as can impose a political constitution or a form of government which is unpopular. It means,

that every individual is left perfectly free to follow his own will, to pursue his own objects in his own fashion, with no limits whatsoever imposed upon him by others; this complete freedom being bounded only<sup>677</sup> by the equally complete freedom of every one of his neighbours.

She continues, in her Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, by stating that a right to life means far more than a right to mere existence; it implies the right "to exercise every physical and every mental faculty, to grow, to develop, to become perfect." However, even though all men have a right to a complete freedom of action, yet man "has no right to infringe on the complete freedom of any one else."<sup>678</sup> Thus, the individual has the right to reach his highest potential, and if there are vague similarities to the thought of John Stuart Mill, yet it is by no

<sup>674</sup>"The Reform Bill and the House of Lords," Edinburgh Review, Vol. CLX (October, 1884) 566.

<sup>675</sup>Besant, "Civil and Religious Liberty, With Some Hints Taken from the French Revolution," Essays, Political and Social, p. 19.

<sup>676</sup>Besant, "English Republicanism," Essays, Political and Social, p. 8.

<sup>677</sup>Besant, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," Essays, Political and Social, p. 4.

<sup>678</sup>Ibid., p. 5

means as carefully a worked out scheme of liberty and democracy as in On Liberty. Mrs. Besant remains on a rather superficial theoretical level.

The right to liberty involves the right to property, to all which the individual has acquired for himself by his own skill and his own power, provided that, in acquiring it, he has not trespassed on his neighbours either by force or by fraud.<sup>679</sup>

The right to private property being guaranteed, man has also a right to make "contracts," provided also they do not entrench on the rights of others. Thus, it would appear that each man is a guardian of the right to liberty for himself and for others, exercising this right with due regard to the liberties and rights of others. She is well in keeping with the vital tenet of English liberal thought which viewed the free individual as an ultimate end uninhibited by authority, whether clerical or traditional, yet conscious of the welfare of others. "Equality," she writes, must also be given a specific meaning. Men are not born equal in "power and in possibilities," or in their potentialities for achievement, physical and moral strength, and "moral virility." No such leading equality exists in nature.

Equality is Justice; absolute Justice to all alike; Justice which denies to none the right that is his . . . that in rights, all men are equal; that before the law, all men are equal; that in law-given opportunities, all men are equal; that in advantages bestowed, all men are equal.<sup>680</sup>

Thus, while the better man, more superbly endowed by nature, may forge ahead; yet all must be given equal opportunities to begin with. It would appear that while inequalities of man are natural in nature,

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<sup>679</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

society is bound to remove such inequalities and thus give to all opportunities for equal development. Finally, "Fraternity" is vital, for without it, neither "Liberty" nor "Equality" is possible. It is that which "binds us together." Man is not an island unto himself, as John Donne spoke, and only by the combined and unified efforts of man can Liberty and Equality be made realities. In essence, it is a spirit of "Brotherhood"--a tenet in Mrs. Besant's thought which was to grow increasingly important as she turned to Theosophy.

Thus are given the "symbols" of the Republican creed, as much to be venerated as the cross to the Christians. The French Revolution was a call to liberty. Her Republicanism is sketchy at best, and she is too passionate and perhaps too impatient to be a clear, erudite thinker versed in English constitutional law and precedent or even aware of the workings of the American Presidential System of Government.

## CHAPTER X

### SOCIALISM: MRS. BESANT AND THE FABIANS

"After 1880," writes Barker, "the bankruptcy of the old Benthamite Liberalism was beginning to be apparent";<sup>681</sup> it had now found itself ". . . in the throes of a crisis."<sup>682</sup> The creed of the classical political economists, like Adam Smith, upon which Manchester Liberalism was based, had failed to bring forth its promised harvest. Already, after 1870, "Legislation, in Professor Dicey's phrase, was passing from an individualistic to a collectivist trend."<sup>683</sup> As the depression worsened, the ranks of the unemployed swelled; and in the last decades of the Century, prosperity no longer remained the prerogative of civilization. Margaret Cole reports,

The skilled trades were hard hit. Harder still was the lot of those in less fortunate positions--dockers living always on a basis of casual labour, unorganized groups like Beatrice Potter's "trouser-hands" or Annie Besant's match-girls.<sup>684</sup>

Trade-Union representatives had a seat in Parliament in 1874; and Arch and Mrs. Besant had served the organization of agricultural labor.

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<sup>681</sup>Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 208.

<sup>682</sup>M. Beer, A History of British Socialism, Vol. II (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), p. 226.

<sup>683</sup>Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 30.

<sup>684</sup>Margaret Cole, The Story of Fabian Socialism, Science Editions (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), p. 12.

Their effect was not lost on a country which, though not fully democratic, was well on the way to being so.

If John Stuart Mill's contribution to political thought dominated the early part of Victorianism, "the most striking feature of the second half was the rise of socialism."<sup>685</sup> Mill, who had stood at the crossroads between "old" and "new" Liberalism, had influenced land reformers such as Mrs. Besant in their attack on landed monopoly. He had, writes Barker, already ". . . opened the gates for the entry of Socialism."<sup>686</sup> To Mill, there existed no absolute right of property; it was merely expeditious. Since "no man made the land; it is the original inheritance of the whole species."<sup>687</sup> As a "qualified socialist," he had suggested that if

. . . the choice were to be made between communism with all its chances, and the present state of society with all its sufferings and injustices, if the institution of private property necessarily carried with it as a consequence that the produce of labour should be apportioned as we now see it almost in inverse proportion to labour, the largest portions to those who have never worked at all, the next largest to those whose work is almost nominal, and so in descending scale, the remuneration dwindling as the work grows harder and more disagreeable until the most fatiguing and exhausting bodily labour cannot count with certainty on being able to earn even the necessities of life, if this or Communism were the alternative, all the difficulties,<sup>688</sup> great or small, of Communism would be but dust in the balance.

Socialism, as a plan for the reorganization of society, was not strange

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<sup>685</sup>Gocch, "The Victorian Age, 1837-1901," Social and Political Ideas of Some Representative Thinkers of the Victorian Age, p. 20.

<sup>686</sup>Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 7.

<sup>687</sup>Mill, Principles of Political Economy, Book II, Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 238.

<sup>688</sup>Mill, "Political Economy," Book II, in Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 22.

to nineteenth century England, but since the demise of Chartism to the foundation of the Democratic Federation by H. M. Hyndman on June 8, 1881, it had fallen into decay. The Christian Socialists, however, had continued to prod the English social conscience. To the Rev. Stewart D. Headlam, Frederick Denison Maurice, and Charles Kingsley, Christian Socialism was essentially an ethical creed, ". . . a co-operative order of society wherein all laboured for the common good rather than for private profit."<sup>689</sup> Both the Church and State were instruments to alleviate the distress of the poor. To Headlam, the major cause of poverty was the monopolization of the land by a few,

and that therefore those who want to cut away at the root of poverty must work to restore to the people the whole of the value which they give to the land, to get for the people complete control over the land, and to that end see to it that those who use land pay for the use of it to its rightful owners, the people.<sup>690</sup>

This objective was sanctified by the eighth commandment as a Christian duty--Hinc laetas urbes pueris florere videbis.

Apart from the depression, the spur to the growth of Socialism was seen by Margaret Cole in the "drying up" of social legislation. Also, the Victorian conscience felt insecure when faced with the appalling poverty in its midst. Darwinism had rudely jolted the conception of his "divinity"; the Christian Socialists--Coleridge, Ruskin, and Carlyle--had placed his sense of values on trial; Mill had turned to a "qualified socialism"; thus,

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<sup>689</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p. 49.

<sup>690</sup> Rev. Stewart D. Headlam, "Christian Socialism," in Rev. Stewart D. Headlam (Stewart, Dearmer) et al, Socialism and Religion, The Fabian Socialist Series No. 1 (London: A. C. Fifield, 1908), p. 19.

Economic insecurity--the slackening of reform--a sense of social shame; all these played their part in creating the mental atmosphere in which the Socialist societies were born. To these three might be added a fourth factor--fear. For a feeling that the social system might stand in need of serious revision was reinforced by a less strong but nevertheless real feeling that worse things might come about if revision were not attempted, or postponed too long.<sup>691</sup>

Socialism in the early 1880's began in a small way and was almost exclusively an intellectual movement. So insignificant were their numbers that in 1881 Kropotkin lamented that he addressed "ridiculously small audiences,"<sup>692</sup> and when Karl Marx died in 1883 after having lived in London since 1849, few knew or cared of his existence or passing. English labor remained impervious to Marxism and seemed content to accept Liberal leadership under Gladstone. In fact, the revival of Socialist propaganda was to be met with stubborn resistance from the ranks of labour--". . . the uneducated working men stood as yet on a very low intellectual level, and were therefore all the more difficult to organise."<sup>693</sup> The, as yet, feeble display of Socialism was however viewed most unfavorably by both the Radical and the Tory--politics, indeed, making strange bedfellows! No longer were the Secularists seen as the greatest of all dangers, and to the uncompromising individualist, Bradlaugh, Socialism represented ". . . the optimism of unpractical men,"<sup>694</sup> which could appeal only to the "neurotic, the noisy, the pas-

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<sup>691</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, pp. 13-16.

<sup>692</sup>Peter Kropotkin, Memoirs of a Revolutionist (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), p. 441.

<sup>693</sup>Bernstein, My Years of Exile, p. 207.

<sup>694</sup>Gilmour, Champion of Liberty: Charles Bradlaugh, p. 163.

sionate, the riotous."<sup>695</sup> The battle that was to ensue between the Radical and Individualist was to be to Mrs. Besant a matter of much concern. To the Tory, like Sir Henry Maine, Socialism was now as much a threat to the established idea of laissez-faire, as laissez-faire had once been to Mercantilism. But Socialism was to prove invincible.

Socialism, writes Joad, is a word ". . . used to denote both a body of doctrine and a political movement."<sup>696</sup> This being so, it becomes imperative not only to limit one's concern to its thought in its many aspects, but also to include an account of the organizations and personalities that were to play their part in its shaping. It becomes even more necessary to do so since it provides a perspective in which to view Mrs. Besant's role as a Fabian.

It was owing to Hyndman that Marxism "found some footing on English soil."<sup>697</sup> A gentleman of the upper class, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, he is seen as,

a cultured financier, who in appearance was like the deity in Raphael's vision of Ezekiel [he] looked as if he had been born in a frock coat and top hat, though he preferred working with the proletarians rather than people of his own class.<sup>698</sup>

Mrs. Besant writes, "Those of you who know him will recognize what the God who was believed in my youth was like."<sup>699</sup> Hyndman published

<sup>695</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>696</sup> C. E. M. Joad, Introduction to Modern Political Theory (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 39.

<sup>697</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 230.

<sup>698</sup> Winsten, Jesting Apostle: The Life of Bernard Shaw, pp. 52-53.

<sup>699</sup> Annie Besant, "Modern Religion," Dan H. Laurence, ed., Platform and Pulpit: Bernard Shaw (Soho Square, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 122.

England for All in 1881 in which he expressed Marxist doctrine but did not, it appeared, give Marx adequate credit. While there appeared little question of "malicious plagiarism,"<sup>700</sup> it touched the sensitivity of the proud theorist and of Engels and was henceforth banished from their presence. The Democratic Federation adopted a programme of social reform of which only the demand for the nationalization of land was of a Socialist nature. Soon it attracted some of "the most prominent socialists of the country. . ."<sup>701</sup> whose backgrounds were far from proletarian. Ernest Belfort Bax, author, man of letters, republican and given to paradoxical pronouncements, did much service in the

propagation of Socialist opinions in England. He is one of those English intellectuals who, early in the eighties, first restored to Socialism, which was then regarded as defunct, its civil rights in the world of letters.<sup>702</sup>

Also a member was William Morris, ". . . somewhat of a revolutionary Utopian."<sup>703</sup> An honorary fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, poet and artist, he was sanguine in his expectation that Socialism could be attained without any parliamentary action but through some dynamic display of will. "He was," writes Freemantle, "in many ways an English Walt Whitman. . . . He disliked intellectuality, subtle metaphysical distinctions, and economic theory."<sup>704</sup> Public school men as J. L. Joynes--once a master at Eton--together with Eleanor Marx and Aveling,

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<sup>700</sup> Bernstein, My Years of Exile, p. 205.

<sup>701</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, p. 247.

<sup>702</sup> Bernstein, My Years of Exile, p. 200.

<sup>703</sup> Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 213.

<sup>704</sup> Anne Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets: The British Fabians, Mentor (The New American Library, Inc., 1960), p. 65. His passionate dislike for Marxian economic theory, being obtruse and incomprehensible, needs to be sympathetically viewed.

and H. H. Champion, an ex-artillery officer whose father was a Major General, joined Hyndman, though the Democratic Federation never really caught fire. In 1883 it took on the stronger hues of Socialism seeking the nationalization of all the instruments of production, exchange, and distribution of wealth. To-day, its monthly publication, together with Justice (edited by Champion) served to propagate its thought. In the following year, 1884, the Democratic Federation became the Social Democratic Federation and became Marxist to an extreme. The Socialists, however, were a contentious lot and several members led by Morris--together with Eleanor Marx, Aveling, and Bax--left the S. D. F. to form the Socialist League in 1884. The split is usually attributed to the dictatorial and rather irascible temperament of Hyndman; but worse still, it appeared that the S. D. F. had failed to ". . . win the support of the working classes, nearly all of whom believed in capitalism and class cooperation."<sup>705</sup> Advocating, quite bluntly, Revolutionary International Socialism through a violent upheaval of society, it was felt that such was both inevitable and near at hand. It only ". . . awaited but the conviction of the working class to be accomplished."<sup>706</sup> In 1884, the immediate object of the Socialist organizations--including, to a degree, the Fabian Society which came into being in that year--seemed a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. The Socialist movement, however capricious, had now taken some shape in England. The Commonweal served as the official organ of the League, and Pelling states,

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<sup>705</sup> Ausubel, Late Victorians, p. 65.

<sup>706</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p.

The main difference between Commonweal and Justice, which the S. D. F. still managed to continue, was that Commonweal was, in Morris's hands, a paper of real literary merit; they were alike in that both lost money heavily.<sup>707</sup>

The League, to the dismay of Morris, was taken over by the Anarchists, who ousted Morris, by 1887. Pease remarks,

Politically the Fabians were closer to the Social Democrats, but their hard dogmatism was repellent, whilst Morris had perhaps the most sympathetic and attractive personality of his day.<sup>708</sup>

None of the Socialist Societies which arose between 1870 and 1890 ". . . exercised so marked and beneficial an influence on educated public opinion and on legislation as the Fabian Society.<sup>709</sup> It came into existence in a "remarkably unobtrusive manner"<sup>710</sup> out of a "schism" in the Fellowship of the New Life which sought ". . . the peaceful re-generation of the race by the cultivation of perfection of individual character."<sup>711</sup> Founded by an Aberdeen Scot, Thomas Davidson, given to Utopian fantasies of a vaguely transcendental kind, the Vita Nova had as its governing principle, "The subordination of material things to physical," It soon dawned on some of its members, such as Frank Podmore, Edward R. Pease, and Hubert Bland who were to become Fabians, that ". . . social reform through legislation was at least as important as self-reform through ethical contemplation."<sup>712</sup> Those founding

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<sup>707</sup> Henry Pelling, Origins of the Labour Party, 1880-1900 (2nd ed.; Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 30.

<sup>708</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 66.

<sup>709</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 274.

<sup>710</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 5.

<sup>711</sup> George Bernard Shaw, The Fabian Society: What It Has Done; and How it Has Done It, reprinted as Fabian Tract No. 41 (1892), p. 3.

<sup>712</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 274.

members who withdrew from the Vita Nova to start the Fabian Society on January 4, 1884, had Socialist leanings "even though they may not have decided the exact form of their Socialism."<sup>713</sup> It was to be left to the "Fabian Essayists," particularly Webb, to give to the new society its special character.

Adopting its name after the Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator ("the delayer"), they sought to emulate his tactics:

Wherefore it may not be gainsaid that the fruit of this man's long taking of counsel--and (by the many so deemed) untimely delays--was the safeholding for all men, his fellow-citizens, of the common weal

For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did most patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be vain, and fruitless.<sup>714</sup>

Its name seemed to indicate from its inception not an expectation that Socialism would come in slow stages,

but rather a will to take time in working out the right method and policy. Gradualism was an easy graft upon this initial notion, but formed no part of it. It seems in fact to have come into the Society well after its foundation, as the distinctive contribution of Sidney Webb.<sup>715</sup>

Its strength, as Clayton recognizes, never lay in its numbers,<sup>716</sup> and soon it was to attract some of the finest minds of the time. Pease, one of the founders of the Society and its official historian, was General Secretary between 1889 and 1914, being its Honorary Secretary

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<sup>713</sup>A. M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918 (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>714</sup>G. D. H. Cole, A History of Socialist Thought: The Second International, 1889-1914, Vol. III (London: MacMillan and Company, Ltd., 1956), p. 106.

<sup>715</sup>Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>716</sup>Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p.

both prior to 1889 and after 1914. "Shrewd, hard-headed, sceptical, determinedly unimaginative and Philistine, steadfastly moderate in his politics, Pease made the perfect Secretary,"<sup>717</sup> and the stability of the Society owes to Pease a debt. He remained "the faithful guardian and watch-dog"<sup>718</sup> to what was to become a disputatiously brilliant band of intellectuals. Margaret Cole found him "candid," but never "scintillating"; he was ". . . essentially a modest man."<sup>719</sup> Podmore, an Oxford man and a clerk in the Post Office, was soon to leave the Fabians; but Bland remained, a rather lusty colorful character whose marriage to Edith Nesbit was singularly unconventional though delightfully entertaining.

Soon the acorn was to grow into an oak as it attracted two young intellectuals in ". . . search of light rather than heat."<sup>720</sup> Shaw, a struggling journalist of twenty-eight years, unknown and unkempt and given to haunting intellectual societies in London to test his skill in debate and to conquer his initial shyness, heard Henry George speak. The effect was instantaneous--"He struck me dumb and shunted me from barren agnostic controversy to economics."<sup>721</sup> Having read Progress and Poverty, he attended a meeting of Hyndman's Federation and was contemptuously treated as a neophyte who was unacquainted with Marx. This he set out to remedy only to discover that the members

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<sup>717</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 3.

<sup>718</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 56.

<sup>719</sup> Cole, "Introduction," in Pease, History of the Fabian Society.

<sup>720</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 275.

<sup>721</sup> Bernard Shaw, "How I Became a Public Speaker," Sixteen Self Sketches (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1949), p. 58.

of the Federation were unacquainted with Marxism. Quickly withdrawing his application to the Democratic Federation, he joined the Fabians and gives his reasons:

I was guided by no discoverable difference in program or principles, but solely by an instinctive feeling that the Fabians and not the Federation would attract the men of my own bias and intellectual habits who were then ripening for the work that lay before us.<sup>722</sup>

Shaw's attention to "political economy as the science of social salvation"<sup>723</sup> owed itself to Henry George and his ideas on land nationalization and the single tax, but his flirtation with Marxism was to be brief. He writes,

I read Marx . . . Marx's Capital is not a treatise on Socialism, it is a jeremaid against the bougeoisie, supported by a mass of official evidence and a relentless Jewish genius for denunciation. It was addressed to the working classes; but the working man respects the bourgeoisie, and wants to be a bourgeoisie.<sup>724</sup>

Making his way to Pease's rooms on May 16, 1884, for the first time, he was elected to the Society on September fifth. The effect of Shaw was instantaneous. A few days after his joining, he wrote his Manifesto in which the society was a little more explicit in its commitment to Socialism.<sup>725</sup>

"In March 1885 the second major event occurred."<sup>726</sup> Shaw introduced Sidney Webb (later Baron Passfield) to the Society, and in May, Webb and his Colonial office colleague and friend, Sidney Olivier

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<sup>722</sup>(George Bernard Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 4.

<sup>723</sup>"Memoranda by Bernard Shaw" in Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 275.

<sup>724</sup>Shaw, "Who I Am, and What I Think," Sixteen Self Sketches, p. 49.

<sup>725</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 32.

<sup>726</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 7.

(later Lord Olivier) became Fabians. Both Webb and Olivier were University men, and Shaw, acutely aware of his lack in this direction, could exclaim as much in desperation as in chagrin, "I cannot too often repeat that though I have no academic qualifications I am in fact much more highly educated than most university scholars. My home was a musical one."<sup>727</sup>

Shaw had previously heard Webb speak at a meeting of the Zetetical ("truth-seeking") Society and, overwhelmed by his brilliance, his mastery of the facts and his command of the debate, had sought his friendship. "This was the ablest man in England," Shaw writes emphatically, and continues in a Shavian manner,

The difference between Shaw with Webb's brains, knowledge, and official experience and Shaw by himself was enormous. But as I was and am an incorrigible histrionic mountebank, and Webb was the simplest of geniuses, I was often in the centre of the stage whilst he was invisible in the prompter's box.<sup>728</sup>

Webb was a disciple of Mill, whom he had mastered as "he seemed to have read and mastered everybody else."<sup>729</sup> He was firmly convinced that private property in the means of production coupled with an unlimited freedom of contract must inevitably produce a "plutocracy face to face with a proletariat, and substitute class war for genuine democracy."

Shaw, in his appraisal of Webb, continues:

Webb, as a modern upper division civil servant, knew that there is a quite feasible corrective alternative in nationalization of the sources of production, and direct management of vital indus-

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<sup>727</sup>Shaw, "Am I an Educated Person?" Sixteen Self Sketches, p. 69.

<sup>728</sup>Shaw, "Fruitful Friendships," Sixteen Self Sketches, pp. 65-66.

<sup>729</sup>"Memoranda by Bernard Shaw," in Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 274.

tries by the state, of the existence and success of which he had at his fingers' ends an overwhelming list of examples. On this basis he was a convinced Socialist.<sup>730</sup>

To Beer, it was Webb, greatly aided by the "analytical powers and dialectical skill" of Shaw, who was "the real pioneer of Fabianism";<sup>731</sup> and "if Webb was the directing genius of the Fabian Society, Shaw was ever the life and soul of the party."<sup>732</sup> Certainly, Fabianism owed more to Webb than to any other.

Olivier, like Webb, had brilliantly passed his civil service examinations. Both were, in time, to hold Cabinet appointments, though in the early 1880's "to become Socialists was burning their boats as far as any official promotion was concerned."<sup>733</sup> Olivier's Socialism appears to be touched by greater moral overtones than Shaw's accent on economics and Webb's emphasis on facts and statistics. By 1887 the seven "Essayists" had gathered--Mrs. Besant, William Clarke, and Graham Wallas had been admitted. Wallas, a "splendid example of the absent-minded professor,"<sup>734</sup> had impeccable academic credentials. Influenced by Ruskin as an undergraduate at Corpus Christi, Oxford, he was appointed as a professor to the London School of Economics, a position he held with great distinction. William Clarke, a highly competent journalist, in

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<sup>730</sup> Shaw, "Fruitful Friendships," Sixteen Self Sketches, pp. 65-66.

<sup>731</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 277.

<sup>732</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p. 46. Also see Barbara Drake and Margaret I. Cole, eds., Our Partnership By Beatrice Webb (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), pp. 1-11, for an excellent portrait of Webb sketched by his wife.

<sup>733</sup> Freemantle, Little Band of Prophets, p. 44.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

the better sense of the term, was trained at Cambridge University and had found Emerson. McBriar describes him as

personally shy, retiring and scholarly, he was repelled by loud-mouthed and dogmatic Socialist propaganda and even by the flamboyance of some of his Fabian associates, particularly Bernard Shaw.<sup>735</sup>

The Society now had only thirty members, and, apart from Mrs. Besant who was admitted in 1885 and Shaw who labored long and hard at the British Museum, was dominated by scholastic minds sharpened at the leading universities; Olivier and Wallas had distinguished themselves at the Oxford Union. None of them, save Mrs. Besant, had had previous experience of any type of Radical activity or agitation. They brought to the Society

. . . fresh, open, and critical minds to bear upon economic and social questions, and all of them were conscious that they had still a good deal to learn, before they could teach and act.<sup>736</sup>

The Fabian Society, being without any anti-Christian bias, also attracted Christian Socialists belonging to the Guild of St. Matthew.

To become a Fabian was no easy matter, nor did the Fabian Society ask the English people to join its ranks.<sup>737</sup> Even if the Fabians in those early years had little understanding of the ways of society or the meaning of Socialism, it was then

. . . that we contracted the invaluable habit of freely laughing at ourselves which has always distinguished us, and which has saved us from becoming hampered by the gushing enthusiasts who mistake their own emotions for public movements. From the first, such

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<sup>735</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 6.

<sup>736</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 275.

<sup>737</sup> (George Bernard Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70. Report on Fabian Policy and Resolutions Presented by the Fabian Society to the International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress, London, 1896 (London: The Fabian Society, July 1896), p. 3.

people fled after one glance at us, declaring that we were not serious.<sup>738</sup>

It was this marvellous ability of "freely laughing at ourselves," of being able to appreciate the thrust and parry of one another's witticisms, which largely explained why the membership of the Fabians at the close of 1888 was less than 100, "while that of the more dogmatic, but less class-conditioned, S. D. F. ran into four figures."<sup>739</sup>

St. John Ervine, it appears, is one of those who felt that the Fabians "were about as genial as the visit of an Asiatic prince to Buckingham Palace,"<sup>740</sup> a view which seems difficult to accept. They vastly enjoyed each other's company,<sup>741</sup> and Shaw has captured their manner and mood magnificently; their effervescent quality did not lack for an outspokenness:

My colleagues knocked much nonsense, ignorance, and vulgar provinciality out of me; for we were on quite ruthless critical terms with one another.

In the Fabian Cabinet, however, there was considerable strife of temperaments; and in the other Socialist societies splits and schisms were frequent; for the English are very quarrelsome. I believe that some of my own usefulness lay in smoothing out these frictions by an Irish sort of tact which in England seemed the most outrageous want of it. Whenever there was a quarrel I betrayed everybody's confidence by analyzing it and stating it lucidly in the most exaggerated terms. Result: both sides agreed that it was all my fault. I was denounced on all hands as a reckless mischief-maker, but forgiven as a privileged Irish lunatic.

I flatter myself that the unique survival of the Fabian Society among the forgotten wrecks of its rivals, all very contemptuous of it, were

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<sup>738</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 5.

<sup>739</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 23.

<sup>740</sup>Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends, p. 127.

<sup>741</sup>Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets, p. 35.

due not only to its policy, but in its early days to the one Irish element in its management.<sup>742</sup>

Proud of their middle-class and rather exclusively intellectual character, they rightly felt that they could only educate the people in Socialism--as they were soon to come to know it--by making them conversant

with the conclusions of the most enlightened members of all classes. The Fabian Society, therefore, cannot reasonably use the words "bourgeoise" or "middle class" as terms of reproach, more especially as it would condemn a large proportion of its own members.<sup>743</sup>

Nor did Shaw--who never acknowledged till grown old in years that he had been to school with the sons of tradesmen--desire to lower the Society's "intellectual standard" in the slightest.<sup>744</sup> The accent lay on "reason," and since such would have only a limited appeal, the Fabians wished to attract their own kind. As G. D. H. Cole puts it,

It does not aim at mass-conversions or at mass emotional appeals. . . . Mass appeal is a different art from research and education . . . and the Fabian Society prefers to get on with its own different job, which is to put the right equipment of ideas and information into the possession of that not inconsiderable body of persons (some hundreds of thousands at the least, if they could all be reached) who believe in the value of getting at the real facts and thinking hard about them [italics, the author's] and are aware that, even if politics depend fundamentally on men's emotions, emotional appeals by themselves will not get far in practice, unless clear thinking comes to their aid when it is a question of translating desires and ideas into positive achievements.

What was to be avoided was ". . . intellectual dilettantism" or "muddled good-will."<sup>745</sup>

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<sup>742</sup>Shaw, "Fruitful Friendships," Sixteen Self Sketches, p. 68.

<sup>743</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 7.

<sup>744</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 5.

<sup>745</sup>G. D. H. Cole, The Fabian Society: Past and Present, Tract Series No. 258 (London: The Fabian Society, November, 1942), p. 6.

When Mrs. Besant was admitted to the Fabian Society in 1885, she was easily its best known member, enjoying "an extraordinary national reputation and the beginnings of one that was international."<sup>746</sup> Unquestionably its ". . . most spectacular convert," she was recognized as "the finest woman orator and organiser of her day."<sup>747</sup> Her activities as a Freethinker and the loyalty she evoked among the masses had marked her as a personality of some importance whose work in the direction of reform was only too well recognized even by her opponents. She was the Fabians' "first celebrity,"<sup>748</sup> since the other members were, as yet, obscure and unknown. Few in England were even aware of the Society composed of young persons who made their living as teachers, civil servants, or journalists. It would be too easy to say that her entry into their ranks brought to the Fabians instant fame or notoriety. The Fabians, themselves, could be expected to feel a distinct uneasiness at the appearance of Mrs. Besant in their midst. St. John Ervine speaks of their reaction,

How far the Fabians were pleased with her accession is difficult to say. Webb was not the sort of man to feel enthusiastic about a petrel who went looking for storms. . . . he probably found her difficult to talk to, Wallas almost certainly despised her mystical maunderings, for Wallas, being the son of a parson, had endured all the piety and mysticism he could stand, and wanted no more of it. The mind revolts at the thought of Hubert Bland endeavouring to be companionable with her. Sydney Olivier could have sat in her presence for hours without being aware of it. But she was meat and drink to G. B. S., whose liking for oddities was unlimited.<sup>749</sup>

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<sup>746</sup> Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work, and Friends, p. 144.

<sup>747</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 8.

<sup>748</sup> Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets, p. 59.

<sup>749</sup> Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work, and Friends, p. 144.

Apart from Shaw, her personality and activities were hardly of a kind to endear her to the scholarly Fabians, but they were well aware of her worth as a speaker for their cause. Pease writes of her brief Fabian experiences between 1885 and 1889:

Her splendid eloquence, always at our service, has seldom been matched, and has never been <sup>750</sup>surpassed by any of the innumerable speakers of the movement.

But he adds, very significantly, though somewhat uncharitably,

She was not then either a political thinker or an effective worker on committees, but she possessed the power of expressing the ideas of other people far better than their originators. . . . Her departure was a serious loss, but it came at a moment <sup>751</sup>of rapid expansion, so rapid that her absence was scarcely felt.

The Fabians could be expected to recognize, even in those early years of Fabian uncertainty, the vast disparity which existed between Webb's brains and the intellectual depth of Mrs. Besant; and it can be posited that her knowledge of political economy was not geared above a superficial level. But Du Cann insists that Mrs. Besant considered herself superior to her colleagues, "for she commanded a great public who heard her gladly as a unique figure in the national life."<sup>752</sup>

The Socialists, Fabians or otherwise, held resolutely to the equality between the sexes. In the S. D. F., no woman save Helen Taylor had achieved any mark, and Eleanor Marx-Aveling was a well known and distinguished member of the Socialist League. But it is Mrs. Besant who, in the Fabian Essays (1889), is recognized as one of the seven "Essayists."

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<sup>750</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 98.

<sup>751</sup>Ibid., pp. 98-99.

<sup>752</sup>Du Cann, Loves of Bernard Shaw, p. 114.

If her transition seemed sudden, yet it had its period of gestation. Mrs. Besant, who had first heard Shaw speak in 1884, was disgusted with him since he proudly proclaimed himself a "loafer." In the spring of 1885 she learned that the object of her detestation was to speak at the Dialectical Society on Socialism, and Mrs. Besant set forth to attend the meeting to destroy both the speaker and his thought. "She came to scoff and stayed to listen," writes Freemantle;<sup>753</sup> Williams insists that "It was George Bernard Shaw who proved Annie Besant's undoing."<sup>754</sup> Winsten sees her ". . . converted to socialism by his slashing rhetoric."<sup>755</sup> Shaw, warned of his impending doom waited for Mrs. Besant to lead the attack against him. To the amazement of the meeting --and Shaw--she rose to demolish the opposition. Shaw writes,

There was nothing left for me to do but to gasp and triumph under her shield. At the end she asked me to nominate her for election to the Fabian Society, and invited me to dine.<sup>756</sup>

In 1883, Mrs. Besant was in full cry as a Freethinker, but towards the close of that year she does briefly nod in the direction of Socialism in the National Reformer. As yet, she was unacquainted with the economic rationale of Socialist thought; but, influenced by Mill, she had already advocated the holding of land as public property, the taxation of land, and restrictions on the rights of inheritance. Mill, himself, in his "qualified Socialism" had progressed no farther than land reform. As yet, Mrs. Besant had not investigated the ". . . deeper

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<sup>753</sup>Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets, p. 59.

<sup>754</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 153.

<sup>755</sup>Winsten, Jesting Apostle: The Life of Bernard Shaw, p. 71.

<sup>756</sup>Shaw, "Annie Besant's Passage Through Fabian Socialism," Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work, p. 7.

economic causes of poverty, though the question was pressing with ever-increasing force on heart and brain."<sup>757</sup> Secularism seemed to be wanting. Our Corner published two of Shaw's novels, The Irrational Knot and Love Among the Artists, along with articles by Charles and Hypatia Bradlaugh, Webb, and Wallas. In the next year (1884), a "more definite call to consider" Socialist teachings was to come. In the first issue of the Reformer for that year she writes:

What tests 1884 may have for our courage, what strains on our endurance, what trials of our loyalty, none can tell. But this we know--that every test of courage successfully met, every strain of endurance steadily borne, every trial of loyalty nobly surmounted, leaves courage braver, endurance stronger, loyalty truer, than each was before. And therefore, for our own and for the world's sake, I will not wish you, friends, an 1884 in which there shall be no toil and no battling; but I will wish you, each and all, the hero's heart and the hero's patience, in the struggle for the world's raising that will endure through the coming year.<sup>758</sup>

In that year was to come her period of trial, being faced with the choice between accepting Socialism or continuing her Freethought activities. On February 3 she was incensed by an article in Justice which advocated violent means to meet ". . . working class ends" and protested strongly declaring that those who urged violence were "the worst foes of social progress."<sup>759</sup> Her attacks on the Socialists continue. On April 17, 1884, took place the great debate between Bradlaugh and Hyndman<sup>760</sup> on "Will Socialism Benefit the English People?"

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<sup>757</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 299.

<sup>758</sup>Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>759</sup>Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>760</sup>See Benny on Bradlaugh and Hyndman: Review and Criticisms of the Recent Debate on "Socialism" between Messrs Bradlaugh and Hyndman, at St. James's Hall on April 17, 1884, London, 1884. The evils of society, Bradlaugh argued, were to be remedied by individual effort and not state action.

To Mrs. Besant, the urge to attend was compelling, and it served to rouse her to a more serious study of the issues involved. While she still insisted that Socialism seemed to be the fashion,

It suits those who like to play in artistic, dainty, dilettante fashion with problems of life and death, which they have not the earnestness, the courage, nor the self-sacrifice to solve.<sup>761</sup>

Yet she admits to being impressed by the Socialists and began to feel that there existed ". . . something more in practical Socialism than I had imagined."<sup>762</sup> Looking back on that year, Mrs. Besant regrets that the "English Socialists" were so wanton and reckless in their attacks on Bradlaugh, causing many of his friends to resolutely set their minds against Socialism. It was now that she also met Shaw, whom she had denounced the year before and saw him as "one of the most brilliant of Socialist writers and most provoking of men."<sup>763</sup> She regrets her previous attack on him, realizing that he was actually rather poor. Nethercot insists, "The Irish charm of Mr. Shaw had overpowered the Irish charmer, Mrs. Besant."<sup>764</sup> It would appear that after the debate the ardent Freethinker was attracted to Socialism, but it in no way elbowed aside her commitment to Freethought. The fact also remains that, regardless of her meeting with Shaw in 1884, the next year she set out to destroy both him and his "Socialism," yet remained to applaud and seek membership to the Fabian Society. It does appear that in 1884 and 1885, even if she perceived the Shawian genius, she was uncommitted to

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<sup>761</sup>Tsuzuki, Life of Eleanor Marx, p. 104.

<sup>762</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 302.

<sup>763</sup>Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>764</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 215.

the Shavian brand of Socialism which, itself, was hardly of a sophisticated kind, being a mixture of Henry George and Karl Marx. The Socialists in England in 1885, whether Marxists as were the S. D. F. or Anarchist as the Socialist League, were in the main a reaction against laissez-faire liberalism, and the differences between them and the Fabians remained, as yet, "latent and instinctive."<sup>765</sup>

It was to Mrs. Besant a period of ambivalence and involved the making of a choice. The transition to Socialism was, perhaps, not brought about by Shaw, but effected through him when Mrs. Besant, herself, felt the need to do so. Also, in 1884 the inclusion of John Robertson on the staff of the National Reformer brought Mrs. Besant in touch with a highly intellectual Socialist and Freethinker, scholar, literary critic, and historian. Mrs. Besant finds "that the case for Socialism was intellectually complete and ethically beautiful"; also, as the controversy raged around her, she admits that she said little but ". . . listened, read, and thought much."<sup>766</sup> Perhaps Robertson ". . . interested her and constituted another argument for Socialism,"<sup>767</sup> but Mrs. Besant makes quite clear early in 1885:

Socialism in its splendid ideal appealed to my heart, while the economic soundness of its basis convinced my head. All my life was turned towards the progress of the people, the helping of man, and it leaped forward to meet the stronger hope, the lofty ideal of social brotherhood, the rendering possible to all of freer life; so long had I been striving thitherward, and here there opened up a path to the yearned-for goal! How strong were the feelings surging in my heart may be seen in a brief extract from

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<sup>765</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 4.

<sup>766</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 304.

<sup>767</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 152.

an article published second week of January, 1885: "Christian charity? We know its work. It gives a hundredweight of coal and five pounds of beef once a year to a family whose head could earn a hundred such doles if Christian justice allowed him fair wage for the work he performs. It plunders the workers of the wealth they make, and then flings back at them a thousandth part of their own product as charity. It builds hospitals for the poor whom it has poisoned in filthy courts and alleys, and workhouses for the worn-out creatures from whom it has wrung every energy, every hope, every joy!"<sup>768</sup>

In the first few months of 1885, Mrs. Besant openly advocated rate supported meals for poor children in Board Schools, for which she was attacked by the Individualists. As yet, she waved aside the idea of being "at heart a socialist."<sup>769</sup> In her An Autobiography she explains that she dreaded to publicly ally herself with Socialism because of their hostility to Bradlaugh. Also, she asks,

Could I take public action which might bring me into collision with the dearest of my friends [Bradlaugh], which might strain the strong and tender tie so long existing between us?<sup>770</sup>

But the private conscience was to overrule Secularist loyalties as she realized that the misery of the poor was a product of an evil system caused by the private ownership of the means of wealth production reducing the laborer to a mere toy helpless under the inexorable laws of supply and demand. Thus, "with a heavy heart I made up my mind to profess Socialism openly and work for it with all my energy."<sup>771</sup> Though her friendship with Bradlaugh did not cease, yet "he never again felt the same confidence in my judgement as he felt before."<sup>772</sup> A series of

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<sup>768</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 304-305.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid., pp. 305-306.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

articles in Our Corner of 1885 makes her Socialist position clear. To Gertrude Marvin Williams,

Temperamentally, she had never for a minute belonged among the Secularists. It was Bradlaugh's powerful personality rather than an intellectual response which had identified her with Atheism. <sup>773</sup>

Once she became a member of the Fabian Society, she and Bradlaugh remained friendly, and each continued to chair each other's meetings; yet other Freethinkers such as W. P. Ball were not disposed to be charitable. Ball writes that "her mind is like a milk-jug: that which is poured into it is in turn poured out of it," and

As far as manner goes, Mrs. Besant's arguments are always perfectly decisive. The dignity and infallibility of the cultured lady and the successful lecturer ensure this happy result; only, unfortunately, a little after-reflection too often shows that the style of thought and the matter of her new Socialistic teaching are better suited to Pygmalion and Galatea, or Her Majesty's Ship Pinafore,<sup>774</sup> than to the disenchanted realms of sordid and obstinate reality.

Ball's condemnation that she was at the "mercy of her last male acquaintance for her views on economics"<sup>775</sup> brings an instant, and appropriate, response:

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; who, again, in embracing active Socialism, had run counter to the views of her nearest "male friends"; such a woman may very likely go wrong, but I think she may venture, without conceit, to at least claim independence of judgement.<sup>776</sup>

Bradlaugh's daughter recognizes that this was a moment of ebb

<sup>773</sup>Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 149.

<sup>774</sup>W. P. Ball, Mrs. Besant's Socialism (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889), pp. 2-3.

<sup>775</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 315.

<sup>776</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

"in the tide of Freethought"; and poverty did call for a solution divorced from the ". . . more abstract theorems arising out of religious speculation." Mrs. Besant was

obeying this tendency when, in 1886, she thought she had found in the optimistic dreams of Socialism a remedy for this most bitter of human ills. This was the point upon which she first diverged from Mr. Bradlaugh, and once having separated her thought from his, the breach swiftly widened, Socialism was, as it were, the fork in the Y of their lives.<sup>777</sup>

There appears little doubt that both the S. D. F. and the Socialist League would have liked to have claimed Mrs. Besant. Shaw gives her reasons for choosing the Fabians. In doing so, she made a sound decision,

for it was the only one of the three Socialist societies then competing with one another in which<sup>778</sup> there was anything to be learnt that she did not already know.

The collective effort of the Fabians far outweighed the contribution of any single member. In their objective to reduce Socialism to a "practical political programme" to be run on constitutional lines, they set about to devise the appropriate administrative apparatus in light of a detailed practical knowledge and experience of the workings of Government. Many of the Fabians were upper division civil servants. The other societies were "hopelessly deficient" where this was concerned; and it appeared to Shaw that it was what Mrs. Besant most needed at the time to "complete her equipment." However, Fabianism quickly lost

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<sup>777</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, pp. 14-15.

<sup>778</sup> Shaw, "Annie Besant's Passage Through Fabian Socialism," Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work, p. 5.

its appeal when she had learnt "what she could from it."<sup>779</sup>

The Fabians were never "heroic." Their object was to make Socialism respectable and as possible as either Liberalism or Conservatism". . . for the pattering suburban voter who desired to go to church because his neighbours did, and to live always on the side of the police."<sup>780</sup> It was to be a particularly British institution, its programme having ". . . that stamp of the vestry which is so congenial to the British mind."<sup>781</sup> Finally, writes Gray, they

not merely took the sting out of socialism, but they gave it an allure of its own. . . . They not merely made socialism respectable; they came near to making it a fashion, so that a profession of socialism (of a kind), so far from being the mark of a rebel, almost became the done thing.<sup>782</sup>

Hyndman, reports Freemantle, "for all his money, devotion, enthusiasm, and intelligence, could not turn Marxism into a language understood by the British people."<sup>783</sup> But Fabianism lacked that quality of dash and daring, continues Shaw, so vital to Mrs. Besant, who "with her heroic courage and energy, was wasted on work that had not some element of danger and extreme arduousness in it."<sup>784</sup>

The Fabians never took themselves seriously. Comedy and a sense of the ironic marked their approach to Socialism as it did to each other. However, Mrs. Besant "was a tragedienne. Comedy was not her

<sup>779</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>780</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>781</sup>G. Bernard Shaw, ed., "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., n.d.), p. 245.

<sup>782</sup>Alexander Gray, The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), p. 400.

<sup>783</sup>Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets, p. 40.

<sup>784</sup>Shaw, "Annie Besant's Passage Through Fabian Socialism," Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work, p. 5.

clue to life." The levity of the Fabians jarred upon her fervent evangelical dedication to a "cause"; truth never seemed to approach her in the form of a jest;

Injustice, waste, and the defeat of noble aspirations did not revolt her by way of irony and paradox: they stirred her to direct and powerful indignation and to active resistance.<sup>785</sup>

Shaw sees Mrs. Besant's Fabian role as a

. . . sort of expeditionary force, always to the front when there was trouble and danger, carrying away audiences for us when the dissensions in the movement brought our policy into conflict with that of the other societies, founding branches for us throughout the country, dashing into the great strikes and free-speech agitations of that time. . . . Her powers of continuous work were prodigious. . . . An attempt to keep pace with her on the part of a mere man generally wrecked the man.<sup>786</sup>

Shaw, somewhat unjustly, feels that as far as any effective contribution to the "indoor work" of the Fabian Society was concerned, Mrs. Besant was "wasting her time as fifth wheel to the coach."<sup>787</sup> Mrs. Besant, in giving her reason for choosing the Fabians, simply writes that she did so "Because it was less hotly antagonistic to the Radicals than the two other Socialist organisations."<sup>788</sup>

In 1885, the year Mrs. Besant joined the Fabians, there existed much intimacy among the Socialist organizations. William Morris often spoke to the Fabians, and Shaw appeared on the Federation platform. Joynes and Champion were even listed as Fabians, and Bland and Frederick Keddell, members of the first Fabian executive, were also members of the Federation. Though Hyndman remained hostile to the Fabians,

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<sup>785</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>787</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>788</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 310-311.

Bland was quite charitably disposed towards the Federation. Their "latent or instinctive" differences had not as yet become firm. Shaw declares,

The Constitutionalism which now distinguishes us was unheard of at the Fabian meetings in 1884 and 1885 as at the demonstrations of the Social-Democratic Federation or the Socialist League. . . . In short, we were for a year or two just as Anarchistic as the Socialist League and just as insurrectionary as the Federation.<sup>789</sup>

Pease, however, sees the Fabians as distinctly non-Marxist from the inception. They also kept to themselves and maintained their separate identity. The reason, as given by Pease, was that the Fabians were "not suited either by ability, temperament, or conditions to be leaders of a popular revolutionary party."<sup>790</sup> Mrs. Besant appears the sole exception.

Mrs. Besant with her gift of splendid oratory and her long experience of agitation was an exception, <sup>791</sup>but her connection with the movement lasted no more than five years.

Even though the Socialists exchanged speakers, differences in their attitude, temperament, and character made any question of amalgamation impossible; indeed, it was never even suggested. Apart from their temperamental variations, the narrow Marxist dogmatism of the S. D. F. and its aim to enlist mass support through passionate propaganda would appeal to few Fabians--and certainly not to Webb who was "from the start the master-mind in the Fabian Society."<sup>792</sup> Shaw violently disagrees with Pease in his footnote to Pease's work on page 62; however in his Preface to the 1931 Edition of the Fabian Essays he notes,

<sup>789</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 4.

<sup>790</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 62.

<sup>791</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>792</sup>Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p. 43.

The distinctive mark of the Fabian Society among the rival bodies of Socialists with which it came into conflict in its early days was its resolute constitutionalism.<sup>793</sup>

Regardless of the typical ambivalence of Shaw, it would seem plausible that neither Pease, Webb, Olivier, Clarke, or Wallas could be anything but dedicated constitutionalists from the beginning of the Society. Webb does admit, however, that the Society "had its enthusiastic young members--aye, and old ones, too--who placed all their hopes on a sudden tumultuous uprising of a united proletariat."<sup>794</sup> The Society had, quite apparently, not come to grips with the issue or ". . . officially declared itself on the question."<sup>795</sup> And Pease does point out that none of the early Fabians had been influenced by Marx, but

Had he lived a few years longer he might have dominated them as he dominated his German followers, and one or two of his English adherents.<sup>796</sup>

Engels remained hostile to Socialist movements. Mrs. Besant was never to approach Engels owing to his association with Eleanor Marx and Aveling--and, their presence in the Socialist League would in itself constitute a valid reason for Mrs. Besant to keep aloof--apart from its anarchism. The S. D. F., whose members saw themselves as the only true champions of the oppressed, were not slow in their attempts to subvert her Fabian allegiance. Like the other Fabians, she often appeared in the list of their speakers, yet showed no fondness for their Marxism.

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<sup>793</sup>Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets, p. 14.

<sup>794</sup>Sidney Webb, L.C.C., Fabian Tract No. 51, Socialism: True and False (London: The Fabian Society, 1894), p. 3.

<sup>795</sup>Pelling, Origins of the Labour Party, p. 34.

<sup>796</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 239.

Many of the early Fabians had been Republican and Radical as part of the extreme left-wing of the Liberals. The majority of the members were in all likelihood still Republican even to the time of the Jubilee of the Queen in 1887. McBriar writes,

It is true the Society was never actively or vehemently Republican; but the Fabians, like the other Socialists, began in an atmosphere of Republicanism, where <sup>197</sup>it was taken for granted that Socialism implied Republicanism.

Also in the early eighties, the Fabians, with the exception of Clarke, were influenced, in different degrees, by the school of positivist thought shorn of its later leanings towards a "Religion of Humanity." No evidence of this seems apparent in their writings and tracts; but it could be suggested that the Republican Radicalism of the Fabians would prove congenial to Mrs. Besant. Also, their Positivism may have made the transition less of an intellectual summersault. The Fabians, moreover, did not appear to look upon the Secularists with that degree of violent contempt which dominated the attitude of Hyndman and the Socialist League. Overshadowed by the academic brilliance and reasonableness of Webb, composed of minds more acutely intellectual, they were aware of their differences from individualism but were not given to angry and violent denunciations. And Mrs. Besant had been too thoroughly ingrained by Bradlaugh in the ways of Parliamentarism, respect for the law, and the virtues of constitutional methods of reform to fall victim to either the S. D. F. or the Socialist League.

The early Fabians were unclear as to the meaning of Socialism, and Webb admits that "it was two or three years before we had quite

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<sup>797</sup>McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 79.

found out what our instinctive choice of a title really portended."<sup>798</sup>

Soon they were to bring about a distinctive view of Socialism, which is lucidly stated by Shaw,

Socialism, as understood by the Fabian Society, means the organisation and conduct of the necessary industries of the country, and the appropriation of all forms of economic rent of land and capital by the nation as a whole, through the most suitable public authorities, parochial, municipal, provincial, or central. . . . The Socialism<sup>799</sup> advocated by the Fabian Society is State Socialism exclusively.

A rather prominent member of the Fabians in their early years was Mrs. Charlotte Wilson, a member of the Freedom Group of Kropotkinist Anarchists.<sup>800</sup> She was even elected to the Fabian Executive in 1884 and with her presence ". . . a sort of influenza of Anarchism soon spread through the Society."<sup>801</sup> One of the contributors to What Socialism Is (published as Fabian Tract No. 4 in 1886), it was "a discussion between the Anarchist and Collectivist elements in the Society."<sup>802</sup> Soon the issue was to be decided against the Anarchists, in which Mrs. Besant played no insignificant part. The tract itself amounted to little, containing ". . . nothing that was not already to be found better stated in the famous Communist manifesto of Marx and Engels."<sup>803</sup>

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<sup>798</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 3.

<sup>799</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 5.

<sup>800</sup> Kropotkin--following his dramatic escape from Russia, his expulsion from Switzerland and his imprisonment in France--had permanently taken residence in London. Also see Pease, History of the Fabian Society, pp. 48-49 for an account of Mrs. Wilson and the Fabians.

<sup>801</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 3.

<sup>802</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 17.

<sup>803</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 3.

In 1884 the Fabians had no clear view of the meaning of Socialism; they were given at that time to railing against

. . . emigration, National Insurance, Co-operation, Trade-Unionism, old-fashioned Radicalism, and everything else that was not Socialism; and that, too without knowing at all clearly what we meant by Socialism.<sup>804</sup>

The word "Socialism" never occurred till their sixth meeting in March 1884, and it was first mentioned in their third Tract entitled To Provident Landlords and Capitalists: A Suggestion and a Warning by Shaw in June 1885--the year Mrs. Besant joined the Society. Pease notes that Shaw, like the rest of the Fabians, was unclear as to the meaning of Socialism or its distinction from Anarchism. "We were still playing with abstractions, Land and Capital, Industry and Competition, the Individual and the State."<sup>805</sup>

The Manifesto written by Shaw on his entry into the Society<sup>806</sup> gave no indication of Fabian maturity. Slowly the Society began to take shape through patient study and thought. They held their lectures in the fashionable Willis' Room, each being followed by a heated discussion where ideas were examined, dissected, rejected as unworthy or acclaimed as intellectually sound. They wished to be the "Jesuits of Socialism,"<sup>807</sup> and Shaw boasts, "From 1887 to 1889 we were the recognized bullies and swashbucklers of advanced economics."<sup>808</sup> A group composed of Webb, Shaw, Olivier, and "many others" formed a society for the

<sup>804</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>805</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 44.

<sup>806</sup> Found in Pease, History of the Fabian Society, pp. 41-43.

<sup>807</sup> Bernstein, My Years of Exile, p. 226.

<sup>808</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 16.

study of Marx which "had much to do with settling the Fabian attitude toward Marxian economics and historical theory."<sup>809</sup> Together with Marx, they turned, oddly enough, to Proudhon, along with the works of the English economists such as Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Mill, and "gradually shook themselves free from the old Socialist traditions."<sup>810</sup> An important event in the maturity of a particularly Fabian attitude was the Hampstead Historic Club in which each member took his turn to "lecture" to the rest. It "had much to do with settling the Fabian attitude towards Marxian economic and historical theory."<sup>811</sup> Mrs. Besant, it would appear, attended, but not perhaps as often as the "regulars," i.e. Shaw, Webb, and Olivier who met each fortnight.

The ". . . seedling which might easily have perished in a hostile soil"<sup>812</sup> now grew to stature, even if by the close of 1888 it had less than one hundred members and few had heard of it. Pease attributes the success of the Society to its good fortune of attracting to its ranks a group of exceptional men like Webb, Shaw, Wallas, and Olivier. "Mrs. Besant," Pease states,

had made her reputation in other fields, and belonged, in a sense, to an earlier generation; she was unrivalled as an expositor and agitator, and naturally preferred the work that she did best.<sup>813</sup>

The Fabians excelled in their "Tracts." They were written by the members in an attempt to demonstrate the evils of laissez-faire

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<sup>809</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 65.

<sup>810</sup>Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 275.

<sup>811</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 65.

<sup>812</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 9.

<sup>813</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 64.

capitalism, drawing their facts from all official sources, whether Socialist or not. The Fabian Society believed ". . . that in the natural philosophy of Socialism, light is a more important factor than heat."<sup>814</sup> In the years 1884 to 1889 while Mrs. Besant remained a Fabian, the number of Tracts reached ten, but thereafter their rate increased prodigiously and were, in the main, concerned with practical questions such as trams, markets, and London vestrymen. None of Mrs. Besant's writings was ever to appear as a Tract. The early Tracts up to 1890 dwelt much in the areas of expansion of the democratic machinery of government and its powers to promote greater equality and insure the welfare of the toilers.

The first Tract was written by the only working-class member among the Fabians. W. L. Phillips in Why Are the Many Poor (1884) gives a sense of the evils of a competitive society, attacking Capital as being ". . . the sum of our instruments of production, and of the advantages of the work of former years" and hence must be used for the benefit of all,<sup>815</sup> but it "gives no indication of the remedy."<sup>816</sup> Thus, Shaw can say:

If any delegate present thinks that the Fabian Society was wise from the hour of its birth, let him forthwith renounce that error. The Fabian wisdom, such as it is has grown out of the Fabian experience.<sup>817</sup>

It took the Fabians three years to reach Facts for Socialists (Fabian

<sup>814</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 7.

<sup>815</sup>(W. L. Phillips), Fabian Tract No. 1, Why Are the Many Poor? (London: The Fabian Society, 1884), p. 1.

<sup>816</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 40.

<sup>817</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 3.

Tract No. 5) which "was the effective beginning of Fabianism."<sup>818</sup> Webb emphasizes that vital tenet of Fabianism that no person who knows the facts could help but become a Socialist. He challenges individualism on the basis of the recognized writers of political economy. Extracts are quoted from reputed English economists and statisticians such as Professor Henry Fawcett (Manual of Political Economy), McCulloch (Principles of Political Economy), J. S. Mill (Political Economy), Professor H. S. Foxwell of University College, London (The Claims of Labor), Professor J. K. Ingram, L.L.D. of Trinity College in Dublin (History of Political Economy) to demonstrate that every charge levelled by the Socialists against the Capitalist system could be substantiated by their writings. Webb also writes:

Indeed, those who remember John Stuart Mill's emphatic adhesion to Socialism, both the name and the thing, in his "Autobiography," cannot be surprised at this tendency of economists. The only wonder is, that interested defenders of economic monopoly are still able to persuade the British public that Political Economy is against Socialism, and are able to make even Bishops believe that its laws "forbid" anything save the present state of things.<sup>819</sup>

Shaw himself in his Essay "Economic" similarly challenges individualism--together with "scepticism, pessimism, worship of Nature personified as a devil"--on the grounds of the "science of the production and distribution of wealth . . ." or "Economic Science."<sup>820</sup> Holding the view that "Economic Science" was above party differences but, being irre-

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<sup>818</sup> Shaw, "Fruitful Friendships," Sixteen Self-Sketches, p. 67.

<sup>819</sup> (Sidney Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, English Progress Towards Social Democracy (London: The Fabian Society, 1890, reprinted October 1901), p. 3

<sup>820</sup> Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 44.

future, had to be accepted by all the basis of fact and logic, they claimed "we are all Socialists now."

Webb's knowledge of economics and statistics was prodigious. He shows that the greatest part of the national income--1,920,000,000 pounds or 185 pounds per adult man, which is produced by workers by hand and brain--is taken by the few idle rich in return for small services or none at all. He quotes Mill to show that

They live, in the main, upon the portions of the national product which are called rent and interest, by the legal guarantee to them of the fruits of the labor and the abstinence of others, trans-<sup>821</sup>mitted to them without any merit or exertion of their own.

Like Shaw, Webb sees no difference between the rent obtained from land or interest from capital; thus,

Colloquially, one property with a farm on it is said to be land yielding rent; whilst another, with a railway on it, is capital yielding interest. But economically there is no distinction between them when they once become sources of revenue . . . shareholder and landlord live alike on the produce<sup>822</sup> extracted from their property by the labor of the proletariat.

Thus Rent, being the share of the landlord or capitalist, is the product of a monopoly resulting in inequality in the distribution of wealth.

The unequal distribution of the fruits of combined labor of the working community--as opposed to the "idlers"--brings into being the "two nations" of Lord Beaconsfield. Pointing to the evil, Webb proposes that the "two nations" can once more be reunited

. . . by the restitution to public purposes of rent and interest of every kind, and by the growth of social sympathy promoted by

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<sup>821</sup>J. S. Mill, Popular Ed., "Political Economy," in (Sidney Webb), Fabian Tract No. 5, Facts for Socialists From the Political Economists and Statisticians (11th ed.; London: The Fabian Society, September 1908), p. 5.

<sup>822</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 35-36.

the accompanying cessation of class distinctions.<sup>823</sup>

Fabian Tract No. 7, Capital and Land (1888) by Olivier, emphasizes that since there can be no economic distinction between Land and Capital as instruments of production, both should be nationalized. Capital is that part of the wealth which its owner intends to use for greater production of wealth or satisfaction of any want. Being, like Land, productive of wealth as a result of the bounty of nature and human labor, they cannot be separated. Virgin soil can yield no revenue; it is only as the natural resources are worked upon by the labor of others that it creates capital and wealth for its owner. The aim of Socialism, declares Olivier, is "the emancipation of land and industrial capital from individual and class ownership and the resting of them in the community for the general benefit."<sup>824</sup>

Fabian Tract No. 8 by Webb (Facts for Londoners: An Exhaustive Collection of Statistical and Other Facts Relating to the Metropolis; With Suggestions for Reform on Socialist Principles), first published in 1889, contained an exhaustive collection of statistics relating to the city of London with suggestions for Reform on Socialist principles, i.e. increased death duties, extension of Factory Acts, and adult suffrage. It was now also recognized that the municipalization of monopolies was intrinsic to Socialism.

The Fabian Basis, adopted in 1887, was a clear declaration by the Fabians of their principles:

"Basis of the Fabian Society."

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<sup>823</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 5, p. 18.

<sup>824</sup>(Sydney Olivier), Fabian Tract No. 7, Capital and Land (7th ed. rev.; (London: The Fabian Society, 1888), p. 3.

The Fabian Society consists of Socialists.

It therefore aims at the re-organization of Society by the emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individual and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit. In this way only can the natural and acquired advantages of the country be equitably shared by the whole people

The Society accordingly works for the extinction of private property in Land and of the consequent individual appropriation, in the form of Rent, of the price paid for permission to use the earth, as well as for the advantages of superior soils and sites.

The Society, further, works for the transfer to the community of the administration of such industrial Capital as can conveniently be managed socially. For, owing to the monopoly of the means of production in the past, industrial inventions and the transformation of surplus income into Capital have mainly enriched the proprietary class, the worker being now dependent on that class for leave to earn a living.

If these measures be carried out, without compensation (though not without such relief to expropriated individuals as may seem fit to the community), Rent and Interest will be added to the reward of labor, the idle class now living on the labor of others will necessarily disappear, and practical equality of opportunity will be maintained by the spontaneous action of economic forces with much less interference with personal liberty than the present system entails.

For the attainment of these ends the Fabian Society looks to the spread of Socialist opinions, and the social and political changes consequent thereon, including the establishment of equal citizenship for men and women. It seeks to achieve these ends by the general dissemination of knowledge as to the relation between the individual and Society in its economic, ethical and political aspects.<sup>825</sup>

What is clearly stated is the Fabian policy of the nationalization of all differential unearned incomes, whether from land or capital, and the control and management of the instruments of production by the community.

In 1889 the publication of the Fabian Essays in Socialism sounded "the death knell of laissez-faire, at any rate in its nine-

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<sup>825</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, Appendix II; also (Sidney Webb), Fabian Tract No. 69, The Difficulties of Individualism (London: The Fabian Society, June 1896, third reprint January 1908), p. 10.

teenth-century form."<sup>826</sup> Edited by Shaw, who wrote two of the eight essays, it was based on a series of lectures delivered by the seven essayists the year before. It represented the views of the more prominent Fabians rather than that of the society as a whole. The Fabians had no theoretical doctrine held in common by all. And as Stephen Winston puts it,

. . . Shaw refused to Webbulize Bland or to Blandulate Webb, for he insisted on retaining and even emphasizing the particular approach and style of each contributor.<sup>827</sup>

In the "Preface," Shaw writes, however, that ". . . there has been no sacrifice of individuality--no attempt to cut out every phase and opinion the responsibility for which would not be accepted by every one of the seven."<sup>828</sup> But to Cole, "The general line of the lectures was worked out by the seven in close consultation. . . . Shaw suggested numerous changes to most of his fellow-authors."<sup>829</sup> The seven Essayists, apart from Shaw, were Sidney Webb, Graham Wallas, Annie Besant, William Clarke, Sydney Olivier, and Hubert Bland. Webb's concentration lies more in economic history. Shaw is mainly concerned with Fabian economics. Of the "Essayists," only Mrs. Besant had had any experience with literary work or was known to the public. "The Essays," reports Beer, "form the groundwork of Fabianism."<sup>830</sup> Shaw continues, rather modestly, "There are at present no authoritative

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<sup>826</sup>Joad, Introduction to Modern Political Theory, p. 47.

<sup>827</sup>Winsten, Jesting Apostle: The Life of Bernard Shaw, p. 74.

<sup>828</sup>Shaw, "Preface," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 6.

<sup>829</sup>Cole, History of Socialist Thought, Vol. III, p. 6.

<sup>830</sup>Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 289.

teachers of Socialism. The essayists make no claim to be more than communicative learners," though united in their common belief in Social Democracy.<sup>831</sup>

The Fabian Essays taught the English working classes, or at least their leaders,

. . . that Socialism was a living principle which could be applied to existing social and political conditions without a cataclysm either insurrectionary or even political . . . we recognize nowadays that the real battles of Socialism are fought in committee rooms at Westminster and in the council chambers of Town Halls.<sup>832</sup>

Whether it was "a clear exposition of English Socialism"<sup>833</sup> is sometimes left in doubt. And Pease adds to the controversy about its nature by positing that the scheme of the work was arranged as a whole, and the parts allocated to each Essayist

. . . with an agreement as to the ground to be covered and the method to be adopted, in view of the harmonious whole which the authors had designed . . . it may be assumed that every phrase was considered, and every word weighed, by the editor before the book went to press.<sup>834</sup>

The work was instantly acclaimed and in a single month the entire first edition of 1000 copies was sold. The years of the Fabian "boom" in 1888 and 1889 led to the founding of local Fabian Societies in the Provinces. By 1889, 6500 Tracts were distributed and 31 Fabian

<sup>831</sup>Shaw, "Preface," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 6.

<sup>832</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 237.

<sup>833</sup>Cole, Fabian Society: Past and Present, p. 21.

<sup>834</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, pp. 86-87. Shaw, in his footnote on page 87 of Pease's work, demurs and says he did not revise the papers verbally--"especially those by Mrs. Besant and Graham Wallas, but that he suggested or made alterations in the others." Pease is yet disposed to suspect "that my statement is not far from the truth."

lecturers in a single year delivered 721 lectures.<sup>835</sup> The exposition of Socialism in the Fabian Essays is seen by Margaret Cole as ". . . definite without being dogmatic";<sup>836</sup> their thought was essentially "eclectic," and there existed no such thing as a Fabian "orthodoxy." Each took his ideas from various sources and adapted them as they saw best to their writings. Essentially non-doctrinaire,

. . . there was far too much equality and personal intimacy among the Fabians to allow of any member presuming to get up and preach at the rest in the fashion which the working-classes still tolerate submissively from their leaders.<sup>837</sup>

And G. D. H. Cole acknowledges that the Society has sought to keep its conditions of membership as flexible as possible in order to admit diversity of views.

It insists on Socialism, and does its best to define Socialism in the broadest possible terms. In all other matters of faith and doctrine, it prefers to leave its members free.<sup>838</sup>

In the words of its Basis, adopted in 1886 and revised in 1919 and 1949, "The Fabian Society consists of Socialists." This is the "fundamental role" to which all members must subscribe. The Fabian Society

. . . therefore aims at the establishment of a society in which equality of opportunity will be assured and the economic power and privileges of individuals and classes abolished through the collective ownership and democratic control of the economic resources of the community.<sup>839</sup>

Having no distinctive views on such questions as marriage, "Religion,

<sup>835</sup>Freemantle, This Little Band of Prophets, p. 82.

<sup>836</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 27.

<sup>837</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 5.

<sup>838</sup>Cole, Fabian Society: Past and Present, p. 1.

<sup>839</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

Art, abstract Economics, historic Evolution, Currency, or any other subject than its own special business of practical Democracy and Socialism," the Society sought its goal ". . . with complete singleness of aim."<sup>840</sup>

If Democratic Socialism was their objective, "permeation" was a method to this end. The Society never had any pretenses to represent any working-class organization or any political party. Webb puts it well:

What we Socialists are aiming at is not to secure this or that reform, still less to put this or that party into power, but to convert the great mass of the English people to our own views.<sup>841</sup>

He feels their work is analogous to the Philosophic Radicals in their task to contribute to a later generation a "body of systematic political thought" in their objective of substituting private ownership in the means of production for collective ownership and control. Thus he speaks of the Socialists being ". . . the Benthamites of this generation."<sup>842</sup> The policy of permeation or "incultation" was immensely successful. Quite early in the history of the Society, it was believed by its leaders that it was not only possible, but imperative, to bring about socialist reforms by actively urging its members to exercise their influence in community affairs at all levels--whether county, town, district, or parish. The members were also urged to join all kinds of local political organizations and, in particular, to become members of its governing bodies. "In short," writes Beer, "active political work

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<sup>840</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 3.

<sup>841</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 6.

<sup>842</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

and full exercise of citizenship in the interest of social reform is the duty of the Fabians."<sup>843</sup> In pursuing their policy of permeation, the Fabians aimed, in particular, at those holding responsible positions and therefore being in the best possible position to influence others. The work of the Society has been "not to make Socialists, but to make Socialism."<sup>844</sup>

The Fabians, particularly Webb, were optimistic that once the facts of Socialism were explained, its appeal would be irresistible.<sup>845</sup> Their hope, it can be imagined, extended even to the Radical Individualist. To Mrs. Besant, the Radical was the "half-fledged" Socialist, and she was optimistic that once the Radical had seen the light he would change the color of his belief. This distinctive flavor of Fabianism, quite unlike the narrow sectarianism preached by the S. D. F. and Socialist League which looked upon all other organizations as inimical, would itself provide a reason for her choosing the Fabians in preference to the other Socialist groups. Shaw had written,

Almost all organizations and movements contain elements making for Socialism no matter how remote the sympathies and intentions of their founders may be from those of the Socialists.<sup>846</sup>

And Stead insists that even Bradlaugh was a Socialist, though he was unaware of it.<sup>847</sup> G. H. Cole sees Bradlaugh's anti-Socialism as largely owing to the Marxism of the S. D. F., but remained doubtful

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<sup>843</sup>Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 287.

<sup>844</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Socialism, p. 255.

<sup>845</sup>See Webb, Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 19.

<sup>846</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 4.

<sup>847</sup>Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 83.

if he would ever have become a Socialist owing to his firm commitment to individualistic libertarianism.<sup>848</sup>

Like the Benthamites, the Fabians were essentially reformers. While they deliberately avoided appeals of an emotional kind, yet they were not without a kind of ethical morality. It appeared to Shaw that

On the ground of abstract justice, Socialism is not only unobjectionable, but sacredly imperative. . . . In truth, it is as honest as it is inevitable.<sup>849</sup>

Olivier in his Essay, "Moral," is certain that all moral philosophers are convinced of the "moral Basis of socialism," of the need for a new and more humane social ethic to replace the individualistic system of capitalism. Socialism is indispensable for the realization in both the individual and the state "of the highest morality as yet imagined by us."<sup>850</sup>

G. D. H. Cole writes that the Fabians saw the advance of Socialism not in terms of power, "but of power animated by rational conviction, and inspired by the ethical impulse to achieve social justice."<sup>851</sup> Thus,

Idealistic considerations, among which the lecturing, writing and personal example of William Morris was a powerful element, provided the main inspiration which made Socialists of the Fabians.<sup>852</sup>

Perhaps this quality of reformist energy, which sought a new ethical, social, political, and economic way of life, must have also exerted its fascination for Mrs. Besant.

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<sup>848</sup> See G. D. H. Cole, A History of Socialist Thought: Socialist Thought; Marxism and Anarchism, 1850-1890, Vol. II (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1957), pp. 393-394.

<sup>849</sup> Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 221.

<sup>850</sup> Olivier, "Moral," in Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 133.

<sup>851</sup> Cole, History of Socialist Thought, Vol. III, p. 114.

<sup>852</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 7.

As a member of the Fabian Society, Mrs. Besant worked hard at it as a speaker and organizer. Her passionate desire for reform had found a new channel in which to express itself, and whatever her beliefs, she ran the extra mile. Action and thought once more remained inseparable, and her writings and debates on Socialism receive attention in a subsequent chapter. Her role as a Fabian appears to have been rather slighted by both Shaw and the official historian of the Fabian Society, both of whom seem to have ignored her role in the growth of Fabian maturity from its early days of uncertainty. Perhaps she did seek, rather precipitously, to bring the obscure society into the public spotlight as an example of non-violent Socialism through her many contacts in the Radical world and the publication of the early Tracts in Our Corner; but the view that her activities were confined to agitation exclusively does ignore her part in the development of a distinctly Fabian outlook.

G. D. H. Cole is of the opinion that prior to joining the Fabians she was a member of the S. D. F.<sup>853</sup> At the time there existed much interchange between the Socialist organizations, and Mrs. Besant did certainly speak to the Federation on occasion. She was not unimpressed by Hyndman; but she was most eloquent in her denunciation of all revolutionists in the year of her joining the Fabians, and there appears little to indicate that at any time she succumbed to the Marxist spell of the S. D. F. As McBriar puts it,

Annie Besant, though she had associated with the S. D. F. in the early days, brought with her strong sympathies with Liberal-Radical ideas and methods into the Society, and she had gone into

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<sup>853</sup> Cole, History of Socialist Thought, Vol. II, p. 408.

print recommending "evolutionary Socialism."<sup>854</sup>

In December of 1885, she attacked the revolutionary John Burns at a meeting of the Fabian Society. She speaks,

You who strive to keep the poor miserable, and you who drive them into revolution--you who look with satisfaction on the misery of a strike-conflict, in the hope that it may culminate in bloodshed: what shall I call you? Something far worse than foolish. Society is to be reformed by a slow process of evolution, not by revolution and bloodshed. <sup>855</sup>It is you revolutionists who stem and block evolutionary process.

The Socialists of whatever persuasion were not lacking in publicity. Justice and Commonweal spouted forth revolutionary Marxism and Anarchism respectively. Bax and Joynes jointly edited To day, and Mrs. Besant in Our Corner took pains to declare her constitutionalism even at a time when Shaw wore a red tie with his crumpled suit. Pelling states that after their initial period of uncertainty, the Fabians began as early as 1885 to accept the ways of constitutionalism; "Mrs. Besant, the most experienced politician among them, was forthright in her denunciation of the would-be revolutionaries!"<sup>856</sup>

Her literary efforts did turn some of the spotlight on the Fabians. In March of 1886 the pages of Our Corner carried the item, "The Fabian Society and Socialist notes," which explained the choice of the name, reproduced the minutes of the Fabian meetings, and voiced an appeal to Radical and Trade-Unionist alike to espouse the new Zeitgeist. The Fabians could, quite justifiably, be accused of being "London minded." They had good reason to take a dim view of the Provincial

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<sup>854</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 19.

<sup>855</sup> Besant, "Practical Socialist," in Pelling, Origins of the Labour Party, p. 49.

<sup>856</sup> Pelling, Origins of the Labour Party, p. 49.

Fabian Societies since they lacked that capacity for intellectuality which marked the parent body. However, Mrs. Besant was not to be deterred and was quick to start local groups in Sheffield, Nottingham, Deptford, and even Edinburgh though they were soon to dissolve. She stormed the citadels of "New Toryism" in the Lancashire Campaign in which she presented the case for Socialism shorn of revolutionary overtones. The Fabians in the 1880's were quite insular in their views, and prior to 1885 their only interest in things international lay in the Irish demand for Home Rule. Mrs. Besant, in Our Corner for a brief time, stepped farther afield and ventured to point out the gains made by Socialists in foreign lands. It was only at the end of the Century that the Fabians displayed any concern with questions of international importance, by which time Mrs. Besant as a Theosophist had made her home in India. Though Pease had denied that she served as an "effective worker on committees,"<sup>857</sup> she quickly became an important member, in 1885, of a Fabian subcommittee to investigate and report on the advisability of convening a joint conference of all reformers who had the common object of improving the social conditions of the poor. Her activities for the Fabian cause, her speeches in the Halls of Freethought, and her writings continued to bring upon her the wrath of aggressive Radicalism.

Always sensitive to the oppressed, on April 7, 1885, she convened at her home a meeting to draw attention to the lot of Russian political prisoners and to establish a society to investigate the happenings in that country. The Society of Friends of Russia had Pease for

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<sup>857</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 98.

its secretary and Bradlaugh for a member. Also present was Sergius Stepniak. It did not appear to have made much impact.

In 1885 the Fabian Society had only forty members, and the "latent or instinctive" differences between it and the S. D. F. became an open breach. As a result of the incident of the "Tory Gold at the 1885 Election," the fledgling society began to develop its own distinctive flavor. The events brought home to those Fabians who were still rather romantically inclined to think in terms of "catastrophic socialism" the futility of their ways. "Fabian theory," writes McBriar,<sup>858</sup> was worked out after the Fabians had been finally estranged from the S. D. F. by the incident of "Tory gold" and the unemployed riots of 1886 and 1887."

On June 9, 1885, Gladstone was ousted from office and in the election that followed in November, the S. D. F., seeking political power, sought to get two of its members elected to the constituencies of Hampstead and Kennington in London. The Federation, adding to the ignominy, made no secret of the fact that the expenses were paid by the Tories in order to split the Liberal vote. The S. D. F. representatives were badly beaten, but

What was worse, they had shocked London Radicalism, to which Tory money was an utter abomination. It is hard to say which cut the more foolish figure, the Tories who had spent their money for nothing, or the Socialists<sup>859</sup> who had sacrificed their reputation for worse than nothing.

The Fabians now viewed the S. D. F. with great hostility and passed a resolution

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<sup>858</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 15.

<sup>859</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 6.

That the conduct of the Council of the Social-Democratic Federation in accepting money from the Tory party in payment of the election expenses of Socialist candidates is calculated to disgrace the Socialist movement in England--4th December, 1885.<sup>860</sup>

Hyndman and Justice renewed their attack on the Fabians, and after 1885 the Fabians tread their separate path away from the S. D. F. and looked to itself to find its way. Frederick Keddell, who was a member of the S. D. F., resigned from the Fabians and was succeeded by the placid Pease. Mrs. Besant, whose hand can be detected in the Fabian outburst against the S. D. F., addressed a meeting on "How Can We Nationalize Accumulated Wealth." In answer to the urging of revolutionary action by John Burns, Mrs. Besant replied,

Force indeed! What is your revolutionary strength in London; may we not guage it by your fifty votes or so<sup>861</sup> at the late election--and bought and paid for with Tory Gold?"

To Mrs. Besant, who knew more of the ways of the working class than the scholarly Fabians, goes some of the credit for weaning away those Fabians who held a pathetically optimistic view of the appeals of revolutionary Socialism to the England of their time as taught by the S. D. F. Neither Shaw nor Pease makes any mention of Mrs. Besant's part in this episode.

1886 and 1887 were years of unemployment and were ". . . not favorable years for drawing room Socialism and scientific politics."<sup>862</sup> The working classes had won their right to vote in 1884 and "Old Liberalism" was giving way to collectivism. Socialism was now very much

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<sup>860</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>861</sup> Thomas Bolas, ed., The Practical Socialist, in McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 16.

<sup>862</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 7.

before the English public,<sup>863</sup> and the years of depression and hunger brought forth agitators "to marshall columns of hollow-cheeked men with red flags and banners inscribed with Scriptural texts to fashionable churches on Sunday."<sup>864</sup> Champion declared publicly that if all men of property had a single throat to cut, he would do so without any qualms if it would remedy social injustice; and H. M. Hyndman was expelled from his exclusive London Club for declaring on the Thames Embankment that ". . . there would be some attention paid to cases of starvation if a rich man were immolated on every pauper's tomb."<sup>865</sup> Bitter speeches protesting the poverty and unemployment were voiced. In London the S. D. F. was to the fore in the agitation and to some it appeared as if a revolutionary era had appeared on the English scene. As the unemployed marched, Sir Charles Warren, the Police Commissioner of London, took repressive measures. On February 8, 1866, the S. D. F. held a public meeting in Trafalgar Square to demand public works to absorb those without jobs. This led to the smashing of a few windows in fashionable Pall Mall. Hyndman, Champion, and Burns were arrested but subsequently acquitted. This did not prevent Sir Charles Warren from continuing a policy of firm repression. Meetings continued to be held and processions organized in defiance of the authorities. In all these agitations which were to lead to the infamous "Bloody Sunday in Trafalgar Square" on November 13, 1887, the Fabian Society as a whole played no part at all. Pease states,

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<sup>863</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 53.

<sup>864</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 7.

<sup>865</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

In these commotions the Society as a whole took no part, and its public activities were limited to a meeting at South Place Chapel, on December 18th, 1885, addressed by Mrs. Besant.<sup>866</sup>

Never having any pretense of representing the working classes, the Fabians had little use for the shibboleths of class distinctions or a belief in the Marxian theory of class struggle. Shaw admits

. . . that we were overlooked in the excitements of the unemployed agitation. . . . The Fabians were disgracefully backward in open-air speaking. . . . On the whole, the Church Parades and the rest were not in our line;<sup>867</sup> and we were not wanted by the men who were organizing them.

In fact, the events of 1886 and 1887 were ". . . to confirm the Fabians in their anti-revolutionary position and their opposition to the S. D. F."<sup>868</sup>

Mrs. Besant, though no advocate of revolutionary tactics, plunged into the fray. Freedom of speech, the right to assembly, and the cause of the oppressed were always matters of deep concern. To her, there existed a kind of mystique about the proletariat which was not shared by her colleagues. She had already in 1885 affirmed quite unequivocally her commitment to constitutionalism, but whenever gripped by reformist zeal for a cause she was always its most challenging advocate. Her attack on Sir Charles Warren was scathing; in a letter to the press on "The Police and the Public," she eloquently waxed on the right to hold public meetings without any police interference. She speaks on "Slums and the Men Who Made Them," in which the social system comes

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<sup>866</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 53.

<sup>867</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 10.

<sup>868</sup>McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, pp. 16-17.

under attack. While she fought with pen and word for the right of public expression, yet it is evident that she never crossed over from agitation and propaganda to advocacy of violent action--even if the Salvation Army accused her, quite unjustifiably, of having stomped upon a Bible during a public lecture. As the meetings intensified and the arrests grew more frequent, Mrs. Besant organized the Socialist Defence Association in order to ". . . help poor workmen brought up and sentenced on police evidence only, without any chance being given them of proper legal defence."<sup>869</sup> To do so, she organized a ". . . band of well-to-do men and women" who promised to respond to any immediate summons at any time of night or day to bail out any person arrested for exercising his ". . . ancient right of walking in procession and speaking."<sup>870</sup> The first of her successes was a Mrs. Lyons whom she carried off from jail in triumph. Mrs. Besant at this time was also very aware of the "crusade" against the Socialists, in particular as opposed to the "Christians, Freethinkers, Salvationists, agitators of all kinds. . . ."<sup>871</sup> The Socialist Defence Association, one of the many bodies brought into existence by her, was ever ready to follow her lead in thought and action.

The government finally decided to close Trafalgar Square, the traditional forum for the expression of opinion, to all public meetings. Delegates from the various clubs and associations, the Fabians, the S. D. F., and the Socialist League met together and decided to challenge

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<sup>869</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 323.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>871</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

the ruling. A march to the Square was organized and if challenged by the police, they were to formally protest against the "illegal interference" and "then to break up the processions and leave the members to find their own way to the Square."<sup>872</sup> In the vanguard of one of the groups marched Mrs. Besant and Shaw. Suddenly there was a charge by the police with ". . . uplifted truncheons"; men and women, she reports, ". . . were falling under a hail of blows."<sup>873</sup> Shaw, who was more discreet than courageous, merged innocuously into the crowd of bystanders as Mrs. Besant stood her ground. Orders had been given to the demonstrators that no violence should be attempted. As Cunninghame Graham and John Burns, who eighteen years later became a Cabinet Minister in a Liberal Government, attempted to pass through the police lines, they suffered injury and arrest. (Their legal defender was a young barrister who had just entered Parliament--Herbert Henry Asquith). Then, once more as in her Freethought episode, came that moment of high courage:

The horse police charged in squadrons at a hand-gallop, rolling men and women over like ninepins, while the foot police struck recklessly with their truncheons, cutting a road through the crowd that closed immediately behind them. I got on a waggonette and tried to persuade the driver to pull his trap across one of the roads, and to get others in line, so as to break the charges of the mounted police; but he was afraid, and drove away to the Embankment, so I jumped out and went back to the Square.<sup>874</sup>

She reached the square alone. The sauve que peut produced little over a hundred casualties of sorts, and one man, Linnell, died soon afterwards. Morris writes a few lines on Linnell's death, and the "Bloody

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<sup>872</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>873</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>874</sup>Ibid., p. 325.

Sunday in Trafalgar Square" provided Socialists and Radicals alike with a cause celebre. Mrs. Besant of the Socialist Defense Association came to the rescue of the arrested, and her publication The Police and the Public sold over 100,000 copies. Shaw was now fully convinced of the futility of pitting unorganized men against a trained police force and effectively countered Mrs. Besant's initial reaction to organize another peaceful march to the Square. Later, as her reason prevailed over her enthusiasm, Mrs. Besant set to work more constructively in defense of the arrested. This "heroine . . . who may be said without the slightest exaggeration to have all but killed herself with overwork in looking after the prisoners,"<sup>875</sup> together with William T. Stead, the "most chivalrous of journalists,"<sup>876</sup> formed a Defence Fund to pledge bail. She writes,

By sheer audacity I got into the police-court, addressed the magistrate, too astounded by my profound courtesy and calm assurance to remember that I had no right there, and then produced bail after bail of the most undeniable character and respectability, which no magistrate could refuse.<sup>877</sup>

Together with Stead,<sup>878</sup> she formed the Law and Liberty League on November 18, 1887, presided over by Jacob Bright, a Liberal M. P. and the brother of John Bright. It provided legal defense for all persons unjustly imprisoned and was to assist their families ". . . and to form

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<sup>875</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 10.

<sup>876</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 326.

<sup>877</sup>Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>878</sup>Stead, who edited the Pall Mall Gazette previously edited by John Morley, was a champion of liberalism. His Life is written by his daughter. The often dramatically inclined, crusading journalist lost his life in the Titanic.

a rallying point for sufferers from oppression."<sup>879</sup>

The Law and Liberty League existed for a year. With Mrs. Besant's usual flair for the dramatic, she organized a public funeral for the unfortunate Linnell who was now a martyr for a cause witnessed by a mute, bareheaded crowd. In the cortege marched Stead, Burrows, and the Rev. Stewart D. Headlam whose Guild of St. Matthew was actively allied with the Socialists in these troubled years. Mrs. Besant provided London with a rare spectacle. Bradlaugh himself was lavish in his praise of Mrs. Besant. Her work bore fruit. Indignation against the police grew, and they were "silently boycotted."<sup>880</sup> No excuse for violence was given by the public or permitted by Mrs. Besant. The Tory Government in power under Lord Salisbury felt that London was being completely alienated, and Sir Charles Warren was replaced by a more judicious officer.

Fortified by their victory, Stead and Mrs. Besant started on a new venture. They began a new magazine called the Link with the subtitle "A Journal for the Servants of Man." It was to serve as a mouth-piece for the helpless and oppressed and to seek "The Temporal Salvation of the World." In it she attempted to bring together the Radicals and Socialists in their struggle for freedom of expression and the right to hold public meetings. The Link was soon extinguished,

. . . but before it burnt out it lit up the state of things at Messrs. Bryant and May's, and from its articles grew the Match Girls' Strike<sup>881</sup> which was the precursor of the birth of the New Unionism.

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<sup>879</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 85.

<sup>880</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 328.

<sup>881</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 86-87.

She could be no other than an activist when a cause beckoned. There appears little evidence to show her support for the revolutionary insurrectionary tactics of the S. D. F. even if, often, her natural exuberance for a cause led her to a display of the dramatic.

Out of her agitation for the unemployed arose the strike of the Bryant and May's match girls in 1888 which gave a much needed impetus to the movement for "New Unionism" of unskilled workers. Cole reports that she

. . . struck the first open blow for the "New Unionism" which, to the discomfiture of the S. D. F., soon pushed their Marxian Socialism into the background and prepared the way for the "New Socialism" of the Independent Labour Party.<sup>882</sup>

Her very successful organization of the match girls' strike made possible the Great London Dock Strike of 1889 "which drew attention not only to Trade Unionism but to the shocking conditions of the workers in low-paid and seasonal occupations."<sup>883</sup> Certainly she contributed to the growth of the Trade Union movement in England and the labor movement in general. A year after her successful venture, Mrs. Besant championed Theosophy, her work as a Socialist completed.

The Fabians in the 1880's had no faith in Trade Union activities of any sort. The Essays gave no indication of the utility of Trade Unions in bringing about better conditions for the workers. "Indeed," writes Gray,

. . . one of the matters on which the Fabians subsequently reproached themselves was that their eyes were at first sealed to the significance and importance of trade unionism.<sup>884</sup>

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<sup>882</sup> Cole, History of Socialist Thought, Vol. II, p. 408.

<sup>883</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 34.

<sup>884</sup> Gray, Socialist Tradition, p. 390.

Shaw viewed such activities as not only injurious to the organization of industry but likely to precipitate an open clash between those who owned the means of production and the workers. Webb was forthright in his denunciation of Trade Unionism as a cure to poverty:

The belief in universal Trade Unionism as a means of greatly and permanently raising wages all round must be at once dismissed as involving a logical fallacy. Certainly, the workers in some trades have managed to improve their economic position by strict Trade Unions. We are never allowed to forget the splendid incomes earned by these aristocrats of labour, a mere tenth of the whole labour class. But those who merely counsel the rest to go and do likewise forget that the only permanently effective Trade Union victories are won by limitation of their numbers in that particular trade, and the excluded candidates necessarily go to depress the condition of the outsiders. The Trade Unionist can usually only raise himself on the bodies of his less fortunate comrades. If all were equally strong, all would be equally powerless--a point clearly proved by Prof. Cairnes, and obvious to all Trade Unionists themselves.<sup>885</sup>

Pease feels that had the Fabian Essays been written a year later, they would have

. . . acquired from the great Trade Union upheaval of 1889 a fuller appreciation of the importance of Trade Unionism than they possessed at the earlier date . . . that the authors of the Essays were still youthful, and in some matters ignorant.<sup>886</sup>

If the Fabians realized their mistake too late, it was not so with Mrs. Besant. Already, in 1887, she firmly declared in her debate with Foote that in a time of economic uncertainty and declining prosperity, low wages and growing exploitation, Trade Unions were vital to prevent the malaise in society. She speaks,

Trades unions are essentially Socialistic. . . . They do away among the members with that competition of which Mr. Foote is so strong a supporter; they tell the stronger men not to use their strength for the injury of their weaker brethren, but to hold together so that the advantage of the strength may spread over all,

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<sup>885</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 8.

<sup>886</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, pp. 91-92.

and not be taken by the stronger to the detriment of the weaker. The same sort of attack as that of the Tories on trades unionism is now being made on Socialism, and the same reasons are given for the attack, namely, that trades unionism was tyrannical, that it held back the stronger, and tended to equalise the earnings of the more and the less skilled workers.<sup>887</sup>

To Mrs. Besant, Trade Unions were essentially cooperative ventures having for their object the protection of the defenseless worker. She did not feel, as did Webb, that Trade Unions themselves could be productive of much harm. Nor does she feel, as Shaw did, that it would precipitate a class struggle.

As a Freethinker, her Trade Union sympathies had already been evident. In December, 1876, she had come to the aid of two members of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Riveters and Finishers who had been jailed for "intimidation"; and two years later had helped to organize, along with Bradlaugh and Headlam, the International Labor Union and had occupied a seat on its governing body. Also the Dockers Union, organized by Ben Tillet in July 1887, received much support from Mrs. Besant as it did from the Liberals, Bradlaugh and Cardinal Manning.<sup>888</sup>

Her part in the Trade Union movement becomes all the more remarkable when one realizes that the well-established Trade Unions of skilled workers ". . . regarded the preaching of Socialism in the 'eighties with a cold indifference; their elected officials were mildly contemptuous of this new gospel; in many cases frankly hos-

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<sup>887</sup> Annie Besant, Is Socialism Sound?, Verbatim Report of a Four Nights' Debate between Annie Besant and G. W. Foote, at the Hall of Science, On February 2nd, 9th, 16th and 23rd, 1887 (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1887), p. 51.

<sup>888</sup> See Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, pp. 56-57.

tile,"<sup>889</sup> and certainly between 1860 and 1880 there was no important Trade Union leader who claimed to be a Socialist. The few that were Socialists were foreigners now living in England, and even the ferment of Socialist thought stirred by Hyndman and Morris in the mid 1880's affected them little. Until about 1880 the leaders of the Trade Unions remained enthusiastic about free-enterprise. There was no suggestion "that the system itself should be challenged."<sup>890</sup> Their leaders ". . . still put their faith in the Radical wing of the Liberal Party."<sup>891</sup> It was the great strike of the London dockers in August, 1889, that finally brought the Socialists into the Trade Union movement. It was "organised, led and brought to a successful issue by Socialists."<sup>892</sup> The new leaders of the unskilled workers were now mostly Socialists as "New Unionism" got under way. The "New Unionism" not only ensured Socialists a place in the Trade Unions and a say at the Trade Union Congresses and Councils; it also showed Socialism as ". . . something other than insurrection,"<sup>893</sup> and attracted the sympathetic notice of press and public alike. In particular, "it touched the imagination of all men of goodwill and made a tremendous appeal to the younger spirits at the Universities."<sup>894</sup> Its way was prepared by Mrs. Besant.

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<sup>889</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>890</sup>Norman MacKenzie, Socialism: A Short History (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1966), p. 79.

<sup>891</sup>Cole, History of Socialist Thought, Vol. II, p. 402.

<sup>892</sup>Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p. 57.

<sup>893</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>894</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

Mrs. Besant's Trade Union sympathies were based on the resolve to unite all factions of labor against the "idlers." In The Trades Union Movement, she declares quite emphatically that in the perspective of the past, according to the lessons of history and evolution, the Trade Union movement represents the onward march of labor, which having begun in slavery will reach its fruition in "the transformation of Class Society into a Brotherhood of equal workers."<sup>895</sup> The keynote is co-operation and the willingness to subordinate all personal gain for the mutual good. This represented the very basis of all "social morality." Mrs. Besant places her belief in the merits of united action and self-reliance and puts a special responsibility on its leaders to show the way by demonstrating a greater sense of responsibility. But very significantly, the Trade Union movement for Mrs. Besant was not an end in itself but merely an instrument to aid the cause of labor, a way to prevent the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few and so bring about a "New Order" in society.<sup>896</sup> The transformation of society required men, particularly Socialists, whose perspective was not parochial or narrow but distinctly British and who could influence the younger generation of Trade Unionists. There was no call to arms, no overtones of syndicalism or Marxist ideology. Being a British movement, it must remain true to its democratic traditions.

Her chance was soon to come. In 1888, along with Herbert Burrows who had been an ally in the "Bloody Sunday" episode and contributed

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<sup>895</sup> Annie Besant, The Trades Union Movement (London: Free-thought Publishing Co., 1890), p. 3.

<sup>896</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

articles for the Link, she had served the need of the poor and, in particular, the "dockers." It now appears from her An Autobiography that Webb was not altogether unsympathetic to the Trade Union movement. He is reputed to have written,

To-morrow morning, in London alone 20,000 to 25,000 adult men will fight like savages for permission to labour in the docks for 4d. an hour, and <sup>897</sup>one-third of them will fight in vain, and be turned workless away.

Her activities in the cause of the oppressed soon resulted in an appeal made to her by the workers in the Bryant and May (Limited) match factory for assistance. The company, while paying large dividends to its shareholders, paid their workers--all unskilled women--a pittance wage. Mrs. Besant published the facts in "White Slavery in London" and called for a boycott of the Bryant and May matches. She was very promptly threatened with an action for libel "but nothing came of it."<sup>898</sup> A few days later the girls stormed Fleet Street asking to see Mrs. Besant who cordially received a peaceful deputation. They told their story. The management had forced them to sign a paper stating that they were well treated and content and that Mrs. Besant's allegations were untrue.<sup>899</sup> One girl who had stood firmly by Mrs. Besant was discharged and the rest had gone on strike. Their appeal to Mrs. Besant met with an immediate response--". . . a pretty hubbub we created,"<sup>900</sup> Mrs. Besant writes as she and Burrows raised money and roused sympathies in the clubs and held meetings. Even Bradlaugh asked questions in

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<sup>897</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 333.

<sup>898</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>899</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>900</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

Parliament and "stirred up constituencies in which shareholders were members, till the whole country rang with the struggle."<sup>901</sup> Mrs. Besant and Burrows led a procession of the girls to Parliament and were received by a member. Mrs. Besant reports that together with Hobart of the S. D. F., Shaw, Bland, Olivier, and Headlam of the Fabian Society helped the cause. Mrs. Besant, it appears, had roused them to action, though Webb remained, presumably, remote but sympathetic. The London Trades Council finally acted as arbitrators, and a satisfactory end was reached. Out of the ferment rose the Matchmakers' Union, one of the strongest of the Women's Trades Unions in England; Mrs. Besant acted as secretary for a while with Herbert Burrows as treasurer. Even if Engels made light of the strike and its aftermath, yet it was the spark which set afire the movement for organized unskilled labor. As a result of her activities, writes John Scurr,

. . . that factory is now one of the model factories; every person employed there is a Trade Unionist, and as far as it is possible in present conditions to solve the unemployment problem, they have solved it for their own industry.<sup>902</sup> That all sprang from the work Annie Besant started down there.

And Trevelyan in his British History in the Nineteenth Century mentions:

The first skirmish of the new Unionism was the successful strike in 1888 of the London girls employed in making lucifer matches: one of the most dependent and helpless sections of labour, who could never have won their fight unaided or in a hostile social atmosphere. Friends pleaded their cause in the newspapers, and subscriptions from the public pulled them through. . . .<sup>903</sup>

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<sup>901</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>902</sup> Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 125.

<sup>903</sup> Williams, Passionate Pilgrim, p. 177. Williams reports that Mrs. Besant, as in the Knowlton pamphlet, made a permanent contribution to the progress of women.

The slogan of Mrs. Besant was now to "Unionise" and co-operate wherever the workers' interests were at stake. The "box-makers," "tin-makers," "chain-makers" together with workers in many other trades received the help of Mrs. Besant and Burrows in 1888 and 1889 with money, speeches, organization, and publicity. Her activities in these late autumn months of 1889 extended to aiding shop assistants, providing legal defense, agitating for free meals for children, and aiding the movement for lessening the working day of those employed on buses and trams. The spark struck by the Matchgirls' Union gave impetus to the further organization of unskilled labor. The history of British labor owed Mrs. Besant a debt which few of the Fabians appeared to recognize.

The "Tory Gold" episode of 1885 had alienated the Fabian Society from the S. D. F., and the unemployment agitation of 1886 and 1887 had shown the futility of revolutionary idealism to those Fabians who remained sympathetic to it. Mrs. Besant, who had some pronounced Liberal-Radical ideas, particularly when her conscience was thoroughly aroused, had already quite clearly stated her constitutional position. At the Fabian Conference held in June, 1886, the Fabians attempted to signalize their ". . . repudiation of political sectarianism"<sup>904</sup> by attempting to bring Radicals, Secularists, and all others who would come to a conference "to discuss the present commercial system and the better utilisation of national wealth for the benefit of the community."<sup>905</sup> The S. D. F. naturally boycotted the Conference but fifty-three societies, whether Radical, Socialist, or Secularist, sent delegates.

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<sup>904</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 11.

<sup>905</sup>Our Corner, July, 1886, McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 22.

Eighteen papers were read including those by William Morris and Aveling of the Socialist League, while Mrs. Besant and Webb put forth the Socialist view. Mrs. Besant was quite forthright in her advocacy of the "use of political means to obtain the objects of Socialism."<sup>906</sup> It does appear that Mrs. Besant had played an important role in its organization, and even a text of the invitations sent was included in Our Corner for March, 1886. Her motives in doing so may be analyzed. It would appear that this would be one way of making the Fabians known. Also, true to her belief that the "Radical" was only the unevolved Socialist, it could be seen as an attempt to expose the anarchistic Socialist League and the Secularists to the new truth she now espoused. Pease acknowledges that a short report of the Conference was written by Mrs. Besant and published in To-day for October, 1886 and that ". . . it is plain from Mrs. Besant's report that it was an informal attempt to clear the air in the Socialist movement as well as in the Society itself."<sup>907</sup> Mrs. Besant in her An Autobiography states that its purpose was to enable men and women having different views to compare methods "and so help on the cause of social regeneration."<sup>908</sup> Whatever the purpose, it was the last of the Fabian "follies."<sup>909</sup> "It fully established the fact," writes Shaw, "that we had nothing immediately

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<sup>906</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 24. In a footnote McBriar states that a short report of the Conference appeared in Our Corner for July, 1886, and a fuller one in The Practical Socialist, July, 1886. The M S report is in the British Library of Social and Political Science (R -Coll- Mis. 98).

<sup>907</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 68.

<sup>908</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 315.

<sup>909</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, p. 12.

practical to import to the Radicals and that they had nothing to impart to us."<sup>910</sup>

The Fabians now had a strong Executive Committee which included Mrs. Besant together with Bland, Clarke, Olivier, Shaw, Wallas, and Webb--the seven "Essayists" in fact. By 1886 they had reached a decision concerning the efficacy of revolutionary violence as a method of change:

. . . by 1886 we had already found that we were of one mind as to the advisability of setting to work by the ordinary political methods and having done with Anarchism and vague exhortations to Emancipate the Workers.<sup>911</sup>

The question that still remained to be answered was the extent of support in the Fabian Society for the anarchist Mrs. Wilson. In September of 1886 the Fabians finally settled the question on the issue of Anarchism or "Impossibilism" as opposed to Parliamentarianism or "Possibilism." The anarchists still remained a threat by disrupting Socialist organizations. Mrs. Besant, alive to the danger to the Fabians, brought the issue to the fore. At a meeting at Anderton's Hotel, Bland and Mrs. Besant respectively moved and seconded the following resolution:

That it is advisable that Socialists should organise themselves as a political party for the purpose of transferring into the hands of the whole working community full control over the soil and the means of production, as well as over the production and distribution of wealth.

To this a rider was moved by William Morris as follows:

But whereas the first duty of Socialists is to educate the people to understand what their present position is and what their future might be, and to keep the principle of Socialism steadily before

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<sup>910</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>911</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

them; and whereas no Parliamentary party can exist without compromise and concession, which would hinder that education and obscure those principles, it would be a false step for Socialists to attempt to take part in the Parliamentary contest.<sup>912</sup>

This would provide a sure bait to bring any silent anarchist to the hook.<sup>913</sup> In the debate that followed, Morris and Mrs. Wilson crossed swords with Mrs. Besant, Bland, and Shaw. The debate was so noisy that the Fabian Society received notice from the management that the Hotel would no longer be available to them. Everybody voted and the resolution by Mrs. Besant and Bland was carried by 47 to 19, the rider by Morris being defeated by 40 to 27. Mrs. Besant, in this rather tumultuous affair, had forcibly demonstrated the rejection of Anarchism. However in a manner typical of the Fabians, a "compromise" was arrived at according to which the majority formed a separate body within the Society named the Fabian Parliamentary League open to all who chose to join. It was, however, a short lived affair but the case for Parliamentary action having now been accepted, "the vocal opposition gradually faded away, and the League, as a body, became imperceptibly merged in the Society itself."<sup>914</sup> Also, the Fabian Parliamentary League produced the Fabian Basis of 1887 which affirmed the Fabian principle of achieving socialism by gradual degrees.

Mrs. Wilson--the heroine "Gemma" in The Gadfly by E. L. Voynich--continued her membership in the Fabian Society but was more involved in

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<sup>912</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 20; also (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 41, pp. 12-13.

<sup>913</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 241. He construes this as an attempt by Mrs. Besant to organize the Fabians into a political party. This does not appear to be her objective.

<sup>914</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 21.

Anarchist activity. In 1908, however, she turned her activities once again to the Fabian Society to found the Fabian Women's Group. Her hostility to Mrs. Besant was well marked. Justice continued to snipe at Fabian "Possibilism."

Mrs. Besant, always fertile where imaginative ideas were concerned, conceived some Fabian "amusement" in the form of a Charing Cross Parliament in which the Fabians vigorously debated the "burning questions" of the day.<sup>915</sup> It was to provide the Fabians some experience of the rules and procedure of Parliament, and her enthusiasm seemed infectious. H. H. Champion (who had now deserted the S. D. F. for the Fabians) became Prime Minister and first Lord of the Treasury; Mrs. Besant who as Home Secretary with Shaw as President of the Local Government Board came in for much "criticism" in connection with their proposed rather drastic measures; Webb, quite naturally, was Chancellor of the Exchequer; Bland, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs; Headlam, the Secretary of Ireland; Wallas, President of the Board of Trade; and Sydney Olivier in the Colonial Office; Our Corner noted its progress and activities and reproduced her many speeches as the Fabian "ministry" transformed its proposals into the form of Parliamentary Bills.

Mrs. Besant as a Socialist and Trade Unionist had done much for the cause of the organization of labor. The members of the Fabians and its local groups were urged to permeate organizations of all kinds. In November 1888 Mrs. Besant, together with the Rev. Stewart Headlam, braved the slander and calumny of their Tory opponents and were elected to the London School Board of the New London County Council (LCC).

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<sup>915</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 319.

This was the first of the many electoral gains the Fabians were to make in permeating local organizations, and it was the first time the Fabians played a role in the L.C.C. which was to be finally dominated by them in 1892. The Fabians had urged the promotion of equality through equal education for all through government action and had endorsed free compulsory education for elementary school children together with one free meal per day for Board children. At this time the London School Board was strongly conservative, and her appointment to it was not welcomed by the majority of its members. Mrs. Besant's impact was immediate and dynamic, and the Rev. Stewart Headlam reported to the Fabian Society that the votes of the School Board members had been "constantly swayed by the arguments and eloquence of the Progressives, amongst whom Mrs. Besant was a tower of strength."<sup>916</sup> At her very first meeting she lent support to a resolution that all contracts issued by the Board should be in accordance with accepted Trade Union rates regarding pay and hours of work. Prompted by Mrs. Besant, the resolution was carried and its effect, according to Lansbury,

. . . was electric throughout the world of Labour. Everywhere an agitation was set on foot to secure that all Government and municipal contracts should contain such a clause, and although we have not secured all we hoped for, yet the great municipalities and the Government have all adopted the resolution in such a form as ensures that whether there is a Trade Union or no a standard rate of pay and hours of labour shall prevail.<sup>917</sup>

The School Board--at least before the 1891 election--was the first

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<sup>916</sup>"Fabian News," June 1894, quoted in McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 206.

<sup>917</sup>George Lansbury, "Annie Besant as a Politician," in Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work, p. 11.

. . . important body in England to adopt the principle of a Trade Union Wage Clause, and even the present reactionary body (the Board after the 1891 election) had not gone back upon this reform.<sup>918</sup>

Headlam goes on to list several reforms which had "in principle" been accepted by the Board in spite of its conservative character--free elementary education; special provision for the teaching of backward children; reduction in the size of classes; opportunities for advancement to the Universities for all children, rich or poor; educational opportunities for all children whatever their financial condition; and the availability of such amenities as pianos and baths.<sup>919</sup> The hand of Mrs. Besant can be quite clearly detected.

To the Fabian Mrs. Besant goes a major share of the credit for her services to elementary education even if the proposed reforms were slow in being implemented. Her work, at any rate, was carried on by the later Fabians against "Diggleism" which was more concerned with the money of the taxpayers than the education of the poor. To Mrs. Besant, as to the Fabians, free education was vital, and School Boards existed for no other purpose. It will be noticed that there is no mention as to the teaching of religion in Board Schools. None of the Fabians, and Wallas in particular, saw any use for it.

"Annie herself," writes Nethercot, "just over forty-one, was no longer the slim, sweet woman she had been."<sup>920</sup> Proudly flaunting something red with her dress to mark her Socialist allegiance, she looked and played the part of the dedicated reformer of the working class as

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<sup>918</sup>"Fabian News," June 1894, quoted in McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 206.

<sup>919</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>920</sup>Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 264.

she trudged through the grime of the East End. The Punch captured her appearance in some rather brutal sketches.

The agitation for an Eight Hours Day "attained larger proportions than any other working-class agitation in England since the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>921</sup> It was called for by the S. D. F. and was generally accepted by all the Socialist organizations. The early Tracts of the Fabians had sought an increase of government responsibility to aid public welfare and the Eight Hours Day "appears to have commended itself to the Fabians after Tom Mann's first lecture to the Society in April 1886."<sup>922</sup> "Even Marx," writes Margaret Cole, "believed that the eight-hour day was not a 'palliative' but a real step towards revolution."<sup>923</sup> In the Report on Fabian Policy being Fabian Tract No. 70 (1896), Shaw put forward proposals in this direction, and Sidney Webb in Tracts No. 9, 16, and 23, An Eight Hours Bill (1889), A Plea for an Eight Hours Bill (1890), and The Case for an Eight Hours Bill (1891), respectively, investigated into the hours of work in railways, shops, factories, and mines and showed that the workers had little chance for betterment since public opinion was ineffectual and the only solution lay in government regulation of the hours of labor. Thus, writes Webb, only by shortening the working hours can the toilers "share in the benefits of civilization which they have toiled to create."<sup>924</sup>

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<sup>921</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 84.

<sup>922</sup>McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 26.

<sup>923</sup>Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 19.

<sup>924</sup>(Sidney Webb), Fabian Tract No. 16, A Plea for an Eight Hours Bill, p. 1.

It was considered to be a "demand which struck at the roots of capitalism."<sup>925</sup>

As early as June of 1884, Mrs. Besant found herself protesting against a Bill introduced by Sir John Lubbock which called for a working day of 12 hours. "I declare," she writes, "that a 'legal day' should be eight hours on five days in the week and not more than five hours on the sixth."<sup>926</sup> In her The Redistribution of Political Power (1885) she traces the most important tendencies that become evident after the passage of each Reform Bill (i.e., 1832, 1867, and 1884). Each of these Bills appears to have inaugurated "new eras" and served as starting points for new developments. She writes,

Each Reform Bill has been followed by a great outburst of reforming energy, and amid the many measures carried in the reformed Parliaments those are, I think of the most permanently important character which have dealt with the conditions of Labor, with the extension of Religious Liberty and Equality,<sup>927</sup> with the Tenure of Land, with the Education of the People.

No great work of Reform could be effected by any single Parliament "however great the impulse for improvement."<sup>928</sup> It was only along Parliamentary lines that the future of reform depended. Thus, she finds in reviewing the whole history of legislation passed as a consequence of the Reform Bills, the clear recognition of the right of the community to interfere, by the processes of law and legislation, to protect the workers from

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<sup>925</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 19.

<sup>926</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 303-304.

<sup>927</sup> Besant, Redistribution of Political Power, pp. 3-4.

<sup>928</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

. . . the greed of those who employ them, whether it be to save sailors from "coffin-ships," or miners and other operatives from preventable injury, or factory and shop-workers from excessive hours of labor.<sup>929</sup>

Mrs. Besant now called upon the new Parliament to continue upon the lines of its predecessors, and she expected it to be full of reformist zeal as regards the conditions of labor. Also, since the principle of legislative interference by Parliament was already well established in matters concerning relations between the employer and his workers since 1832, Mrs. Besant feels that the "Reformed Parliament" of 1884 had no cause to be

. . . more careless of the interests of the workers than the predecessors have been; indeed, elected as it will be, by a larger number of handworkers than have ever before taken part in the choice of representatives of the Commons, it will probably be more inclined to legislate in the interests of Labor than any Parliament we have yet seen.<sup>930</sup>

The hours of labor, moreover, had been shortened at "successive intervals" since 1801, and thus it would not appear unreasonable that a further shortening be made. A ten hours' day is much too long; this becomes obvious to all "reasonable people." Thus, Mrs. Besant asks the new Parliament to pass an "Eight Hours Bill," making the legal work day of eight hours only with one "half-holiday" in the week--the weekly hours of labor not to exceed forty four. In time she expects that the hours of labor would be still further shortened, but the Eight Hours Bill would mark a step in the right direction.<sup>931</sup>

The establishment of an Eight Hours' Day would further help to

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<sup>929</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>930</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>931</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

distribute the toil more evenly since

. . . the same amount of work will have to be performed, and if each pair of hands only does  $4/5$  of the work it now does, additional pairs of hands must execute the remainder. At present some are being worn out with excessive labor, while others are clamoring for employment; shorter hours for the present workers mean work for the now idle hands.<sup>932</sup>

Her role as a Fabian was not as important as that of Webb; nevertheless in her multifarious activities not only did she remain resolutely constitutional, she helped in a significant way to guide the Society in a constitutional direction. Also as a "permeator," she was unequalled and set the Fabians an example to follow.

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<sup>932</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SOCIALIST THOUGHT OF MRS. BESANT

"The Fabian Society," writes Clayton, "was Webb and Shaw--with Pease as its secretary--and could not be otherwise."<sup>933</sup> To effectively evaluate the Socialist thought of Mrs. Besant, particularly as compared to Webb and Shaw, some mention of a few salient characteristics of Fabian thinking seems in order. The Fabians had their own particular style, and often it is both interesting and illuminating to note not only what they said but how they said it.

To Barker it was Mill rather than Marx that was their "starting point";<sup>934</sup> and Beer states that "Webb stands on the shoulders of J. S. Mill."<sup>935</sup> Pease sees the Fabians as being responsible for breaking the ". . . spell of Marxism in England."<sup>936</sup> The Fabians, and in particular Webb, based their Socialism on the Law of Rent rather than the Marxian analysis of "surplus value," though Shaw in his "Epilogue" to Pease's work denies that Mill was the primary influence on the Fabians. Apparently to Shaw the influences in the Fabian Essays owe more to the

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<sup>933</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p. 46.

<sup>934</sup> Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 213.

<sup>935</sup> Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 281.

<sup>936</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 236.

economics of Jevons and Ricardo.<sup>937</sup> At any rate, the influence of Webb is far greater on the Fabians and it is he, more than any other, who is credited with forming a theoretical rationale for Fabian collectivism. Also, Shaw is not above using the Law of Rent whenever it suits his purpose in his denunciation of private ownership, even if there exists in his Essay "Economic" references to the Marxian idea of alienation of man and surplus value.

For Marx the value of any commodity could only be measured by the amount of labor which was used in its production. Orthodox economic theory was based on the principle that the production of any commodity having value involves the interaction of the four agents of production, i.e. land or raw materials, labor, capital, and organization or management. Marx denies this and insists that since labor is the sole source of all value, all the profits obtained by the capitalists are obtained through unpaid labor. Such profits are the difference between the wages paid to the worker and the price of the commodity. This difference he called "surplus value," which was appropriated by the owner of the means of production. Shaw admits that "Of the law of rent, which is fundamental in Socialism, Marx was simply ignorant."<sup>938</sup>

Mill, as a "qualified Socialist," had stopped at land reform. Webb goes further and notes that one economic characteristic underlay every form of society. As soon as man was able to produce more than he needed to consume, there rose a fierce competitive struggle for the

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<sup>937</sup>George Bernard Shaw, "On the History of Fabian Economics," in Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 276.

<sup>938</sup>Shaw, "Biographers' Blunders Corrected," Sixteen Self-Sketches, p. 82.

"surplus product." Those individuals or classes having social and economic power are able to use their position to appropriate the "surplus product," leaving to their fellows ". . . practically nothing beyond the means of subsistence according to the current local standard."<sup>939</sup>

This "surplus product," continues Webb,

. . . possessed the character of rent. In relation to agriculture it was fertility, mineral contents, position, or even the mere presence of human beings, that combined to make the net advantage of one piece of land very different from that of another. This differential advantageousness, rising in scale from the very margin of cultivation to the most superior sites, accounted for the phenomena of economic rent. Under unrestricted private ownership and free competition, with the motive of pecuniary self-interest in full play, the man in possession of any position economically superior to the very margin of cultivation or to the very limit of advantageousness was finding himself able to retain for himself the whole differential advantage of that position over and above the yield of the worst land in use.<sup>940</sup>

The law of rent was applicable to land and to capital. The Fabians sought both the socialization of rent from land and interest from capital. Thus it appeared that rent, ". . . being that part of the produce which is individually unearned,"<sup>941</sup> held equally for all forms of capitalist enterprise; the differences between the relative qualities of land are analogous to the ". . . differences between the sites of the factories and commercial offices, use of inventions and discoveries, raw materials and tools, forms of organisations and management."<sup>942</sup> Also, as Pease points out, "The successful entrepreneur

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<sup>939</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15 (1890), p. 5; also see Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, pp. 281-283.

<sup>940</sup>Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, pp. 281-282.

<sup>941</sup>Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 220.

<sup>942</sup>Beer, History of British Socialism, Vol. II, p. 282.

for instance draws a rent of ability from his superior equipment and education."<sup>943</sup>

The advantages enjoyed by the capitalists were the result of social or community effort, and thus the object of Fabian Socialism was to obtain for the entire society the values which it jointly created. These were not to be used for private gain, but were to be transferred to the society as a whole to enrich the ". . . community at large."<sup>944</sup> The methods to be adopted were taxation, municipilization, and nationalization. It was also clear to Webb that the capitalist can control prices simply by withholding necessary commodities from the consumer.

Shaw in his first "Essay" owes much to Ricardo and Jevons--and even Mill. By the application of the Ricardian Theory of Rent, Shaw demonstrates that the original owner of the land--the first "colonist, the original Adam"<sup>945</sup>--by tilling the most fertile land available in a virgin country, prospers. The newcomer is then forced to ". . . pitch his tent on land of lesser quality."<sup>946</sup> Thus the first arrival derives rent from his land owing to its greater fertility, assuming that both are equally industrious. According to Mill, "The rent of land consists of the excess of its return above the return to the worst land in cultivation."<sup>947</sup> Ricardo had pointed out that "Rent is that

<sup>943</sup>Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 245.

<sup>944</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 18.

<sup>945</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 16.

<sup>946</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>947</sup>Mill, "Principles of Political Economy," in Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 19.

portion of the earth which is paid to the landlord for the use of the original and indestructable powers of the soil."<sup>948</sup> As land remains constant in quantity, but varies in its quality, and since an expanding population necessitates the cultivation of poorer land, the owner of the best land derives an extra return. This extra return is taken not by the laborer but by the landlord. The "original Adam" may then retire as an "idle landlord," being the beneficiary of a rent he has not earned but received "as it is to-day, regularly by a worker to a drone."<sup>949</sup> The idle shareholder who consumes the labor of others is a "thief" since he consumes a product which he does not earn and cannot replace. If he sells his shares, he merely substitutes another "thief" in his place.<sup>950</sup> The idle landlord, who depends upon the labor of others, sets up that

. . . phenomena of the man of business who goes on Sunday to the church with the regularity of the village blacksmith, there to renounce and abjure before his God the line of conduct which he intends to pursue with all his might during the following week.<sup>951</sup>

Thus, what the achievement of Socialism involves economically, declares Shaw, is the transfer of the rent from the idle landlord to the community, it being that part of the produce which is individually unearned. As long as the fertility of land varies, and its farmers though possessed of equal intelligence and industry reap unequal rewards,

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<sup>948</sup>Ricardo, "Principles of Political Economy and Taxation," in Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 19.

<sup>949</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 18.

<sup>950</sup>George Bernard Shaw, "Our Lost Honesty," Harper's Magazine, October, 1971, p. 99.

<sup>951</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 20.

. . . so long will it be equitable to take from the richer farmer or shopkeeper the excess over his fellow's gain which he owes to the bounty of Nature or the advantage of situation.<sup>952</sup>

The object of Socialism to Shaw is to transfer all the rent so obtained from both land and capital to the "national treasury."

Shaw also ". . . plays with the Jevonian technique with all the gusto one devotes to a new toy."<sup>953</sup> With the expansion of industrialism and population the marginal worker loses all value. Divorced from the soil and the means of production, he is the forgotten man; "Private Property had forgotten this man. On the roads he is a vagrant; off them he is a trespasser: he is the first disinherited son of Adam, the first Proletariat."<sup>954</sup> As all land is now appropriated by others, he becomes ". . . a landless stranger in his own country."<sup>955</sup> Born a proletariat, he must so die, leaving ". . . his destitution as an only inheritance to his son."<sup>956</sup> To exist, he must sell himself, and since the only saleable commodity available to him is his own labor, no sooner does he do so

. . . than he finds a rush of bidders for him, each striving to get the better of the others by offering to give him more and more of the produce of his labor. . . . The proletariat, in accepting the highest bid, sells himself openly into bondage. . . . But now all the disguise falls off: the proletariat renounces not only the fruit of his labor, but also his right<sup>957</sup> to think for himself and to direct his industry as he pleases.

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<sup>952</sup>Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 221.

<sup>953</sup>Gray, Socialist Tradition, pp. 389-390.

<sup>954</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 22.

<sup>955</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 6.

<sup>956</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 24.

<sup>957</sup>Ibid., pp. 25-26.

Having been forced to sell himself to the highest bidder to survive, his value grows scarce with an increasing population. His "exchange value" becomes negligible. Since supply exceeds demand, his "utility" finally evaporates. "This," writes Shaw, "is the condition of our English laborers to-day: they are no longer even dirt cheap: they are valueless, and can be had for nothing."<sup>958</sup> What the proletariat can expect is merely his keep and a bare level of subsistence which is the condition of labor in England today.<sup>959</sup> His "freedom" consists in working at the market-rate or starving, and as Webb puts it:

He was free, but free only to choose to which master he would sell his labor--free only to decide from which proprietor he would beg that access to the new increments of production without which he could not exist.<sup>960</sup>

Pease admits that if Progress and Poverty by Henry George "gave an extraordinary impetus to the political thought of the time"--yet his political economy was too old fashioned to be of any use to an industrial society as his solution of a single-tax on land values would affect only a ". . . small fraction of England's wealth."<sup>961</sup> It seemed clear to Henry George that all men had an equal right to land, and the present state of misery did not lie in over-population but the appropriation of the land by a few. Land values were owing to the differences in fertility between one piece of land as compared to another. Also, the fact that one piece of land was more conveniently located

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<sup>958</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>959</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>960</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 12.

<sup>961</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, pp. 20-21.

near a town or railway accounted for its greater value. Therefore the owner of the land was not entitled to profit from what was a gift of nature, that which he himself had not created.

Since the community as a whole was to administer the Instruments of production, the presence of some kind of machinery to perform this function became necessary. "This organ the Collectivist Socialist finds in the State."<sup>962</sup> Unlike Marx, the Fabians did not view the State as an instrument of class oppression but as a vehicle necessary for the installment of Socialism. Of the seven "Essayists," only Bland is suspicious of the belief that State activity is synonymous with Socialism; to him what is of the essence is not what activities the State pursues but the purpose for which it exists. Thus,

State control does not imply Socialism--at least in any modern meaning of the term. It is not so much the thing the State does, as to the end for which it does it that we must look before we can decide whether it is a Socialist State or not.<sup>963</sup>

But Shaw and Webb were united in their ". . . common conviction of the necessity of vesting the organization of industry and the material of production in a State identified with the whole people by complete Democracy."<sup>964</sup> Shaw describes the Socialism advocated by the Fabian Society as "State Socialism exclusively";<sup>965</sup> and he asserts, "That State Socialism and not Anarchism is the answer to individual liberty."<sup>966</sup>

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<sup>962</sup>Joad, Introduction to Modern Political Theory, p. 50.

<sup>963</sup>Bland, "The Outlook," in Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 259.

<sup>964</sup>Shaw, "Preface," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 6.

<sup>965</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 5.

<sup>966</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 45, p. 23.

But State Socialism was essentially democratic and constitutional and meant the control of the administration of government by the freely elected representatives of the people.

The Fabian Society energetically repudiates all conceptions of Democracy as a system by which the technical work of government administration, and the appointment of public officials, shall be carried on by referendum or any other form of direct popular decision. Such arrangements may be practical in a village community, but not in the complicated industrial civilizations which are ripening for Social-Democracy.<sup>967</sup>

Fabian "Collectivism" demanded "expert government"<sup>968</sup> but not a highly centralized bureaucracy. Perhaps "By 'state' the Fabians meant the civil service,"<sup>969</sup> and Webb and Shaw, who had little faith in the average intelligence, saw the machinery of government guided and served by a core of experts possessing superior knowledge and versed in administrative matters. The efficiency and impartiality of the British civil service, particularly the "administrative cadre," seems to have proved their point.

The faith the Fabians displayed in the State is shown in its capacity as the "representative and trustee of the people."<sup>970</sup> It was seen to be eminently trustworthy,

. . . the State may be trusted with the rent of the country, and finally with the land, the capital, and the organization of the national industry--with all the sources of production, in short, which are now abandoned to the cupidity of irresponsible private individuals.<sup>971</sup>

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<sup>967</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 5.

<sup>968</sup>Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 217.

<sup>969</sup>Lancaster, Masters of Political Thought, Vol. III, p. 324.

<sup>970</sup>Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 222.

<sup>971</sup>Ibid., p. 224.

The Fabians were Evolutionary Socialists with a belief that the change to Social Democracy must be gradual and not catastrophic.

The Fabian Society accepts the conditions imposed on it by human nature and by the national character and political circumstances of the English people. It sympathises with the ordinary citizen's desire for gradual, peaceful changes, as against revolutionary conflict with the army and police, and martyrdom. . . . The Fabian Society therefore begs those Socialists who are looking forward to a sensational historical crisis, to join some other Society . . . in a Democratic Community Compromise is a necessary condition of political progress.<sup>972</sup>

In slow degrees England was to steer its course towards a collectivist state. The core of their thought is expressed in Webb's famous phrase of "The inevitability of gradualness." Theirs was not to bring about a tumultuous upheaval in society, but to quicken the already present trend towards collectivism. Neither Webb nor Shaw had any sympathies with the Marxian dialectic or the Marxian materialistic conception of historical growth. The evolutionary trend is shown in all the "Essays" and is expressed in diverse ways, but it was clear to Webb and Shaw that the change had to be peaceful and constitutional, free of the Marxian idea of class-struggle leading to the final liquidation of the bourgeoisie. Shaw writes that the coming of Socialism could only be delayed by violent struggle.

The young Socialist is apt to be catastrophic in his views--to plan the revolutionary programme as an affair of twenty-four lively hours, with Individualism in full swing on Monday morning, a tidal wave of the insurgent proletariat on Monday afternoon, and Socialism in complete working order on Tuesday. . . . You cannot convert first and third class carriages into second class; rookeries and palaces into comfortable dwellings . . . by merely singing the "Marseillaise."<sup>973</sup>

The gradual transition to Social Democracy meant the ". . .

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<sup>972</sup>(Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, Report on Fabian Policy, pp. 4-5.

<sup>973</sup>Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 224-225.

gradual extension of the franchise, the transfer of rent and interest to the State, not in one lump sum, but by installments."<sup>974</sup> Viewed in this manner, Shaw sees England already well on the road to Collectivism. To the Marxist the revolutionary seizure of power preceded the reconstruction of society on socialist principles; to the Fabians it was to be brought about in slow degrees through the socialization of vital industries "and at least in the 'eighties they did not seem extremely impatient about the time it was to take."<sup>975</sup>

The coming of Socialism from the prior state of individualism was inevitable to the Fabians. It appeared to be natural as it was peaceful. Also, it was in the process of being realized. The Society never put forth any joint views on historical evolution, and their views in the Fabian Essays cannot be said to be ". . . stated systematically enough to be dignified by the name of philosophy of history."<sup>976</sup> But each Essay, in its own particular way, reflects this thinking. Sydney Olivier explained that socialism is the "offspring" of Individualism, the product of the "individualist struggle." He continues,

Socialism is merely Individualism rationalised, organised, clothed, and in its right mind. Socialism is taking form in advanced societies and the social revolution must be brought to its formal accomplishment through the conscious action of innumerable individuals seeking an avenue to rational and pleasant existence for themselves and for those<sup>977</sup> whose happiness and freedom they desire as they do their own.

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<sup>974</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>975</sup> McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 70.

<sup>976</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>977</sup> Olivier, "Moral," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p.

Sidney Webb sets forth in some detail the Fabian idea that all history points to the inevitable coming of democracy and the advance of Socialism. In each intrusion of Government into the sphere of private interest, Webb sees the growth of Socialism.<sup>978</sup> Little progress in this direction appears to have been made until the beginning of the nineteenth century when the zenith of individualism was attained. As of 1880, "An unsystematic and empirical individualism reigned supreme."<sup>979</sup> The commonly accepted principle was that government activity be kept to a minimum, and free competition somehow ensured the survival of the fittest and a healthy and prosperous State. The Age appeared barren of any systematic program of social improvement. 1880 marked the turning point of change and the question was no longer ". . . whether the existing social order shall be changed, but how this inevitable change shall be made."<sup>980</sup> Individualism cannot last since all of society is in a state of flux and there existed little in the old Individualistic structure based on the private ownership of land and capital which was of permanent value. Thus, "The economic history of the century is an almost continuous record of the progress of Socialism."<sup>981</sup> It appears to Webb that "The typical young politician, who twenty years ago was a convinced Individualist quoting Mr. Herbert Spencer, is nowadays an empirical Col-

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<sup>978</sup> See Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 65, 70-72, for a long list of private enterprises which by 1889 had already been placed under state control as a result of the passage of Legislation, i.e. Local Improvement Acts, Drainage Acts, Truck Acts, Mines Regulation Acts, Factory Acts, etc.

<sup>979</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 4.

<sup>980</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 4.

<sup>981</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p.

lectivist of a practical kind."<sup>982</sup>

Webb continues by stating that the evolutionary trend of society from Individualism to Collectivism during the past one hundred years has been ". . . the irresistible progress of Democracy."<sup>983</sup> He adds that in the present Socialist movement,

All students of society who are abreast of their time, Socialists as well as Individualists, realize that important organic changes can only be (1) democratic, and thus acceptable to a majority of the people, and prepared for in the minds of all; (2) gradual, and thus causing no dislocation, however rapid may be the rate of progress; (3) not regarded as immoral by the mass of the people, and thus not subjectively demoralizing to them; and (4) in this country at any rate, constitutional and peaceful.<sup>984</sup>

Webb does not deal in much detail on "The Disintegration of the Old Synthesis" from feudalism to industrialism but does say that the final collapse of a feudal society and medievalism was mainly owing to the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century; apart from the French Revolution which acted as a "catalyst" for change. He is largely concerned with the era since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in England. The anarchy of individualism to Webb gives way to collectivism as inroads are made into the rent and interest of the capitalist by increasing taxation.

Much as the Fabians rejected revolution, they equally repudiated Utopianism. Neither Webb nor Shaw had any sympathy with a detailed blueprint of any future Socialist society or the founding of ideal Socialist communities. There could never exist a moment in time when one could say that Socialism has been established, as Shaw re-

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<sup>982</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 8.

<sup>983</sup>Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 50.

<sup>984</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

marked in his debate with Chesterton.

There is no such thing as a panacea or plan by which you can set society on a nice satisfactory basis. . . . I believe in the necessity for a daily output of virtue.<sup>985</sup> Salvation is a continuous operation, like breathing.

Webb had little sympathy ". . . with schemes for the regeneration of mankind by the establishment of local Utopias whether in Cumberland or in Chili."<sup>986</sup> The founding of Utopian communities, complete in detail like Sir Thomas More's Utopia or Gulliver's Travels, was based on the "fancy sketches" of Utopian thinkers. As Plato had his Republic, Baboeuf his "Charter of Equality," Cabet his "Icaria," and Fourier his "Phalanstery," so did Robert Owen seek to press "upon an unbelieving generation" his "New Moral World" much as Auguste Comte "must needs add a detailed Polity to his Philosophy of Positivism." The dominant feature of all these proposals was their essentially "statical character," since

The ideal society was represented as in perfectly balanced equilibrium, without need or possibility of future organic alteration. Since their day we have learned that social reconstruction must not be gone at in this fashion . . . we can no longer think of the ideal society as an unchanging State. The social ideal from being static has become dynamic.<sup>987</sup>

Growth and change of the social organism were axiomatic to both Webb and Shaw. The new order evolved gradually from the old, and history shows ". . . no example of the sudden substitution of Utopian and revolutionary romance."<sup>988</sup>

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<sup>985</sup>Shaw, "What Socialism Will Be Like," in Lawrence, Platform and Pulpit: Bernard Shaw, pp. 86-87.

<sup>986</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 3.

<sup>987</sup>Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 47-48.

<sup>988</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

Also, it appeared to Webb that those who put their trust in the Utopian ideal of some perfect Socialist society had little faith in humanity. The object of the modern Socialist movement--as opposed to vague schemes of Utopianism--is not to enable a few individuals to lead an ideal existence "but to loosen the fetters of the millions who toil in our factories and mines, and who cannot possibly be moved to Freeland or Topofo-bambo."<sup>989</sup> The idea of improving the entire society by the founding of isolated pockets of Utopian communities was not possible; thus,

Wise prophets nowadays do not found a partial community which adopts the whole faith; they cause rather the partial adoption of their faith by the whole community. . . . Genuine Socialism grows by vertical instead of horizontal expansion; we must make ever more Socialistic the institutions amid which we live, instead of expecting them to<sup>990</sup> be suddenly superseded by any new set imported from elsewhere.

Both Shaw and Webb were alive to the degrading effects of private ownership of wealth and the inequality of income on the condition of the dispossessed. Shaw writes that the injustice caused by ". . . private appropriation is glaring, flagrant, almost ridiculous" and describes the plight of the proletariat as the landlord exploits his advantage "with scientific precision."<sup>991</sup> The blame for extreme poverty if placed squarely on the Individualist, and Webb issues a warning that if the Socialist solution is rejected the slums will ". . . remain to the Individualist as the problem of the Sphinx, which his civilisation must solve or perish."<sup>992</sup> Laissez-faire has resulted in the degradation

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<sup>989</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 10.

<sup>990</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>991</sup>Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 231.

<sup>992</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 12.

of art and literature, a curtailment of prowess and the crushing of those whose talents were lost for want of opportunity. On the plight of the laborer, he is eloquent.

When we have bound the labourer fast to his wheel; when we have practically excluded the average man from every real chance of improving his condition; when we have virtually denied to him the means of sharing in the higher feelings and the larger Sympathies of the cultured race; when we have shortened his life in our service, stunted his growth in our factories, racked him with unnecessary disease by our exactions, tortured his soul with that worst of all pains, the constant fear of poverty, condemned his wife and children to sicken and die before his eyes, in spite of his own perpetual round of toil--then we are aggrieved that he often loses hope, gambles for the windfall that is denied to his industry, attempts to drown his cares in drink, and, driven by his misery irresistibly down the steep hill of vice, passes into that evil circle where vice begets poverty, and poverty intensifies vice, until Society unrelentingly stamps him out as vermin.

In some rural districts every aged labourer is a pauper. Of all persons over 70 years of age, 40 per cent are permanent paupers . . . one fifth of the population of the richest city in the world die in the workhouse or the hospital. . . .<sup>993</sup>

Socialization of the means of production, municipalization, and taxation was the remedy suggested by the Fabians. No sudden change was anticipated. Socialism was to be gradually brought about by a progressive limitation of private property.

The Fabian Society, G. D. H. Cole suggests, dwelt more in the realms of ideas than organization and sought to make known to the intelligent citizen the way to a better social system than offered by Individualism and the "necessity of Socialism, and the best means of achieving it."<sup>994</sup> Mrs. Besant, as an articulate and enthusiastic convert to the new Zeitgeist, expounded the Socialist point of view in her writings and debates. While none could doubt her fervor, particularly

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<sup>993</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 7. Also see Fabian Tract No. 5, Facts for Socialists, for authorities for the statistics given for poverty in England.

<sup>994</sup>Cole, Fabian Society, p. 3.

in her debates with such Individualists as G. W. Foote, Frederick Millar, and Corrie Grant, Q. C., yet her thought is often ambiguous and ambulant to the point of incomprehension. She was, however, as much concerned with carrying the Fabian point of view as in developing the nascent Society in a constitutional direction. When the wheat is separated from the chaff, reducing her thought to some semblance of order and comprehension, there is to be found much of value in her writings and debates which seems to have been largely ignored. In 1885 appeared The Redistribution of Political Power, and in the following year was published Why I Am a Socialist, which was widely read at the time and in which she explains that there were "three main lines of thought" along which she traveled to Socialism; and she invites her readers to join her. "I am a Socialist because I am a believer in Evolution," Mrs. Besant writes; she continues, "I am a Socialist because of the failure of our present civilisation," and "I am a Socialist because the poverty of the workers is, and must continue to be, an integral part of the present method of wealth-production and wealth-distribution."<sup>995</sup>

The Evolution of Society, Modern Socialism, and The Socialist Movement, the last of which was published in the Westminster Review, appeared in the same year. In 1887, Mrs. Besant wrote Radicalism and Socialism and engaged in a debate with G. W. Foote which lasted four days on the question, Is Socialism Sound? Chaired on different nights by William Morris and Shaw, it was a discussion of the most pressing issue of the time, and Morris introduces the protagonists as ". . . skilled debaters, with very great talent" and is ". . . perfectly certain that the subject will be

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<sup>995</sup> Annie Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, 1886, pp. 2-6.

treated in a thoroughly serious and satisfactory manner."<sup>996</sup> The debate helped to educate the public in the issue at stake and generated much enthusiasm among an audience which took little care to conceal their prejudices. In fact, Mrs. Besant, at one stage of the debate, warns the very partisan audience of Socialists and Individualists that "Your flag to-night is in my hands, and I cannot keep it unsoiled if you interrupt my opponent."<sup>997</sup> Arguing that the evils in modern society were inherent in the system of laissez-faire Individualism and could only be remedied by Socialism, Foote responds that the law of struggle was part of the law of progress and could not be set aside by such dreamers and idealists as the Socialists, and in particular by Mrs. Besant who "plays the role of the prophet throughout"<sup>998</sup> in her belief in the final coming of Socialism. Foote continues, "Sometimes I envy Mrs. Besant's power of appealing to people's feelings. (Hear, hear) Fortunately this debate will be reported verbatim, and will be read in cold blood."<sup>999</sup> This verbal thrust did not lack sufficient cause. As the year wore on and the misery of the unemployed grew more acute, it became clear to Mrs. Besant that unless Society found some way to deal with repeated trade depressions and the general economic malaise of an individualistic society that a stormy time lay ahead.

The Victorian Age was a period of elegance, which admitted the luxury of debate and discussion regardless of its length and encouraged that quality of unhurried eloquence which the present time, with its

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<sup>996</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 2.

<sup>997</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>998</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>999</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

unseemingly haste and neurotic passion for economy and efficiency in all things, has dispelled forever. In 1890 Mrs. Besant engaged in a debate with Frederick Millar of the Liberty and Property Defence League in Nottingham on "Socialism v. Individualism." It was chaired by S. G. Johnson, Esq., the Town Clerk of the City. Millar argued in true Individualistic fashion that all that governments were required to do in regard to the regulation of human conduct was to limit their functions only to those conditions which allowed full play for individual liberty. That was to say that the primary duty of government was to prevent any harmful acts against its citizens. The evils to which the present society was heir, argued the Individualist, were owing to the fact that man had never been allowed to follow his own ". . . instincts, habits, and character."<sup>1000</sup> The path to progress and advancement of both the individual and the nation lay in individual freedom and absolute self-dependence. The principle of laissez-faire was the cardinal good which fostered the quality of individual initiative, as against protection, restrictions on trade and greater State action. Thus, argued Millar, Mrs. Besant in seeking to bring about a condition of equality was not only upsetting the "natural order of things," but was

. . . working in the very face of her previous teaching . . . [in] bringing about a state of things which could not do other than produce a deadly uniformity under which all progress would be negated. . . .<sup>1001</sup>

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<sup>1000</sup> Socialism V. Individualism. Public Debate in the Mechanics' Hall, Nottingham, on Saturday, October 25th, 1890 Between Mrs. Annie Besant (of the Fabian Society) and Mr. Frederick Millar (of the Liberty and Property Defence League). Chairman: S. G. Johnson, Esq., (Town Clerk of Nottingham). (Nottingham: C. J. Welton, 1890), p. 3.

<sup>1001</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

While Mrs. Besant, Millar admits, had done more than any other woman to bring the lessons of "prudence and self-help" to the working-classes and so had earned the respect of all true Individualists, yet in her advocacy of Socialism, ". . . she was unconsciously undermining those very motives to which she had previously appealed, and with such good results. (Applause)"<sup>1002</sup> It was an article of Individualistic faith that free trade and limited government would bring about conditions which would ensure that the best individuals--the most capable, industrious and competent--would reap the just rewards of their virtues. Millar feels that if only Mrs. Besant would direct her energy and her intelligence to "exhorting people to think for themselves, to help themselves, and to trust themselves, she would be doing a great and mighty good."<sup>1003</sup>

Both Individualism and Socialism looked to the good of man, but their approaches varied. The Individualist creed of fifty years past looked to man's welfare in terms of the Utilitarian ethic, but to Mrs. Besant and the Fabians such assumptions were no longer tenable. Webb did admit the influence of Bentham in his "Essay," yet his concern was now to demonstrate that the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" could only be brought about by the community as a whole, it being the legitimate recipient of the value which it jointly creates. For Bentham and Mill, the State was to exercise its powers to a minimum; for the Fabians, the reverse was true. The good of all required the "Welfare State" of Webb which could ensure the health and vitality of the social organism. Man was no longer an isolated atom--"The Com-

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<sup>1002</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>1003</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

munity must necessarily aim, consciously or not, at its continuance as a community."<sup>1004</sup> In her debates with the Individualists, Mrs. Besant seeks to show that "'Each for other' is at once the motto of a physical organism and of socialist doctrine."<sup>1005</sup>

Of all her writings the one most known is her contribution to the Fabian Essays of 1889 entitled "Industry Under Socialism." The Essay is concerned with the manner in which industry would be structured in the ideal state, and it is unfortunate that her obvious Utopianism should be seen as her major contribution to Socialist thought. Moreover, if, as Cole and Pease had suggested, the Essays were a product of a close collaboration and the scheme was worked out by the Fabian Essayists with an understanding as to the content and method under the baton of its Editor, then her culpability appears less severe. Even if Shaw denied that he had anything to do with Mrs. Besant's contribution, one can hazard a fair guess that the iconoclastic Irishman took some delight in intellectual perversity and found in Mrs. Besant a willing ally whose thought did tend in the direction of Utopianism. In view of Webb's severe criticism of Mrs. Besant's Utopianism, it is clear that he had little to do with it. Also, it is seen that her writings appeared in the years 1885, 1886, and 1887 when the Fabians were in their process of maturation.

Socialism to Mrs. Besant implied that the instruments necessary for the production of the means of subsistence, i.e. land and capital, should be placed under the control of the community and be utilized for

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<sup>1004</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 78.

<sup>1005</sup> Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 221.

the common good, the general welfare, rather than be left to the cupidity and avarice of private individuals who owned the instruments of production. Land and capital, once made common property, would prevent any individual from exploiting the less fortunate. Thus,

The name Socialist is in itself a fine name, connoting as it does the social union; it is the recognised label of the school which holds as its central doctrine that land and the means of production should be the property of the social union, and not of privileged individuals in it.<sup>1006</sup>

Socialism implied that there would be no individual monopoly in those instruments of production necessary for the national good. It is Socialism, rather than any other system, which claimed that the wealth created by associated effort should be equitably shared by the producers allowing no "idlers" to have a lien upon it. No other system, declares Mrs. Besant, "save that of Socialism makes industry really free and the worker really independent, by substituting co-operation among workers for employed and employing classes."<sup>1007</sup> The creed of Mercantilism stood condemned at the bar of economic and moral judgment, producing the pauper and the millionaire. Socialism was the way to both "national freedom" and the emancipation of the poor and oppressed, recognising no barriers of ". . . nationality, of class, or of creed, but who see a brother in every worker, a friend in every lover of the people."<sup>1008</sup>

The Fabians in those early years had their visions of their new order fixed on England. To Mrs. Besant it appeared more universal in scope; the name Socialist "like the name Atheist, is of no one land:

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<sup>1006</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 2.

<sup>1007</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>1008</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

it is valid in every country; it is whispered on Russian steppe, in German field, in French city, in Italian vineyard."<sup>1009</sup> It was a message of hope for all who cared to listen. She recognised that Socialism in other countries would be a long time in coming, particularly in such "non-Socialist" states people by the "lower races," as in China or India. This seemed understandable since the only action existing between England and these nations was "plunder" and "murder." Also, continues Mrs. Besant,

It will indeed be a long time before the negro is socialised; but we hope it will not be long before England, France, Germany, America, and Italy will be socialised.<sup>1010</sup>

She cites Emile de Laveleye to the effect that the majority of French workmen and professions at most German and Italian Universities were already upholding Socialism. The Zeitgeist seemed to be spreading to Europe, its inevitability certain, and Mrs. Besant as its expositor seeks to hasten its arrival by elucidating the advantages that Socialism had to offer.

To Webb, Individualism was inconsistent with any idea of democratic self-government. The feudal tyranny of the aristocracy and monarchy of the 18th Century had been replaced by the new tyranny of the 19th Century capitalist and the "economic servitude" of the worker.<sup>1011</sup> Both Webb and Mrs. Besant recognize that the cure for the evils of society did not lie in a modified form of individualism; that no mere "charitable palliation," in Webb's phrase, of individualism

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<sup>1009</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>1010</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Scound? p. 75.

<sup>1011</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 12.

could cure the ills of poverty and want.

Against this complacent delusion of the philanthropist, Political Economy emphatically protests. So long as the instruments of production are in unrestrained private ownership, so long must the tribute of the workers to the drones continue: so long will the toilers' reward inevitably be reduced by their exactions.<sup>1012</sup>

Mrs. Besant submits that her Socialism was based on the "recognition of economic facts, on the study of the results which flow inevitably from the present economic system."<sup>1013</sup> She also is aware that Socialism implies more than a change in the present system of Individualism or the manner in which wealth is produced and distributed, however great such an economic change may be. It implies

. . . the substitution, as method, of co-operation for competition in every department of human life, it means the substitution, as aim, of the common good for the personal profit of the individual; it means the placing of the production and distribution of wealth, as well as of all public affairs in which men and women are associated, under the control of bodies elected by and responsible to those who are concerned in them, whether as workers or as citizens, instead of leaving them, as so many of them now are, under individual authority.<sup>1014</sup>

Apart from her greater emphasis on co-operation, she is one with Webb and Shaw and the Fabians in their common conviction that the organization of industry be placed under the effective control of democratically elected bodies rather than in private hands. Her method of the organization of industry is, however, quite another matter, as will be seen.

The question that is of pressing importance for Mrs. Besant is to find a cure for poverty. The co-existence of wealth and poverty,

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<sup>1012</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 11.

<sup>1013</sup>Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 8.

<sup>1014</sup>Annie Besant, "Radicalism and Socialism," (London: Free-thought Publishing Company, 1887), Annie Besant, Essays On Socialism (London: Robert Forder, 1893), p. 4.

huge fortunes and the starving poor, required that some remedy be found. She asks, "Cannot human brain discover some means to put an end to this state of things."<sup>1015</sup> The advent of machinery, which promised much in the way of increased production, reduction in the hours of labor, and an increase in the welfare of the workers, was blighted by the creation of affluent industrialists--of "cottonlords and merchant-princes"--and a starving proletariat. She announces her optimistic faith that a cure was possible; the Fabians were nothing if not optimists.

I believe that the present system, devised by man and founded in greed of gain, may by man be changed; and that man's growing power over external nature may be used to bring comfort and wealth to each, and not, as now, to enrich the few at the cost of the enslavement of the many.<sup>1016</sup>

She was, in fact, seeking to answer the question posed by the first Fabian Tract, Why Are the Many Poor? with the optimistic faith that this need not be so, and could be remedied by intelligent and appropriate action. Thus, she declares of the new Socialist Zeitgeist, of which she quite obviously sees herself as its most challenging apostle,

The Zeitgeist has its mouth in those of its children who have brain to understand, voice to proclaim, courage to stand alone. . . . When such an event occurs a few hearken, study, and then rejoicingly accept the new Truth; these are its pioneers, its apostles, who go out to proclaim it to the as yet unbelieving world. . . . Slowly, against custom and tradition, against selfishness and violence, even against indifference, deadliest foe of all, this band of devoted teachers makes its onwards way . . . and thus the race makes progress, and humanity climbs ever upward towards the perfect life.<sup>1017</sup> [*Italics, the author's*].

In the mid-1880's, Socialism was not popular, and Mrs. Besant set about to make it respectable. To many, she reports, a Socialist is

<sup>1015</sup> Besant, "Modern Socialism," Essays On Socialism, p. 5.

<sup>1016</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>1017</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

one who has his pockets full of bombs and his mind occupied with "assassinations"--an animal to be hunted if he lived under Bismark or persecuted under Victoria.<sup>1018</sup> "Prejudice and passion, not reasoned arguments," are the weapons forged for his destruction.<sup>1019</sup> Socialism had now replaced Radicalism as the "ugly duckling in Society's brood."<sup>1020</sup> Mrs. Besant, who--unlike Webb and Shaw--had a faith in the working class intelligence, seeks to spread its message among the workers. Shaw was certain that only an enlightened minority could overcome the natural inertia of the masses in the bringing about of Socialist measures such as the abolition of private property and the nationalization of rent.<sup>1021</sup> Mrs. Besant, however, is positive that "Once let the working classes understand what Socialism really is, and the present system is doomed."<sup>1022</sup> The Fabians, having no faith in class-war or revolutionary change, placed their emphasis on education and propaganda, and Mrs. Besant seemed quite clearly to be their foremost expositor to the working man.

The Fabians conceived society as a "living body" where each cooperated with all in the production of wealth. Webb writes,

We must abandon the self-conceit of imagining that we are independent units, and bend our jealous minds, absorbed in their own

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<sup>1018</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 1.

<sup>1019</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>1020</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>1021</sup> Shaw, "Proprietors and Slaves," in Lawrence, Bernard Shaw: Platform and Pulpit, p. 10.

<sup>1022</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 1.

cultivation, to this subjection to the higher end, the Common Weal.<sup>1023</sup>

The life of the community "transcends" that of individuals who are its members, and with the rapid advance of Collectivism is ushered in a "conception of a new social nexus, and a new end of social life."<sup>1024</sup> To the Fabians there existed no conflict between the state and the individual. It was

. . . in a new sense, the ideal of Rousseau, that the governing people (the Souverain) should be one and the same as the governed people (the Etat), and that "each, giving the direction of himself to all, should give himself to none."<sup>1025</sup>

Mrs. Besant recognizes that society is an organism in which each member contributes to the good of the whole, but her organic view of society is peculiar to herself. The recognition of Evolution in the world of matter, of the physical dimension, implies that all life proceeds from the "simple to the complex." This principle can be applied, apparently, both to the "psychical world" and the "sociological." Thus, human beings, much as the lowest form of organic life, the simple cell, co-ordinate to form more complex and intricate organisms. The association for the "Common Weal" is not confined to humans. It is seen that wolves hunt in packs, and bees and ants work in communities for the good of their society as a whole. Thus,

Each member of the community yields up something of individual freedom, receiving in exchange the benefits of association, and it is among those who--like the bees and ants--have carried very far the subordination of the unit to the social organism that the most successful communities are to be found.<sup>1026</sup>

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<sup>1023</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 79-80.

<sup>1024</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>1025</sup> Barker, Political Thought in England, p. 217.

<sup>1026</sup> Besant, The Evolution of Society in Essays On Socialism, p. 4.

Kropotkin found support in his idea of "Mutual Aid" in the behavior of animals in Siberia. It does appear that Mrs. Besant is aware of his writings--particularly since she formed the "Friends of Russia" to aid the exiled Russian anarchists.

The idea of the community is universal. Human society is seen as an organism, where the health and vitality of the whole are contingent on the proper functioning of each unit "in correlation not in independence, therefore all that tends towards integration will be recognised as of life, all that tends towards disintegration as of death."<sup>1027</sup> Also, if the future is to be judged by the past, there exists a tendency in human society towards a greater social unity. It appears axiomatic to Mrs. Besant that Society must integrate even more or face disintegration and decay.

Mrs. Besant's Socialist concept of human society as an organism involves, yet further, the question of rights and duties. Society is seen from two distinct points of view, from that in which individuals had rights to begin with or were initially possessed only of duties. The former was no society at all, humans being only isolated atoms, each struggling for his personal gain. The other, which she calls the "biological view of society," is regarded "not as a mass of isolated atoms but as an organic whole, a growth with a common life running through it."<sup>1028</sup> The second concept of society, which emphasized duties rather than rights, is truly Socialist. The first was Individualistic and was no society at all. From this, Mrs. Besant lays

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<sup>1027</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>1028</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 11.

down three propositions,

First that man was essentially a social animal--using the word animal in its widest sense--and could only reach his highest development in society. Secondly, that associated labour was more productive than isolated labour. Thirdly, that for man in his present stage of development, Socialism was necessary for the general happiness and progress.<sup>1029</sup>

Mrs. Besant expresses her dissent from the concept of natural rights as having no historical basis in fact and being "devoid of any answering realities in life." The natural rights of man, to Mrs. Besant, are for him to "grab as much as he can, and to hold all he can grab as long as he can."<sup>1030</sup> Also, continues the Fabian, rights were in no way anterior to society but grew gradually from the social state. Their origin lay in the desire of each individual to protect himself from oppression, "and from the union of many to restrain the aggressor, from public opinion codified as law."<sup>1031</sup> Prior to society and to law--which, apparently, had its source not in custom or precedent but in "public opinion"--there existed no rights at all; and thus the doctrine of "natural rights" is an "idle metaphysical theory, and what we now call the 'rights of man' are those conditions which human experience has shown to be most conducive to happiness."<sup>1032</sup> It appears as if natural rights are somewhat Utilitarian and almost Hobbsian. Also, it has evolved slowly as society developed, society existing to secure these rights for the weak. To the Fabians, the questions of metaphysical theory or natural rights were totally insignificant and were

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<sup>1029</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>1030</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 57.

<sup>1031</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>1032</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

completely ignored; Webb would certainly have none of it. Not so, however, with Mrs. Besant.

The Fabians were evolutionary Socialists, and Mrs. Besant asserts,

. . . it is because I am an evolutionist that I am a Socialist; it is because I see that society is evolving in the direction of Socialism, and that the tendency of the most Radical legislation is to promote the growth of Socialism.<sup>1033</sup>

Much as in the case of biological evolution which sees a gradual progression from the simple cell to the complex organism, society is seen by Mrs. Besant to be evolving from a state of savagery, from a state of embryonic barbarism" through nomad life to settled order, through tribes to nation, through feudalism to industrialism, through industrialism to--Nowither? Evolution complete?"<sup>1034</sup> The evolutionary process is a continuing one, and society must inevitably evolve from a state of Individualistic anarchy where competition reigns to one of associated order and co-operation. She traces the four stages in the "Evolution of Society" as seen by her. Mrs. Besant carries the evolutionary interpretation of history much further than any of the other Fabian "Essayists" and in the process appears to ignore those revolutions which were a part of the history of Europe and America. Her purpose in so fully outlining her evolutionary concept is to show not only the inevitability of the coming of Socialism, but to make explicit the absolute necessity for its adoption in England and other civilized nations "if the civilisation of the present is not to break down as past

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<sup>1033</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>1034</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 3.

civilisations have done."<sup>1035</sup>

In the "Barbaric Period and its Survival," the virtues of the brute prevailed where disputes were solved by war; and the warrior, the strong and cunning were head of the community. Slowly the military chief became the monarch as the "hereditary principle" took effect, and the present monarchy is seen to be both useless and barbaric, being an anachronism in a civilized society which exists only by reason of the inertia of public opinion. Emerging from the time when all men were warriors, a state of "primitive individualism," where strength was the supreme law,<sup>1036</sup> society becomes divided into two classes, Kings and nobles and the workers. The Kings served a function at that early time inasmuch as they defended those whom they tyrannized, but, quite clearly, "The life of the nation was in its workers," mainly agricultural, who were protected by the feudal landlord out of a sense of duty. In fact, there existed far less difference in the manner of life between ". . . lord and villein than now between lord and laborer."<sup>1037</sup> Also, it was the division of society into the propertied and non-propertied classes, the lords and chattel slaves, as in Greece and Rome where the slaves were without rights, that caused ancient civilisations to be destroyed.

On that rock of utter division of classes--of the breaking up of society into practically two nations in every community--on that rock ancient civilisations split, and every one of them in turn went down before a flood of barbarism.<sup>1038</sup>

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<sup>1035</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 78.

<sup>1036</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>1037</sup> Besant, Evolution of Society, p. 6.

<sup>1038</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 80.

As Greece and Rome decayed owing to the division of classes founded on slavery, the rich and oppulent who did not labor growing weak and effeminate; so would it happen in England as the upper classes become idle and profligate.

The growth of medieval industries marked the evolution of society from barbarism. In medieval times handicraftsmen were banded in Guilds, without any accumulation of capital in the hands of a few, analogous to the present industrial system. In fact, the craftsman was ". . . one of a small group, and was trained as a member of a family rather than as a 'hand.'"<sup>1039</sup>

One of the surviving relics of the "Barbaric Period" remains the monarchy and hereditary aristocracy which is

. . . a curious travesty of the scientific truth as to race. The analogy of a high-bred horse and a high-bred man is misleading, for the human breeding is a matter of name, not of qualities. There can be no doubt that a human aristocracy might be bred, by matching men and women who showed in marked degree the qualities which might be selected as admirable, but the aristocracy which proceeds from male idlers, profligate in their undisciplined youth and luxurious in their pampered maturity, matched with female idlers, whose uselessness, vanity, and extravagance are their chief recommendations, is not one which should bear rule in a strong and intellectual nation. To the Barbaric Past it belongs, not to the semi-civilised Present, and the lease of its power will be determined when the workers realise the power which has now passed into their hands.<sup>1040</sup>

The Platonic influence is matched by a strong Republicanism, and like the Fabians her intent is to convince the workers to make use of the power already possessed by them.

The second stage of evolution is entitled "The Industrial Period and its Products" and commences with the invention of the Spinning

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<sup>1039</sup> Besant, Evolution of Society, p. 7.

<sup>1040</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

Jenny by Hargreaves in 1764. Between 1764 and 1776, with the invention of the steam engine by Watts in 1765, began "the vastest revolution in industry the world has known, the birth of a new Period in the Evolution of Society."<sup>1041</sup> The Industrial Revolution with the introduction of machinery enabled those possessing the means of production--the entrepreneurs--to control, brutalise and condemn to poverty the masses. Thus it was only for the past one hundred years that society was faced with the great problem of the aggregation of capital in the possession of a few with the result that "slavery" was revived under a new guise. The unpropertied classes resembled the slaves of former years except that the worker, as slave, worked for a wage and was not a mere chattel. But the principle was the same,

. . . for you have in each case one man taking another man and using his labor for his own purposes--taking the product that the laborer has produced and giving back to him only enough to keep him in working order. (Cheers)<sup>1042</sup>

Both chattel slave and worker worked for a master and not for themselves, having no control over the product of their own labor which passed into the coffers of the lord or capitalist. In return, the producer got a bare subsistence sufficient only for maintaining him in tolerable working order. Even so, the slave was better off than the worker since he was kept in good working condition and fed and sheltered when his utility was over. But the capitalist had found that it was more advantageous to hire his worker for the period of his working life and to discard him thereafter.

The introduction of machinery did nothing in the way of lessen-

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<sup>1041</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>1042</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 83.

ing the toil of the workers; increased production had not meant a rise in wage. Thus, to Mrs. Besant,

The inference is irresistible; machinery is of enormous value in lessening human toil when it is owned by those who produce, and who produce for use, not for profit; it is not of value to those who work it for wages, for the wages depend, not on the worth of the goods produced, but on the competition in the labor-market and the cost of subsistence.<sup>1043</sup>

Mrs. Besant asks, "What sort of England is the Industrial Period going to leave to its successors?"<sup>1044</sup> She compares the robust, stalwart Lincolnshire laborer with the weak emaciated factory "lads." Also, the law should concern itself with the pollution of the atmosphere and of the rivers. "There is no reason," she writes,

. . . why every factory should not consume its own smoke, and the law already existing on this matter should be sternly enforced, by imprisonment, not by fine.<sup>1045</sup>

The tendency of Industrialism to produce "castes" is not overlooked. Trade often becomes hereditary, being handed down in successive generations producing a fixed caste of workers. Should this continue, it would mean the division of society into immobile castes and the formation of "rigid lines of demarcation, the petrification which has befallen some older civilisations."<sup>1046</sup> The influence of the environment on the human organism is called into account. What manner of race, questions Mrs. Besant, will the pallid, unhealthy atmosphere of Industrialization produce where the poor live miserable lives in an

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<sup>1043</sup> Besant, Evolution of Society, pp. 11-12.

<sup>1044</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>1045</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>1046</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

unhealthy milieu,

A high human type cannot be bred in a back slum, trained amid filth and ugliness and clangor, sent to labor ere maturity; it must be bred in pure air, trained amidst sights and sounds that are harmonious and beautiful, educated until mature; then let it turn to labor, and give back to the community the wealth of love and comfort which shielded its earlier years.<sup>1047</sup>

The third stage in the evolution of society is "The Conflict Between Social and Anti-Social Tendencies." This appeared to be of ancient vintage, being the conflict between the forces of integration and disintegration, and is still to be found. It is the conflict between brute survival, having only personal aggrandizement as its objective, with no regard for the welfare of others, and the forces of social consciousness which seek the general good and happiness with the readiness to subordinate personal gratification for the social welfare. The period of Industrialization with its theoretical rationale of laissez-faire economics and Mercantilism provided the stimuli for the anti-social forces. The laws of Political Economy of the time sanctified the pursuit of wealth as a duty, and seized upon Mines, Factories, and Landed Estates as their three primary sources of wealth with disastrous results for the dispossessed. In the Mines,

Manly decency, womanly modesty, childly weakness, all went down before the Juggernaut car of unrestrained competition, until the social tendency, in the guise of law, stepped in to curb the brutality of anti-social greed.<sup>1048</sup>

In the Factories, men and women were overworked until their suffering was partially alleviated by legislation; and the anti-social tendencies in the form of confiscation of land and high rents held sway in the

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<sup>1047</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>1048</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

Landed Estates of the gentry. The cure lay in the law, for the "Law, and law alone, can curb these anti-social tendencies."<sup>1049</sup> The time, it seemed to Mrs. Besant, had not as yet come when man had reached that level of noble altruism which prevented him from profiting at the expense of others.

Yet, it does appear to Mrs. Besant that social tendencies making for integration are already evident. It is seen in the allocation of public money for education, increasing legislative measures and the resort to law to bring about the desired changes in a laissez-faire economy, and the increasing understanding that social effort was needed to bring about relief. She proclaims her ideal which Socialists are called upon to follow,

Enough for each of work, of leisure, of joy; too little for none; such is the Social Ideal. Better strive for it worthily, and fail, than to die without striving for it at all.<sup>1050</sup>

"The Reconcilement of Diverging Interests" is her fourth stage in the progressive Evolution of Society. She feels that among the many features of public life in England, none is more unfortunate than the antagonism between the Individualistic Radical and the Socialist. As a Socialist, she admits that

. . . it is with much regret that I am forced to acknowledge that the first provocation came from the Socialist side, and it was the uncalled-for and un-scrupulous abuse poured out on Radical leaders and workers which stirred up the anger of the Radicals, and caused reprisals as bitter as the attacks.<sup>1051</sup>

Obviously she has the Social Democratic Federation and Hyndman in mind,

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<sup>1049</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>1050</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>1051</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 3.

thinking of their attacks on Bradlaugh. To Mrs. Besant, the Radical is the "half-fledged Socialist," however indignant some would be at being so described,<sup>1052</sup> and her intent is to bring them together as a united force in the cause of reform and progress.

No worse mischief can be done to the cause of labor, no more serious harm can be done to progress, than by setting Radicals and Socialists in antagonism, instead of binding them together; than by putting in opposite camps those who ought to be banded against the common foe.<sup>1053</sup>

In her efforts to combine the Radical and Socialist against the common enemy of monopolism and capitalistic exploitation, she explains that the Radical has already accepted the Socialist theory of land nationalization and favors the State as being the "sole landowner." This has been an important factor in the development of the Socialist movement since "it familiarizes the national mind with the idea of the state absorbing the functions hitherto belonging to a class."<sup>1054</sup> Such Radical institutions as Land Courts, together with Radical measures as the determination of "judicial rents" and the legal restrictions placed on the "rights" of the landlords, are seen as steps towards Socialism. The introduction by Bradlaugh of a Bill for the expropriation of land held by landlords who did not cultivate lands which were cultivable and which were to be forfeited to the State was, in itself, a clear Socialist measure. Thus,

The shrinking of English politicians from the name [Socialist] does not prevent their advance towards the thing, and the Liberty and

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<sup>1052</sup> Annie Besant, "The Socialist Movement," Westminster Review, CXXVI (July, 1886), 219

<sup>1053</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 4.

<sup>1054</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 219.

Property League is justified in its view that politics are drifting steadily in a Socialist direction.<sup>1055</sup>

If the Radical favors the State as being the sole landowner, she asks the Individualist to take one further step in the direction of Socialism by accepting the idea of the State as being the "sole capitalist."

Attempting to "reconcile" the interests of the Radical and Socialist, Mrs. Besant holds that when any school of thought has gained a substantial following and has existed for any period of time it has some viability and credibility, possessing a part of the truth. Often such "truths" are held so intensely that its adherents are blind to other doctrines, which, if united, would form a "perfect whole." Thus,

Truths which are complementary to each other are held as though they were mutually destructive, and those who should be brothers in a common strife turn their weapons against each other's breasts. Such has been the conflict between the "Individualistic" and the "Socialistic" schools; each holds a truth and does well to cling to it, for neither truth could be lost without injury to Society; the whole truth is to be found by joining the twain, for there is needed for the highest humanity the perfecting of the Individual within a highly organised Society.<sup>1056</sup>

Attempting to demonstrate her point of view, she contends that the Manchester School has contributed to progress inasmuch as it has demonstrated that the productivity of labor is enhanced by co-operation--the socialization of the method of production--and division of labor. It has been a vast improvement upon cottage industries. But its defects lie in its deification of the competitive ethic, the reduction of men to mere machines, and the overriding concern for wealth-getting sanctified by the laws of laissez-faire Political Economy, derived obviously from the Physiocratic doctrine of free trade, freedom of con-

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<sup>1055</sup> Ibid., pp. 219-220.

<sup>1056</sup> Besant, Evolution of Society, p. 19.

tract, free competition, and limitation of the powers of the State.

Turning to the "Socialist School," she finds that it contains the "truth that man is a social animal, and that his progress must lie in the direction of closer social union."<sup>1057</sup> The Socialists have learned from the Manchester School the ways of production on a large scale, but, aware that it leads to extremes of wealth and poverty, seek to claim the raw materials and instruments of production as common property. Both the "Individualistic School," which apparently to Mrs. Besant includes the extreme Anarchist, and the Socialist have as their "vital truth that free play for human faculties, encouragement not discouragement of variations, are necessary to human progress."<sup>1058</sup> She finds a similarity in the objects of the Individualist and Socialist. "The Individualist admits that the claims of the unit must yield if they come into conflict with those of society."<sup>1059</sup> This does not appear to be sound Individualistic philosophy. The Collectivist Socialist, who, quite erroneously, is seen as placing the rights of the State above the Individual (Mrs. Besant makes suitable amends for this lapse), recognizes

. . . that he is working for a higher social state in order that each individual may have room and opportunity to develop to the highest point of which he is capable.<sup>1060</sup>

Thus, each having the common end of the good of the individual, it appears feasible that their antagonism should cease, even if their methods

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<sup>1057</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>1058</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>1059</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>1060</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

vary. The Socialist, unlike the Individualist, advocating the gradual nationalization of the means of production.

Another basis of common accord between the Radical and Socialist was the role of law in a changing society; particularly in matters concerning tax-supported compulsory education, factory inspection, sanitary measures, and recreational facilities. Also,

The organism, born into and growing up in a healthier environment, will be more vigorous and therefore more capable of evolving of higher personality, a more marked personality.<sup>1061</sup>

None of the Fabians dwelt as much on the relationship between "organism" and environment as Mrs. Besant, though they were quite aware of the evil effects of poverty. Also, Mrs. Besant clearly appreciates the role of the Radical Individualist, particularly in land reform, as a step towards Socialism. G. D. H. Cole, writing of Bradlaugh and the Secularists, does say ". . . his movement itself must also be regarded, despite his opposition to Socialism, as having helped to prepare the way for it."<sup>1062</sup> Webb admits in his "Essay" that the Radical is rapidly becoming a Collectivist as a result of his "practical experience,"<sup>1063</sup> but in the main appears to see Individualism as anachronistic. The Individualistic ethic has been superseded by the Socialist, his principles wholly discredited and his methods condemned in its failure to deal with the problems of the "administration of industry and the distribution of wealth."<sup>1064</sup>

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<sup>1061</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>1062</sup> Cole, History of Socialist Thought, Vol. II, p. 393.

<sup>1063</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 82.

<sup>1064</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 6.

Individualism, being essentially static in character, had failed to appreciate that all society was in a state of constant evolution and flux. It was also the cause of a new type of feudalism, a result of the private ownership of land and capital. To Webb, the Individualist was offering as a solution to the social problems of the time "an untried and nebulous Utopia," whilst the Socialist

. . . occupies the superior position of calling only for the conscious and explicit adoption and extension of principles of social organization to which the stern logic of facts has already driven the practical man.<sup>1065</sup>

Webb saw no way to reconcile the differences between Socialism and Individualism. Shaw appears to ignore the issue almost totally.

Mrs. Besant recognizes in the growing interference of the State the growth of an "unconscious Socialism" as did Webb and Shaw. It was seen not only in the expansion of "Radical" legislation but also in the increasing trend of municipalities to extend the sphere of their activity. Glancing backwards since the Reform Bill of 1832, it becomes evident that there existed an unconscious growth of Socialism in England. At the beginning of the Century, little legislation existed, and the State remained remote from any attempt to interfere between the employer and the employed. When pure Individualism reigned, the worker--living on the brink of poverty--was forced to sell his labor to survive. Until 1830 no laws existed preventing the exploitation of the worker who worked sixteen hours a day. Soon the passage of the Education Act, the Factory Acts, Shipping Acts, Land Acts and Ground Game Acts, Employers' Liability Acts and Artisans' Dwelling Acts established the

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<sup>1065</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

principle of legislative interference in the life of the community. They served to increase corporate action and lessen individual initiative, and the numerous changes made by the Acts of Parliament, Mrs. Besant feels, will eventually result in State Socialism. And so, the laws once tailored for the advantage of the select were now extended in defense of the majority against the exploitation of the few and "Everywhere the old ideas of free contract, of non-interference, are being outraged by modern legislation."<sup>1066</sup> "Socialism," then,

. . . is the outcome, the legitimate and necessary outcome, of Radicalism; that the main current of Radical legislation, despite little eddies and backwaters, sets towards Socialism.<sup>1067</sup>

In removing entrenched privilege, giving the people a share of political power, attacking the monopolism of the landlord and regulating the relations between the worker and his employer, "Radical legislation" appears to be "penetrated by the Socialist spirit, and has already leavened the community with Socialist ideas."<sup>1068</sup> Another effect seen by Mrs. Besant as a product of the onrush of Radical legislation is:

The idea of the State as an outside power is fading, and the idea of the State as an organized community is coming into prominence. In the womb of time the new organism is growing: shall the new birth come in peace or in revolution, heralded by patient endeavour or by roar of cannon? This one thing I know, that come it will, whether men work for it or hinder; for all the mighty, silent forces of evolution make for Socialism, for the establishment of the Brotherhood of Man.<sup>1069</sup>

The set of the tide is for the inevitable coming of Socialism, it being one of the dominant features of the present tendencies of

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<sup>1066</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, pp. 3-4.

<sup>1067</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 4.

<sup>1068</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>1069</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 230.

English society, Mrs. Besant states. She also notes that John Morley, in his Life of Cobden, mentions that in England, where the Socialist influence was small, there was a body of Socialist legislation greater than could be found elsewhere.<sup>1070</sup> Also, Herbert Spencer, in his "Man versus the State," summarized the legislation of the past quarter of a century to show the increase of State interference during the era of Liberal power.<sup>1071</sup> Yet it appears to Mrs. Besant that more is to come, the advances made by "Radical Legislation" having only, as yet, partially liberated labor from the grip of capital.<sup>1072</sup>

Despite the fact that Radical legislation had contributed to the growth of Socialism, it seemed to Mrs. Besant that the Radicals advocated particular remedies on the basis of their "individual usefulness," failing to appreciate the underlying tendencies of the legislative enactments. The major difference between the Radicals and Socialists

. . . in dealing with these practical questions is that Radicals take the steps towards Socialism without recognising whither they are going; while the Socialists see the goal as well as the steps, and recognise the general tendency of legislation as well as the separate Acts of Parliament. They have risen from empiricism to science.<sup>1073</sup>

Despite this difference, there need exist no reason for antagonism or any cause to prevent mutual co-operation in matters of common concern. It should be obvious to the Radical that the major thrust of the legis-

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<sup>1070</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 4.

<sup>1071</sup> See Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, pp. 8-10, for an extract of Spencer's writing.

<sup>1072</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 14.

<sup>1073</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 10.

lation passed during her generation was tending towards greater collective control.

In the growth of industrialism is also seen an expansion of the powers of the State. To Mrs. Besant it seemed always important to study the present in the perspective of the historical past. There had been attempts by the State during the Middle Ages to regulate industry, particularly in the 14th Century when the first edict was passed which attempted to limit wages. It was unsuccessful since the workers demanded more, and it suited their masters to pay higher wages--the law became imperative since both classes were unwilling to accept State regulation. However, the Statute of Apprentices had proved successful. With the industrial age came the conflict between classes and a degradation so horrible as to frighten Parliament into passing the Factory Acts and other enactments. With a growing Socialism has come about a greater improvement and with it,

There has been a growing recognition on the part of the community that it is concerned with something more than the regulation of business relations. The responsibility of the community for the feeding of its helpless members had long been recognised. (Hear, hear)<sup>1074</sup>

The growing power of the State and the community was also recognized by Webb. The Socialist spirit was seen to pervade the smaller representative bodies in the country, i.e. corporations and municipalities. The substitution of collective effort for individual enterprise in such matters as the supply of water and gas had marked the growth of municipal Socialism and the spread of an "unconscious Socialism." Mrs. Besant feels,

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<sup>1074</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 85.

So blind are many to the real character of the changes taking place before their eyes, that while they would denounce the supply of milk or bread by the municipality as sheer Socialism, they regard with approval the supply by it of gas and water.<sup>1075</sup>

Not only has the municipalization or socialization of gas and water proved to be more economical and efficient to the consumer, but it implies a move in the direction of placing the distribution of the necessities of life in the control of a democratically elected body of representatives of the community who conduct the utilities for the benefit of those who elect them. The advantages which accrue to the community were demonstrable as in the case of Nottingham where the municipality, having taken over the supply of gas, had used its profits in the building of a college for literary, scientific, and artistic training.<sup>1076</sup> The Fabians were not nationalizers in the sense that they wished to bring all industries under centralized control. They believed, rather, that Democracy required local or municipal ownership of many kinds of industry and a strong base of local self-government.

The growth of Socialism in the municipalities must accompany its expansion over the entire State. The Post Office is an example. The organization of the task of collecting and distributing letters could be applied to all aspects of industry. Thus would labor be organized more efficiently and the profits accrue to the nation as a whole rather than to private shareholders or capitalists. In the place of individual gain, the good of the community would be paramount. Mrs. Besant states,

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<sup>1075</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 12.

<sup>1076</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 87.

Is there any difference in principle between the state collecting the letters of a district and collecting the goods manufactured in it? between distributing the letters and distributing the goods?<sup>1077</sup>

Mrs. Besant, as did Shaw and Webb, recognized in the Post Office in particular and the socialization of municipalities the increasing role of the State and the community in the corporate life of the nation. Webb, in his "Essay," writes,

Step by step the political power and political organization of the country have been used for industrial ends, until to-day the largest employer of labor is one of the ministers of the Crown (the Postmaster-General); and almost every conceivable trade is, somewhere or other, carried on by parish, municipality, or the National Government itself without the intervention of any middleman or capitalist.<sup>1078</sup>

The State now regulates, controls, inspects, and supervises nearly all industrial functions, and the process of socialization is expected to extend into other capitalistic enterprises. The rapid spread of Collectivism is obvious to Webb who sees England as ". . . already the most Socialist of all European communities."<sup>1079</sup> Shaw, like Webb, recognizes the ". . . enormous convenience and cheapness of socialistic or collectivist charges over those of private enterprise."<sup>1080</sup> In proving the extent to which the community has taken into its own hands the organization of labor and the increasing role of municipalities, Webb lists a number of trades, organizations, services, and public utilities which are already under community control.<sup>1081</sup> Thus, "Step by step the com-

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<sup>1077</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 14.

<sup>1078</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 66.

<sup>1079</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 14.

<sup>1080</sup> Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 227.

<sup>1081</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 66-68; also (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 5, p. 19.

munity has absorbed them, wholly or partially, and the area of private exploitation has been lessened."<sup>1082</sup> Mrs. Besant, like Webb, demonstrates that what is now of the essence is that municipalization be extended to as many urban communities in the country as possible. Recognizing the power of persuasion based on facts, their way is to make both public opinion and public enterprises aware of their opportunities and obligations. The Fabians were, not without cause, called "gas and water Socialists." It was in the growth of municipalities that Webb, in particular, saw the socialization of industrial life. The expansion of the sphere of action of local governments was proof of the progress of Socialism. He gives a number of instances of cities and towns which had provided, built, and maintained for their citizens "common lodging houses," "science lectures," "schools of design," and "cattle markets."<sup>1083</sup> The expansion of "Municipal Socialism" was an article of Fabian faith, for Mrs. Besant, Webb, and Shaw.

Mrs. Besant, however, goes a step further. She already perceives that from municipalization to the organization of distribution is but a step, there being no difference between production and distribution in principle. The establishment of "municipal stores" which would distribute the goods manufactured occurs to her--"stores that would soon become popular from the purity of their goods and the lowness of their prices."<sup>1084</sup>

The advantage of "civilisation" appears dubious to Mrs. Besant.

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<sup>1082</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 67.

<sup>1083</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

<sup>1084</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 12.

The question "Whether on the whole civilisation has been an advantage?" a continuing theme of academic discourse since Rousseau won his prize for his essay "Has the restoration of the Sciences contributed to purify or to corrupt Manners?"<sup>1085</sup> is one that needs once more to be examined. "Is it rational," Mrs. Besant questions, "that the progress of society should be as lopsided as it is?"<sup>1086</sup> that "civilisation" should bring for some the joys of art, beauty, and a gracious life; while others would be condemned to vice and misery, the "gin-palace," and the slum.

It is little wonder that, under these circumstances, there are many who have but scant respect for our social fabric, and who are apt to think that any change cannot land them in a condition worse than that in which they already find themselves.<sup>1087</sup>

She declares her Socialist allegiance is a result of the obvious failure of the present civilization, and she asserts the optimistic faith of the Fabian that conditions in England are already making the country ripe for Socialism. However, such change is not to be brought about by any means--by the starving poor in an outburst of revolutionary ardor, any such "popular revolution"

. . . sweeping from the slums over the happier parts of the towns, would not be a revolution set going by men of genius, directed by men of experience and of knowledge as was the French Revolution of 1789. It would be a mad outburst of misery, of starvation, of recklessness, which would for a brief space sweep everything before it, and behind it would leave a desolate wilderness.<sup>1088</sup>

Change must, therefore, be democratic and peaceful, not engineered by a

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<sup>1085</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 212.

<sup>1086</sup>Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 4.

<sup>1087</sup>Ibid., p. 4; Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 212.

<sup>1088</sup>Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 4.

frenzied mob. The responsibility for changing the social system lies, in the main, on the intelligent citizen. Even so, the spread of Education and Religious scepticism among the masses has produced an "educated proletariat" who, awakened to their plight, are capable of working out their own salvation, refusing "any longer to act as the basis on which is reared the pyramid of civilisation."<sup>1089</sup> The poor, being no longer altogether ignorant, were

. . . sowing the seeds of a noble discontent with unworthy conditions, while at the same time they are developing and training the intelligence, and are converting aimless, sullen grumbling into a rational determination to understand the Why of the present, and to discover the How of change.<sup>1090</sup>

The educated proletariat could no longer accept its fate as the support of a corrupt civilization which

. . . rests on the degradation of the workers; in order that they may accept their lot they must be kept poor, ignorant, submissive; the culture of their superiors is paid for with their ignorance; the graceful leisure of the aristocrat is purchased by the rough toil of the plebian; . . . Such is modern civilisation. Brilliant and beautiful where it rises into the sunlight, its foundation is of human lives made rotten with suffering. Whited sepulchre in very truth, with its outer coating of princes and lords, of bankers and squires, and within fitted with dead men's bones, the bones of the poor who builded it.<sup>1091</sup>

Mrs. Besant waxed eloquent whatever the cause. While her faith in an "educated proletariat" was not shared by her colleagues, she saw it--together with the spread of religious scepticism, which accentuates the value of an earthly existence where poverty is no longer a prelude to heavenly bliss--as conditions receptive for the flowering of Socialism in England. Mrs. Besant is, however, aware that the discontent of the

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<sup>1089</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>1090</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 213.

<sup>1091</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 5.

present system is not limited to the poor. Those who sought a complete change in the methods of both the production and distribution of wealth could be found in all classes. The Socialist movement in England at the time was recognized to be far more of a middle-class one, its creed being upheld ". . . as an intellectual conviction by the thoughtful and the studious, and is preached by them to the workers."<sup>1092</sup> But she appears sanguine that once the message is got across to the workers, it will unite patrician, intellectual, and plebian in a joint effort to destroy capitalistic exploitation.

The conditions were receptive for the growth of Socialism in England, and "The sowers who are to scatter the seed have been fashioned."<sup>1093</sup> Thoughtful individuals had already noted the frequent periods of depression and inflation in the past century, the decline of the prominence of England in the world's markets, and the inherent weakness of the industrial system. The Fabians took their inspiration from English sources; however, Mrs. Besant posits that the insularity of English intellectual and philosophical thought has been, to an extent, modified and influenced by European thinkers. It was, therefore, inevitable that foreign influences should pervade "Sociology" and gain the attention of students of social problems. Apparently, to Mrs. Besant, the works of such as Marx, Engels, Strauss, Hegel, and Kant had not reached the majority of Englishmen, yet had influenced a small band of English thinkers. Nevertheless, Mrs. Besant in 1886 is wise enough to recognize that the English brand of Socialism has its own

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<sup>1092</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>1093</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 214.

distinctive coloration, the German influence being diluted and influenced by English traditions and custom.

English Socialism shows, at its best, the influence of the open-air of English political life, the tolerance of diversity of thought which is bred of free speech; it is less arrogant, less intolerant, than it is with Germans, or with those English who are most directly under German influence. In Germany the intolerance of oppression has caused intolerance of revolt; here the very power of the democracy has a tendency to sober its speech, and to make it take its own way in the quiet consciousness of its resistless strength. This peculiarity of English life must modify Socialism, and incline it to resort, if such resort be possible, to methods of legislation rather than to methods of dynamite.<sup>1094</sup>  
 [Italics, the author's]

Mrs. Besant professes her faith in non-Utopianism. "Socialists," she writes, "are not fools enough to believe that they can settle beforehand every detail of a future condition of society."<sup>1095</sup> Also, Socialism is natural as it is inevitable, a product of the evolutionary process. "It fixes its gaze on the vast changes wrought by evolution, not the petty variations made by catastrophes."<sup>1096</sup> Mrs. Besant is certain

There will never be a point at which a society crosses from Individualism to Socialism. The change is ever going forward; and our society is well on the way to Socialism. All we can do is to consciously co-operate with the forces at work, and thus render the transition more rapid than it would otherwise be.<sup>1097</sup>

The Non-Utopian Socialism of Mrs. Besant, Shaw, and Webb implied the destruction of private property in the means of production and allowed the economic forces to fashion the establishment of a Socialist state

<sup>1094</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>1095</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 132.

<sup>1096</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 187.

<sup>1097</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

with additional promptings by intelligent men. Mrs. Besant asserts, "We do not propose to start a new heaven and a new earth with laws different from what they are now,"<sup>1098</sup> but to erect a more viable, durable society on a sounder economic basis. Soon, however, in her scheme for the organization of industry under Socialism, her non-Utopianism, so declared, is to appear visionary at best.

Mrs. Besant was equally at odds, as were Shaw and Webb, with Utopian experiments such as those of Brook Farm and New Lanark. She writes, "The tendency to think of complete social change as a possible occurrence has come down to the present generation as an inheritance of the past."<sup>1099</sup> Attempts to bring about a better social state by "earnest and noble-hearted men during the last hundred years"<sup>1100</sup> had been doomed to failure. Even if the attempts of Owen failed, they did give rise to a co-operative movement; "and the impulse to seek some rational system of society, since his time, never quite died out of England."<sup>1101</sup> Mrs. Besant reminds her audience:

Remember it was the noblest men who did this. Utopian dreamers or not, they were the nobler outcome of humanity. All who long for a nobler life on earth must at times dream of some Utopia. (Hear, hear.) And it was better to have noble dreams even, than to rest satisfied with the brutal gratifications of gain and greed. Is it therefore, because some have made their Utopias too perfect, that we shall not strive to realise something better than the Pandemonium we have now? (Cheers).<sup>1102</sup>

Webb, like Mrs. Besant, pays a passing tribute to "Utopian dreamers,"

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<sup>1098</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 132.

<sup>1099</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 213.

<sup>1100</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 5.

<sup>1101</sup> Ibid., p. 7. C. E. M. Joad in his footnote on p. 40 in Introduction to Modern Political Theory does recognize the importance of Owen's influence on the Fabians.

<sup>1102</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 55.

"the little knot of noble-minded enthusiasts who broke for us the chains of the oligarchic tyranny of the eighteenth century."<sup>1103</sup> Both recognize the futility of isolated islands of Socialism in an ocean of Individualism. This was merely to create small Socialist pockets which could in no way compete with an Individualistic society having control of accumulated capital, means of transportation, and the instruments of production. Socialism could only be achieved by the peaceful conversion of the majority to its ideals and by the socialization of the means of production already in existence. Socialism, in fact,

. . . is no wild scheme, no Utopia impossible of realisation. It is a carefully-reasoned scheme of production, distribution, and administration, which, <sup>1104</sup> it is contended is better than the monopolist system of today.

What the Socialists desire are not isolated communities of self-sufficiency such as the Amana Community, The Harmony Society near Pittsburgh, the Separatists of Zoar, Ohio, The Shakers, the Perfectionists of Oneida and Wallingford or the Aurora and Bethel Communes, but to control the ". . . railways and the canals and the plant that they and their fellows have made, and not to leave these to the competitive system whilst they go out naked into the wilderness to make more (Cheers)."<sup>1105</sup>

The cure lay not in a piecemeal reform of society or the saving of a few from the evils of Individualism but in "Modern Socialism." It implied the abandonment of the shibboleths of spurious Utopianism and Mercantilism. Webb writes,

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<sup>1103</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 5.

<sup>1104</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 20.

<sup>1105</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 105.

Modern Socialism is, accordingly, not a faith in an artificial Utopia, but a rapidly-spreading conviction, as yet only partially conscious of itself, that social health and consequently human happiness is something apart from and above the separate interests of individuals, requiring to be consciously pursued as an end in itself; that the lesson of evolution in social development is the substitution of consciously regulated coordination among the units of each organism to their internecine competition; that the production and distribution of wealth, like any other public function, cannot safely be entrusted to the unfettered freedom of individuals, but needs to be organized and controlled for the benefit of the whole community; that this can be imperfectly done by means of legislative restriction and taxation, but is eventually more advantageously accomplished through the collective enterprise of the appropriate administrative unit in each case; and that the best government is accordingly that which can safely and successfully administer most. <sup>1106</sup>

It was clear to Webb and Mrs. Besant that the clash of private interests was incompatible with a proper, well-ordered social system and the good of labor.

To Mrs. Besant, "Modern" or "Scientific" Socialism--the terms appear synonymous--are not the same as Utopian Socialism, that

. . . which is thought out by the student in seclusion, and which gives a complete scheme full of elaborate details on every point--a scheme which it is proposed to impose from without upon society. <sup>1107</sup>

"Modern" or "Scientific" Socialism has wider aims than the saving of a few individuals or a fragmented, piecemeal reconstruction of society. It appears to deal largely with the question of poverty, to get at the basic underlying causes of poverty, "to find out how fortunes are made; why commercial crises occur; what are the real relations of capital and labor at the present time." <sup>1108</sup> Much as Webb uses the term "Sociolo-

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<sup>1106</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 69, pp. 5-6.

<sup>1107</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 4.

<sup>1108</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 9.

gy,"<sup>1109</sup> Mrs. Besant uses the term "Scientific" or "Modern"--to each it would appear to imply the correct, careful study of society based on the irrefutable laws of Political Economy and removed from any sentimental emotionalism or Utopianism. It is, to Mrs. Besant, ". . . a reasoned scheme based on political economy," which seeks to change the economic basis of society not by any sudden impulse or Utopian schemes but by ". . . rational and thoughtful argument, convincing the brain of man."<sup>1110</sup> Political Economy, having supplied Socialism with a scientific basis, has been instrumental in ridding it of

Appeals to the emotions by means of word-pictures of the sufferings and degradation of the industrious poor, [which] may rouse sympathy, may even excite to riot, but can never bring about fundamental changes in society. The intellect must be convinced ere we can look for any wise movement in the direction of organic improvement; and while the passion of the ignorant has its revolutionary value, it is on the wisdom and foresight of the instructed that we must rely for the work of social reconstruction.<sup>1111</sup>

The most important thing for Mrs. Besant was that Socialism was primarily an economic movement based on the writings of orthodox Economic Science such as those by Ricardo or Mill. "In truth," Mrs. Besant writes, "Socialism founds part of its disapproval of the present industrial system on the very facts pointed out by orthodox economists."<sup>1112</sup>

In setting out to analyze the way in which wealth is produced and accumulated by the capitalist and landlord and in seeking the causes of extreme wealth and poverty which was so salient a feature of the

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<sup>1109</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 80.

<sup>1110</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 5.

<sup>1111</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 216.

<sup>1112</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

capitalist system, Mrs. Besant examines the three factors necessary for the production of wealth, i.e. "Natural Agents" or Land, Capital, and Labor. The "transitional organisms" in which the landlord tills his own land or the capitalist works in his own mill are exceptions to the rule and may be discounted.<sup>1113</sup> Shaw admits that he had often been reproached for his emphasis on the economic side of Socialism,<sup>1114</sup> and Mrs. Besant, in her examination of the factors of production and her proposal of definite economic measures, does give it some emphasis. To both Shaw and Mrs. Besant, the landlord is a "thief" having taken unfairly by force or fraud that which does not belong to him. The landlord, as an idle class member, lives on the profits of the labor of others. Capitalism is a ". . . legalised system of thieving."<sup>1115</sup> The land belongs to the owner who does nothing to create wealth, the land itself being enriched by the

. . . toil of ages, wrought out by the mighty unseen forces, finds its end in my Lord Emptyhead, who stretches out his useless hands over the noble product, and cries to his countless brothers, "This is mine!"<sup>1116</sup>

No wealth can be produced without the consent of the landlord who owns the natural agents. She quotes Mill,

The only person, besides the labourer and the capitalist, whose consent is necessary to production, and who can claim a share of the produce as the price of that consent, is the person who, by

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<sup>1113</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 218.

<sup>1114</sup>See Shaw, Fabian Tract No. 45, The Impossibilities of Anarchism (5th reprint; London: The Fabian Society, 1911), p. 3.

<sup>1115</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 65.

<sup>1116</sup>Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 6.

the arrangements of society, possesses exclusive power over some natural agent.<sup>1117</sup>

The landlord, by virtue of his position as monopolist, can obtain wealth which the dispossessed proletariat can only acquire by arduous labor. Owning the raw materials, he can claim the right to tax the labor of those who work for him.

Thus Dukes of Westminster, of Bedford, and of Portland; Marquises of Londonderry, of Anglesey, and of Bure; Earls of Derby and of Dudley; with many another beside; all these grow ever wealthier, not because they work, but because their ancestors by force or fraud got grip of the soil, and in days when the people were unrepresented made laws which secured to them and their descendants the monstrous monopoly of natural agents.<sup>1118</sup>

As population multiplies and presses more heavily on the means of subsistence, the landowner increases his rent, and thus it becomes obvious that as long as there is private property in land so long will the proletariat lie at the mercy of the property owner and poverty will result. Also, echoing Henry George, since the capitalist will compete for raw materials which are more advantageously located, he pays a higher price for the land, resulting in a greater Rent demanded by the idle owner. No progress is thus possible until the landlord is more than compensated for his investment, and so

The whole nation is at the mercy of a comparatively small class, so long as it consents to admit that this class has a right to own the ground on which the nation lives. Here is a point at which Socialism finds itself in direct antagonism to the present system of society.<sup>1119</sup>

Passing from the landlord, who has a monopoly of the natural

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<sup>1117</sup> Mill, Principles of Political Economy, in Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 218.

<sup>1118</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 6.

<sup>1119</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 218.

agents, to the Capitalist, who has sole control over the means of production, Mrs. Besant examines the basis for the existence of Capital and wealth. Capital is accumulated by withholding from those who produce the greater share of the value produced by them; it is obtained by the "partial confiscation of the results of labor."<sup>1120</sup> Mrs. Besant recalls that in societies based on slave-labor, the owner confiscated the entire product of slave labor. However, as civilization progressed, the so-called "free-labor" replaced "slave-labor" and "serf-labor." Capital is derived from unpaid labor, though now of the wage-earner. Also, the Economists see another factor now at work in the production of Capital. Marshall stated, Capital is "the result of labor and abstinence."<sup>1121</sup> Thus, wherever Capital exists, it is the result of two factors--labor and the abstinence from the consumption of the entire profits derived from the labor of others. It is the product of labor and saving. Shaw puts forth a similar argument. Capital, he writes,

. . . is provided for by the proprietors not consuming the whole excess over wages of the produce of the labor of their other wage workers . . . capital can claim to be the result of saving, or, as one ingenious apologist neatly put it, the reward of abstinence.<sup>1122</sup>

Also, Capital is never found in the possession of the industrious, as Mill recognized,

In a rude and violent state of society it continually happens that the person who has Capital is not the very person who has saved it, but some one who, being stronger, or belonging to a more powerful community, has possessed himself of it by plunder. And even in a state of things in which property was protected, the increase of

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<sup>1120</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 29.

<sup>1121</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 220; also Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 30.

<sup>1122</sup> Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 34-35.

Capital has usually been, for a long time, mainly derived from privations which, though essentially the same with saving, are not generally called by that name, because not voluntary. The actual producers have been slaves, compelled to produce as much as force could extort from them, and to consume as little as the self-interest or the usually very slender humanity of their task-masters would permit.<sup>1123</sup>

It is for these reasons that Socialists agree, says Mrs. Besant, that there should be no private property in capital. A man who does not inherit or own land or capital can only exist by sale of his labor for that which it will fetch.<sup>1124</sup>

The Wealth of the Capitalist is obtained by forcing the laborer to accept as his Wage far less than the value created by him. Driven to accept whatever wage is offered by the pressure of competition and the cost of living, he is faced with the choice between starvation and exploitation. Naturally, Mrs. Besant is aware that the Capitalist will employ labor only when there is a profit to be made, "that is when the capitalist can get out of his 'hands' more value than he returns to them as wage--will he employ them."<sup>1125</sup> Also in his desire for wealth, the Capitalist is guided solely by the maxim caveat emptor. In his business dealings he takes full advantage of the ignorance or the need of the seller. It is thus

. . . that the weakest should go to the wall; that feeling should not interfere with business; that labour should be bought at the lowest possible price, and as much got out of it as may be; that trade morality differs from the morality of private life;--all these maxims the Socialist regards as the evil fruits of the perpetuation among men of the struggle for existence; a struggle which,

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<sup>1123</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, pp. 30-31.

<sup>1124</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 17.

<sup>1125</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 7.

however inevitable among brutes, is from his point of view unworthy of human civilization.<sup>1126</sup>

Machines, which should have lessened toil, have made fortunes for the few who possess them. The Capitalist is in a position to say to his fellow-man:

You shall use my machinery on condition that you are content with bare subsistence,<sup>1127</sup> and leave to me the wealth which flows from you and the machine.

As long as the possession of mechanical advantages lies with a few, so long will they be in a position to profit while the producer is forced to accept a mere fraction of the value produced by him as wage. Capital, being the result of unpaid labor, the profit of the Capitalist is the difference between the price or wage paid to his workers and the wealth produced by them. The answer is to place Capital "under the control of the community."<sup>1128</sup>

Mrs. Besant turns to an examination of how wage is determined or the conditions which regulate the market-price of labor. Webb does mention that since labor is to be had for the asking, the wage is not the legitimate value of labor or the "price" of his worth. The owners of the instruments of production reap their benefits in the form of rent and interest.<sup>1129</sup>

The Fabians did not seek to abolish the wage system, but sought to establish a standard allowance for the maintenance of all the workers in the community in place of wages fixed by a competitive economy.

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<sup>1126</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 217-218.

<sup>1127</sup>Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 7.

<sup>1128</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 18.

<sup>1129</sup>See (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 6.

"The worker in the factory gets," declares Webb,

. . . absolutely no advantage from the machinery which causes the product of his labour to be multiplied a hundredfold. . . . The whole advantage of industrial capital, like the whole advantage of superior land, necessarily goes to him who legally owns it. The mere worker can have none of them. "The remuneration of labour as such," wrote Professor Cairnes in 1874, "skilled or unskilled can never rise above its present level."<sup>1130</sup>

By the "abolition of the wage-system" as presently understood, Webb means the removal of the current practice in capitalism by which a worker's wage is not determined with any reference to his quota of the national product, the conditions necessary to maintain him and his family in any degree of comfort. The wages determined by the competitive struggle are to be replaced by an allowance for the worker's maintenance determined by that worker's need and the condition of the national economy.

Mrs. Besant accepts the Ricardian theory of the "iron law of wages" and recognizes that wages invariably tend to fall to the minimum on which a laborer can exist.<sup>1131</sup> Also quoting the arguments of Cairnes, Sidgwick, and Jevons, she posits that the natural tendency in the present system is to deflate wages to an absolute minimum, to a level below that required for a healthy life. She writes,

Mr. Sidgwick points out that wherever laborers belong to the capitalist--as the horse and the ox belong to him--then they have a fair subsistence to keep them in working order; but he says that the pressure of competition has forced the wage-laborer below a fair subsistence; and that is the point to which the wage continually tends. (Hear, hear.)<sup>1132</sup>

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<sup>1130</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>1131</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 217.

<sup>1132</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 34.

Wage is determined by competition for employment, the law of supply and demand, and is checked in its decline by the standard of living. It is impossible for the laborer to work for any less. The outcome is a perpetual strife between the employer and employed.

If an employer requires fifty laborers, and two hundred laborers compete with each other for the employment he offers, and if the employment stands between them and starvation, he will be able to beat down their price until it touches the lowest point at which they can subsist. The more rapid the multiplication of the proletariat, the better for the working class.<sup>1133</sup>

Since the Capitalist desires to obtain more wealth than he can himself produce even with the aid of the machinery owned by him, he seeks human labor. In exchange for a fixed sum determined by the laws of supply and demand, which is paid as wage, the Capitalist takes over the whole value of the produce of the worker. The difference between the total result of labor and the wage is taken by the capitalist as profit or "surplus value." The employer, quite naturally, seeks to increase his "surplus value" by making the workers toil longer hours and by using cheaper female and child labor in the place of male labor.<sup>1134</sup> Mrs. Besant, in her theory of "surplus value," does skirt dangerously close to the Marxian concept, but so did Shaw.

Proceeding still further, Mrs. Besant recognizes that the production by the worker of much greater value than received by him as wage is the condition of his employment: "The employer does not hire a man for his amusement; he hires him that he may make something out of him."<sup>1135</sup> The profit of the employer means a loss for the worker.

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<sup>1133</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 12.

<sup>1134</sup>See Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 222-223.

<sup>1135</sup>Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 18.

Since Capital is made by "associated labor, and can only exist where men co-operate for a common end," Mrs. Besant feels that it is not unreasonable to demand that that which is produced by the co-operative effort of labor jointly should be placed under common control. Thus,

No individual should have the right to monopolise the result of associated labor for his own personal advantage, for his own personal gain. Under the system proposed by Socialism, in which the means of production would be under common control--that is, in which each trade would own for use the machinery needed in the trade--under that system only can be stopped the constant war between capital and labor, for under it co-operating, self-ruling workers would be substituted for masters and men.<sup>1136</sup>

In her rejoinder to Foote, who asserted that there was a significant rise of wages under Individualism, Mrs. Besant points out the absolutely disproportionate rise of those who make fortunes of 50,000 pounds and upwards as compared with that of the worker. She reminds her audience that De Tocqueville had observed in the French Revolution that people rise in revolt when their position improves, not when ground in despair and abject misery.<sup>1137</sup> As Freethinker and Socialist, Mrs. Besant was mindful of that revolutionary era, but it seemed strange that in tracing the Evolution of Society she omitted it entirely.

The Fabian Society was opposed to the idea of equal wages, equal hours of labor, equal official status, or equal authority for all. Such conditions, declared Shaw, ". . . are not only impracticable, but incompatible with the equality of subordination to the common interest which is fundamental in modern Socialism."<sup>1138</sup> They were certainly not "doctrinaire equalitarians," although Margaret Cole does feel that as

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<sup>1136</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>1137</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 52.

<sup>1138</sup> (Shaw), Fabian Tract No. 70, p. 7.

Socialism progressed "and the increase of communal good came into being, the need for great differences in money incomes could gradually disappear."<sup>1139</sup> Socialism did not mean to Shaw the "equal division of all existing wealth,"<sup>1140</sup> although later, in his debate with Chesterton and in his The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism, he declares quite unequivocally that Socialism involves the principle that the entire income of the country be divided equally.<sup>1141</sup>

However, in the 1880's both Webb and Shaw were firm in their belief that the object of Socialism was not to divide the wealth equally, the "essential principle" of Socialism being

. . . that men shall honestly labor for those who labor for them, each man replacing what he consumes, none profiting at his fellows' expense, and, all profiting alike by the most economical division of labor.<sup>1142</sup>

Mrs. Besant feels that she is in a minority amongst Socialists in thinking that the various forms of labor should be equally rewarded. It appeared to her that the majority of Socialists favored unequal payment so as to reward extra competence and skill. But whether labor should be paid equally or not did not seem to Mrs. Besant to be of the essence of Socialism. What was vital was "that you should not have any payment whatever made to an idle class."<sup>1143</sup> Her views seem unclear on the

<sup>1139</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, pp. 31-32.

<sup>1140</sup> Shaw, "Our Lost Honesty," Harper's Magazine, p. 96.

<sup>1141</sup> See "Shaw vs Chesterton" (A Debate in the Memorial Hall, London, 30 November 1911) in Lawrence, Bernard Shaw: Platform and Pulpit; also Bernard Shaw, The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism (New York: Brentano's Publishers, 1928), pp. 68-70.

<sup>1142</sup> Shaw, "Our Lost Honesty," Harper's Magazine, p. 96.

<sup>1143</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 131.

subject. In the same debate she professes that Socialism does not imply a leveling equality of wage; in fact, "Wages for exceptional ability might exist under Socialism."<sup>1144</sup> Also, Socialism ". . . does not mean the distribution of everything in equal proportions, without any regard to what each one does."<sup>1145</sup> Whether wages be equal or not is not as important as the fact that no interest should be paid to the idle shareholder. Also, she feels that the truly great, such as Oliver Cromwell, were motivated more by a zealous desire for service than by pecuniary gain. Great men and great "generalship" were men of high moral fibre who thought little of financial reward. Nor did Mrs. Besant feel that all human beings were equal in capacities and potential. What she did say was to give to each an access to the means of production and the materials for the production of wealth.

The proletariat was the very "necessary correlative" of the capitalist,<sup>1146</sup> the third factor to be considered in the production of wealth. It is clear that as long as land (or "raw material") and capital (or "wrought material") remain in the hands of a class, then they can determine the remuneration of labor. She quotes Cairnes to the effect that there appears no way for the proletariat as a class to improve its position as long as it is composed of wage-earners. The competitive economic system forces the proletariat to choose between low wages or starvation, making a mockery of any pretense of free competition which is "a fraud and a hypocrisy, for one of the competitors has

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<sup>1144</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>1145</sup>Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 13.

<sup>1146</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 221.

a clog around his neck which makes it impossible for him to swim against the other. (Cheers)"<sup>1147</sup> The idea of "free contract" is a mere delusion, the proletarian being forced into it by the spectre of starvation since he is possessed only of labor-force. Thus,

A very brief comparison of those who produce and save, and those who possess themselves of the results of labor and abstinence, will suffice to show the inequality which characterises the present system. The worker lives hardly and dies poor, bequeathing to his children, the same necessity of toil.<sup>1148</sup>

Mrs. Besant wants to know, if this is the best of all possible worlds, and the laws of supply and demand are of benefit to all as the Individualist claims, why it is that the worker is so meanly exploited.

. . . while at the apex you have persons whom you point to as products of your magnificent civilisation, and who are as useless in their lives as they are mischievous in their action on society (Cheers).<sup>1149</sup>

Divorced from the ownership of the land and the means of production, a prey to the economic forces of laissez-faire Mercantilism, forced to accept a pittance as a wage for his subsistence, the proletariat's plight is to Mrs. Besant, as to Shaw, of the very essence. In his misfortune is seen the "citadel of the Socialist position."<sup>1150</sup> Poverty will exist, she submits,

. . . so long as one class depends on another for "employment"; so long as one man must sell another man his labor at whatever rate the condition of the market may fix. Free men may associate their labor for a common end, and divide the common product; slaves are

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<sup>1147</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 22.

<sup>1148</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 31.

<sup>1149</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 129.)

<sup>1150</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 222.

obliged to let their labor be at the direction of their master, and to accept subsistence in exchange. <sup>1151</sup>

The very foundation of "Modern" or "Scientific" Socialism exists in the realization that society is divided into two antagonistic classes. What is called for is not a mere revision but a complete change in the industrial organization. It confirmed Mrs. Besant's position that capital must be controlled by labor, instead of labor being controlled by capital, the producers obtaining full possession of their own product and being in a position to regulate their own labor.

The Fabians had little use for the Marxian concept of "class war," but they did recognize that society was divided into two distinct classes antagonistic to each other--the capitalist, who owned the means of production and appropriated the "differential rent," as against the large majority of workers "by hand or brain," who produced profits, rent, and interest for the idle classes. Neither Shaw nor Webb was blind to the strong conflict of interest existing between the producers and non-producers of wealth. Like Marx, they saw that with the onrush of industrialism, the capitalist class would grow smaller as the masses increased in both numerical strength and poverty. The cure did not lie in violent revolution but in the socialization of the profits of labor.

Mrs. Besant recognizes that the antithetical interests of capital and labor, of the employer and worker, will never be reconciled while the instruments of production remain a capitalist monopoly. Machinery, while it "centupled" man's productive capacity, led to its fruits being garnished by a few; and it has ". . . poisoned our rivers,

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<sup>1151</sup> Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 7.

polluted our atmosphere, marred the beauty of our country's face, besetialised large numbers of our people."<sup>1152</sup> Class distinctions would endure while men stood in the position of employer and employed. The antithetical interests of Capital and Labor would continue to entail "a constant and embittered war."<sup>1153</sup> The reconciliation of the conflict would only cease when Capital is placed under the control of the "Community" and used for the benefit rather than the oppression of the worker.

Mrs. Besant, as did the other Fabians, used the class concept defined absolutely in terms of the possession or non-possession of the means of production. Even if she uses the term "war," it would not imply a violent upheaval--perhaps more of a figure of speech to one often given to dramatic oratory. The cure for all the "Essayists" lay in the socialization of the means of production. Mrs. Besant makes it clear that Socialism

. . . would put an end to the war of classes, for it would substitute a community of workers for the present gradations of social rank. It would bid all healthy adults work, but it would also give to each leisure to enjoy."<sup>1154</sup>

While Webb is confident of the inevitable outcome of Democracy and "the gradual substitution of organized co-operation for the anarchy of the competitive struggle,"<sup>1155</sup> yet to him a dependence on co-operation was futile as a cure for the "Social ulceration" of his

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<sup>1152</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 223.

<sup>1153</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 18.

<sup>1154</sup>Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 20.

<sup>1155</sup>Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 52.

time. Co-operation could make no gains towards the removal of poverty. The cure lay, as Mill had pointed out in the ". . . subjection of labour to capital, and the enormous share which the possessors of the instruments of production are able to take from the produce."<sup>1156</sup>

Thus, writes Webb,

Co-operation can make no real defence against the continuance of the exaction of this "enormous share"--rent and interest--the continued individual enjoyment of which it, indeed, actually presupposes.<sup>1157</sup>

Mrs. Besant, more than any of the other "Essayists," accentuates the virtues of co-operation based on an ideal of brotherhood and mutual help. In an eloquent passage, she declares:

Over against those who laud the present state of Society, with its unjustly rich and its unjustly poor, with its palaces and its slums, its millionaires and its paupers, be it ours to proclaim that there is a higher ideal in life than that of being first in the race for wealth, most successful in the scramble for gold. Be it ours to declare steadfastly that health, comfort, leisure, culture, plenty for every individual are far more desirable than breathless struggle for existence, furious trampling down of the weak by the strong, huge fortunes accumulated out of the toil of others, to be handed down to those who had done nothing to earn them. Be it ours to maintain that the greatness of a nation depends not on the number of its great proprietors, on the wealth of its great capitalists, or the splendour of its great nobles, but on the absence of poverty among its people, on the education and refinement of its masses, on the universality of enjoyment in life.<sup>1158</sup>

Victory is not always to the strong and cunning; the qualities of sympathy, brotherhood, respect for others, and justice mark the superior man. The scramble for gain was not favorable to the "highest mental development" of man, and certainly a powerful "British Grenadier" would get the better of a learned Professor (Professor Clifford) in a

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<sup>1156</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, pp. 8-9.

<sup>1157</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>1158</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 306-307.

"free scramble." Her ideal was that of "Brotherhood" and "Mutual Help,"<sup>1159</sup> and since all men were brothers all should work for the common good in a rational society under law.

Competition is "war," and the same reasons that prompt arbitration for war should motivate society to substitute co-operation for competition.<sup>1160</sup> The Post Office is cited as an example to be emulated, where the Postmaster-General takes pride in performing his duty as a public servant. Mrs. Besant paints the evils of competition and the effect on the successful Capitalist, the Distributor and the "Operative Classes."

The Capitalist, sensing a want, designs an article to meet its demand or even creates a want where none exists. Once the article becomes a fashionable commodity, demand soon exceeds supply. Other Capitalists, hungry for profits, enter the competitive race and soon supply exceeds demand. At this point, the supply is not diminished; as long as there remains any hope of profit, the product continues to be manufactured. The result is that wages are reduced to compensate for falling profits. This proving fruitless, the hours of work are shortened, and the market is glutted with surplus merchandise. Then follows great distress as the ranks of the unemployed swell and the small capitalist is ruined by his bigger competitor--"In the universal war, the big capitalist fish devour the small fry."<sup>1161</sup> But the joys for the successful man of business turn to ashes.

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<sup>1159</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, pp. 23-24.

<sup>1160</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 21.

<sup>1161</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

Not for him the pure joy in natural beauty, in simple amusements, in intellectual triumph, which is the dower of those unstained by the fight for gold. For the successful competitor in commercial war Nature has no laurel-crown. He has bartered himself for a mess of pottage, and his birthright of healthy humanity is gone from him for evermore.<sup>1162</sup>

It is the successful capitalist who is not only dehumanized but alienated as well!

As many traders compete for business, the competition for places of business drives up rents which add to the retailer's "burden." The Distributor is forced to advertise, "striving by brilliancy of color or eccentricity of design to impress himself on the public mind."<sup>1163</sup> With competition comes a decline in business morality and an increase in wasted energy; advertisement, haggling, and canvassing exercise their corroding influence.

The burden on the "Operative Classes" is heaviest of all. As consumers, they bear the brunt of rising prices; as workers, they face lowered wages through competition and finally unemployment.

The lowest depth is reached by the crowd who at the dockyard gates at the East of London literally fight for a place in which the foreman's eye may fall on them.<sup>1164</sup>

The only classes that profit through competition are the landlords and the big capitalists.

Thus the chief gainers by competition are the idlers who are permitted to hold the nation's soil, and who live in luxury on the toiler's, laughing to see how the fratricidal struggles of those who labor turn to the advantage of those who lounge.<sup>1165</sup>

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<sup>1162</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>1163</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>1164</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>1165</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

The cure lay in the substitution of co-operation for competitive strife, a belief in the universality of the human race embedded in the concept of a universal brotherhood. That the strong and greedy should triumph was the "natural law of the vegetable and the brute,"<sup>1166</sup> not that of the rational, humane human devoted to just causes. Not even Olivier in his Essay "Moral" reaches the pitch attained by Mrs. Besant in her condemnation of competition. To Mrs. Besant, the apotheosis of laissez faire, laissez aller, was the brutalization of man and industrial anarchy.

To Mrs. Besant the panacea lies in the

. . . substitution of co-operation for competition, of organisation for anarchy in industry. The relation of employer and employed must disappear, and a brotherhood of workers, associated for facilitation of production for use, must replace the band<sup>1167</sup> of servants toiling for the enrichment of a master by profit.

In the manner of Webb, the Socialist State to Mrs. Besant is neither bureaucratic nor despotic as in "Peru," ruled over by a hierarchy of priests and aristocrats and subject to the tyranny of class, but

. . . the whole of the community organised for self-government, . . . a society organised for the good of the whole society . . . that it is of the essence of Socialism that that organised community shall be supreme over itself.<sup>1168</sup>

She unequivocally asserts that she "had no notion of advocating centralised state control,"<sup>1169</sup> and felt that if the people properly performed their duties of citizenship there would exist no friction be-

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<sup>1166</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 23.

<sup>1167</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 27.

<sup>1168</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 54.

<sup>1169</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 21.

tween them and officialdom. Nor does Mrs. Besant place her faith in an omnipotent state which should "do everything and interfere with everything."

We allege that you should have an organization elected by the people, responsible to the people, removable by the people, which should administer for the general good the material for the production of wealth in the country. (Hear, hear.) But such a State, or rather the Executive of such a State would be nothing more than a body or bodies of officers elected by the people, much as your municipalities are now elected to discharge certain functions for the benefit of the towns whose business they administer.<sup>1170</sup>

Mrs. Besant makes clear that the State is the best representative of the interest of the individual. The people, in fact, constituted the State; and since it was the people who made the laws and legislated, it was the object of Socialism to allow the people political power and to instruct them in its proper use.<sup>1171</sup> Responding to Foote's criticism, "She wants to call in an omnipotent State to provide the brains which we have not got."<sup>1172</sup> Mrs. Besant replies that since the workman is incapacitated from releasing himself from capitalist exploitation, it remains for the State to do so. Even though she was not an advocate of bureaucratic centralization, to which the Fabians were averse, yet Mrs. Besant recognized that State employment was preferred to private employment since it was more secure and considerate.<sup>1173</sup>

Mrs. Besant strikes a true Fabian chord in recognizing that governments implied a measure of both control and coercion and the prevention of people from giving free play to individual self-interest and

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<sup>1170</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 75.

<sup>1171</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 30.

<sup>1172</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 35.

<sup>1173</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 22.

doing as they liked. She remarks that there were only two conditions in the world where a man could be given free rein. One, if he was completely isolated, as Robinson Crusoe on a desert island before his meeting with Friday. Second, when man had reached that pitch of perfection in whom "desire and duty were identical, and who because he was a law to himself had no need for laws outside."<sup>1174</sup> Webb, who was not prepared to believe that man could ever rid himself of his "ego" and personal selfishness,<sup>1175</sup> was also aware that Socialism implied a degree of co-ordination and control, particularly in the organization of industry.

If a man wants freedom to work or not to work just as he likes, he had better emigrate to Robinson Crusoe's island, or else become a millionaire. To suppose that the industrial affairs of a complicated industrial state can be run without strict subordination and discipline, without obedience to orders . . . is to dream, not of Socialism but of Anarchism.<sup>1176</sup>

The essential role of the State to Mrs. Besant is that it should control the land and capital and spread its benefits over the entire community, that in the future

Land must not be used as an investment which is to bring in a profit in the shape of Rent to some speculator or idler, but must be used for purposes of production for the general good, yielding food and raw materials for clothing and other necessities of life, but profit in the shape of Rent to no individual.<sup>1177</sup>

As a Collectivist Socialist, Mrs. Besant lays claim to the socialization of land and capital--to all the means of production. On the question as to how to bring about the desired change, she admits

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<sup>1174</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>1175</sup>See (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 11.

<sup>1176</sup>Webb, Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 18.

<sup>1177</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 219.

that that is a "question for discussion." Her point, as a Socialist, appears to be at this time to persuade the people that socialization of "raw materials" or land, which includes minerals, ore, and other national benefits together with "wrought material" or Capital including the means of production, would be a good thing. And that until that has been achieved, it is useless to discuss the "method" of achieving it. "Socialists," she feels, "are not agreed as to the method, although they are agreed that they must do something to bring that nationalization about."<sup>1178</sup> To her the simplest way to achieve it was to make a "reasonable allowance to the present holders of land and capital, to terminate with their lives."<sup>1179</sup> The Fabians in the 1880's under Webb's leadership did seek the establishment of progressive Socialism by limitation of private property.<sup>1180</sup> This was to be brought about largely through taxation, municipalization, nationalization, and the collective control of rent by the community. The community was to assume "through their own organisations"<sup>1181</sup> collective control of the means of production. Land, however, was not to be given to the State to control, and in the Essays it is seen that it should be possessed by local or municipal agencies rather than the national government. "We now foresee," writes Shaw, "our municipality equipped with land and capital for industrial purposes."<sup>1182</sup> Also, certain

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<sup>1178</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 63.

<sup>1179</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>1180</sup> Clayton, Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, p. 45.

<sup>1181</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 15.

<sup>1182</sup> Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 237.

industries such as railways and public utilities were to be under State control. The Fabians, however, seemed to agree in the main that most industries--apart, perhaps, from large trusts or monopolies--should be gradually controlled by local authorities. Mrs. Besant writes,

We want to convince you first that it would be well for us to cross to the other side of the river, and when that is done we will consult as to the best methods of building the bridge that will take us over.<sup>1183</sup>

The Radical had agreed that land should be held by the State. Mrs. Besant suggests that this was a long step on the way to Socialism and urges upon the Radical the adoption of the abolition of private property in both land and capital.

If the Radical already goes so far as to desire the abolition of private property in land, it is not wonderful that Socialists should look forward to his taking the other step, the abolition of private property in capital.<sup>1184</sup>

In a rather un-Fabian manner, Mrs. Besant asserts that since the rights of property were made by society, no man had a natural right to hold any property to the "injury of the greater number among whom he lives."<sup>1185</sup> Thus, since private property is "theft," the man of property should be required by law to sell his estate should he voluntarily refuse to do so. It was in the right of property that the difference between the Individualist and Socialist came to a head, as Mrs. Besant champions the Socialist cause against Foote and other Individualists.

In demanding that the State be the "sole landowner,"<sup>1186</sup> she

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<sup>1183</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 64.

<sup>1184</sup>Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 17.

<sup>1185</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 96.

<sup>1186</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 39.

submits that the system of private monopoly of land has led to three great evils. First, "The establishment of an idle class, which grows richer by increasingly taxing the industrious"; Second, "the divorce of the really agricultural class from the soil"; and lastly, "the exodus from the country districts into the towns."<sup>1187</sup> This being so, it becomes vital for the advance of Socialism that any effort to create new landowners should be firmly resisted. Peasant cultivators who pay Rent to the State are permissible, but proprietors of the soil who profit at the expense of the labor of others are to be discarded.

She calls for a complete revision in the system of Land Tenure to be brought about by the Reformed Parliament of 1884, to replace the "quasi-feudal one now existing."<sup>1188</sup> The new system is to be based on the recognition of the socialist principle that since land is necessary for the existence of the entire community it cannot be left as private property.

Since men can only live by virtue of what they obtain from land, so long as land belongs to a set of individuals in a nation the remainder of the nation must work for these at whatever wages they will give, and freedom of contract between those who hold the means of existence and those who need them becomes a meaningless phase.<sup>1189</sup>

The gulf between those possessed of unearned wealth and the starving proletariat could only be bridged by a complete and total alteration in the present system of land holdings directed towards the goal of nationalization. No mere tinkering with the present system would solve the problem. Methods suggested by her now appear to be the

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<sup>1187</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>1188</sup> Besant, Redistribution of Political Power, p. 27.

<sup>1189</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

breaking up of the large estates and the continued acquisition of land by the State by the imposition of a graduated land tax. Also, all lands which were cultivable but left fallow and not used for "public purposes" were to be forfeited to the State

. . . with payment to the dispossessed landowner of say twenty years' purchase at the average annual value of the land for the seven years prior to the "dispossession."<sup>1190</sup>

To Mrs. Besant, the socialization of land included the holding of land by "co-operative groups" directly under the control of the State.<sup>1191</sup> It is also important that Socialists should make popular the concept of "communal, or co-operative, farming."

There can be no doubt that cereal crops can be raised most economically on large holdings, and such holdings should be rented from the body or bodies, representing the community, by groups of cultivators, so that both large and small farms should be found in agricultural districts.<sup>1192</sup>

The Fabians never appeared to lay much store by co-operative farming; in fact, the idea was actively resisted, particularly by Webb.

As land was to be socialized, so should capital. It also was seen by Mrs. Besant as impossible to separate "raw material" (land) from "wrought material" (Capital) so that only one could be nationalized and the other left as private property. Capital is both the product of unpaid labor and, in a complex industrial system, of "co-operative" or "socialised" labor. Experience has shown that with division of labor, productivity increases and in every industry workers co-operate to manufacture the product. Thus, "In each commodity is

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<sup>1190</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>1191</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 219.

<sup>1192</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 39.

embodied the labour of many workers, and the socialization of labour has reached a very advanced stage."<sup>1193</sup> However, while labor is socialized, capital remains "individualistic" since the co-operative effort of many workers is appropriated by a single capitalist. The answer is to do away with the single owner and, quite obviously, to allow the producers to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Also, Rents, whether obtained from land or capital, were to be owned by the State and thus,

Private property in these being destroyed, common property, or --if you prefer the word--Communism takes its place. Thus we reach Collectivist Socialism, the Socialism I am defending to-night.<sup>1194</sup>

Citing Sidwick, she points out that capital and land are inseparable. Shaw, in his essay "Economic," and Olivier, in Fabian Tract No. 7, Capital and Land, had realized that since there existed no difference between land and capital as instruments of production, both were subject to nationalization.<sup>1195</sup> The difference between Capital and Land was only a surviving relic of Mercantilism in which Capital implied money and nothing else. Mrs. Besant cites as her example,

Take a marsh. That is raw material which is useless for agricultural purposes, having, of course, no Economic Rent. But if you drain the marsh, it is no longer raw material, for human labor has changed<sup>1196</sup> the raw material into wrought material for the use of man.

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<sup>1193</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 224.

<sup>1194</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 10. The words "Communism" and "Socialism" were used interchangeably by both Marx and Mill and for some little time afterwards.

<sup>1195</sup>See Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 35-36; also (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 7, p. 3.

<sup>1196</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 8. Ricardo had defined Rent as that "portion of the produce which is paid for the use of the original and indestructible powers of the soil."

There exists no difference between a marsh which is rendered fertile by the application of human labor and raw iron which in its natural state was of no value until human labor moulded it into a machine capable of productive power. Nationalization of differential rent follows inevitably--an accepted Fabian policy and to be found in the Basis. Thus,

If you only claim for the State the rent of your raw material, then your whole scheme of land nationalisation becomes absurd and hopelessly impracticable. (Hear, hear.) But if you are going to claim for the State rents which are based upon the present differences of the value of the land--of land which has been made fertile by generations of laborers--land on which human power has been expended and which in its present condition is the result of the employment of human energy--then I submit to you that you are nationalising the rent of wrought material and not only the rent of raw.<sup>1197</sup>

Turning her attention to the means of transportation, Mrs. Besant feels that State control is a step towards Socialism--tramways, hackney carriages, and omnibuses to be transferred to the municipality and railways acquired by the State. She reminds the Radicals that they too were in favor to a great extent in placing all the means of transportation under State control. All the profits so derived were to go into the "general exchequer" for the public good.<sup>1198</sup> Webb sees "cabs" and "omnibuses" as being registered and controlled by the State.<sup>1199</sup>

The Fabian Basis stated that no compensation would be given to the expropriated owner of land and capital. Shaw, however, makes clear its need in his contribution to the Essays,

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<sup>1197</sup> Besant, Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>1198</sup> Besant, Radicalism V. Socialism, p. 14.

<sup>1199</sup> Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p.

The nationalizers will declare for its annexation by the municipality without compensation, but that will be rejected as spoilation, worthy only of revolutionary Socialists.<sup>1200</sup>

Since the socialization was to be a slow process, the refusal to pay compensation would be tantamount to ". . . singling out individual proprietors for expropriation whilst the others remained unmolested."<sup>1201</sup> Such a practice would never be tolerated by the essentially fair British public. Since Socialism was to be gradually introduced, the proper way would be to compensate the appropriated landlord or capitalist from money raised by a tax levied on the owners of property. Thus, the public would benefit, it costing the people nothing since the ones to pay would be the landlords themselves.

It was also felt by the "Essayists," such as Mrs. Besant, that public utility corporations would put out of business the private company by virtue of their greater efficiency and effectiveness. Mrs. Besant, as did Webb, saw in the functioning of the Post Office and the municipalization of gas and water, not only a lessening of private exploitation, but a demonstration of greater efficiency.

Mrs. Besant is clear on the issue, "I should destroy private property in land completely and utterly."<sup>1202</sup> However, where a man has earned his own money and invested it in land he was entitled to the usufruct of the estate during his life, or could reclaim the sum invested without interest. Full compensation could be granted only to the person who has earned his wealth; to those who lived off the labor

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<sup>1200</sup> Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 236.

<sup>1201</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>1202</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 107.

of others, as the idle landlord, there was no need to offer any compensation.<sup>1203</sup> However, she also states her willingness "to give life annuities to the expropriated owners" such as the Duke of Westminster who was of little value to society. She says,

We will . . . give you for the rest of your unprofitable life a decent little income, say \$500 a year. . . . That is the sort of compensation which I meant when I spoke of life annuities.<sup>1204</sup>

It appears her ideas are not at all clear on the issue of Compensation. What appears paramount is her desire to eliminate the unproductive landlord from the scene.

The question often posed by the critics of Socialism was to what extent would private property, if any, be permitted in the materials of the production of wealth. Since economic rent and private property, i.e. "Unsocialism,"<sup>1205</sup> were to be nationalized or taxed, the question was not an idle one. Webb feels that Socialism will, in time, change the ideas of the community relating to the institution of private property, it being already clear

. . . that no really democratic government, whether consciously Socialist or not, will lend its soldiers or its police to enforce the "rights" of such an owner as Lord Clanricarde.<sup>1206</sup>

Private property is an anachronism, and Webb believes that its gradual limitation, already evident in England, will continue. However, to Webb, it was not at this time feasible to look "Beyond the vista of

<sup>1203</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>1204</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>1205</sup> Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 16.

<sup>1206</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 14.

this extension of collectivism."<sup>1207</sup> Mrs. Besant is emphatic. No property needs be socialized other than private property necessary for the production of wealth, i.e. Land and Capital. She is sanguine that in time society will come to accept the ways of Collectivism, of co-operation instead of competition where accord and harmony replace competitive strife. There appeared to Mrs. Besant a difference between community ownership of land and capital and the enjoyment by individuals of their legitimate share in the product of their own labor. Socialism

. . . would leave a man in full possession of his share of the value he and his fellow-laborers had produced. It denounces "individual effort for individual gain" when the individual utilises other people's efforts for his individual gain; and it points out that when many co-operate to produce no one man should claim the common product as his. It does not affirm that the State should "own all wealth," but that it should own the raw material and the means of production.<sup>1208</sup>

Thus, to Mrs. Besant, Socialism exists to enable the worker to obtain the value created by his own efforts. It implies that not all property be nationalized, only that which is used by those who profit by the labor of others. Shaw holds that since both land and capital are productive of "rent" which is appropriated by an idle class, they should be taken over by the community for the public benefit. Both rent and interest are to be transferred to the State in gradual degrees.<sup>1209</sup>

The Fabian Society in their emphasis on municipalization made evident that Socialism did not imply centralization. Since the United Kingdom was blessed with an intricate system of democratic machinery ex-

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<sup>1207</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>1208</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 15.

<sup>1209</sup> Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 225.

tending from the Houses of Parliament to the local parish council, it could effectively be put to use. To the Fabians, the State implied more than Westminster or Whitehall. "A democratic State," Shaw wrote,

. . . cannot become a Social Democratic State unless it has in every centre of population a local governing body as thoroughly democratic in its constitution as the central Parliament.<sup>1210</sup>

The local units of government had an important role to play in the functioning of the democratic machinery. The House of Commons, Shaw felt, must develop "into the central government which will be the organ of federating the municipalities."<sup>1211</sup>

Mrs. Besant appreciates that if the State is to be the sole landowner, yet State ownership does not imply centralized control. It would be preferable that the "municipalities" or "Corporations" should hold the land in towns, and "local boards" or "County Councils" in the agricultural areas. The holding of the land by the "municipality" would guarantee that the rents would go into the "municipal exchequer" and be utilized for the good of the town.<sup>1212</sup> The placing of the land under communal control would ensure that each individual be given the opportunity to develop his potential to the fullest. To place it in the hands of the community, which acted as the "trustees" of the people, instead of private owners, would secure the welfare of the people as a whole.<sup>1213</sup> Her method of the acquisition of property by local collective groups, whether "County Councils" or "Corporations," was seen to

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<sup>1210</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>1211</sup> Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 248.

<sup>1212</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 17.

<sup>1213</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 30.

be in keeping with the English genius for "self-government," and

It was for that that the Socialists were striving, and they would have the land vested in the bodies representative of the people, they paying a land tax to the central administration for the expenses of the Imperial Government, and retaining the remainder of the rental for the benefit of those who paid it; the rent going for lighting, paving, parks, museums, art galleries, reading rooms and libraries, the education of the children, and for other communal advantages that the people could enjoy by mutual co-operation.<sup>1214</sup>

The communal possession of land would ensure co-operation and the public good. It would rid society of the intolerable land monopoly and ruthless exploitation and competition.

Turning to the nationalization or socialization of the means of production, Mrs. Besant affirms that it is not required that the organization of a business concern having branches be arranged "from a single State centre."<sup>1215</sup> The Post Office is cited as an example. Its organization is not governed in all its detail from St. Martin's-le-Grand. The Centre issues certain laws and regulations to be observed, but the State does not employ the country postmen or issue instructions necessary to the performance of his daily task. This is done by the Post-Master of the District. Therefore,

. . . in all kinds of business, under Socialism, there will be group after group, co-ordinate with each other, each being related to the wider group next above it; and the individual laborer would, come into contact with his own group, not with the central executive.<sup>1216</sup>

Also, in the organization of the Post Office is seen the benefit "of a central unifying power." It can effectively cope with a sudden demand

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<sup>1214</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>1215</sup>Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 13.

<sup>1216</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

or crisis which would incapacitate the local units.<sup>1217</sup>

If industry is controlled by a single person, there exists "individual anarchy," and the organization of labor becomes faulty. "Equilibrium" can only be had after many reverses and trade fluctuations. However, with a "central regulative body" organizing the details of business, efficiency would be restored.

Then labor would be organized without waste and without excess, and while laborers would be as free as Post Office clerks are now, all profits made would come back to the nation as a whole; so that instead of individualistic gain, there would be corporate good and corporate advantage everywhere.<sup>1218</sup>

It is not possible for the State, i.e. "the people, organized as a community,"<sup>1219</sup> to control the labor of all its citizens. However, it seems to Mrs. Besant that when the people organize themselves in groups of workers they can effectively control their own labor, elect their own superintendents "as well as elect such representatives as might be necessary to constitute boards of management to keep group in touch with group."<sup>1220</sup> While she rather modestly says that the details of her socialized industry cannot be "authoritatively" outlined,<sup>1221</sup> she sees in the Trade Unions and Co-operative Societies the model of her future re-organization of industry. Each industry in every district is to organize itself and own the means of production; thus,

. . . the miners of Durham, for instance, organized in their lodges, with their central executive, would form the mining

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<sup>1217</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>1218</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>1219</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>1220</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>1221</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 28.

trade society of that district; all the mines of that district would be under their control, and they would elect their officers of all grades. So with all mining districts throughout the land.<sup>1222</sup>

The separate trade associations, based on the model of Co-operative Societies or Trade Unions having control of their own industry, need to be "federated." To keep the separate organizations in touch with one another, Mrs. Besant suggests that a "Central Industrial Board" or "General Board" be formed to which each association would send an elected representative.<sup>1223</sup> The Central Industrial Board would then, apparently, have the task of supplying labor to those trades in need of it and co-ordinating the activities.

It appears to Mrs. Besant that the elements necessary for her scheme of a self-organized industry already exist. Therefore,

The more closely the miners can band themselves into district unions, and the unions into a national federation, the more prepared will they be to play their part in the great industrial revolution.<sup>1224</sup>

Similar organizations would have to be formed for every productive industry. It also seems very probable that the representatives elected by each self-regulating, autonomous industry would form a "Central Industrial Board."

There is more. Socialists are agreed, apparently, on the principle that the only rightful owners of capital "are industrial groups, or one great industrial group--the State, i.e., the organised com-

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<sup>1222</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>1223</sup> Ibid., p. 27; also Besant, Socialism and Individualism, p. 19.

<sup>1224</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 27.

community";<sup>1225</sup> also that the results of socialized labor are not appropriated by a few but used for the benefit of all. This, it appears, could only be ensured by placing all profits in the "industrial funds of the several trades that produce them or into a central industrial exchequer."<sup>1226</sup> Either way,

. . . these funds created by past labour would be used for the facilitation of present and future labour. They would be available for the introduction of improved machinery, for the opening up of new industries, for the improvement of means of communication, and for similar undertakings. Capital thus employed would bear no interest, for no idle class would have a lien upon it; and thus, in a very real sense, capital would become only the deferred payment of labour, and the whole results of toil would be constantly flowing back upon the toilers.<sup>1227</sup>

Such a scheme would guarantee that the capital or plant would be owned by the workers employed in it. Wealth employed in production would be utilized by the community and not for individual profit. Also, under such conditions the distinction between employer and employed would disappear.

All would be members of industrial communities, and the necessary foremen, superintendents, organizers and officers of every kind, would be elected as the officers of trade unions are elected at the present time.<sup>1228</sup>

Once more Mrs. Besant turns to the Radical to accentuate their similarities. Radicals who had supported Trade Unions and the combination of workers could not oppose the idea that the workers were competent to control their own labor and to manage production.<sup>1229</sup>

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<sup>1225</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>1226</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 224.

<sup>1227</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>1228</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>1229</sup> Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 16.

Mrs. Besant's scheme for the future organization of industry receives greater attention in her contribution to the Essays. Her already evident visionary approach is further demonstrated. There appear to be two ways by which industry may be organized. The easier way is by sketching a Utopia, "an intellectual gymnastic in which a power of coherent and vivid imagination is the one desideratum."<sup>1230</sup> She is quite positive that this is not her way. The second method, which is less "Utopian" but more "useful," is to discover the underlying tendencies of the present state of society and "to trace those tendencies to their natural outworking in institutions."<sup>1231</sup> The future organization of industry is conscious not of "the transient riots" which overthrow thrones or kings but the irreversible evolutionary patterns which transform the social state.<sup>1232</sup> Since Mrs. Besant does appreciate that Socialism is a continuing process, she insists that she will in no way "touch on the ideal Social State that will one day exist."<sup>1233</sup> Conscious of its inevitability, all one can do ". . . is to consciously co-operate with the forces at work, and thus render the transition more rapid than it would otherwise be."<sup>1234</sup> The Fabians were the foremost articulators of the new Zeitgeist. With increasing State action and social reorganization, the need for reformers was recognized. As Webb so brilliantly put it,

The characteristic feature of our own age is not this constant evolution itself--for that, of course, is of all time--but our increas-

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<sup>1230</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 187.

<sup>1231</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>1232</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>1233</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>1234</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

ing consciousness of it. Instead of unconscious factors we become deliberate agents, either to aid or resist the developments coming to our notice . . . man becomes the midwife of the great womb of Time.<sup>1235</sup>

Mrs. Besant sees herself as a deliberate instrument designed to quicken the inevitable coming of Socialism, to expedite the social evolution, and in her presentation of the future organization of industry, to explain the manner in which the future Socialist State would be constructed.

Mrs. Besant sketches out a rather nebulous scheme for the establishment of Socialism based on County Councils, which had recently been implemented in England. "The division of the country into clearly defined areas, each with its elected authority, is essential to any effective scheme of organisation."<sup>1236</sup> The division of England into districts governed by County Councils had created the "machinery" which made Socialism possible. While as yet the County Councils were not fully developed, it was for the Socialists to fill in the details:

It remains to give every adult a vote in the election of Councillors; to shorten their term of office to a year; to pay the Councillors, so that the public may have a right to the whole of their working time; to give the Councils power to take and hold land. . . .<sup>1237</sup>

Once such measures were set afoot, the progress of the socialization of industry would depend upon the acceptance of Socialism by the people.

Universal nationalization by a centralized authority was never a Fabian creed, and they saw the surplus value being allocated to local units which included County Councils much like the L.C.C. Democratic decen-

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<sup>1235</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 4.

<sup>1236</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 190.

<sup>1237</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

tralization being the accepted Fabian method, Mrs. Besant claims,

The mot d ordre for Socialists now is, "Convert the electors; and capture the County Councils." These councils, administering local affairs, with the national executive, administering national affairs, are all destined to be turned into effective industrial organisers; and the unit of administration must depend on the nature of the industry.<sup>1238</sup>

On the division of function between the central and local authorities, Webb had no clear concept,

But which subjects should be local and which should be central-- upon what principle the division should be made, and in what form and to what extent there should be a central control--these are problems to which, as far as I know, no solution has been found and very little serious thought been given.<sup>1239</sup>

Neither Webb nor the Essayists seemed certain to what extent the management of industry should be nationally or locally administered. Mrs. Besant, apparently, had given it thought. It seemed best that the post, telegraph, railways, canals, and the large industries which could be made in Trusts, would "so far as we can see now, be best administered each from a single centre for the whole kingdom." The smaller industries, together with tramways, gas-works, and water-works, could be managed locally. "In marking the lines of division, convenience and experience must be our guides. The demarcations are of expediency, not of principle."<sup>1240</sup>

The problem of the unemployed did not admit of any solution to the "Essayists" and to Webb in particular. "In my humble judgement," he writes,

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<sup>1238</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>1239</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 9.

<sup>1240</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 191.

. . . no plan has yet been devised by which the fluctuations of work could be entirely prevented, or safe and profitable employment found for those rendered idle by no fault of their own. . . . Something more than agitation is required. . . . I fear that if we were given full power to-morrow to deal with the unemployed all over England we should find ourselves hard put to it how to solve the problem.<sup>1241</sup>

Mrs. Besant takes a more hopeful view in her plan to give gainful employment to the unemployed in County Farms and Municipal Workshops. Certainly, of all the Fabians, Mrs. Besant was recognized as knowledgeable in matters concerning labor and Trade Unions, even if Webb was to view her solution with scepticism. The responsibility for the solution of unemployment lay on the County Councils. Skilled and unskilled workers must be registered separately. The rural organization of labor is to be effected on County Farms controlled by the County Councils. The unemployed are to be converted into communal workers organized in great farms in the country and Trades in urban areas. Thus,

To the County Farm will be drafted from the unemployed in the towns the agricultural laborers who have wandered townwards in search of work, and many of the unskilled laborers. On these farms every advantage of machinery, and every discovery in agricultural science, should be utilised to the utmost. The crops should be carefully chosen . . . the one aim being to obtain the largest amount of produce with the least expenditure of human labor. . . . Economy would also gain by the large number of laborers under the direction of the head farmer.<sup>1242</sup>

The County Farm must be self-supporting, having in it all the "small industries" required for the necessities of existence "and an industrial commune thus built up."<sup>1243</sup> The visions of her County Farms, industrial communes, and workshops seem to resemble more and more some

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<sup>1241</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 51, pp. 8-9.

<sup>1242</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 191-192.

<sup>1243</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

kind of admixture of Louis Blanc, Fourier, and Owen. She resurrects the idea of the formation of well equipped rural communities and county farms. It also seemed similar to Kropotkin's proposal of established agricultural and industrial communities of self-sufficiency having excellent facilities for work and recreation. Communes are to be democratically run, with a working day of eight hours and the laborers comfortably housed. Each farm in the "commune" would have a "central store" adjacent to a railway station and a public hall located in the center of the "farm village" to be used for all manner of social activities and lectures. Also,

. . . its public schools, elementary and technical; and soon, possibly from the outset, its public meal-room, saving time and trouble to housewives, and, while economising fuel and food, giving a far greater choice and variety of dishes. Large dwellings, with suites of rooms, might perhaps replace old-fashioned cottages; for it is worth noting, as showing the tendency already existing among ourselves to turn from isolated self-dependence to the advantages of associated living.<sup>1244</sup>

Concerning the urban organization of industry, it is to be run on the "most advanced lines, and take advantage of every modern tendency towards less isolated modes of living."<sup>1245</sup> Each individual needs be employed at that activity he is best capable of doing, with their products "garnered in municipal stores." The organization of industry into these self-sufficient "workshops" based on communal living and co-operation

. . . will be under the direction of foremen, thoroughly skilled workmen, able to superintend and direct as though in private em-

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<sup>1244</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>1245</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

ployment. The working-day must be of eight hours, and the wages, for the present, the Trades Union minimum.<sup>1245</sup>

It is not surprising that Mrs. Besant, who fought so valiantly for an eight hours' day and the match-girls' strike, should include these in her ideal of industrial reconstruction.<sup>1247</sup> The "workshops" would, quite obviously, ensure the best division of labor, production efficiency, and the welfare of the workers who would consume the wealth produced by them and serve as a remedy for idleness, poverty, and unemployment. This is important since

Under Socialism the workers are to be the nation, and all that is best is for their service, for, be it remembered, our faces are set towards Socialism,<sup>1248</sup> and our organisation of labor is to be on Socialist lines.

The unemployed laborer in city and farm is not communalized in County Farms, industrial communes, and workshops.

The private capitalist, as with Louis Blanc, is expected to collapse under the weight of competition from the new Socialist organization of industry, the latter having the advantages of a greater concentration of capital and efficiency. "After awhile the private producers will disappear, not because there will be any law against individualist production, but because it will not pay."<sup>1249</sup>

The ideal form of management during the period of change from

<sup>1246</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>1247</sup> Margaret Cole in The Story of Fabian Socialism writes that in her scheme for the establishment of socialism by County Councils, etc., Mrs. Besant makes no mention, quite curiously, of Trade Unions, p. 26.

<sup>1248</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 194.

<sup>1249</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

Individualism to Socialization would be "Communal Councils" which would appoint committees to supervise the many aspects of industry, the committees to be responsible for the appointment and dismissal of the manager and foreman for each factory.

To Webb, Mrs. Besant's proposal would be Socialism of an extremely "spurious" kind. The idea of placing the control of the means of production under the worker in "work-shops," communes, or County Farms rather than under that of the entire community was more Syndicalist than Collectivist in nature. Such proposals often involved the idea that the workers in each trade elect their own officials and superintendents and hours of work, which, writes Webb, are ". . . survivals of Owen's principles, diametrically opposed to modern Socialism."<sup>1250</sup> To Webb, the profits of miners or other trades and industries must be transferred to the community as a whole and not to the workers. What Socialists aim for

. . . is, not the assumption by any trade of the management of that trade, but the extension of the public organisation of industry, whether under the Central Government, the County, the Town,<sup>1251</sup> or the Parish Council in the interest of the Community as a whole.

"Joint Stock Individualism" was particularly abhorrent to Webb who, obviously having Mrs. Besant in mind, feels it lingers ". . . vaguely about the Trade Union world, and periodically captures the imagination of enthusiastic reformers."<sup>1252</sup> It was another form of "spurious" Collectivism influenced by Louis Blanc and the Paris Socialists of 1848. Blanc, like Owen, Fourier, and Henri de Saint-simon, attributed all poverty to private property, competition, and monopoly.

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<sup>1250</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 14.

<sup>1251</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>1252</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

He suggested that the State establish "social work-shops" in which each worker would pursue the task best suited to his abilities and interests on terms of absolute equality, the Capitalist to be displaced by small groups of workers who would appoint their own administrators from among themselves. Groups of workers would thus jointly own the instruments of their trade. Blanc's proposal puts the organization of production under the control of the workers and not of the Community. The problem was that, much as in the case of the capitalist employer, the various groups of workers would

. . . openly compete for business with private firms and other associations of producers. The self-governing workshops belong in fact, not to Socialism but to Joint Stock Individualism. . . .<sup>1253</sup>

It stood little chance of success as it could only lead to chaos and confusion, lacking any organization and control. Also, the tendency of each man being his own master was no different from Individualism. To Webb, "The worker is and must be the servant of the Community."<sup>1254</sup>

The nature of Mrs. Besant's proposal did tend to make the trade or industry the basic administrative unit. The worker in each trade was to control the means of production. A form of "Trade Sectionalism," which neither Webb nor the other Fabians thought much of, it was of ancient vintage in England. Robert Owen in 1833 had suggested that the instruments of production be owned collectively by the workers in each trade, rather than by the community--an early form of "spurious" Socialism. Mrs. Besant, somewhat falsely, feels that workers' control is tantamount to community control. The organization of industry along

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<sup>1253</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>1254</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

Trade Union lines would eliminate competition, and her scheme of "federation" would promote greater co-ordination by the presence of "General Boards" or "Central Industrial Boards." However, the workers in any particular trade combined as co-operative owners and producers would have as much effect in eliminating commercial strife and competition as the union of all employees who formed a joint stock corporation. As Webb points out,

. . . the shipwrights, making wooden ships, would have found the boilermakers competing for their business by making iron ships, and would have had either to succumb or to transform their wooden ship capital into iron ship capital and enter into competition with the boilermakers as commercial rivals in the same trade.<sup>1255</sup>

The fact that each trade, organized along Trade Union lines, was centralized in "General Boards," "Central Industrial Boards," or "Grand Lodges" would not only transform the individual trade or industry into something analagous to a private company, but the Grand Lodges would become much like the head-offices of large corporations, free of the control by the community. This being so,

They would therefore have been in a position at any moment to close their ranks and admit fresh generations of workers only as employees at competitive wages, instead of as shareholders, thus creating at one stroke a new capitalist class and a new proletariat.<sup>1256</sup>

Mrs. Besant continues in her vision of her state of society to outline how books and newspapers would be published when all industries are to be carried on by the Commune which is identified with the "Nation." "Printing, like baking, tailoring, shoemaking, is a communal

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<sup>1255</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>1256</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

rather than a national industry."<sup>1257</sup> The printing offices would be controlled by a Communal Council free to accept or reject any publication. However, in cases where it rejects a submitted work, the author may have it printed by transferring the cost necessary to cover the cost of printing from his credit at the "Communal Bank" to the printing committee.

Thus liberty of expression would be guarded as a constitutional right, while the community would not be charged with the cost of printing every stupid effusion that its fond composer might deem worthy of publicity.<sup>1258</sup>

A more "thorny subject" than the organization of workers is that of the remuneration of labor, how the "share of the product" is to be distributed between the individual, the municipality, and the State.<sup>1259</sup> Since Socialism demands that the workers reap the benefits of their labor, from the value of the "communal produce" must be paid the rent of land to the "local authority," the rent for the plant, taxes, reserve, and accumulation fund; the remainder is to be distributed equally among the communal workers as a "bonus."<sup>1260</sup>

The Fabians were concerned as good Socialists with the production of wealth, and they paid little attention to its distribution. Mrs. Besant, however, recommends the placing of the distribution of wealth in the control of "organised societies."<sup>1261</sup> In her view, there must be as great a change in the methods of distribution as in production. Co-operation must replace competition once again. She sees the change al-

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<sup>1257</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 197.

<sup>1258</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>1259</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>1260</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>1261</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 108.

ready evident in the large-stores which stock all varieties of goods. At present, they are owned by capitalists and compete for business, but they are the "forerunners of a rational distributive system." Under Socialism, all manufactured goods would be distributed to a "central store" in each district, and later distributed to "retail stores." She writes,

Anyone who thinks such distribution impossible had better study the postal system now existing; we do not have post-offices jostling each other as we do baker's and butcher's shops: there are sufficient of them for the requirement of the district, and no more. . . . But then in the Post Office co-operation has replaced competition, organisation has replaced anarchy.<sup>1262</sup>

The example of the Post Office is to be emulated, and improved upon, in all aspects of distribution of commodities by "district stores." Turning once more to the Radical, she points out that he has accepted the principle and recognized the function of the State in collecting and distributing letters and mail. Could there be, she questions, any difference "in principle" between the Post Office collecting and distributing letters and a "district store" collecting and distributing manufactured goods.<sup>1263</sup> Also, the distribution of goods by "district stores" would guarantee greater efficiency and less waste and expense to the consumer.

There would be no more fruit rotting in Yorkshire because its sale would not pay the cost of carriage, while high prices were being paid for similar fruit in London; no more exorbitant railway charges and middleman's profits eating up the whole price paid by the consumer.<sup>1264</sup>

The Fabians never attempted to found their version of a new

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<sup>1262</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, pp. 28-29.

<sup>1263</sup>Besant, Radicalism and Socialism, p. 14.

<sup>1264</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

Jerusalem with dramatic suddenness complete in every detail. They were more concerned with immediate administrative and social problems. Unlike Mrs. Besant, their idea that the community own the means of production did not admit any precise, well-planned "blue-print" of the future Socialist structure. Even if they envisaged large corporations or railroads as being owned by the community, whether controlled nationally or by local authorities, they were unconcerned with the precise details of administration.

Mrs. Besant is one with Shaw and Webb in her condemnation of interest obtained by the idle shareholder. Webb, acknowledging his debt to Mill, states that it was Mill of the later Socialist leanings who saw in Socialism the way to release the great evils attendant on exploited labor by those who did not work for a living.

We who call ourselves Socialists to-day in England, largely through Mill's teaching and example, find a confirmation of this hope in social history and economics, and see already in the distance the glad vision of a brighter day, when, practically, the whole product of labour will be the worker's and the worker's alone, and at last social arrangements will be deliberately based upon the Apostolic rule ignored by so many Christians, that if a man do not work, neither shall he eat.<sup>1265</sup>

Shaw, in his Essay "Economic," was particularly opposed to the "idle landlord."<sup>1266</sup> Mrs. Besant affirms that "Socialism aims at rendering impossible the existence of an idle class."<sup>1267</sup> She sees the vast disparity between the capitalist with his inherited wealth and the landless laborer. The investment of money at interest puts an additional burden on the laborer, the capitalist receiving from his invested capital more

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<sup>1265</sup>(Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 11.

<sup>1266</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 18.

<sup>1267</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 226.

than one-third of the national income. There exists no right to invest money at interest, as it is money not earned by the receivers. Mrs. Besant answers those who feel that, should the interest on capital be abolished, it would not be possible to finance the railroads, trams, etc. The answer is to place the making and operation of all means of transportation in the control of local bodies or municipalities who would raise the moneys required from the community which would then enjoy its benefits. Thus,

An effective step towards the abolition of interest might be taken by the closing of the sources of idle investment, the taking over by local bodies of the local means of transit, the gas and water supply, etc., while the central authority takes over the railways.<sup>1268</sup>

Mrs. Besant, unlike Webb and the Fabians, appears to have decided upon the division of function between the local and central authorities concerning the control of the instruments of production and the means of transportation.

Answering the question raised by her concerning the cause of poverty, Mrs. Besant writes,

Poverty will never cease so long as any class or individuals have an interest in the exploitation of others. While individuals hold capital, and other individuals cannot exist unless that capital is used for their employment, the first class will prey upon the second. The capitalist will not employ unless they can "make a profit" out of those they hire to work for them; that is, unless they pay them less than the value of his work; and while one class grows wealthy on unpaid labour, another must remain poor, giving labour without return. Socialism would give to each return for labour done, but it recognizes no claim in the idle to grow fat on the produce of the industrious.<sup>1269</sup>

Since Socialism claims for each individual an appropriate compensation for his work, it cannot recognize interest bearing capital. Capital now in

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<sup>1268</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 35.

<sup>1269</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 225.

private hands must be transferred to the community to cure the disease of inherited wealth and interest which keeps an idle class in luxury at the expense of those who work.

If a man possesses three or four thousand pounds he can invest them, and live all his life long on the interest without ever doing a stroke of honest work, and can then bequeath to some one else the right to live in idleness; and so on in perpetuity. Money in the capitalist system is like the miraculous oil in the widow's cruse-- it can always be spent and never exhausted.<sup>1270</sup>

Since the publication of Fabian Tract No. 8, Facts For Londoners, by Webb, the Fabian Society was certain that the municipalization of all monopolies was essential. They also saw the growing tendency towards a greater concentration of capital in the hands of monopolists and the growth of trusts and monopolies. Shaw, in his Essay "Economic," saw the great evils of the increasing concentration of economic power in "rings, trusts, corners, combinations, monopolies" which determined the Exchange Value of any commodity by their power to regulate the supply for their own advantage.<sup>1271</sup> All the Essayists, with the exception of Bland, thought the trusts would fall before the onrush of Socialism. They based their optimism in their belief in the inevitability of Socialism and that the public conscience would recognize trusts as anti-social and demand their expropriation. Mrs. Besant is certain that "Everything which has been organised into a Trust, and has been worked for a time in the Trust fashion, is ripe for appropriation by the community."<sup>1272</sup>

Like the other Fabians, Mrs. Besant recognized that the competi-

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<sup>1270</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>1271</sup> Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 32.

<sup>1272</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 194.

tive system led to a greater concentration of capital in the hands of fewer monopolists. This was evident both from the irrefutable laws of Political Economy and the nature of society. As industries fall into fewer hands, as in the case of joint stock corporations, particularly in America, the smaller capitalist is crushed, and

. . . then you will be face to face with an absolute tyranny over society as you have got it in America, where a ring of capitalists simply plays with the market for its own profit and plunders the community for its own gain.<sup>1273</sup>

Capitalistic monopoly spells ruin, as the rich grow effete while the poor bear the cross of dire need. Society stands in peril of being destroyed by the division of classes, as were the ancient civilizations of Rome and Greece which rested on the division of classes into slave and proprietary. Both Webb and Clarke had demonstrated that with the growth of increasing monopoly, an Individualistic society was no longer possible; society itself was becoming undemocratic. Therefore, as regards these great combinations:

State action may take one of three courses. It may prohibit and dissolve them; it may tax and control them; or it may absorb and administer them. In either case the Socialist theory is ipso facto admitted: for each is a confession that it is well to exercise a collective control over industrial capital.<sup>1274</sup>

Thus in order to prevent the decay of civilization, the exploitation of the wage-earner, the Socialist plan to Mrs. Besant is to put the monopolies into the power of the community, "and to make them social instead

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<sup>1273</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 126.

<sup>1274</sup>William Clarke, M.A., "Industrial," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 128; Clarke also points out on page 116 of the same Essay that the best examples of "rings" and "pools" are to be found in America, "where capitalism is more unrestrained and bolder in its operations than in Europe."

of anti-social as they are under your Individualistic system."<sup>1275</sup> Also, since the capitalists have already centralized industries into monopolies and combines and have thereby unconsciously paved "the way for their own supersession," it is possible for the State to set up "Local Boards" such as an "Iron Board" or "Tin Board" which would be responsible to the nation instead of a "casual crowd of shareholders."<sup>1276</sup>

Mrs. Besant seemed sanguine that human nature, however imperfect, could be completely changed. She declares, "It is because I do not take an optimistic view of human nature that I advocate socialism."<sup>1277</sup> The idea that man was possessed of any "Christ-like unselfishness" was, to Webb, an idle dream and an "ancient one." Science had shown that there could be no change in the moral habits of man,

Forms of egoism may change, and moral habits vary; but, constituted as we are, it seems inevitable for healthy personal development that an at best instructed and unconscious egoism should preponderate in the individual.<sup>1278</sup>

Mrs. Besant acknowledges that when man has the opportunity to exploit another, to live idly on another's labor, he will do so. It was because she did not believe that human nature was perfect that she was a Socialist, for only when the necessary production of the means of subsistence belonged to the community would the "possibility of social aggression" be reduced to a minimum, "and produce the greatest extent of common working

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<sup>1275</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 126.

<sup>1276</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 194.

<sup>1277</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 130.

<sup>1278</sup> (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 11.

for the common good."<sup>1279</sup> It was because she held that human nature was imperfect that she wanted "to take away the opportunities of exploitation which are enjoyed by men under the present system of society."<sup>1280</sup> Thus, Socialism is in a position to declare to the indolent and lazy that "If you do not work you will starve," and to destroy the monopolies in the production of wealth which allow the owners to exploit their fellows.

To Mrs. Besant, Socialism implied co-operation and brotherhood, each working for the good of all. The way to direct human nature toward this end was to destroy "by every effective means" those conditions which allowed the strongest and most selfish to be the most successful. The Individualistic system must be done away with.

It was not to be expected that at first human selfishness would disappear, but when men and women held property for the common good the first step towards this was taken.<sup>1281</sup>

It was seen that when workers in a factory co-operated as "co-partners," they were far more productive and energetic. Thus,

This principle might be widened out from the smaller community to the larger, from the larger to the nation, and from the nation to the race . . . so a nobler humanity should be evolved with sympathy and not with cunning and craft.<sup>1282</sup>

Mrs. Besant did not call upon a superior breed of civil servant who would guide society. Webb and Shaw had little faith in the average man, but apart from the socialization of the means of production, Webb placed his hope in a corps of elite experts who would be superior in quality to

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<sup>1279</sup>Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 12.

<sup>1280</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 130.

<sup>1281</sup>Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 31.

<sup>1282</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

the common man. Mrs. Besant saw quite clearly the growth of co-operation spreading in ever-wider circles to embrace the totality of humanity.

However, to Mrs. Besant, it was very possible that society would also evolve into "Communism." She admits that man had not as yet reached that state of development, and for man as now constituted, "Communism" would mean the living "of the idle on the toil of the laborious." Thus, immediate Communism was not possible, "but that through Collectivism you may come to Communism."<sup>1283</sup> While human nature was not as yet ready for "Communism," it appeared ripe for Collectivist Socialism. What Mrs. Besant means by "Communism" is not made clear. It implied, as with Marx, the destruction of capitalism, but not, however, by violent means. Perhaps she means the control of the means of production by the community, identified with the proletariat and workers. Like Olivier, in his Essay "Moral,"<sup>1284</sup> "Communism" may imply co-operative production to Mrs. Besant.

Mrs. Besant makes very clear that under Socialism, the monetary incentive was not vital and that its removal would not destroy economic growth. Once each individual felt secure about his means of subsistence, the "abnormal development of the gold-hunger would disappear. . . ."<sup>1285</sup> With a feeling of security, the desire for gain would disappear, and man would excel in creative work and enjoy a full rich life. "Everywhere," she writes, "we see the multiform desires of humanity assert themselves

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<sup>1283</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? pp. 22-23.

<sup>1284</sup> See Sydney Olivier, "Moral," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 160.

<sup>1285</sup> Besant, "Industry Under Socialism," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 208.

when once livelihood is secure.<sup>1286</sup> The desire to excel, as with the sportsman, is the guarantee that Socialism will progress. Socialism rests not only on the Individualistic desire for profit but on the thrill of work well done and nobly performed. The stimulus to action is provided for by a spirit of esprit de corps and the honor to the flag as with the soldier. With the coming of Socialism, not only could all the ills of society disappear but man would don the armor of a Sir Lancelot.

To the shirker, the stimulus to labor would be the fear of starvation, the desire of the worker for the products of communal labor, "and the determination of his fellow-workers as to make him take his fair share of the work of producing it."<sup>1287</sup> The threat of dismissal from communal employment would prompt service as much as the approbation of his fellows. Once man is secure as to the necessities and needs of life, it would bring to the fore the finer qualities of service, achievement, constructive endeavor, artistic merit, and a conscious striving for perfection of man and society. Man would give with no regard to the cost, and labor with no thought of reward.

Quite clearly, Socialism is the expression of a strong moral impulse. It sought a "universal brotherhood" in its attack on the indifference of the wealthy and comfortable who sat idly by as the hewers of wood and drawers of water toiled for their benefit. All work was useful which served society, whether that of a teacher or farmer, a poet or an artist.

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<sup>1286</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>1287</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

Society has many needs, and they all have to be supplied; and any man who fulfills a function that is useful--that man deserves his place in society.<sup>1288</sup>

Mrs. Besant is optimistic that Society is moving in the right direction. The growing "outburst of human brotherhood" was evidence that society was "evolving Socialism-wards." The Socialist ideal could not meet with its "wide acceptance if humanity were not marching towards its realisation."<sup>1289</sup> In Socialism, Mrs. Besant sees the realization of an unselfish brotherhood of man. Socialism was both an "idea" and a "movement." It required devotion to an ideal and implied a faith which would bring about a change of heart in man. The Socialist movement was an ardent love affair between emotion and intellect, each geared to human well-being, universal brotherhood, co-operation, and a new nexus of economic life and concept of society.

It was feared by the Individualists that the coming of Socialism would destroy Individualism and restrict the liberty of the individual. Mrs. Besant, more than any of the Fabians, defends the Socialist position--Webb never entered into long-drawn out debates with the Individualists, although he was firm in his belief that Socialism had secured greater liberty for the individual than laissez-faire Individualism. To Webb, personal liberty could be had by the majority of the people

. . . only by their substituting democratic self-government in the industrial world for that of personal power which the Industrial Revolution has placed in the hands of the proprietary class.<sup>1290</sup>

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<sup>1288</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 107.

<sup>1289</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 228.

<sup>1290</sup> Webb, Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 18.

The Fabians had a genuine concern with individual liberty. Each citizen was entitled to participate in the common good and to develop his potential and personality to the fullest. Olivier had justified Socialism on the precept of "ethical science."<sup>1291</sup> Shaw had shown that private property was unjust, and, much as Mrs. Besant, he was convinced that any attempt made to construct "true societies" upon it was doomed to failure and that the present civilization was "already in an advanced state of rotteness may be taken as statistically proved."<sup>1292</sup> Shaw's "proletariat" was much like Rousseau's "natural man." It was only in society that man was no longer alienated and capable of self-fulfillment. Webb in his Essay "Historic" had pointed out the many activities which the State had already obtained control of with no stifling of individual liberty. Also, the Socialist concept of the "Social Organism" as well as the canons of "Political Economy" had compelled ". . . a revision of the relative importance of liberty and equality as principles to be kept in view in social administration."<sup>1293</sup> The State existed for the good of the individual, and, unlike the Utilitarians, Webb, in particular, points out clearly that individual liberty could only be had by collective control of the means of production. The "Organic Concept" of the State, Collectivism and municipalization, was essential to the "Co-operative Commonwealth" in which men were truly free.

Mrs. Besant, responding to the Individualist attack, contends

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<sup>1291</sup>See Olivier, "Moral," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, pp. 131-134.

<sup>1292</sup>Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 39.

<sup>1293</sup>Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 81.

that the worst foe of Individualism was not Socialism but the struggle for existence. True Individualism could only develop when Socialism had lifted from the shoulders of man the burden of care and want. It was seen that:

Exhausting toil and ever-growing anxiety, these crush out individuality, and turn the eager promising lad into the harassed drudge of middle age. How many capable brains are wasted, how many original geniuses lost to the nation they might illuminate, by the strife for more livelihood?<sup>1294</sup>

Since no Individualism was possible while men struggled for existence, only the destruction of monopoly in the materials in wealth production would change man from "the drudges they are to-day into the cultured men and women who shall form our Socialist Commonwealth."<sup>1295</sup> Socialism has substituted "rationality" for the crude Darwinistic ethic of survival of the fittest.

To the Individualist, state action was a negation of individual liberty. Foote, in his debate with Mrs. Besant, rather caustically comments that Mrs. Besant ". . . wants to call in an omnipotent state to provide the brains which we have not got, to provide the moral cohesion we have not got."<sup>1296</sup> Millar demands to know what assurance Mrs. Besant could offer that under "State monopoly and control" the workers would prosper.<sup>1297</sup> Also, to suppose that the socialization of the means of production would contribute to the good of the whole was to say that Socialism should try to establish a condition of equality by preventing the able and the fit realising the benefit of their

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<sup>1294</sup> Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 227.

<sup>1295</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 110.

<sup>1296</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>1297</sup> Besant, Socialism V. Individualism, p. 6.

ability and fitness. In other words, Socialism would rob the competent Peter in order to pay the incompetent Paul.<sup>1298</sup>

Individualism was an assertion of true worth, the Social ideal was to produce a "deadly uniformity"<sup>1299</sup> where the idler and shirker would benefit at the expense of the industrious and able. Socialism would destroy those very motives which secured progress, and by stifling the natural instincts of man for "self-preservation and acquisition" would remove all incentives to "self-help and self-dependence which had done so much to promote the happiness and welfare of the working classes."<sup>1300</sup>

The Individualist was aware

. . . how Greek civilisation, which attained its height in the age of Pericles, had its life's blood sapped by the Socialism of Cleon, and how it was overwhelmed by the hordes of Macedonia.<sup>1301</sup>

Mrs. Besant rises to the challenge. Socialism as seen by the "non-student" is a rigid system in which the State, which is supposedly separate from the individual, "shall rigidly assign to each his task, and deal out to each his subsistence."<sup>1302</sup> This is simply not true, and even if it were, Socialism would ensure for the majority a greater freedom for they would be required to work shorter hours and enjoy greater leisure. This was a far cry from the Compulsion on the workers who were forced to sweat and bleed, bound to the yoke for long days and nights of toil by the Capitalist master. If there existed any "tyranny" about Socialism, it lay in the fact that each individual was

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<sup>1298</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>1299</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>1300</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>1301</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>1302</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 49.

required to work for his own subsistence. Therefore,

One kind of liberty, indeed, will be restricted--the liberty to oppress and to enslave other people. But with this exception liberty will be increased. Only the very wealthy are now free. The great majority of people must work, and their choice of work is very limited.<sup>1303</sup>

The poor in a competitive system must get what work they can. The civilized man is a varied being, and each must be given the opportunity to do that which provides him with the most satisfaction. Socialism offers man a choice, and when the day's work is done the chance to turn to "science, literature, art, gymnastics, to what he would, for the joyous hours of leisure."<sup>1304</sup> Mrs. Besant is aware that some must perform the more disagreeable duties, yet the compulsion by the community upon those "would not be a greater restriction of personal liberty than the present compulsion of hunger."<sup>1305</sup> The most rigid organization of labor by the community imaginable would be preferable to the present system for, at the worst, it would occupy only a small part of the working day, leaving the rest to do as he willed. Also,

The pride in skill, the stimulus of honorable ambition, the pleasure of success, all these would be present, as they are to-day: but instead of being the privilege of the few, they would brighten the life of all.<sup>1306</sup>

Socialism took pride in its principle of equality for women. Even the Radicals, it now appears, were not fully dedicated to it, attempting to deny women even the rights of "citizenship."

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<sup>1303</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 227.

<sup>1304</sup>Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 50; it was a fond hope that the worker would turn to worth-while pursuits in his hours of leisure. A persistent Fabian fallacy.

<sup>1305</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 227.

<sup>1306</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

There is no body in the world save the Socialist, whether you take them in England, or in America, or in Germany, or among the Nihilists in Russia, . . . where you find the absolute independence and equality of women proclaimed as one of the cardinal points in their creed. (Cheers). That was one of the things that attracted me to the Socialist party.<sup>1307</sup>

Foote, quite appropriately, reminds Mrs. Besant that the Freethinkers with whom she had been associated proclaimed that equality and made no distinctions between the sexes.<sup>1308</sup>

Finally comes that stirring peroration, which marks the style of Mrs. Besant,

I know that our hope is said to be the dream of the enthusiast; I know that our message is derided, and that the gospel of man's redemption which we preach is scorned. Be it so. Our work shall answer the gibes of our opponents,<sup>1309</sup> and our faith in the future shall outlast their mockery.

For the continued success of a Socialist State, an effective system of national education was essential. A self-governing people must be instructed. She proposes a complete overhaul in the system of education geared to the fullest development of the young as future members of a free community. Neither cram nor class was suitable. The foundations of absolute social equality must be laid in the schools, all children to be educated in "communal schools" on a co-educational basis and provided with a common education preparatory for "common work." Each student will be exposed to the elements of science, art, history, literature, and language. This would broaden their horizons and enrich their cultural lives. Nor is physical training forgotten-- "gymnastics, dancing, riding, athletic games, will educate the senses

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<sup>1307</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 109.

<sup>1308</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>1309</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 50.

and the limbs."<sup>1310</sup> To this must be added "technical training"; the cultured and educated are also to be "workers." "The foundations of this technical training will be the same for all; all will learn to cook and scrub, to dig and sew, and to render quick assistance in accidents."<sup>1311</sup> As the child grows, his natural interests and capabilities require special instruction, thereby providing the community the full benefit of the diverse talents of its members.

No genius then will be dwarfed by early neglect, no rare ability then perish for lack of culture. Individuality will then at last find full expression, and none will need to trample on his brother in order to secure full scope for his own development.<sup>1312</sup>

She confesses that the "sketch" presented by her of education in a Socialist community might appear "a mere Utopian dream."<sup>1313</sup> Yet it seems quite feasible to Mrs. Besant and very essential if the interests of the community are to be best served by intelligent and more complete young men and women.

The cost of the education is to be borne by the community, and it is to be made compulsory. It appeared to Mrs. Besant that when no idle class was a burden on society and each individual produced his share of wealth, the National Income would be sufficient to bear the cost. Free compulsory education for all was an accepted Fabian ideal; but only Mrs. Besant outlines its nature. As an Atheist, Mrs. Besant recognized its importance; as a Socialist, she fills in its details, however fanciful, in a society dominated by an elitist educational

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<sup>1310</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>1311</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>1312</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>1313</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

system from the public school to Oxbridge.

As a Fabian, Mrs. Besant remained a devoted supporter of Neo-Malthusianism and views its acceptance by the Fabians as absolutely vital to the future of Socialism. She writes, "On one matter the Socialist movement, both abroad and at home, has set itself in opposition to science and to right reason eg., on the law of population."<sup>1314</sup> To the Fabians, and Webb in particular, Malthusianism was a doubtful cure; to urge prudence and self-restraint upon the poor was of little value since the poor would not heed the advice. The cure for over-population lay in the proper distribution of wealth. Webb sees no relation between the rise of wages and an increase in population. It was the private ownership of land and capital, rather than an increase in population, which excluded the worker from the natural advantages of soil and the instruments of production.<sup>1315</sup> This, and not an increasing population, was the real cause of poverty. Mrs. Besant recognizes she is in a minority on this question among the Socialists. Early marriage and the limitation of the family within the means of subsistence was a cure to poverty.

Many of my fellow Socialists--not thinking as carefully and thoughtfully as they should--ignore or deny that indisputable truth. But I allege that when you have Socialism, the fact that unless you regulate the relative numbers of producers and consumers you will over-burden your producers, will be a fact so patent and obvious that the blindest will be compelled to see it. (Hear, hear)<sup>1316</sup>

Excessive population among the poor is contributory to their terrible plight. The poor are left with little pleasure apart from sexual inter-

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<sup>1314</sup>Besant, "The Socialist Movement," 228.

<sup>1315</sup>See Webb, Fabian Tract No. 69, p. 10; and (Webb), Fabian Tract No. 15, p. 12.

<sup>1316</sup>Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 23.

course. Bred in the stale atmosphere of poverty, this one pleasure is all that remains to them.<sup>1317</sup> To Mrs. Besant, the duty to restrict the growth of population was as important as making changes in the means of wealth production.

Justice and liberty were a passion for the eloquent and dynamic Fabian. To pretend that there was any equality under the law was a barefaced lie. One of the most important functions of the State was to secure equal justice for all and to prevent the oppression of the weak. In a "civilised State" justice should be meted out without fee or reward. Both lawyers and judges are to be officials paid by the State which has no pecuniary interest in the case under trial.<sup>1318</sup>

The once dedicated Atheist is accused by Foote who charges that Socialists had made common cause with Christianity. Mrs. Besant denies that she had mellowed in her religious views, but she was charitably disposed to those Christians (as the Rev. Headlam) who were such stout allies of the Socialists. She declares,

And if Christianity walked on the same lines as Socialism then Socialists would be willing to welcome it on these points of agreement, as they are willing to-day to welcome Christians as workers for this common purpose. (Hear, hear)<sup>1319</sup>

Mrs. Besant fought poverty not out of a sense of Christian duty as did the Christian Socialists. Her commitment was to Socialist principles, and in her writings and speeches, it cannot be said that she was unaware of the major tenets of Fabian thought, even though her

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<sup>1317</sup> Also see Shaw, "Economic," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 36; Shaw uses a similar argument.

<sup>1318</sup> Besant, Modern Socialism, p. 45.

<sup>1319</sup> Besant, Is Socialism Sound? p. 54.

obvious Utopianism proved galling to Webb, in particular. To Mrs. Besant, Socialism was a means of bringing about a better social state. It cannot be said that her thinking was tinged with a rigid doctrinairism, which the Fabians deplored, and although she was to turn to Theosophy, yet her role and thought as a Fabian need to be viewed sympathetically. In both action and thought, Mrs. Besant as a Fabian steered a constitutional course.<sup>1320</sup>

Mrs. Besant was a Fabian from 1885 to 1889, and in May of 1889 she renounced Fabianism for Theosophy, becoming a pupil of Madame Blavatsky and remaining a dedicated Theosophist to the end of her days. She first became aware of the existence of the Theosophical Society in 1882, while engaged as a Freethinker in her political and social struggles, but airily dismissed it as a type of esoteric phantasy having nothing in common with Secularism. She declares that, "There is a radical difference between the mysticism of Theosophy and the scientific materialism of Secularism."<sup>1321</sup> But the question remained whether the rational and scientific would satisfy a woman whose deeply felt longings had once been for martyrdom and to whom Anglo-Catholicism was once a cherished joy. Besterman writes that since the beginnings of the 'eighties, she sought to find relief from the "dull atheistic round" as she ". . . threw herself into one thing after another, science, Our Corner, Socialism, local government, and the rest."<sup>1322</sup> But the call to

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<sup>1320</sup> Nethercot in First Five Lives of Annie Besant writes on page 275 that Mrs. Besant virtually deserted the Fabians for the Social Democrats at the close of her socialistic phase. It seems difficult to justify this view. Shaw made no mention of it.

<sup>1321</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 280-281.

<sup>1322</sup> Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 131.

Theosophy was not to be denied and Mrs. Besant now sought a new understanding to the mysteries of life and existence in terms of Theosophic thought. She confesses in 1888, the year prior to her joining the Theosophic Society: "How unconsciously I was marching towards the Theosophy which was to become the glory of my life."<sup>1323</sup>

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<sup>1323</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 330.

## CHAPTER XII

### MRS. BESANT AND THEOSOPHY

It seemed to the observer of the time that Mrs. Besant's turn to Theosophy from Fabian Socialism on May 21, 1889, was the result of a sudden impulse. But as in all her transformations, it was not the product of a gust of emotional enthusiasm; an inner questioning and dissatisfaction with both Secularism and Socialism propelled her towards the adoption of a new faith which, she writes, ". . . realised the dreams of childhood on the higher planes of intellectual womanhood."<sup>1324</sup> To Shaw it came as a complete surprise. Casually entering the editorial office of the Star, he noticed the proof of an article entitled "Sic Itur ad Astra; or, Why I Became a Theosophist," signed by Mrs. Besant. Staggered by the unexpected and the loss of a comrade-in-arms, he impulsively rushed to her office in Fleet Street only to be confronted by a woman who had now found herself and her identity. No longer, reports Shaw, was she the victim of her pride; her persistent quest had led to her "Elysium." Shaw admits that Fabianism was not for her:

The only permanent interest the Fabian Society or any other society could have for her personally lay in such advance as it was capable of towards a religious philosophy, and when I led this advance into

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<sup>1324</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 345.

a channel repugnant to her, her spiritual interest in the Society died.<sup>1325</sup>

Shaw now dropped out completely from her "saga." The loss of Mrs. Besant was not acutely felt by the other Fabians, Pease in particular. Soon a new luminary was to enter its ranks--Beatrice Potter who was soon to wed Webb in 1892. Also, by February 1891, the Fabians were in the period of their "First Blooming" and had 361 members and twelve local societies--including one in Bombay.<sup>1326</sup> The Essays continued to sell rapidly. And as the Star reported,

A Fabian writes us:--Mrs. Annie Besant has just resigned her membership of the Fabian Society, and theosophy gains at the expense of social democracy. . . . By way of compensation for the loss, the Fabians have, during the last fortnight, recruited three times as many members as ever in the same time before.<sup>1327</sup>

In 1888 Mrs. Besant, Burrows, and Stead were involved in the tumult and stress of the Trade-Unionism and the Law and Liberty League. In the late Victorian era, spiritualism, seances, and clairvoyance were making their appearance. The Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, could boast in its list of members such personalities as Gladstone, William James, Tennyson, and Ruskin. Mrs. Besant, as far back as 1882 when she was active in her Freethought struggles, had summarily and curtly rejected such phenomena as well as the Theosophical Society. Seven years later, in 1888, Mrs. Besant was contemplating the building of a "true commonwealth" devoted to the idea of the service of man. She writes in Our Corner for February 1888,

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<sup>1325</sup> Shaw, "Annie Besant's Passage Through Fabian Socialism," Dr. Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work, p. 7.

<sup>1326</sup> Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, p. 36.

<sup>1327</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 319.

Lately there has been dawning on the minds of men far apart in questions of theology, the idea of founding a new Brotherhood, in which service of man should take the place erstwhile given to service of God.<sup>1328</sup>

One day in 1888 as she walked towards Millbank Goal with the Rev. Headlam, she was prompted to remark to him,

"Mr. Headlam, we ought to have a new Church, which should include all who have the common ground of faith in and love for man." . . . The teaching of social duty, the upholding of social righteousness, the building up of a true commonwealth--such would be among the aims of the Church of the future.<sup>1329</sup>

The search for something loftier, an ideal, had taken shape and by Mrs. Besant's own admission it was in 1886 (the year after she joined the Fabians) that it dawned upon her that her philosophies of doubt and socialism were inadequate to answer the riddle of the existence and purpose of man and the universe. She began to study the phenomena of clairvoyance, clairaudience, and thought power; to delve into the esoteric mysteries of states of consciousness, dreams, and illusions. The reading of the Occult World by A. P. Sinnet "expounded not the supernatural but a nature under law, wider than I had dared to conceive."<sup>1330</sup> She discovered that Oriental Religions are profoundly Pantheistic, demonstrating the unity of all phenomena, the unity of all existence. Already, she saw the gulf between Pantheism and Materialism,

that whereas Pantheism speaks of one universal life bodying itself forth in all lives, materialism speaks of matter and of force of which life and consciousness are the ultimate products and not the essential fact.<sup>1331</sup>

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<sup>1328</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 329.

<sup>1329</sup> Ibid., pp. 329-330.

<sup>1330</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>1331</sup> Besant, 1875 to 1891: A Fragment of Autobiography, p. 7.

Having been convinced that there existed a hidden power that propelled all existence, she set out resolutely to find it. Early in 1889, she penned a number of articles on "Primitive Religion" and spoke in the Hall of Science on "Buddha: His Life and Teachings"; and Beatrice Potter in My Apprenticeship writes that the Hon. Auberon Herbert was

. . . excited with the prospect of converting Mrs. Besant to spiritualism. . . . Strange will be the intimacy between the two natures: Mrs. Besant, with her rabid Socialism, embittered, by personal suffering, against the morality and the creed of Christendom; and Auberon Herbert, with his idealistic individualism, a character softened and perhaps even weakened by perpetually dwelling on spiritual influences.<sup>1332</sup>

But Mrs. Besant's transformation--regardless of the attempts of others--was to be brought about by herself and in a strangely metaphysical manner. Sitting alone immersed in deep and silent thought, yearning to solve "the riddle of life and mind,"<sup>1333</sup> she heard a "Voice" bidding her to take courage for the light she sought was near at hand. A fortnight later Stead asked Mrs. Besant to review the two volumes of The Secret Doctrine by Madame H. P. Blavatsky with the remark, "Can you review these? My young men all fight shy of them, but you are quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them."<sup>1334</sup> It was Stead who was to be the unconscious agent which drew Mrs. Besant to Theosophy and H.P.B. Mrs. Besant responded to the challenge and wrote to Stead,

I am immersed in Madame Blavatsky. If I perish in the attempt to review her, you must write on my tomb, "She has gone to investigate the Secret Doctrine at first hand."<sup>1335</sup>

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<sup>1332</sup> Nethercot, First Five Lives of Annie Besant, p. 292.

<sup>1333</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 340.

<sup>1334</sup> Gertrude Marvin Williams, Madame Blavatsky: Priestess of the Occult (New York: Lancer Books, 1946), p. 331.

<sup>1335</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

As Mrs. Besant poured over the pages with fascinated interest, she was dazzled by its message. Her quest had ended, and in an intuitive flash, ". . . the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew that the weary search was over and the very truth was found."<sup>1336</sup>

From that moment on, Theosophy had found its most dedicated apostle, and H.P.B. her most cherished disciple. Mrs. Besant wrote the review and asked Stead for an introduction to H.P.B. Their meeting was cordial. As Mrs. Besant rose to leave, the atmosphere of polite formality changed to a passionate intensity. H.P.B. was moved to say, "Oh, my dear Mrs. Besant, if you would only come among us!"<sup>1337</sup> Mrs. Besant checked an almost irrepressible desire to bend down and kiss her, but controlling the impulse she bid the elder woman a conventional farewell. The urge to join the Theosophical Society was not easily given into. Mrs. Besant asked herself, now that she had been so successful in her work on the London School Board and the Matchgirls' Union,

Was I to plunge into a new vortex of strife, and make myself a mark for ridicule--worse than hatred--and fight again the weary fight for an unpopular truth. . . . And he, [Bradlaugh] the strongest and truest friend of all, whose confidence I had shaken by my Socialism-- must he suffer the pang of seeing his co-worker, his co-fighter, of whom he had been so proud, to whom he had been so generous, go over to the opposing hosts, . . . The struggle was sharp and keen, but with none of the anguish of old days in it, for the soldier had now fought many fights and was hardened by many wounds.<sup>1338</sup>

But return she did to H.P.B. who questioned Mrs. Besant whether she had read the report about her by the Society for Psychological Research which had condemned H.P.B. as a fraud. So great was her belief in the new

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<sup>1336</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 340.

<sup>1337</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>1338</sup> Ibid., pp. 342-343.

truth that the report was seen by Mrs. Besant as an absurdity. The next day she became a member and visited H.P.B., who, with a "gleam of tears" in her almost hypnotic eyes, placed her hand on Mrs. Besant's head with the blessing, "You are a noble woman, may Master bless you."<sup>1339</sup>

Stead, who remained sceptical of Theosophy, writes

To me the essential miracle is the conversion of Mrs. Besant from Materialism to a firmly based belief in the reality of the spiritual world. We all tried our level best to work that miracle, but we failed. Madame Blavatsky succeeded. Honour where honour is due. To have secured Mrs. Besant for Theosophy is an achievement much more wonderful to me than the duplication of any number of teacups or the tinkling of whole peals of "astral bells."<sup>1340</sup>

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that H.P.B. and her Secret Doctrine provided the answer to Mrs. Besant's own quest. It enabled her to see and understand the universe and man in a manner most comprehensible to her. An inscrutable fate saw to it that the inspiration came at the time Mrs. Besant was most in need of it.

Thus, in 1889, she had found her way "Home" as a Theosophist and disciple of H.P.B., firm in her belief that it provided a nobler ethic than either Secularism or Socialism. She readily admits that while the Socialist position sufficed on the "economic side"; yet could it provide her with the means ". . . to gain the inspiration, the motive, which should lead to the realisation of the Brotherhood of Man?"<sup>1341</sup> Geoffrey West suggests that her Socialist experiences "are not, as far as she is

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<sup>1339</sup> Ibid., p. 344; The "Master" or "Mahatma" in Theosophical terms is "The name given to highly evolved and living men, who have developed the spiritual nature and mastered the physical and passional," in A. Besant and H. Burrows, Glossary of Theosophical Terms (London and Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, reprinted 1906), p. 12.

<sup>1340</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 94.

<sup>1341</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, p. 338.

concerned, particularly significant."<sup>1342</sup> Perhaps the intellectual atmosphere and the vein of irony that dominated the Fabian attitude were galling to a woman who sought the answers to reality and social and political questions in something other than a purely intellectual approach. Nor could Materialism and Secularism provide the answer to all the problems of the universe, of life, and mind. Mrs. Besant acknowledges her frustration with the cause of Freethought and Socialism. She writes,

Our efforts to really organise bands of unselfish workers had failed. Much indeed had been done, but there was not a real movement of self-sacrificing devotion, in which men worked for Love's sake only, and asked but to give, not to take.<sup>1343</sup>

For one who had defied authority, had suffered for causes so vital to her in the pursuit of liberty and a nobler political and social order, it is not inconceivable that the purist in Mrs. Besant would be repelled by the discovery that her comrades in arms lacked the altruism that marked her own attitude. There, yet, may have lingered in some deeply hidden crevice of belief the visions of her youth, the mysteries of the Sacraments, and the splendor of cathedrals that the rather commonplace attitude of Secularism and the excessively "factual" accent in Fabianism had not wholly dispelled. Stead, in his work, gives her answer to the question "Why Theosophy." Mrs. Besant explains the inadequacy of Materialism, especially as touching such questions as "Double consciousness" and "Effect on the body of mental conceptions" and then says,

My own Socialism was that of love, and of levelling up; there was much Socialism that was of hatred; and I often wondered if out of hatred any true improvement could spring. I saw that many of the poor were as selfish and as greedy of enjoyment as many of the rich, and sometimes a cold wind of despair swept over me lest the "brute

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<sup>1342</sup>West, Annie Besant, p. 78.

<sup>1343</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 338.

in man" should destroy the realization of the noblest theories. Here Theosophy, with its proof of the higher nature in man, came as a ray of light, and its teaching of the training of that nature gave solid ground for hope. May I add that its call to limitless self-sacrifice for human good--a call addressed to all who can answer it--came to me as offering satisfaction to what has always been the deepest craving of my nature--the longing to serve as ransom for the race. At once I recognised that here was the path to that which I had been seeking all my life.<sup>1344</sup>

It seems appropriate to briefly sketch the nature of the Theosophical Society and the incredible and compelling woman who was its founder. H.P.B., one is told, was born of noble birth in Russia in 1831 and was, even at an early stage, seen to possess extraordinary psychic powers. However, Besterman declares,

For her possession of genuine supernormal powers there is not a shred of evidence worthy of the name; while for the fact that she systematically and constantly faked phenomena, the evidence is complete. Of her personal character, the best that can be said is that she was an impulsive creature and that her impulses were sometimes good.<sup>1345</sup>

After an early marriage, she left her husband to travel the world, even into Tibet in search of the occult. In the 1870's she came to New York and together with Colonel H. S. Olcott formed the Theosophical Society in 1875. Four years later H.P.B. and Olcott established their headquarters at Adyar, near Madras in India, where it still stands. She is reputed to have learned of her destiny in the August of 1851 in London. While in Hyde Park, H.P.B. was confronted by a mystical messenger from the Orient who informed her that she had been chosen by the "Masters" as their particular envoy. In 1885 she completed her magnum opus, The Secret Doctrine, in Europe and gathered around her in London an ardent group of devotees pledged to the service of the "Masters." "Her life," writes Gertrude

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<sup>1344</sup> Besant, "Why Theosophy," Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, pp. 90-91.

<sup>1345</sup> Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 157.

Marvin Williams, "exudes a musky odor of mystery and paradox."<sup>1346</sup>

The Secret Doctrine is contained in two volumes entitled "Cosmog-  
genesis" and "Anthropogenesis" and to Besterman, ". . . is often obscure  
to impenetrability."<sup>1347</sup> Certainly, its esoteric nature makes it diffi-  
cult reading. It is based on the Secret Book of Dyzan only to be found  
in the dim reaches of inner Tibet. Reducing it to its basic principles,  
it is seen that, inter-alia,

1. "Theosophy is the accumulated wisdom of the ages.
2. "There is one homogeneous divine substance--principle from which  
the visible world arises.
3. "Universes come and go and our universe is the periodical mani-  
festation of an immaterial reality."<sup>1348</sup>

The Theosophical Society had three objectives:

"To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity,  
without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

"To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy,  
and science.

"To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers  
latent in man."<sup>1349</sup>

The founders of the Society denied any personal God. Theosophy  
taught a concept of the universe which was somewhat Pantheistic. It was  
open to all peoples of all faiths who were in accord with its objectives.  
"Their bond of union," writes Mrs. Besant, "is not the profession of a  
common belief, but a common search and aspiration for Truth."<sup>1350</sup>

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<sup>1346</sup>Williams, Madame Blavatsky, p. 11.

<sup>1347</sup>Besterman, Mrs. Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, p. 137.

<sup>1348</sup>The Historical Basis of Modern Theosophy (Wheaton, Illinois:  
The Theosophical Society in America, n.d.). Also see Annie Besant and  
H. T. Patterson, The Theosophical Society and H.P.B.: Three Articles  
(London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1890).

<sup>1349</sup>Annie Besant, Theosophy: A Manual (Adyar, Madras, India: The  
Theosophical Publishing House, 1952), p. 30.

<sup>1350</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

Truth was to be striven for through study, reflection, purity, and high ideals. It was not a dogma to be rigidly imposed from above: "The members of the Theosophical Society are thus connected by an ethical rather than by an intellectual bond, and their unity rests on a sublime ideal, not a formulated creed."<sup>1351</sup> Each religion is seen as an expression of "Divine Will"; their greatest duty lay in the display of tolerance to all beliefs as a duty to be performed, "Peace is their watchword as Truth is their aim."<sup>1352</sup> It offered to the world a philosophy

which renders life intelligible, and which demonstrates the justice and the love which guide evolution. It puts death in its rightful place as a recurring incident in an endless life, opening the gateway of a fuller and more radiant existence. It restores to the world the Science of the Spirit, teaching man to know the Spirit as himself, and the mind and body as his servants. It illuminates the Scriptures and doctrines of religions by unveiling their hidden meanings, and thus justifying them at the bar of intelligence, as they are ever justified in the eyes of intuition.<sup>1353</sup>

Apart from the Transcendentalists and those like Sir Edwin Arnold, few Western scholars had studied Eastern faiths. Thus, to Mrs. Besant, "There is no brotherly service the East can do to the West comparable to the unveiling of her hidden treasures of spiritual knowledge."<sup>1354</sup> The time also was opportune. Theosophy is seen by Mrs. Besant as a cure to the curse of Western materialism. The cry was now being sounded that between Rome and Atheism there was no sure and defensible standing-ground, and that the battle of the near future was between a religion devoid of all science and a science devoid of all religion.<sup>1355</sup>

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<sup>1351</sup> Annie Besant, An Introduction to Theosophy (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913), p. 12.

<sup>1352</sup> Besant, Theosophy: A Manual, p. 31.

<sup>1353</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>1354</sup> Besant, An Introduction to Theosophy, p. 7.

<sup>1355</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

It was at this moment that the guardians of the spiritual truths--the "Masters"--sent Theosophy to the world to unite science with religion.

Victorian England looked upon the Theosophists as rather mad, even if the society was graced by many of the avant-garde titled nobility. Oscar Wilde occasionally made his appearance, and William Butler Yeats surveyed Theosophy with his poet's fancy but never became a member.

Mrs. Besant's review of The Secret Doctrine was published in the National Reformer of June 23, 1889; in it she demonstrates that esoteric teaching was not beyond her ken. The thrust of the review is to show the differences in approach to phenomena as demonstrated by Western science and Eastern thought. With scientific instruments, Western science "interrogates nature" and discovers the "How" of things, but the "Why" ever eludes it. "Eastern Science," on the other hand,

uses as its scientific instrument the penetrating faculties of the mind alone, and regarding the material plane as Maya--illusion--seeks in the mental and spiritual planes of being the causes of the material effects. There, too, is the only reality; there the true existence of which the visible universe is but the shadow. <sup>1356</sup>

To investigate phenomena beyond the material, Science may suffice, but Eastern thought has transcended Western Science and by the cultivation of superior senses, of greater evolved faculties, has been able to investigate phenomena on a higher plane of existence than the merely material. These powers lie latent in all men and can only develop as the race evolves and progresses. Man is destined to play the leading role in the Cosmolgical drama, having the ability by a greater perception to pierce the unknown. Thus, Mrs. Besant, "agnostic of agnostics, had

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<sup>1356</sup> Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 346-347.

become gnostic."<sup>1357</sup>

Mrs. Besant's espousal of Theosophy was, quite expectedly, followed by a howl of protest. Though it came as a shock to many--Shaw, Bradlaugh, and Foote in particular--yet her turn to gnosticism cannot be said to have undone her contribution as a Secularist or Socialist. Bradlaugh writes of the Theosophists and Mrs. Besant,

They appear to me to have sought to rehabilitate a kind of Spiritualism in Eastern phraseology. I think many of their allegations utterly erroneous, and their reasonings wholly unsound. I very deeply regret indeed that my colleague and co-worker has, with somewhat of suddenness, and without any interchange of ideas with myself, adopted as facts matters which seem to me to be as unreal as it is possible for any fiction to be.<sup>1358</sup>

According to Bradlaugh's daughter, Mrs. Besant had already had her doubts about Secularism as far back as 1879:

For thirteen years she had stood upon the same platform with him; and when she one day said that for ten years she had been dissatisfied with her own teaching, he felt it very keenly, but he neither uttered a word of blame himself, nor would he allow anyone else to blame her in his hearing.<sup>1359</sup>

Foote writes that her change caused him "pain," but came as no surprise since she lacked any gift of originality.

She seems to me very much at the mercy of her emotions, and especially at the mercy of her latest friends. . . . At one leap she left Atheism and materialism and plunged into the depths of wildest Pantheism and spiritualism . . . surely no intellect like Mrs. Besant's could undergo such rapid changes by itself.<sup>1360</sup>

<sup>1357</sup> Lavender, "Dr. Besant: Practical and Mystical Psychologist" in Cousins, Annie Besant Centenary Book, p. 198.

<sup>1358</sup> Bradlaugh, National Reformer, June 30, 1889, in Besant, An Autobiography, p. 351.

<sup>1359</sup> Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work by His Daughter, Vol. II, p. 13. Mrs. Besant became a Fabian in 1885, but resigned from the National Secular Society in 1890, the year after becoming a Theosophist.

<sup>1360</sup> G. W. Foote, Mrs. Besant's Theosophy (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889), p. 3.

In Why I Became a Theosophist (1891), being originally a series of lectures delivered in the Hall of Science in August of 1889, Mrs. Besant answers her critics. Growth and change are inseparable; they are the signs of "intellectual life." It seemed strange to her that the Free-thinkers who professed a belief in freedom of thought should be the ones most critical of those who sought the Truth where they found it best. "The Light is beyond!" she affirms.<sup>1361</sup> She declared that as she had lectured on Radicalism, Socialism, Science, and Theology, she would continue to do so in search of Truth--being the article of faith of Theosophy. Not in any way regretful of her attacks on the "Supernatural" as an Atheist, she felt that it sufficed for a time but could not wholly answer the questions, "What is life? What is Thought?" The quest for the "Eternal Sphinx" must be pursued by those who desire to know it, even to its "innermost recesses."<sup>1362</sup> Materialism shed no light on man's consciousness, on the nature of thought and even if it meant expulsion from the ranks of Freethought she would not

. . . purchase peace with a lie. . . . That one loyalty to Truth I must keep stainless, whatever friendships fail me or human ties be broken. She may lead me into the wilderness, yet I must follow her; she may strip me of all love, yet I must pursue her; though she slay me, yet will I trust in her, and I ask no other epitaph on my tomb, but SHE TRIED TO FOLLOW TRUTH.<sup>1363</sup>

Thus, in answer to the query "Why did you join the [Theosophical] Society," she replies,

There is a sore need, it seems to me, in our unbrotherly, anti-social civilization, of this distinct affirmation of a brotherhood

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<sup>1361</sup> Annie Besant, Why I Became a Theosophist (3rd ed.; London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1891), pp. 4-5.

<sup>1362</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>1363</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

as broad as Humanity itself . . . each who affirms that ideal, and tries to conform thereto his own life, does something, however little, to lift mankind towards its realisation, to hasten the coming of that Day of Man.<sup>1364</sup>

Finally, the desire for knowledge involves the search for the latent powers that lie dormant within man. She mentions that those like President Wayland of Brown University and Sir William Hamilton both felt that clairvoyance and spiritualism demanded attention and philosophic inquiry.<sup>1365</sup>

Mrs. Besant was committed wholly to Theosophy to the end of her life and was particularly welcome in its ranks. Stead writes that she brought to the Theosophists a "zeal and an enthusiasm at least equal to that of H.P.B."<sup>1366</sup> Her rise in the Society was rapid. Following the death of H.P.B. in 1891 (the year Bradlaugh died), she became its head. Now for the first time Mrs. Besant was really in full command of a movement in which she played a part. As a Secularist she was overshadowed by Bradlaugh, and in the Fabian Society, Shaw had seen her as a "fifth wheel to the coach." Her evolution to Theosophy was one of natural growth. As a child she had suffered for oppressed humanity, and her humanitarianism grew as she passed through Secularism and Socialism. It was Theosophy, which extolled the Brotherhood of Man and Self-Sacrifice to an ideal, which provided her passion for service with an ideal outlet. Human brotherhood was not only to be sought in purely intellectual endeavor and in the study of "sociology" or "matter, but in a spiritual unity. And it is seen that the success of The Theosophical Society owes

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<sup>1364</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>1365</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>1366</sup> Stead, Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, p. 91.

more to Mrs. Besant ". . . than any inherent strength of the movement."<sup>1367</sup>

And thus she came "through storm to peace,"

not to the peace of an untroubled sea of outer life, which no strong soul can crave, but to an inner peace that outer troubles may not avail to ruffle--a peace which belongs to the eternal <sup>1368</sup>not to the transitory, to the depths not to the shallows of life.

As a Theosophist, Mrs. Besant saw that all her earlier struggles and activities were merely preparatory for the task the "Masters" had now assigned her. The great spiritual impulse which envisaged hierarchical ordering of the universe changed the entire complexion and direction of her life and thought. Her writings as a Theosophist in England are few. From the time she joined the Theosophical Society on May 21, 1889, and succeeded H.P.B. in 1891 to her arrival in India on November 16, 1893, she traveled much. In 1891, she toured the United States giving lectures, and in September of 1893 represented the Theosophical Society at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Her important Theosophical works in these years were Why I Became a Theosophist (1889), The Theosophical Society and H.P.B. (1892), and A Short Glossary of Theosophical Terms (1891) with Burrows; together with Theosophy and the Law of Population (1891), Theosophy (1892) and, of course, publication of her An Autobiography in 1893 and several others. Mrs. Besant must have felt as she embarked on her new course, which she followed until her death in 1933, that a new destiny awaited her--one that was to carry her away from her native shores to a foreign land. But

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<sup>1367</sup>R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychandhuri, Datta and Kalikinkar, An Advanced History of India (London: MacMillan and Company, Limited, 1950), p. 887.

<sup>1368</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, pp. 363-364.

thereby hangs a different tale, which, it is hoped, will receive appropriate attention in another writing. However, some mention of Mrs. Besant's Theosophy must be made, particularly since it appeared to be the first attempt by the Victorians to formulate a new theory which explained the apparent diversity of beliefs and action in terms of a Universal Brotherhood of Man, an essential Unity in the cosmological ordering of the universe, and a new spiritual renaissance of man based on the Unity of Faiths and a belief in a Supernatural Hierarchy of "beings." In its conviction that truth can only be found in the highly evolved mental and spiritual planes of existence, it did have its impact on the more mundane levels of her envisioned ideal of a new social order.

Besterman gives fair warning,

The attempt to summarise at secondhand Annie Besant's exposition of Theosophy, would be foredoomed to failure, were anyone so foolhardy as to make such an attempt. As well try to compress science into one page, history into another, and philosophy into a third, as to try to set out Annie Besant on Theosophy in one chapter.<sup>1369</sup>

Nor does Besterman add assurance by saying,

The difficulties in arriving at a true estimate of the Theosophical Society are as nothing to the difficulty of obtaining an accurate notion of Theosophy itself.<sup>1370</sup>

Nevertheless, a synthesis must be attempted.

Theosophy derived from Theos or God and Sophia or Wisdom means "Divine Wisdom," that which is given to all men alike but can be grasped by the few. This "direct knowledge of God by man"<sup>1371</sup> belongs equally to all Faiths. As a cure to agnostic science and Western

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<sup>1369</sup> Besterman, Mind of Annie Besant, p. 90.

<sup>1370</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>1371</sup> Besant, Theosophy: A Manual, p. 3.

materialism, it declares a spiritual concept of man and the universe which can be both "demonstrated" by reason and "justified" by the intellect.<sup>1372</sup> Theosophy is that "esoteric" side of Religion, recognized by St. Paul and known to the Greeks, Romans, and classical India, which holds that man can know God and Nature both in its physical and "super-physical" aspects by the methods of empirical science--"It is the Gnosis of Early Christian and Neo-Platonic times, the Brahma-Vidya (or God-Wisdom) of the Hindu."<sup>1373</sup>

Having no creed, dogma, or authority, it takes its inspiration and guidance from those who have the capacity to seek its message, it being, she admits, more obstruse than that of Hegel. It was seen in the ancient truths embodied in all Faiths, and can be found in the ancient history of civilizations. Since man is an essentially spiritual Being, a part of the "Universal Self" or God, thus to know himself is to know God. It was not so much the making of a "good man" which was its object but the "transforming of the good man into a God."<sup>1374</sup> It is an attitude to life demonstrated by the man who deliberately and consciously evolves himself recognizing his own divinity. The necessary corollaries to the recognition of man's divinity as a knower of God are the Theosophical truths of the "Immanence and Transcendence of God" and the "Solidarity or Brotherhood" of man. Since the Divine Life exists in all

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<sup>1372</sup> Annie Besant, In Defence of Theosophy: A Lecture (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1891), p. 4.

<sup>1373</sup> Annie Besant, The Work of Theosophy in the World (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905), p. 4.

<sup>1374</sup> Annie Besant, Theosophy (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1912), p. 10.

things "from the atom to the archangel,"<sup>1375</sup> all life is seen as an essential Unity. God being immanent in all "forms," then each is related to every other. Teaching a lofty morality inspired by the great Faiths, and the unity of consciousness,

The Theosophical system of thought is an immense, an all-inclusive, synthesis of truths, as it deals with God, the Universe, and Man, and their relations to each other.<sup>1376</sup>

The work of Theosophy is to unfold the divine nature of man; his destiny is greater and loftier "than poets have chanted, something mightier than even prophets have dreamed."<sup>1377</sup> Man is seen as a "seven-fold being" composed of higher and lower principles. The three higher are called "Triad" which, composed of his soul, is immortal. The four lower are the "Quaternary" and perish with his death.<sup>1378</sup> Thus the Soul, not the material body, constitutes man, and the highly evolved man can at will transfer consciousness from one plane of Existence and Being to another. The higher dominates the lower, and it becomes his duty to evolve his divine nature. But such powers mean greater responsibilities to be demonstrated in service to others, to the multitude whose level of evolution must remain on a low material plane. As long as man lies victim to "Desire," being the calculus of pleasure and pain of Utilitarianism, so long has he not evolved the greater powers latent in him, i.e.

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<sup>1375</sup> Annie Besant, The Riddle of Life (Adyar, Madras 20, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961), p. 1.

<sup>1376</sup> Besant, Theosophy, p. 18.

<sup>1377</sup> Annie Besant, The Sphinx of Theosophy: A Lecture (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1891), p. 12.

<sup>1378</sup> Annie Besant, The Seven Principles of Man (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892, revised 1897 and 1904), p. 4.

his "Will." For "Will" is not determined by attractions or repulsions which play on the "outer nature" of man--it is a "divine quality which is Self-Determined."<sup>1379</sup> The animal, unlike man, is ruled by desire, the law of the struggle of the fittest being the "law of evolution" for the brute. However the "Brotherhood of Man" implies that "no man is an island unto himself"; and to Mrs. Besant the "great law of human love is not the law of the survival of the fittest, but the law of the sacrifice of the stronger to the weaker."<sup>1380</sup> Man begins to perceive that he is only a part of a greater whole like a cell in a body, and so must perform his duty to perfect the social organism. In doing so, he makes not only for Righteousness, but being a part of existence permeated by a Universal Spirit he is acting in accordance with divine nature. All that ". . . we call Law," writes Mrs. Besant, "is the expression of this divine nature."<sup>1381</sup> Theosophy regards man as a link in a chain proceeding from the source of the Divine Life to the lower level of spiritual intelligences, and by putting himself in harmony with the Law, he unfolds his divinity and rises to a higher stage of spiritual growth. Thus it would seem that the unevolved man of the present has little in common with the more spiritually and morally evolved man to come.

Since "man's true and primitive form is divinity,"<sup>1382</sup> being

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<sup>1379</sup> Annie Besant, "The Great Plan," in Mrs. Olive Stevenson-Howell, ed., Evolution and Man's Destiny, compiled from Dr. Besant's lectures and writings (London: The Theosophical Society in England, 1924), p. 15.

<sup>1380</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>1381</sup> Annie Besant, Vegetarianism in the Light of Theosophy: A Lecture (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1894), p. 5.

<sup>1382</sup> Annie Besant, Giordano Bruno; Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century, A Lecture delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris, on June 15,

possessed of such consciousness, man may raise himself through the knowledge of his own divine nature to a divine form, thus making his life "heroic," Giordano Bruno, once a martyr to the Freethought cause, becomes a true Theosophist who exemplified the life heroic in his dedication to things divine. The venerable and learned Sorborne rang with her message:

This, then, is the Heroic Life, as depicted by Giordano Bruno. . . . The message that here, to-night, I have sought to expound, is a message not only to individuals, but to nations, for there are souls of nations, as well as souls of individuals. For the nation, as for the individual, thought is the instrument of progress; for both equally the effort to realise a noble and lofty Ideal transforms the life into the Great and the Heroic.<sup>1383</sup>

Her new concept of man in the light of Theosophy resulted in her renunciation of Neo-Malthusianism. In 1891, after joining the Theosophical Society, Mrs. Besant withdrew The Law of Population and publicly denounced her former stance on birth-control. As a Secularist, she had realised that the teaching of asceticism as a cure to over-population was futile. Theosophy, now made Neo-Malthusianism impossible for her since birth-control was based on an erroneous view of the nature of man, treating him as a mere product of evolution rather than a person possessing "Spirit" and "intelligence" capable of shaping his own future. Man is more than a biological organism, a product of physical evolution, whose life is limited to one world of existence. To the Theosophist, who seeks a higher spiritual perfection of man, it is necessary to sound the note of self-restraint within marriage and the "restriction of marital relations" and so create an evolutionary process by bringing into being a

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1911, and The Story of Giordano Bruno (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophist Office, 1913), p. 16.

<sup>1383</sup>Besant, Giordano Bruno: Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century, pp. 19-20.

future type of man of a higher order--"bodies and brains of a higher type."<sup>1384</sup>

But celibacy is not for all; though a counsel towards perfection, it can only be practiced by the few. "Theosophy does not advise celibacy to those not on fire with its flame."<sup>1385</sup> In sexual passion, man is seen as a brute; his spiritual growth is thus limited. Only by sounding the note of self-restraint can he set into effect the causes necessary for a more perfect man of a higher type. She explains in full her new Theosophical view of man:

What is man in the light of Theosophy? He is a spiritual intelligence, eternal and uncreate, treading a vast cycle of human experience, born and reborn on earth millennium after millennium, evolving slowly into the ideal man. He is not the product of matter, but is encased in matter, and the forms of matter with which he clothes himself are of his own making. For the intelligence and will of man are creative forces--not creative ex nihilo, but creative as is the brain of the painter--and these forces are exercised by man in every act of thought. Thus he is ever creating round him thought-forms, moulding subtlest matter into shape by these energies, forms which persist as tangible realities when the body of the thinker has long gone back to earth and air and water. When the time for rebirth into this earth-life comes for the soul, these thought-forms, its own progeny, help to form the tenuous model into which the molecules of physical matter are builded for the making of the body, and matter is thus moulded for the new body in which the soul is to dwell, on the lines laid down by the intelligent and volitional life of the previous, or of many previous, incarnations. So does each man create for himself in verity the form wherein he functions, and what he is in his present is <sup>1386</sup>the inevitable outcome of his own creative energies in his past.

Mrs. Besant had embraced celibacy, asceticism, and spiritualism as ways towards human perfection and the good of the race.

The word "Theosophy," which contains a view of God, the universe

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<sup>1384</sup>Besant, Theosophy and the Law of Population, p. 10.

<sup>1385</sup>Besant, Why I Became a Theosophist, p. 26.

<sup>1386</sup>Besant, An Autobiography, p. 241.

and man, is classified under three heads: Religion, Philosophy and Science. It is upon these truths, as seen by Mrs. Besant, that its ethical system is constructed. Its Religious Teachings are manifest in the Universe in the aspects of "The Unity of God"; "The Manifestation of God as a Trinity for the building of a universe"; and "the existence of graded Orders of Intelligences." God is seen as the sole source of all existence. The Theosophist sees in all creation a portion of His work and Immanence, "He is in everything, and everything in Him."<sup>1387</sup> Also, since its doctrine is common to all Religions, it points the way to a unity of Faiths and seeks to reconcile the differences of conflicting theological beliefs. Knowing that all Religions emanate from a common source, "The White Brotherhood," Theosophy shows the way to harmony and peace. While, initially, Mrs. Besant sees the role of Theosophy as the helper of all Faiths, in its attempt to deepen the belief of the Christian, the Zoroastrian, the Buddhist, and Hindu in his own Religion, in time it leads to her concept of a "World Religion" as a basis of world unity. Since the essence of Religion is the knowledge of God, and as the central teaching of Theosophy is the "Unity of God," it seemed feasible to Mrs. Besant to envision the coming of both a "World Teacher" who brings into being a "World Religion" as a way for the harmony for mankind.<sup>1388</sup>

Mrs. Besant proclaims her faith in a "Great Hierarchy of the Inner Government of the world." She writes,

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<sup>1387</sup> Besant, Theosophy: A Manual, p. 10.

<sup>1388</sup> See Annie Besant, "The Coming of a World Teacher; A Lecture," in Annie Besant, The Immediate Future (Chicago: The Theosophical Press, 1922) and Annie Besant, A World Religion (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1916).

I believe in the Universal Life, "One without a second," manifesting as the Great Architect of the Universe, the Logos, the Emanator, Preserver and Regenerator of our universe.

I believe in an Inner Government of our own world, the Occult Hierarchy, composed of the Company of Just Men made perfect, the Rishis of the Hindus and Buddhists, the Saints of the Christians, the great Prophets of the Hebrews and Muslims, who are within the reach of men, who, assisted by a great host of Devas, Archangels, Angels and Nature-spirits, guide and help upward sub-human and human evolution from the simple to the complex, from nescience to knowledge, from imperfection to relative perfection, within the inviolable laws of Nature, which express the conditions of the manifestation of the Universal Life through the Great Architect of our universe.<sup>1389</sup>

Each rank of the "Occult Hierarchy" has its own duties and in so doing contributes to perfect harmony in "working out a portion of the plan of the Supreme Lord, the Logos of the system, in a service which is 'perfect freedom.'"<sup>1390</sup> It has two "departments," one concerned with "Ruling" and the other with "Teaching" which, in their own sphere, are responsible for the conduct of the affairs of governments, nations and the world. At the head of the "Ruling Department" is Manu, being "the perfect man of every race, who gradually develops in the race the qualities embodied in Himself."<sup>1391</sup> The "Enlightened," the "Buddha," is the "Supreme Teacher" who inspires and founds world-faiths and guides religions as much as is made possible by the ignorance of man.

Thus, in Mrs. Besant's cosmological view of the universe, she sees human evolution as guided by unseen powers. Also, nature, as such, is not a mere collection of soulless atoms, an "unconscious machine"

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<sup>1389</sup> Annie Besant, D. L., India: Bond or Free? A World Problem (2nd ed.; London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), p. 21.

<sup>1390</sup> Besant, Riddle of Life, p. 67.

<sup>1391</sup> Besant, "The Occult Hierarchy and the Work of the Manu," in Stevenson-Howell, Evolution and Man's Destiny, p. 43.

acting in accordance with physical laws but a truly living organism shaped by "Devas" or "Archangels" through the "natural laws" of God in which "Spirit" guides "matter" to deliberately chosen ends. Thus,

It shows us man as evolving in the midst of beings, above and below him, evolving like himself to higher and higher stages, unfolding hidden possibilities, developing endless potentialities. He is one of a vast family, dwelling among elders and youngers, elders who help him, youngers who need his help.<sup>1392</sup>

Only when man reaches the highest stage of the evolution which he is capable of achieving will anarchy be replaced by order as his "Will" rises above conflict and disharmony to bring about Unity in accordance with the "natural laws" of God and the Universe. The man who chooses this path of evolution must necessarily recognize that the final end is Unity to be attained by devotion to an Immanescent God and in service to his fellow man.

The fourth of the "Truths" in Theosophy is Universal Brotherhood which is an inevitable result of the preceding three. Since

there is but one life in all forms, all forms must be inter-related, linked together, and, however unequal they may be in development, they none the less make one huge family, are "of one blood."<sup>1393</sup>

Much as any injury inflicted on any organ of the body affects the whole body, so does any wrong done by any person harm Humanity as a whole. This organic concept of man and society is a natural corollary to the fact that as man is "Spirit" recognizing the Unity of God,

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<sup>1392</sup> Annie Besant, ed., The Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part I (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1967), p. 63.

<sup>1393</sup> Annie Besant, The Truth Through Theosophy (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1960), p. 19.

None may separate himself from this intimate union; none may stand apart and seek to live alone; born into the human family, we must all live in it; Brotherhood is a fact in nature, and from it there is no escape.<sup>1394</sup>

But Brotherhood is a product of the human spirit which seeks fulfillment in service; it cannot be imposed by legislation. Being a law of nature, it is seen that, by a study of history, nations have decayed for want of it. Oppression and exploitation have inexorably produced decay and destruction. It is only when Brotherhood is practiced that civilizations survive. The ideal, being common to all Faiths, has as its basic goal the "Unity of Man." This was recognized by the great Sages of yore in India who gave her the Upanishads, and belonged to the same Brotherhood as Plato who contributed to Greece and the Western World "the immortal teachings that have moulded the system of the modern world."<sup>1395</sup>

But Brotherhood, to Mrs. Besant, did not mean a dead level of Equality since "The wise are not equal to the ignorant."<sup>1396</sup> Theosophical "Brotherhood" differs from "Equality,"

the foundation of modern democracy, in that it postulates identity of origin and potentiality, but recognises varying degrees of development, the latter yielding the Hierarchy of Beings, or Ladder of Lives. In this Freemasonry resembles it, with its broad divisions of mankind into the enlightened and profane, and the subdivisions of the enlightened into degrees and graded officers, uniting the essential equality with the hierarchical order and due subordination. In this both Theosophy and freemasonry are in harmony with nature, increasing power going hand-in-hand with increasing knowledge and

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<sup>1394</sup> Annie Besant, Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part I, p. 159.

<sup>1395</sup> Besant, An Introduction to Theosophy, p. 16.

<sup>1396</sup> Annie Besant, "Eastern Castes and Western Classes," The Birth of New India: A Collection of Writings and Speeches on Indian Affairs (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1917), p. 240.

increasing responsibility. Wisdom, supported by Strength and made manifest in Beauty, rules in a true Brotherhood, as in nature. <sup>1397</sup>

Theosophy, as a system of Philosophy, is a creative power which lies latent within man. By thought, man masters physical nature, and dominates his passions and emotions to a controlled obedience,

The man becomes that upon which he reflects; and if he reflects daily [meditation] on the perfect ideal of humanity he will begin to grow towards that perfect ideal himself. <sup>1398</sup>

Thought creates "thought forms" which are creative forces by which man influences the action of others, and therefore purity of thought becomes all the more vital in seeking human unity. <sup>1399</sup>

Philosophically speaking, there existed to Mrs. Besant no doctrine having so grand an "intellectual ancestry" as Reincarnation. It is

. . . the unfolding of the human Spirit through recurring lives on earth, experience being gathered during the earth life and worked up into intellectual faculty and conscience during the heaven-life, so that a child is born with his past <sup>1400</sup> experiences transmuted into mental and moral tendencies and powers.

It appeared in all the great histories of the East, was recognized by the Fathers of the Church, the Gnostics and Neo-Platonists as a fact of Nature only to be lost in Medieval Europe. The "Psyche" or "Soul" enters into successive bodies which ". . . are linked together like pearls strung upon a thread, the thread being the living Principle, the pearls

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<sup>1397</sup> Besant, Theosophy: A Manual, p. 12.

<sup>1398</sup> Annie Besant, The Path of Discipleship (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1895).

<sup>1399</sup> See Annie Besant, Thought Power: Its Control and Culture (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1901).

<sup>1400</sup> Besant, Riddle of Life, p. 27.

upon it the separate human lives.<sup>1401</sup> It implies that man makes his own destiny by his actions in succeeding lives; neither God nor heredity determines what he is. Also, man's conscience is not a "gift of God" but the product of experience. The child is not born with a tabula rasa, but

brings with him the harvest of his past, the sense of right and wrong, the tendency to approve or condemn. . . . The child of the civilized man brings into the world a ready-formed character.<sup>1402</sup>

All men, to Mrs. Besant, are destined to ultimate perfection; "The savage of to-day is the saint of the future."<sup>1403</sup> Once man realizes that, in essence, he is a spiritual being only clothed in matter having the capacity to mould his own life, new vistas open for him in his evolutionary progress towards perfection. It is in the "Perfect Man," who is called "Master,"<sup>1404</sup> that he reaches the ultimate of man, is united with the Deity and is called Tseka or Adept or one who now no longer has more to learn. Reincarnation is inevitable, rational and a fact in nature which is necessary to satisfy reason, science, and morality. "Without it," Mrs. Besant declares, "life is a hopeless riddle, a problem which

<sup>1401</sup> Annie Besant, Reincarnation (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1910), p. 8.

<sup>1402</sup> Annie Besant, "Reincarnation: Its Necessity," Popular Lectures on Theosophy (Krotona, Hollywood, Los Angeles, California: Theosophical Publishing House (American Branch), 1919), p. 41.

<sup>1403</sup> Besant, Riddle of Life, p. 33.

<sup>1404</sup> Also defined by Mrs. Besant as "The Founder of every faith," who is both "law-giver" and "teacher"--their existing no difference in Him as regards the "sacred" and "profane." He unites "in His sole person the office alike of the Priest and of the King," in Annie Besant, London Lectures of 1907 (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1907), pp. 29, 30, 31.

defies solution."<sup>1405</sup> Dwarkadas writes,

To Mrs. Besant, re-incarnation was not just a popular and superstitious belief. She knew it to be a fact. Her previous incarnations were, inter alia, Giordano Bruno and Hypatia of Alexandria and she told me that she was a Kashmiri Brahmin and passed away in 1843 to be reborn four years later as Annie Wood.<sup>1406</sup>

Theosophy, apart from being a Religion and Philosophy, is also a Science. It differs, however, from "modern science" in that it investigates the superphysical phenomena. Its methods remain the same:

. . . investigation by observation of objective phenomena, reasoning on observations, framing of hypotheses, discovering of invariable sequences, i.e., of natural laws, repeated experiments to verify deductions and formulation of results.<sup>1407</sup>

But it increases its area and scope to the intangible and the occult. It sees the world in greater perspective through the unfolding of the new senses in man. Thus, "Out of the chaos of phenomena it restores the cosmos of ordered reason."<sup>1408</sup> Observing phenomena through his senses, man can reach a ". . . knowledge of Nature and understanding of her laws."<sup>1409</sup>

To Mrs. Besant, the "Law of Action and Reaction" or Karma made life intelligible. It is seen to be a universal natural law which exists as much "in the world of emotion, thought and spirit" as in the

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<sup>1405</sup> Besant, "Reincarnation: Its Necessity," Popular Lectures on Theosophy, p. 37. Also see Annie Besant, The Necessity for Re-Incarnation (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904).

<sup>1406</sup> Kanji Dwarkadas, India's Fight for Freedom, 1913-1937: An Eye Witness Story (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966), p. 2.

<sup>1407</sup> Besant, Theosophy: A Manual, p. 17.

<sup>1408</sup> Besant, "What is Theosophy," Popular Lectures on Theosophy, p. 10.

<sup>1409</sup> Besant, Theosophy, p. 18.

"physical world."<sup>1410</sup> Being a "natural law," it is

. . . an expression of the divine Nature, and is changing and inviolable; we cannot alter it; we can only disregard it, and disregarded, bringing us into conflict with the law, brings pain. We bruise ourselves against it, as a man who flings his body against a rock. Moreover, a natural law has no rewards and no punishments, only inevitable sequences, and these sequences reveal the existence of the law. Joy and pain follow respectively harmony with, and disregard of, the law.<sup>1411</sup>

Karma is based on the principle "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." It is the sister to Reincarnation in its implication that a man forms his own character, moulds the factors and circumstances of his life in the future by his actions and deeds. Good action reaps a beneficial Karma, evil action, an evil one. Since the present is a product of past actions, so it becomes imperative to so act in the now to ensure a better future. Thus,

It may well be that the present poverty, misery, and disease spring inevitably from past evil, and this all scientific thinkers must admit, whether or not they use the word Karma.<sup>1412</sup>

It is also through repeated incarnations that man reaches human perfection, and may by greater unselfishness and service pass beyond the human to become a "Master."

The second of the inviolable laws of Theosophy as seen by Mrs. Besant is the "Law of Sacrifice." It is work for the betterment of one's fellow man. By so doing, "spirit triumphs over matter"; it is "the road to freedom . . . the human will becoming one with the div-

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<sup>1410</sup> Besant, Theosophy: A Manual, p. 24.

<sup>1411</sup> Besant, Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part I, pp. 112-113.

<sup>1412</sup> Besant, Why I Became a Theosophist, p. 24.

ine."<sup>1413</sup> Since "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts XX, 35), the Law of Sacrifice has for its end the bringing of man into a true union. It is ". . . the law by which the worlds are built and upheld."<sup>1414</sup> An essential Unity lay at the base of her Theosophical thought. As the "Unity" and "Immanence of God" provided the core of religious teaching and justified man's search for the Divine; so were the "Universal Brotherhood of Man," the ideas of Karma, and the "Law of Sacrifice" ways to a universal solidarity of all beings and the basis of all morality since no man could harm another without doing injury to himself. She now recognizes Giordano Bruno as one who preached that a "Unity of Life" lay at the basis of all humanity.<sup>1415</sup>

The Universe is seen by Mrs. Besant to be harmonious, an orderly system which is guided by a "Great Plan" known to very few but aided in its onward Evolution by the Occult Hierarchy. Each nation, however, must follow

. . . its own line of evolution, and any attempt to make it follow the line of evolution of another nation would be disastrous, could it be successful; but--as a matter of fact--any such attempt is foredoomed to failure, because it clashes with the World-Plan.<sup>1416</sup>

To Mrs. Besant, the world is divided into distinct regions, each with a Master in charge. It is His task to select as His agents those men best fitted to perform his allocated task in the furtherance of the "Great

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<sup>1413</sup>Besant, Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part I, p. 118.

<sup>1414</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>1415</sup>Besant, Giordano Bruno; Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century, p. 11.

<sup>1416</sup>Adeltha Peterson, ed., Annie Besant Builder of New India: Her Fundamental Principles of Nation Building (Adyar, Madras, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, n.d.), p. 233.

Plan." "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" who enact the Drama written by the Master. Man's choice of his role appears limited by his Karma which he has created by his past actions. Co-operation with the Plan will not only further national growth but will also contribute to the happiness of man.

To Mrs. Besant, Theosophy and morality are inextricably related. While the Ethics of Theosophy is not formulated into any distinct code,

. . . being itself the embodiment of the highest morality; it presents to its students the highest moral teachings of all religions, gathering the most fragrant blossoms from the gardens of the world-faiths.<sup>1417</sup>

It seeks to elevate man to the loftiest ethic he is capable of appreciating. There does not appear to be any "absolute morality," since that which is right for the savage in a low stage of evolutionary growth is not acceptable to those highly civilized and advanced. Thus, morality, which is "truth applied to man's duties towards others and himself,"<sup>1418</sup> is relative. She defines morality as "the science of harmonious relations,"<sup>1419</sup> since it is based on the one "omnipresent Life"--each being a part of a single whole it implies that injury to another is to damage oneself. In this sense, it would appear that "moral laws are as much laws of Nature as are any laws affecting physical phenomena."<sup>1420</sup>

There exists, to Mrs. Besant, a "Science of Conduct" based on moral laws which lays down the conditions necessary to preserve harmony

<sup>1417</sup> Besant, Riddle of Life, p. 3.

<sup>1418</sup> Annie Besant, "Answers to Theosophical Questions," Theosophical Lectures and Answers to Theosophical Questions (Chicago: Theosophical Society, The Rajput Press, 1907), p. 102.

<sup>1419</sup> Besant, Theosophy, p. 43.

<sup>1420</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

between individuals, groups, families, societies, nations, and humanity as a whole."<sup>1421</sup> Its basis lies in the recognition of the Unity of Life, and

where Morality is unknown or disregarded, friction inevitably arises, disharmony and pain result; for nature is a settled Order in the mental and moral world as much as in the physical, and only by knowledge of that Order and by obedience to it can harmony, health and happiness be secured.<sup>1422</sup>

The three ways to the understanding of the Laws of Morality are Religion and Science, Intuition, and Utilitarianism. Religion and Science looks to moral laws laid down by the Founders of Faiths who have authoritatively declared them. Such laws can be verified by Reason, and as the "Expressions of the divine Reason" they are also demonstrable by the methods of Science. Found in the scriptures of the World Faiths,

The unlearned and the young must accept these laws, as they accept other laws, on authority; the earnest and competent can, by the use of his own reason and by experiment, re-verify them for himself.<sup>1423</sup>

Thus, to Mrs. Besant the moral law comes from authority "divinely commissioned," since "Religions have yielded the categorical imperative necessary for the moral education of mankind."<sup>1424</sup>

Intuition, or "Conscience," being the result of the past experiences of a single individual, cannot have any authority for all. Also, it may be the "conscience of a fool," since "the average conscience of the members of a community, as manifested in its public opinion, is be-

<sup>1421</sup> Besant, Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part II, p. 3.

<sup>1422</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>1423</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>1424</sup> Besant, "The Necessity of Religious Education," Birth of New India, p. 125.

hind, not in advance of, the best ethical thought of its time."<sup>1425</sup>

Utilitarianism or the belief in the "greatest good of the greatest number" is ineffective as it ignores the good of the minority--it too being ". . . a part of the whole, and its interests must be guarded, for majority and minority form one humanity."<sup>1426</sup> Also the Utilitarian ethic fails in that it has no appeal to the average man--"Only the world's great ones can live nobly, upheld by such a thought."<sup>1427</sup> Its weakness lies in that its imperative fails to attract a response from those whose care is not for the welfare of society, but seek only personal satisfaction.

Thus, Theosophy rings out its great message of the right principles of conduct based on morality and capable of being applied to human existence.

. . . it holds up great ideals which appear to human thought and feeling, which will gradually raise humanity out of misery and sorrow and sin. . . . Theosophy rings out the glad, if startling proclamation that not misery but happiness is the natural and inevitable destiny of man, misery grows out of ignorance; poverty grows out of ignorance; these unhappy outer conditions are transitory and shall pass as our knowledge grows. You, the inner You, are an Eternal Spirit whose nature is Bliss and you are partaker of the divine nature. . . . Our miseries are of our own making, and we shall destroy what we have created. Offspring of God, you can rule the lower world, for Spirit becomes master of matter. Bliss and joy are your natural life. . . . Such is the glad proclamations of every messenger of the Divine Wisdom.<sup>1428</sup>

Based on a study of the past, Mrs. Besant lays down her "Principles of the New Order" in the light of Theosophy. They are:

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<sup>1425</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>1426</sup> Besant, Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part II, p. 9.

<sup>1427</sup> Besant, "Necessity for Religious Education," Birth of New India, p. 123.

<sup>1428</sup> Besant, "What is Theosophy," Popular Lectures on Theosophy, pp. 13-14.

1. That Government should be in the hands of the Elders, i.e., the wisest, the most experienced, and the morally best;
2. That the possession of ability and of power imposes the duty of service;
3. That freedom brings happiness only to the educated and self-controlled and that no one, so long as he is ignorant and un-self-controlled, should have any share in the governing of others, and should only have such freedom as is consistent with the welfare of the community;
4. That the life of such a one should be rendered as happy and useful as possible, under discipline until he is fit to "run alone," so that his evolution may be quickened;
5. That cooperation, mutual aid, should be substituted for competition, mutual struggle;
6. That the fewer resources a man has within himself, the more means of outer enjoyment should be placed within his reach by Society.<sup>1429</sup>

These principles, Mrs. Besant makes clear, are only suggestions which are the result of her own study. Her desire is to indicate the lines of change "consonant with Theosophical ideas," since "Brotherhood demands fundamental social changes" which are to be brought about by the wise.<sup>1430</sup>

The point of Theosophy is "that knowledge has the right to rule and not the ignorant"; the politics of a nation is to be entrusted to its "best men."<sup>1431</sup> She turns to America,

Is there no Hercules among you strong enough to cleanse the Augean stable of politics, and make them a fit place for high-minded gentlemen to work in for the good of the nation? . . . You cannot afford to have your political life controlled by the ignorant or the self-seeking, and not by the intellectual, by the geniuses of your people . . . the best people. . . . Be careful that the ignorant

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<sup>1429</sup>Peterson, Annie Besant Builder of New India, 234; also, Besant, Theosophy, pp. 236-237.

<sup>1430</sup>Besant, Theosophy, p. 76.

<sup>1431</sup>Besant, "The Value of Theosophy in the World of Thought," Theological Lectures and Answers to Theosophical Questions, pp. 73-75.

foreigners, who land here by myriads on your shores, do not injure your political life.<sup>1432</sup>

Great changes must always begin from the best people and work downwards to the masses. These changes which "begin in the masses tend to bring about revolutions rather than reforms"; also "a small group of disciplined people are far more effective than a large body of undisciplined."<sup>1433</sup> In her Letters to a Young Indian Prince, she urges the Ruler to plan, direct, and inspire his people. She continues,

The pity is that Leader and Ruler are not always found in one and the same person, and the "Hero as King" is not always one with the wearer of the royal robe. It is likely that one outcome of the present anarchy in Western Nations will be to prove that ignorance cannot rule, whether embodied in a mob or in an aristocrat, that folly, whether in purple or in fustian, spells ruin.<sup>1434</sup>

While she does not give up wholly on "Democracy" since it

. . . will probably work out some way of finding a Nation's best, and placing them in the seats of power, for superior wisdom and character are the only true credentials of authority;<sup>1435</sup>

yet she is wary of giving a vote to the ignorant. Mrs. Besant states,

When it comes to voting then the most ignorant man, who is absolutely innocent of any knowledge of politics, may give his vote, and it counts as much as the vote of the most learned. I would not give a vote in national affairs to anyone who did not understand something of political history and political economy, who could not show his fitness for managing national affairs by the work done in the smaller spheres of individual and municipal politics.<sup>1436</sup>

The Theosophical conception of Brotherhood in no way implied a

<sup>1432</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74.

<sup>1433</sup> Besant, "Work of the Theosophical Society in India," Birth of New India, pp. 351-352.

<sup>1434</sup> Annie Besant, Letters to a Young Indian Prince (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1921), p. 3.

<sup>1435</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>1436</sup> Besant, "The Occult Hierarchy and the Work of the Manu," in Stevenson-Howell, Evolution and Man's Destiny, p. 64.

leveling equality. The foundations of a nobler social order were to be ushered in by the wise and learned, who by virtue of their excellence owed a duty to those not on their own plane of moral, intellectual and spiritual evolution. Their duty lay in guiding the footsteps of the unlearned and ignorant. Brotherhood also means the elevation of the human race, the evolution of man into God, and while Manu reigns in the terrestrial spheres it becomes the duty of his earthly equivalents to seek a regeneration of mankind in the light of Theosophical teachings.

The State, to Mrs. Besant, in tune with Theosophical teachings, is to secure for all of its members the very minimum of welfare--of food, shelter, clothing, and education--and to ensure a situation "which will enable each to develop to the full the faculties which he brought with him into the world."<sup>1437</sup> The State as spoken by Pythagoras was "The Father-Mother of its citizens";<sup>1438</sup> however, the lions in the way were selfishness and a "want of will," not a lack of human ingenuity. Pointing to the past, she writes,

It was done long ago under the King-Initiates who rules in the City of the Golden Gate and in Peru. It was done in the time of King Ramachandra, as may be read in the Ramayana. It was done when the Manu ruled in the City of the Bridge.

The Builders: But it must be planned out by Wisdom, not by ignorance, and brought about by the love and sacrifice of the higher, and not by the uprising of the lower. Mobs can make revolutions; but they cannot build a State.<sup>1439</sup>

To Mrs. Besant, Pythagoras was a Theosophist, who now in his present stage of Evolution has become the Master Koot Homi, a well

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<sup>1437</sup>Besant, "The Theosophical Ideal of the State," in Peterson, Annie Besant Builder of New India, p. 232.

<sup>1438</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>1439</sup>Ibid., pp. 232-233.

known part of the Cosmic Hierarchy. She quotes his speech to the Greek colony of Naxos,

Listen, my children, to what the State should be to the good citizen. It is more than father or mother, it is more than husband or wife, it is more than child or friend. The State is the father and mother of all, is the wife of the husband, and the husband of the wife. The family is good, and good is the joy of the man in wife and son. But greater is the State, which is the Protector of all, without which the home would be ravaged and destroyed.<sup>1440</sup>

Theosophy is the cure to conflicts in Society. The birth of a child into an organized society gives him a claim for protection as much as it imposes upon Society the duty to protect, educate, and teach. The strong have only duties to perform. Society is seen to be naturally composed of three distinct classes--Superiors, Equals, and Inferiors. The Superiors are God, the Monarch or Chief of State, Parents, Teachers, and the Aged to whom reverence is due. The basis of reverence to God is the knowledge that He is the source of all life--in Him "we live and move and have our being." (Acts, xvii, 28). From this arises "Trust" and "Submission." To the Sovereign, equal reverence is due since

The Sovereign is the embodiment of the Realm, as God of the Universe. The Chief of the State should be treated with Reverence, even by those who only see in him the symbol of the will of the people, the representative of the greatness of the nation, as in the President of a Republic. More should the King be revered by those who see him as the symbol of the ruling and guiding Power behind all things, the symbol of the divine, rather than of the popular, Will. The True King thinks ever of his people's weal, rather than of his own pleasure; of his duties, rather than of his rights, of his responsibilities, rather than of his privileges. Such Kings are loved in life, honored in death, and even bad Kings have not eradicated the sentiment deeply wrought into human nature, of Reverence to the King. Loyalty, Fidelity, Service are the virtues which spring from Reverence to the Monarch, and their opposites, the vices of Disloyalty, Treason, and Rebellion, tear ascunder social bonds, and

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<sup>1440</sup> Besant, Theosophy, p. 74.

wreck the nation that harbors them.<sup>1441</sup>

"Patriotism" and "Public Spirit," Mrs. Besant sees as the highest type of Loyalty, of devotion to the "Motherland." The idea of Duty, of Dharma, seeks its greatest fulfillment in the role of the citizen who seeks the welfare of the Nation, the Nation being the "living whole" to which Service must be rendered. The Nation, which appears to have a corporate life of its own, is to be the arena in which its citizens follow the ideals of "public duty," to resolutely fight every wrong done to it, to safeguard both its honor and safety and to place the national good above any private interest. Thus, the betrayal of the trust reposed in the citizen as a member of the Nation is worse than the dishonor of "private treachery." The virtues of loyalty, fidelity, trust, honor, and public duty mark the virtues of a good citizen and strengthen the stability of the Nation.

"The Nation," writes Mrs. Besant, "whose men and women do not show these virtues is on the downward grade and is doomed to extinction."<sup>1442</sup> She echoes the ideal of the Greeks and the funeral oration of Pericles to the citizens of Athens. The ideal of a harmonious life where each citizen recognizes that in his citizenship lies Athenian glory may have fallen into decrepitude, but to Mrs. Besant and Theosophy the ideal remains clear. Though cynics and "realists" may scoff, yet her political vision resurrects some of the brilliance of classical Greece.

To Parents, reverence is due since the family is the true basic unit of the State, and where Parents and the Aged are respected, there exist "Virtues," which make for a secure and harmonious state. These "Virtues," she admits, are found wanting in modern times, where the

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<sup>1441</sup> Besant, Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals, Part II, pp. 71-72.

<sup>1442</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

tendency is more to "depreciate, rather than to admire, superiority."<sup>1443</sup> Mrs. Besant continues

These Virtues belong especially to an ordered and graded Society, to leisure more than to hurry. . . . If modern Democracy is not to turn nations into bear-gardens . . . these Virtues should be earnestly inculcated in every house and in every school.<sup>1444</sup>

As Reverence is to be shown to Superiors, to Equals the appropriate attitude is one of "Affection." It is a way to harmony in both family and social life among those having equal "status." To "Inferiors" the correct attitude is "Benevolence" and "Duty." A man's natural Inferiors are those who are not as advanced as he in "Soul age" or in the evolutionary process; whose "spiritual development," "intellectual attainments," and "moral character" are on a lower level. Also, the natural Inferiors of man are those who are not on the same level regards "social grade" and are younger than he, as in the case of children and youths. This, Mrs. Besant admits, is only a "transitory inferiority," since each man has the capacity to evolve himself. Yet at that moment and time in the Evolution of Lives, the natural Superiors owe the Inferiors the discharge of certain duties (Dharma). "Towards all of these, his Love must show itself as BENEVOLENCE."<sup>1445</sup> Love, Benevolence, and the discharge of Duty are owed to the Inferiors; it appears to be the way of preserving harmony and ensuring the welfare of the citizen who, possessing a moral nature, seeks the ultimate good of the Nation by playing the part assigned to him according to his degree of evolution. Both religion and polity sound the high note of Duty and responsibility.

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<sup>1443</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>1444</sup>Ibid., pp. 75-76.

<sup>1445</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

The graded cosmological orders of the Hierarchy of Beings appear to have found their parallel on earth in a graded society of three classes. The fundamental virtue appears to be evolutionary growth and, much as Plato, knowledge. The man possessed of these qualities--the man who has superior wisdom, character, and understanding--is the one to whom power is given since he is entitled to it by the qualities inherent in him and the stage of evolution attained by him. It does not, in any way, spell despotism of the enlightened since the "higher" owe to those "lower" than themselves a duty to concern themselves with the welfare of the "lower"--noblesse oblige, perhaps. Also, like Plato, society exists for the satisfaction of mutual wants where harmony and order prevail. The "Philosopher King" of Plato is the earthly Manu of Mrs. Besant and is found in the "Superiors."

It becomes all too obvious to Mrs. Besant that the feelings of social duty, responsibility, and sacrifice, "which characterise the good citizen as distinguished from the good man,"<sup>1446</sup> can be fostered in the young by a carefully planned education. In her system of Education, learning must be both free and universal between the ages of seven and twenty-one for both sexes so that on reaching maturity, they can be useful citizens. The working life lasts from twenty-one to fifty unless it becomes necessary for the good of the nation to shorten this term. After fifty, the citizen receives a pension, drawn from the surplus of wealth accumulated during his years of work, to devote to any pursuit of his choice. Essentially, Education plays an important role in the elevation

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<sup>1446</sup> Annie Besant, "Indian Ideals in Education," Indian Ideals in Education, Philosophy and Religion and Art (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1925), p. 18.

of man:

By Education and Culture of man's spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical nature can he be lifted from the savage to the Sage and the Saint, can poverty be abolished, can society be made fraternal instead of barbarious, can crime, the fruit of ignorance, be gotten rid of, and, international and social peace replace war and the strife of classes.<sup>1447</sup>

Virtue is more than knowledge; it is the making of a good citizen, a way to human perfection. As in Plato's scheme, education receives much importance, and its similarities are evident in the inculcation of the Virtues of morality and intellectual growth. But it is not only the making of a "Philosopher King" that is called for, but a spiritually evolved individual who is to play a role in the bringing about of unity and harmony in a world of conflicting beliefs and creeds.

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<sup>1447</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

## CHAPTER XIII

### CONCLUSIONS

Mrs. Besant was cast in a heroic mold, a reminder of the resolute grandeur and courage of the human spirit who dared face personal tragedy and social odium for causes deeply held. It seemed her fate that she could, in her intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage, finally reach her promised land in Theosophy only after passing through the wilderness of conflict and pain. She was blessed with a rare discontent, but throughout her life sought to make known her Ideal and demonstrated a longing for sacrifice to causes greater than herself. Like many of her Age, she had a strong sense of mission, Evangelical in its intensity. Possessed of great moral energy and invincible purpose, she sought "Truth." There remained a mystique about this gallant lady which her successive stages of development seemed to accentuate, and her political, intellectual, and spiritual transformations excite intellectual curiosity. She suffered the travail and inner discontent which was so vital to her argosy and essential to the germination of her thought. A rebel for many a cause, it was her way not simply to define her thought but to act upon it. Thought and action remained indissoluble. Above all, Mrs. Besant was a reformer like Bentham, Mill, and Comte; and in an Age of Reform, she remained invincible in her belief (as the Utopian Socialists) that

once men had seen the light shed by her, they could not help but accept her way. But if a reformer, she was in no manner a revolutionist, though often violent in her denunciations when thoroughly roused, as moralistic exuberance prevailed over dispassionate judgment. Possessed of a quality of absolute confidence and positive assurance, a not uncommon trait among reformers, fond of the dramatic and often impulsive, yet she could appreciate that her private beliefs and feelings ran second to a dearly held cause, as the Atheist Fabian battled along with the Christian Socialists, and strong convictions went counter to cherished friendships, particularly with Bradlaugh. Gripped with a passionate desire to reconstruct her society, she was an evolving sort of person who demonstrated in each Weltanschauungen a capacity for intellectual growth, spiritual evolution, total commitment, and a prodigious capacity for work. Often extreme in her views, she sees, for example, no reconciliation between Faith and Science, Genesis and Evolution.

Her personality often remains a paradox. Certainly the most gifted, if often overly dramatic, speaker of her age, she had among the working classes a faithful following and it was for them, in the main, that she wielded a forthright pen. Perhaps she often lacked a quality of self-analysis in her writings and speeches, her ideas being often wantonly composed, repetitive, and contradictory, but they made an impact even on one as august as Gladstone. There exists a real need to edit her writings, a necessary though formidable task. Mostly self-instructed, she was aware, perhaps, of her perfunctory early training as she ranged from Theology to the Physical Sciences, Political Economy to Theosophy, and in an age where the Victorian woman was seldom given her due, it is creditable that she did so well. Her concern, it would appear, lay more

in persuasion than in the construct of a viable and systematic political theory. She was very conscious of her role in the late Victorian era as the propagandist and educator of her society to questions of political, social, and economic importance.

Mrs. Besant, like Hegel and Rousseau, saw no distrust of passion. Also, like Carlyle, passion was indispensable as an inspiration to political thought and action. Perhaps her numerous changes of belief and her eager desire to be in the midst of the fervor of her times denied her the opportunity to fully develop her ideas in a consistent manner. She often passed rather facilely from one concept to another, but the temptation is irresistible to uncover the constant beneath the variations, to strike the themes that connect her cacophony of sound. Even if, as was common to the political theorists of the 19th Century, her thought and ideas were determined by prevailing conditions, she mixed matters of practical politics and abstract thought with moral judgments. Nor can her thought be said to be wholly disinterested and objective, her personal trials and experiences often generating political thought. No phase of her life is barren of meaning and theoretical significance as she transmuted deeply felt emotional and spiritual impulses into political beliefs. An emotional crisis led to Atheism. She appeared to have the answer to theology, not in keeping with the tradition of the thoughtful scholar, her condemnation being both vituperative and unschooled. She resembles Paine in this.

Even if she is not a theorist of the first rank, yet she is not an intellectual corpse to be denied more than a footnote in 19th Century political thought. It is reported that when Shaw met Krishnamurti (adopted by Annie Besant in India and proclaimed as an Avatar or "World

Teacher"), he asked how things were with Mrs. Besant. The one time pupil of Mrs. Besant replied, "Very well," and added, "But at her great age she cannot think consecutively." Shaw replied, "She never could."<sup>1448</sup> This typically Shavian response does slight Mrs. Besant's achievements.

Each century finds its champions and its critics, resulting in the construct of political theory, whether brilliantly conceived or not, by those who seek to uncover the reasons for the political and social discontent of their times, and seek a remedy. It does not mean that the task is limited to a Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Burke, or Bentham who found "schools." Mrs. Besant, as political theorist, appreciates and analyzes to an appreciable degree the pressing problems of her society and suggests a remedy, however visionary or Utopian. In doing so, she articulates her political theory which is architectonic in conception and, as with the Greeks, unites ethics and politics in harmonious concord. The reading of many a great thinker reveals a plethora of intellectual approaches ranging, as it does for Mrs. Besant, from Lockian epistemology, Comtian Positivism, Scientific Rationalism, and Socialism to pure mysticism. In each is to be found a concern for values, and like the Greeks and the Renaissance, Mrs. Besant approached political questions from an ethical perspective despite her scientific and economic rationale. She seeks an answer to human phenomena by the use of both empirical and teleological constructs, though the former is obviously only an instrument to ideal ends. Her thought involves the ideas and ideals of God, Man and the Universe and ranges in scope from the phenomenal to the noumenon. But if her method is often empirical, it cannot be said to be scientific, being

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<sup>1448</sup>Time: A Weekly Newsmagazine, June 7, 1971, footnote on page 63.

often intuitive and reinforced by a conative reaction stemming from her own personal experiences. As the years go by, Mrs. Besant grows increasingly Utopian, and like Plato is given to a questioning of her earlier thought. Regardless, her political thought cannot be neatly compartmentalized; it is as much a theory of religion as of law and morals and demonstrates the obvious that political theory cannot be summarily separated from literature, history, law, ethics, or religion. The danger also exists in reading into her thought that which was not originally meant.

It is quite clear that Mrs. Besant's personality intrudes upon her thought, which is often a product of her own social and developmental experiences. As she wrote vividly about herself, holding little back from the reader, it would provide excellent material to the psychopathologist seeking his way to understand her thought.<sup>1449</sup> Her early life and trials are particularly important, though it would be unfortunate to "classify" Mrs. Besant as any particular "type." Her need for leadership (which she finally achieved as a Theosophist), the high value set on public response, perhaps a need for martyrdom, her stoical fortitude, the agony of self-doubt, a restless searching for her Ideals, her almost obsessive radicalism ending in gnostic Theosophy may have their origins in her early psychic influence, her relations with her mother, an early Calvinistic introspective morbidity, her love for the ornate and ritualistic, her unhappy marriage and loss of Mabel to her husband. Her

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<sup>1449</sup>Perhaps her determined reformist zeal was to compensate for her personal frustrations. She, quite possibly, may have displaced private motives on public objects and sought to explain them in terms of the public good. See Lasswell, Psycho-pathology and Politics, also Lasswell, Power and Personality (New York: Viking, 1962).

eclipse of faith is essential, for it provided the rationale and dynamic power for all her thought and activities as she sought Enlightenment in Secularism, Socialism, and finally found her haven in Theosophy. She was a compelling and fascinating woman who could rival both Luther and Gandhi as a model for psychological study. As martyr, reformist, educator, Atheist, Socialist, Utopian, scientist, and finally gnostic, she may have been a product of some underlying psychological influences. This approach, however, is not attempted here, the writer being unqualified to do so.

Her many changes were both inevitable and natural, and in each case were brought about by herself. Secularism and Socialism were too arid for a woman who sought a lofty morality and where unseen powers helped direct destiny. If an emotional turmoil unleashed doubt, she always sought an intellectual and rational justification in each transformation of belief. There were no sudden somersaults. Each change had its period of gestation in which reason supplemented emotion as an aid to inquiry, dealing with such questions as poverty, Brotherhood, Secularism, Atheism, Socialism, and Theosophy. Perhaps an inscrutable fate supplied Mrs. Besant at that exact moment of personal emotional and intellectual crisis with a helping hand in the shape of Scott, Bradlaugh, Shaw, Stead, and H.P.B. as instruments to aid her in her own evolutionary path. It was not they that were responsible for her changes, being much as guideposts and resting stations for the self-seeking traveler. Her awareness of the problems of the times was first heightened and inspired by Roberts and Arch who had exposed her to the plight of the landless poor and the incident of the "Manchester Martyrs." Later, as Comte, Darwin, Mill, and Hume replaced Anglo-Catholicism and the Apostolic Creed

of the Oxford Movement, they were to provide the theoretical rationale for her beliefs when she had herself turned to Atheism prior to her meeting with Bradlaugh, after personal agony had spurred Atheistic doubt. In all her transformations, Mrs. Besant had the inner resources needed to effect change; and perhaps the lessons learned early cast their shadow later.

Like Paine, Mrs. Besant was a product of the optimistic secular radicalism of the Enlightenment, having a hatred for established faiths, dogma, and monarchy. Though Paine remained a Deist to the end, Mrs. Besant carried the Freethought tradition to a positive Atheism. She shared the 18th Century belief in the perfectibility of man; evil was ignorance, religion, and greed. Man being rational implied to Mrs. Besant that he had the ability and privilege of completely destroying the decaying fabric of Church and Crown and vested privilege rooted in custom, precedent, and prejudice and to remold society in accordance with rationalistic principles. The end of society was to extol man and, like the Philosophes, she was a critic of the established political and social orders of Church and Crown which since the Reformation were seen to be the major obstacles to liberty, progress, and human perfectibility. Science replaced the revealed laws of God, and the world was governed by impersonal natural laws which could be determined empirically. Newton replaces Augustine, and with the condemnation of speculative metaphysics comes a new focus on epistemology, as "experience" derived from Lockian ideas replaces innate ideas and metaphysics as the only true basis of knowledge. Empirical rationalism, drawn from Comte, Hume, and Darwin, struggles to replace a priori ethical propositions, though it becomes clear that the answers provided by "science" cannot fully satisfy Mrs.

Besant's attempt to make the world intelligible solely in secular terms. However, if the writers of the Enlightenment (with the possible exception of Holbach) were not outspokenly anti-religious, keeping God at a respectful distance, Mrs. Besant was vehement in her anti-clericalism as Atheism replaced Revelation, and Natural Religion condemned Revealed Religion. The test to be applied was Reason, not Faith, and both man and nature were capable of being rationally understood. Human perfectibility and historical progress were the destiny of man once freed from the shackles of religious dogma and superstition. With perfectibility and progress was implied a positive view of the evolution of society not in the manner of Henry Adams who saw the 13th Century as the apogee of civilization. A secular humanism is reflected in her thought inspired by the ideals of the French and American Revolutions, and though the former stirred her blood, it was not a call to revolutionary action. To Disraeli, "Man was made to adore and to obey"; it was not so for Mrs. Besant. Instead, Mrs. Besant, in keeping with the spirit of the Renaissance and Reformation, awakens man to a new awareness of his powers and responsibilities. Her secular humanism takes for its own the dictum of Protagoras that, "Man is the measure of all things"; and it reflects what Jacques Maritain termed an "Anthropocentric humanism."

Like Mill in the earlier part of the Century, Mrs. Besant was active in the great issues and controversies of her time, meeting their challenge with unbounded zeal. Her radical and total anti-clericalism and Republicanism in the 1880's were out of step with the changing scene, Mrs. Besant being sometimes unaware of the English preference for placid growth and change. As an apostle of the working classes (much as Paine), she exposed the shallow deceits of her time as she held up a mirror for

the Victorian in which to see his blemishes. It was an age both of science and religion, and if to many, a reconciliation could be effected, to Mrs. Besant this could never be. Anti-clericalism, however illogically conceived, dominated the outlook of this conscious humanitarian as a way to free man from the bonds of tradition and orthodoxy. She posed a challenge to the Old Tory Cosmology of Burke with its emphasis on custom, precedent, and prescriptive rights and the mystic bond of unity between generations. The French Revolution had struck a responsive chord in the 19th Century, and it was seen by her, as by Priestley and Paine, as a vindication of man's right to liberty and a blow for Freethought. In a moral age she sought, like Godwin, to "moralise politics." Mrs. Besant was no anarchist, and it seems clear that, like Plato and Aristotle, she viewed the State as a means of bringing about a moral improvement among its citizens. Strong in her faith in individual liberty and the libertarian ideals of Mill, she wielded a forthright pen in defense of civil liberties, and her secular humanism and anti-imperialism echoed the Liberal faith. The role of law was to guarantee moral freedom and as an advocate of freedom of speech and religious liberty, she followed in the footsteps of Milton, Carlyle, Shelley, Paine, and Bradlaugh. Secular humanism was tied to liberalism in defense of popular liberties, extension of the franchise, attack on privilege and the role of the law to secure, as a Secularist, the inalienable rights of man. Since man had projected himself into God, he had lost his freedom. In an age of science, reason, and faith, she sought to restore man to his proper place as the architect of his own fate.

The idea of progress was intrinsic to her age, an inheritance of the 18th Century, and she sought it, as did Comte, in those laws which

determine the progressive trend of human and social evolution. Hume had destroyed all claims of natural law to scientific validity, and Bentham, in keeping with the spirit of his age, had condemned it as "nonsense upon stilts." In the 19th Century, Utilitarianism was "in the air" until Socialism took its place and Bentham had abandoned a priori rights for a new criteria of action. Mrs. Besant adopts Utilitarianism, which takes on a different conception as it grows increasingly ethical in its postulate of a "general happiness" free of any selfish calculus of pain and pleasure, along with innumerable versions of "natural law" used indiscriminately and wantonly. As a scientist and Secularist, her idea of natural law is Positivist; it can be discovered by the scientific method and is no longer a vague abstraction. Progress and perfectibility depend upon following its mandates as it became an absolute criteria for both truth and action. As a Socialist, man had a natural right to property, it being a "natural gift" to all men and hence not to be claimed by a few--a proposition that would appall Webb. As a Theosophist, she believed the Laws of Brotherhood, Sacrifice, and Karma were inviolable principles of the natural order. If Utilitarianism and natural law appear contradictory, yet it was an attempt by Mrs. Besant to uncover some standard of conduct by which to judge the actions of man.

Mill, Owen, and Mrs. Besant believed that man was a product of his society; to reshape man, it was necessary to change his environment. Mrs. Besant remained receptive to every current of change in an age of intellectual and social ferment. Up to the time of her joining the Fabian Society in 1884, she was well in keeping with the spirit of laissez-faire individualism. After 1880, she recognized the turn of the tide to collectivism. Her change to Socialism cannot be viewed as oppor-

tunistic, but a realization that the cure to want and poverty lay in the new Zeitgeist. Mill himself in his later years had turned to a "qualified Socialism," and Mrs. Besant even as a Secularist was aware that the cure for poverty, low wages, and unemployment lay in the eradication of land monopoly by heavy taxation upon the landlord and that labor was the true source of wealth. The influence of Mill is also obvious in her belief in the new social order based on the principle that those who labored and produced should reap the benefits of their exertions. The malaise caused to laborer and worker by the Industrial Revolution called for another panacea than Atheistic secularism. Unlike Coleridge, she never resented industrialism per se, but like the Romanticists, human good was her ideal. Mrs. Besant often demonstrated her point with references to the past. To show the tyranny of the Church and to expose its evil nature, she traced its history and role in England back over a period of three centuries. Often her zeal displaced an academic objectivity; she suffered acutely from selective perception and saw only what she must with a dramatic flourish. In an age of Acton and Bagehot, she was not insensitive to the historical method.

The 19th Century was an age of the growth of the democratic principle and reform legislation. To Mrs. Besant, Parliament always remained the forum for effecting change and she saw in the extension of the franchise by the Reform Bills the growth of the democratic principle though essentially Republican in concept, Parliament being responsible to the people and not the seat of the privileged. She always remained resolutely constitutional, though aggressively so. Mrs. Besant was no apologist for middle class interests; the extension of the franchise witnessed by the Century was a way to secure for the laborer and worker his rightful

inheritance. Like Aristotle, Mrs. Besant's ideal was a constitutional rule, though as a Theosophist she grows closer to a Platonic concept. She may possibly have influenced the passage of the Third Reform Bill. Nor was Mrs. Besant unaware that the central trend of the time was the shifting of power from entrenched Royal prerogative to the Cabinet representative of a majority in Parliament, which was, to Mrs. Besant, always the House of Commons. Already signs were evident of a decisive shift of parliamentary power from the House of Lords to the House of Commons, and Mrs. Besant was not unaware of the declining influence of the hereditary Lords whom she struck at mercilessly. The triumph of "law and right" demanded that Parliament be representative of the entire nation and not oligarchic privilege.

In the study of Science, Darwin, Positivism, Mill, and Utilitarianism and her attack on jingoistic Imperialism, so dominant a feature of her time, as in her Republicanism and Atheism which dominated her political and social outlook, she was in keeping with the Age of her birth even if she resurrected faded concepts such as natural law. She used the ideas of both the 18th and 19th Centuries, whether "scientific," speculative, or moral, having the desire to justify and propel change and condemn stagnant beliefs. Mrs. Besant recognized quite clearly, also, that the central trend of the times was in the direction of greater individual liberty, and that political equality was impossible without economic equality as well.

Liberty was the supreme passion of her life. Her Radical politics is related to her idea of Liberty and indispensable to it. In an age where Religion and politics were inseparable, Atheism supplied Mrs. Besant with the fuel and inspiration for Radical politics and reform. It

implied no compromise with privilege, human abuse, and the common good. There is more than a moralistic element in her Radicalism, a continuing tradition of the 19th Century, and often it is marked by an extreme naivete. Accentuating reason rather than reverence, she sought to make the world better by originating and fashioning the future course of events. Placing her faith in human reason and man's perfectibility, her economic and political Radicalism voices a spirit of moral indignation at the injustices to the poor reminiscent of Cobbett, Hunt, Cobden, Bright, and the Chartists. Her attack on the Established Church, monarchy, and the aristocracy, Biblical infallibility continue in the tradition of the "working class" Radicalism of Paine. The Radical tradition of the Century assumed many forms, from the intellectual form of James Mill and the Philosophic Radicals with their attacks largely centered on the aristocracy to the demagoguery of Hunt and the more strident voices of the working class Radicalism of Cobbett, Cobden, Bright, and the Chartists, each determined to change their environment for the better in their own way. Her attack, like that of Bentham, was total, but she was never to be as great an intellectual force as either Bentham, the Philosophic Radicals, or Mill. Mrs. Besant was far too emotional and often less than objective--never a pure abstract intellectual in the Radical movement of her Century, even if she was, as were the Philosophic Radicals and the Anti-Corn Land League, totally dedicated. If the Philosophic Radicals and Mill reinforced the intellectual rationale of liberalism in isolated splendor, Mrs. Besant demonstrated it in the open forum, though unlike many, she never sought to enter Parliament.

Her ideas on Liberty and her Radical thought have been largely ignored and need to be delineated. She reflected, however capriciously

at times, the essential characteristics of liberalism of hostility for the arbitrary use of power. Mrs. Besant sought the ends of a humane society by ridding man of clerical and secular authoritarian control and thereby allowing him to develop his capacities. Like Mill, she allows complete freedom of action unless it impaired the rights of another. Property was an inviolable right as was the right to contract. It seemed to Mrs. Besant, as a Secularist, that governments should function at a minimum. Liberty was essentially the product of the revolt of reason and individual conscience against orthodoxy. Science was its handmaiden since it was the way to true knowledge as distinct from Theological superstition and mere belief. The example of Bruno, the martyr for Freethought, is portrayed vividly. Mrs. Besant always identified with her heroes. At any rate, her liberalism was well in keeping with the vital tenet of English liberal thought based on a faith in man and the ideal of the free individual uninhibited by the tyranny of secular or religious authority, yet conscious of the welfare of others. Her aim was a just society under law, and she did not take her mission lightly. The law existed to secure equal justice for all and was indispensable to the proper functioning of the State.

Essential to the liberal ideal was the right to freedom of expression and assembly. Mrs. Besant demonstrates these rights in her two appearances in Court and in the unemployed riots of 1886 and 1887, as a Socialist. The right to expression was absolute and essential to progress; and in the Knowlton case, Mrs. Besant united iconoclastic Atheistic materialism with Neo-Malthusianism to the end of seeking the "general happiness." There could, for Mrs. Besant, be no divorce of social questions from those of abstract justice and liberty, particularly of

women. The Rights of Man were not the result of Parliamentary fiat but inalienable (as a Secularist). Like Mill, Mrs. Besant fought for the representation of women, it being a very necessary prelude to their obtaining their political and legal equality. Her defense of Bradlaugh presented an opportunity for her to further demonstrate her liberal principle. Liberty implied, as with Bright, the Chartists, and Cobden, open elections and universal suffrage; also, total freedom of conscience in matters of faith.

Her hostility to the Church was total. It was the one major bar to the advance of the democratic principle, being traditionally allied to King and landlord. The Church was also seen in legalistic terms as a gigantic monopoly, a creature of the State much as any other Department of State. This being so, it was legally defensible to subject it to executive fiat, or, better yet, to abolish it completely. Her line of legal reasoning is, quite obviously, supportive of a virulent anti-clericalism rising out of many personal injuries. Dogma and the Established Church were antithetical to the growth of the liberal idea of the free man.

Her Anti-Imperialism echoed the ideals of 19th Century libertarianism, of the obligation of a humane society to seek the good of the peoples it ruled. It implied a dislike of Disraeli's Toryism and imperial dominium. Complex international problems were often viewed in moral terms, and British national interest in an era of Realpolitik was not seen in terms of balance of power, but self-determination and morality. Moral conscience, as in the case of India, was elevated above imperialist designs and in so doing she gained great popularity in that country which was to be sadly dissipated after her conflict with Gandhi.

Expansive nationalistic jingoism was both immoral and an impediment to politics and social reform. Her influence on Gladstone and the Midlothian Campaign was keenly felt. The cause of Ireland more forcibly demonstrated that the working of the English liberal principle could not be separated from, perhaps, the most pressing issue of the time. The remedy lay in agrarian reform, which few in England understood or appreciated, a resistance to Executive rule, and the guarantee of constitutional remedies to the Irish. Mrs. Besant remained committed to English Parliamentary traditions and had little use for Irish terrorism, the tactics of Parnell, or British retaliation and repression.

Like the working-class Radicalism of Paine, Arch, Cobbett, Cobden, and Bright, she sought the good of the working-class. Free-trade, as with the Anti-Corn Law League and Paine was an indispensable principle of liberty, and a return to "Protection" implied the continuation of the "sinister interests" of Bentham. As a Secularist, Mrs. Besant saw Protection as an ally of vested interests. Her Free Trade principle was, however, not based on the faith of Bentham in an enlightened self-interest but was related to her ethical principle of the "general good." To Mrs. Besant, each individual, being left free to pursue his own advantage, was not morally defensible; nor did it contribute to the "general good." "Protection" only made for greater injustice by raising the price of food for the poor, a form of monopolism. As with Arch, Mrs. Besant sought the unity of labor against the common enemy of the landlord. Cobden and Mill had condemned land-monopoly, and to Mrs. Besant the liberal principle was incapable of implementation where landlords claimed monstrous rights, a remnant of feudal abuse. The remedy lay in the abolition of all privilege as in the Game Laws. Above all, as did

Paine and the Chartists, she attacks Primogeniture and Entail; the dead were not to strangle the living. Mrs. Besant had a keen appreciation that political power stemmed from economic power, and hence the liberal principle demanded the abolition of monopoly. Like Cobden, her faith in Land Reform was indispensable to her faith in liberty; no country could be free where the large majority of its cultivators were divorced from the ownership of the land. Natural Law came to the aid of her liberal principle to demonstrate that the land of England was an inheritance to all, a gift of nature, which could not be appropriated by a few. The evils of land monopoly were tied to a natural rights philosophy which would have little appeal for Bentham or Mill.

Republicanism was the cure of English progressive thought and the central doctrine of the English liberal principle to Mrs. Besant. To her, it was inevitable, a manifestation of the English genius. Even if Bradlaugh despaired of its coming, Mrs. Besant remained resolutely optimistic. While the nature of the Republican ideal is crudely sketched, it emphasized the principle of universal suffrage. Liberty implied full representation without property qualification. Mrs. Besant, unlike Disraeli and the Tories, had no fear that a vote to men without property would endanger constitutional liberty. The passage of the Reform Bill of 1832 confirmed her belief. Like Paine, society and government existed to secure the natural rights of man (as a Secularist). Monarchy was founded upon brutality and superstitions such as the Theory of Divine Rights, being a myth fabricated by King and Church to enslave man. There is no suggestion of the idea of a "social contract," the cardinal principle being that with the abolition of hereditary institutions as the House of Lords and Monarchy, constitutional government in the sense of Parliamen-

tary Supremacy would benefit all by calling forth the highest political qualities of man in pursuit of the public good. She had faith in the collective wisdom of the people, as a Secularist and Socialist. Republicanism was the way to end the tyranny of Church, Crown, and hereditary succession; Absolute Monarchy was obviously inferior to a government based on the principles of election and representation, which alone could ensure the sovereignty of the people. The French Revolution, apart from its excesses which were excusable as a normal reaction to tyranny, was a rediscovery of the age of innocence, and like most optimistic Radicals of the time, particularly Paine, she saw in the example of the United States the way for man to best enjoy the product of his labor free of the abuses of vested interests.

As a Democratic Socialist, her concern with the liberty of the proletariat grows increasingly patent. Liberty was to be achieved through co-operation, the emancipation of the worker from economic servitude, in greater state control and regulation of industry. Liberty was seen as a communal product brought about by community action as welfarism replaced individualism. The ideals of the "Cooperative Commonwealth" and an organismic society where the community controlled the production and distribution of wealth and man was no longer alienated from his fellow men or from the fruits of his labor were indispensable to individual liberty. Both ethical morality and the canons of Political Economy demanded it be so. Liberty lay in organized co-operative effort instead of the competitive strife which made the worker a drudge. It was possible when not only a few wealthy but all could participate equally in the benefits of a civilized existence, and this to Mrs. Besant included women in particular. Liberty implied not only political equality but economic equality

as well.

As a Theosophist, Mrs. Besant's view of liberty undergoes a transformation. Men no longer seek their identity in a democratic community but in a stratified cosmological order. As with Hegel and other organic theorists as Plato, individual liberty to Mrs. Besant lay in the capacity of man to realize his true essence in service to the State. All men did not have the same capacity for freedom, since all were not equal in their stage of spiritual evolutionary growth. As with Hegel, the concepts of "Reason," "Essence," "Spirit," and "Immortality" are to be found; her theory of politics becomes severely metaphysical. Man played a role assigned to him by his Karma, but it was left to him to improve his position in the Hierarchical Order by acts of service. The primacy of the individual was withdrawn, individual happiness never the aim of man but the perfecting of the whole. Spirit in man was the Life of God, and in seeking Unity with God in service, man perfected his Evolution. Liberty implied self-realization and service in a true Brotherhood. Individual liberty sought its ethical justification in Duty.

Her role as a Secularist deserves recognition. Joining the N.S.S. at an early stage of development, she was responsible for much of its later success and was second only to Bradlaugh, and certainly his most valued comrade. A stalwart crusader for Secularism, she prodded the reluctance of many to admit change in an age of piety. Her mission was nothing less than to school the nation in the ways of Freethought, which appears to Mrs. Besant only second in importance to Theosophy. In her defense of the Knowlton pamphlet, she displayed admirable forensic skill and disseminated effectively the question of population control, a radical maneuver for the time, and in doing so raised the legal tests of "in-

tent" and "pruriency" in cases dealing with obscenity. Neo-Malthusianism not only became a live issue, but the union of Secularism with Neo-Malthusianism brought about by her gave a fillip to the Freethought movement by harnessing the two great forces of a rationalistic secular Atheism to birth-control in the cause of progress, science, and human good. Her role with Bradlaugh highlighted vividly one of the most important events of the late Victorian era. While she played second fiddle to Bradlaugh, yet her efforts helped achieve the passage of the Oaths Bill, a constitutional landmark. It provided an impetus for constitutional change. The case of Mabel brought into bold relief the anomalies existing in the laws of marriage and divorce. The tests of equity and conscience were sought to be applied to the rigidity of the common law stemming from Ecclesiastical codes. Her attempts at scientific education were frustrated, but she did show by precept and example the need to secure for her sex the benefits of higher education. Florence Nightingale and J. S. Mill were not, as Trevelyan suggests, ". . . the two principal pioneers of the position that women hold in our society to-day."<sup>1550</sup>

Mrs. Besant was an important figure in the English Freethought movement.

Her contribution to thought as a Secularist has been totally ignored. Not only did she defend Atheism as being essentially moral, but carried its philosophy further than Bradlaugh by providing it with additional supports from Comte, Hume, and Darwin. Her two major tenets of Atheism were a refusal to believe without the proofs of science and that all phenomena perceived by sensory experience was an illusion. Bradlaugh had little time or interest for theoretical speculation. He sup-

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<sup>1550</sup> Trevelyan, History of England, Vol. II, p. 233.

ported his Atheism, like Paine, largely on the basis of Biblical self-contradiction together with references to Locke, Newton, and Galileo. Mrs. Besant's monistic thought, formed prior to her meeting with Bradlaugh, was strengthened by the cool scepticism of Hume in his disregard of the miraculous--all phenomena beyond sensory experience being illusory. The so-called "truths" of metaphysics were neither logical, nor capable of being tested by experience. They lay beyond human comprehension. Since "science" looked exclusively to proven facts, any concept of the "First Cause" was both illogical and incapable of demonstration. God was therefore incapable of "proof," simply an a priori assumption beyond human comprehension. This being so, a fictitious entity, called God, could supply no solution to human problems. The questions of existence were capable of rational scientific analysis. Comte also comes to the support of Mrs. Besant's Atheistic rationale. His Positive Philosophy offered a way to rid man's belief of the dry rot of metaphysical speculation. Science qua science only dealt with objective truths and not speculative theories. It offered a new view of the world. By discarding as phantasies all theological and metaphysical constructions, and by limiting true knowledge exclusively to the phenomenal, man could now study society in the ways of science and so organize society; both Mrs. Besant and Mill deplored the later Comte with his "Religion of Humanity." Human society had its laws, such as her law of Utilitarian Morality or Science of Ethics based on the "general good" which must regulate human affairs. Though she was, in time, to see man and nature in terms of a Graded Cosmic Hierarchy (which, Mrs. Besant insisted, was "scientific"), as a Secularist and Socialist, she was firmly set in the third stage of Comte's "Law of the Three Stages." Thus, both Positivism and scepticism

supported Atheism, bringing to it the tests of science and experience to supplement metaphysics and God.

Though Darwin claimed no Atheistic conclusions from his premises, it was clear to Mrs. Besant that since man originated as the other animals from a common prototype, there could be no element of "divinity" in him as declared by Genesis. He was simply "matter" in evolution, possessing no "spirit" and composed of no divine substance. Her view of man went through radical alteration as a Theosophist.

To Mrs. Besant, herself, her Fabian phase would appear least important; however, her achievements in both thought and action as a Socialist need to be restored to their correct perspective. The Fabian Society was a capricious movement, totally unsure of itself when Mrs. Besant entered its ranks. If Webb was its "directing genius," the role of Mrs. Besant was considerable although it has been summarily dismissed by Pease and given scanty credit by Shaw. None of the later Fabians appear to have realized her significance, even though she was a considerable asset to its development in an evolutionary direction. She alone of all the Fabians was well known outside its little circle, and her contribution to the Fabian Essays does demonstrate that she was not wholly ignored at the time by the Fabians. Even if their attitudes and manner were not to her liking, yet it brought her into contact with members of her own social background. The N.S.S., apart from Bradlaugh, was rather rough-hewn in character. Gifted with the power of eloquence and being an idol of the working class, she put to good use her powers of persuasion for the new cause in an emotional and highly zealous manner but was not devoid of a base of facts, seeking to make both public and private enterprises aware of their responsibilities to the new Zeitgeist. Our Corner was promptly

turned to good use as an instrument to make the Fabians known and gain support. Even if she was overshadowed by her brilliantly academic comrades, yet it is remarkable that she perceived so much of Fabian theory in so short a time. Mrs. Besant did more than found branches, overwhelm audiences, and plunge headlong into danger. She made Socialism respectable and ably permeated society with its views. And it is owing to her that the London working classes were leavened with Socialism. Advocating Rate-supported meals for poor children in Board Schools, she put into effect an, as yet, unarticulated assumption of the Fabians.

The "latent and instinctive" differences between the Fabian Society and the S.D.F. and League were made explicit by her; and she contributed to the growth of the nascent society as a member of its Executive. The departure of Mrs. Wilson and the anarchists from the Fabian ranks owed as much to her skill in debate as her dogged constitutionalism and resulted in the Fabian acceptance of "Possibilism" even while younger spirits were waving red banners. In the episode of the Tory Gold in 1885, Mrs. Besant made apparent to those catastrophically minded Fabians of the futility of revolution as preached by the S.D.F. The Fabians played little, if any, part in the unemployed riots of 1886 and 1887. Mrs. Besant plunged boldly into the melee and organized Socialist Defence Associations to aid the arrested. It demonstrated to the worker that ethical base of Socialist thought. In the abortive Fabian Conference of 1886, she sought to make the infant society better known and to close the ranks in the Socialist movement by a discussion of the issues. It was an attempt to wean the S.D.F. and League away from their revolutionary path by exposing them to evolutionary Socialism, but was finally to prove to the Fabians that they had nothing in common with them. Along with her

clerical "ally," the Rev. Stewart Headlam, Mrs. Besant was the first Fabian to be elected to the L.C.C., and made way for the later Fabians to gain control of that organization. To capture the Councils was a Fabian creed, and she set the pace in permeation. The question of the Eight Hours Day was to become an important Fabian policy, as it was of all the Socialists, but it was Mrs. Besant who as early as June, 1884, forcibly strove for it. Webb and Oliver later appreciated its importance in subsequent Tracts. It was consonant with the early Fabian objective of increasing government action to aid public welfare.

However, it was in her Trade Union activities that she displayed remarkable foresight and helped make possible the entry of Socialists into New Unionism and the London Dock Strike of 1889. In 1880, Mrs. Besant recognized the value of Trade Unions as a cure to unemployment and poverty when not even Webb recognized their utility. She sees Trade Unions as essentially Socialistic and cooperative ventures, allies to the expansion of the Socialist movement. Her effort becomes all the more remarkable when it is recognized that the Trade Unions regarded Socialism with disdain, if not open hostility. Her efforts not only made the Trade Union movement eminently respectable, but attracted intelligent support. The cause of the Match Girls' strike became, under Mrs. Besant's skillful and dramatic leadership, a national issue and even roused some of the Fabians to action. From it arose the powerful Women's Trade Unions. The history of British labor and the Fabian Society owe to Mrs. Besant a debt, sadly denied her. She was forceful in her activities, but never revolutionary, and as in all her activities, much benefit came as a result.

If Mrs. Besant spread "heat," she also cast some "light" on the

nascent society; she not only "made Socialists" but articulated Fabian thought. Even though her thought was not precise and systematic, her style stilted and too passionate and distinctly her own, her method often ambivalent and contradictory, yet her appreciation of Fabianism was not insignificant particularly since her ideas in her writings and debates were almost exclusively fashioned in the very early years of Fabian growth and maturation--in 1885, 1886, and 1887. Webb himself wrote the most important of his early Tracts, Fabian Tract No. 5, in 1887, the year the Fabian Basis appeared. Her thought seems to be largely slighted apart from her contribution to the Fabian Essays in 1889, a fact not difficult to justify since it takes a measure of desperation to attempt the undertaking. She did articulate the major suppositions of the Fabians.

Mrs. Besant had the optimistic faith of the 19th Century Fabian that a cure for poverty was possible along Socialist principles and that with the destruction of Capitalism, Socialism would inevitably follow. The basis of her thought rested on the premise that the source of poverty was private ownership in the materials necessary to produce wealth. She seeks the basic causes of social and economic injustice. Poverty was the essential economic fact to be faced. She analyzes the system of laissez-faire individualism, expounds its evils and offers her Socialist remedies. Land and Capital must be vested in the community for the general good to enable the community to enjoy the value it jointly created, this principle of economic reconstruction being a Fabian article of faith and found in the Fabian Basis of 1887. Similarly, all differential unearned incomes arising from either land or capital were to be nationalized. Her Socialism laid claim for entire community control of land, capital, interest, and rent. The eradication of monopoly was a vision of hope, and with

the abolition of private property in the instruments of production no man could exploit another. Webb, Shaw, and Olivier were equally emphatic on that basic principle of Fabianism. Like Webb, the starting point of her Socialism was Mill and not Marx, though references to the theory of "surplus value" and alienation of man exist. Also, she is well in the true Fabian tradition in acknowledging her debt to English economists and statisticians. "Modern Socialism" to Mrs. Besant as to Webb was not to be identified with a spurious, sentimental Utopianism or the evils of Mercantilism but was the careful, correct study of society based on the irrefutable laws of Political Economy which appealed to reason and fact and not sentimental emotionalism; nevertheless, she expounded a visionary Socialist Utopianism much to Webb's disgust. Her economic analysis of the methods of production of wealth owe much to Mill, Ricardo, Jevons, and even Henry George. Like Shaw and Webb, the plight of the proletariat is vividly illustrated as is the cause of his poverty. The landlord is a "thief" as is the capitalist since they consume what they do not create. Mrs. Besant is alive to that very central proposition of Fabianism that what was of the essence was not whether or not to divide wealth equally but that there should be no reward to an idle class and no interest be paid to the idle shareholder. Also, the existence of "two classes," a product of laissez-faire individualism and exploitation, could be cured by the eradication of monopoly and the socialization of the means of production. No Fabian could disagree with her premises, though her means of achieving the socialization of land and capital are ambivalent, relying heavily on a revised system of land-tenure and the end of monopoly to be suddenly brought about.

Like Webb, Mrs. Besant is evolutionary in her view of the coming

of the new Zeitgeist, it being in keeping with English traditions. Socialism was the natural stage of evolution of society from Individualism, and like Webb she sees the coming of Democratic Socialism in each intrusion of Government into the areas of private interest. Mrs. Besant, as an exponent and articulator of the new Zeitgeist, is aware of the inevitability of its coming, its essentially democratic and constitutional nature, its moral and ethical substance and absence of bureaucratic centralization as did Webb though she did not formulate, as did the leading Fabian, any clear exposition of Socialist thought as the Law of Rent or contribute to it any "body of systematic political thought." It was the way to provide all an equal opportunity to reach his greatest potential. This being man's privilege, the social and political structure had to be changed accordingly. Soon it was to reach a view of an ideal society. The Fabians were "eclectic" in their thinking, and Mrs. Besant demonstrates this virtue in her attempt to reconcile the Radical and Socialist in a joint effort to bring about Reform. To Webb, there seemed no way to reconcile their differences, and Shaw ignored the issue almost totally. Also, as a Neo-Malthusian, she insisted that birth control was complementary to Socialism, a position few Fabians could support. To Mrs. Besant, it was not only monopoly, exploitation, and private ownership of the means of production that caused poverty but also an increase in numbers of the working classes. Cooperation and harmony lay at the base of her thought, and it even extended to a faith in cooperative farming and the construct of "Co-operative groups" of farmers, never a recognized Fabian principle. If Mrs. Besant appreciated the role of the State and the organic concept of society in true Fabian manner, she saw no distrust of the working-class intelligence as did Shaw and Webb. Im-

portant as economic and social reconstruction was, all her Socialist remedies and ideals would go by default without men of understanding and purpose, drawn from all sectors of society, who could translate abstract ideals into concrete realities. The nationalization of industries, the communalization of the means of production, required men of discipline, dedication, and capable of self-sacrifice. If the Fabians placed their faith in a corp of dedicated experts, members of an elite civil service, Mrs. Besant accentuated the need of all to unite in a cooperative effort to reconstruct her new Socialist Commonwealth. To Mrs. Besant, Socialism would appear to be a step towards an ethical reconstruction of Society which found its fruition in Theosophy and Brotherhood. However, the satirical irony of the Fabians could never suit a temperament which sought its ends in more ideal terms than earthly perfection.

Mrs. Besant embraced Theosophy in 1889, and left for India in 1893. Her impact in England as a Theosophist is totally negligible in the context of her political thought. Theosophical thought found expression in India and legitimately belongs to a new phase. However, these years provided the opportunity for her to develop the new creed, almost totally dissimilar to Secularism and Socialism. Atheism was no longer a powerful ideological force as she sought the ideal of a Brotherhood of man and Unity rooted in Karma, Reincarnation, and esoteric Christianity. It did, perhaps, bring home to the few avant garde intellectuals of the time a new awareness of man and society in terms of a cosmic order reminiscent of the Universitas Hominum of Dante and St. Thomas with its hierarchical arrangements, the unity of man, the spiritual temporal aspects of human nature where the spirit, as distinct from the body, sought a destiny beyond an earthly existence, and "truth" as

found in sources other than 18th and 19th Century rationalism, Western Science and Political Economy.

Mrs. Besant's view of man is essential to her thought. The Secularist man is not only rational and perfectible but is also possessed of a sense of morality. Since the ground of her faith shifts from God, who is deposed, to man, man becomes almost God-like in conception. His true morality is not found in the codes of Moses or Jesus but in the sharing of a common bond of human concern. Her ethical humanism implied a feeling of man for man. Since morality was to be found within man and not in God, man had to look within himself to determine his "ground of being." Despite her Atheism, rationalism, scepticism, and Darwinism, Mrs. Besant never lets go of a lofty concept of man as an ethical being guided by an internalized "moral law." The destruction of Faith did not imply a retreat from a noble morality but its fulfillment in ethical standards of conduct expressed in terms of the common good.

As with Plato, there exists, to Annie Besant, an essential duality in man which finds its greatest expression in Theosophy. Even as a Secularist, she is aware that man is a compound of lower and higher intelligence. Possessing "virtue," being the quality of moral consciousness, he can subdue the evil within him and so rise to his true moral stature, evil being Religion, dogma, greed, and lack of human understanding. Despite her faith in Darwin and evolution, she never forsook that element of morality and intrinsic immortality in man, even if Darwinism obviously conflicted with her a priori hypothesis of man's pristine ethical morality. Man's immortality, as a Secularist, lay in earthly perfection, not Grace, Salvation, and the seeking of a better world in the hereafter. God became the "moral law" within man which supplies the inspiration and

guide for ethical conduct and is exemplified in the lives of inspired beings such as Beethoven and Shelley. The sharing of a common human bond replaces a belief in Divinity and is the basis of her Atheistic morality. Mrs. Besant always has her idea of man--the perfect man. As a Secularist, she does not see it in the unspirited Christian, broken and shackled by submission to doctrinaire authority, but in the example of the free spirit who is his own master, fights the dogma of the Church and Apostolic Creed and makes common cause with his fellows. To Mrs. Besant, there always existed an Ideal to be sought, a perfection to be realized, and a lofty morality to be taught; and undoubtedly her personal experiences, as in the cases of Mabel and Bradlaugh, accentuated her humanistic Atheism.

As a Socialist, Mrs. Besant remains true to her Ideal vision of man. Recognizing that the anti-social forces of greed and gain were intrinsic to his character, man could reach perfection only in a society organized along Socialist principles where the ideals of accord, an organic unity, and co-operation prevailed. Man being essentially a "social animal," though not necessarily a "political" one as with Aristotle, his way to individual self-realization, progress, and perfectibility lay in the direction of a closer social union. In working towards a higher form of social and economic society than individualistic competition, man realized his innate capacity for self-perfection and would appreciate the joys of art, beauty, and literature. Man was perfectible; it was only an individualistic society and Mercantilism which corrupted him. Only when the means of production belonged to the community would the aggressive and competitive instincts of man be changed as he would, ideally, seek gratification in deeds of noble altruism. Mrs. Besant remained optimistic that, however imperfect human nature was, it could be changed.

She was aware that environment and the living organism react upon each other, and that to fashion the perfect man it is necessary to provide a suitable environment. Even selective breeding had its place by the matching of an aristocracy of talent and merit, much like Plato's guardians, rather than a profligate and weak social class. Out of social and political reorganization, a better environment of selective breeding and education could emerge a high human type aware of his responsibilities and his moral obligation not to seek the gratification of selfish desire or personal interest.

In Theosophy, man comes into his own. He is now possessed not only of reason but superior sensory perception capable of revealing the mysteries of the transcendental. Part of a cosmic drama, a fragment of Divinity, his task is to uncover his Divine substance and put it to useful service. The gnostic completely replaces the epistemological concepts of Locke; no longer is he born with a tabula rasa but is a product of Reincarnation, bringing his Karma with him. Man is a composite of a previous inheritance, possessed of past experiences. Capable of true wisdom, this capacity is limited to a few and it is the highest evolved of the species who can control their baser natures. With spiritual evolution comes greater responsibility to aid others in true Brotherhood and service. Man, being no longer a victim to the selfish calculus of "pleasure" and "pain," or seeking survival as the brute in the struggle for existence; no longer a prey to selfish "Desire" or sexual passion, he is to seek his spiritual perfection in accordance with the "Law of Sacrifice." He is part of a Universal Mind and by righteous acts and self-sacrifice expresses his essential divinity. Bruno, once a martyr for Freethought, is now an example of her Ideal. To Plato, the philoso-

phers were those most eminent of men who perceived the knowledge of "the Good"; to Mrs. Besant, the Perfect Man is he who establishes a transcendental relationship with God, i.e. the Gnostic or Theosophist.

Mrs. Besant as Atheist, Socialist, and Theosophist, was confident that a reconstruction and new regeneration of society was possible. The Victorians sought the comfort of a universal code of conduct. The destruction of theology and the codes of Jesus and Moses left a void which Mrs. Besant sought to fill by her "Science of Ethics," or "Science of Morality," being an Atheistic system designed to regulate human conduct and having no base in revealed divinity but being in tune with the laws of nature. In seeking to establish a new basis of morality, she is geared to leading the Secularists to a greater enlightenment. Like Comte, Mrs. Besant was sanguine that she could reconstruct society based on the irrefutable laws of nature which are empirically determined. By the destruction of all metaphysical theories of God and the Cosmos, and basing truth on a knowledge of the phenomenal, society could be observed and organized on a sound empirical basis. Social laws of human behavior were to be found in the laws of nature, and obedience to these inviolable laws spelled progress. Thus, man could reconstruct his society in accordance with reason and science and not Ecclesiastical dogma. The standard of measure in her new science of morality was the principle of "Utility." It implied the "general good," and man acting in accordance with this new principle of conduct was not only acting in harmony with nature laws but could reconstruct his society leading to the common good of all where Truth, Freedom, Love, and Virtue replaced dogma, superstition, and ignorance. It alone led to the greatest morality of man and society, morality and theology being antithetical. "Utility" was man's

only guide to conduct, having the general good of man, his happiness as its object culminating in a true Brotherhood of Man and the elevation of the human race. Both "Utility" and Brotherhood are the supreme virtues of public and private conduct and are seen to be of appeal to all men.

Mrs. Besant's concept of "Utility" is free of the calculated hedonistic and psychological egoism of Bentham; it is essentially an ethical postulate aiming at the good of all men and setting an ideal standard to be attained. Her Utilitarian morality is further reinforced by Neo-Malthusianism. Man, being rational, is capable of appreciating that preventive checks are not only in accordance with nature's laws but also contribute to the "general good." To Mrs. Besant, as Secularist, her summum bonum was her concept of "Utility," a fundamental premise to guide man's action. It provided Mrs. Besant with a basis, a tool, with which to reconstruct society.

Mrs. Besant was to find in Socialism another way to reconstruct society. The Fabians had a quality of ethical morality in their recognition of the need for a more just and humane society than Individualism. They sought to bring about a new concept of society and a new nexus of social life, to realize in both the State and the individual that capacity for a nobler morality. Essentially reformers, they recognized the need for capable architects of change. As a notable exponent of the new Zeitgeist, Mrs. Besant sees in this new truth a way to reconstruct society by ridding it of the dead weight of custom, exploitation, misery and the struggle for existence for the many. "Each for the other" is the way, to Mrs. Besant, to reconstruct her world in which competition gives place to cooperation. Associated labor, each working for the good of all, was the very necessary prerequisite of human happiness and progress, and Mrs.

Besant finds in the Co-operative Societies and Trade Unions a nucleus of the "New Order." The transformation of society is distinctly non-Marxian in approach; there is no reference to a dialectic process in history and the inevitability of a revolution. Her ideal was work for each, leisure for all, and too little for none, only possible with the destruction of Mercantilism. But "Modern Socialism" was not to be enough, and though she repudiated Utopianism, she became increasingly Utopian. She does not attempt a partial reconstruction of Society, but seeks the adoption of her blue-print by the entire community. It was nothing short of a plan for a future Society, an extreme case of Utopia founding, galling to Webb in particular. The Fabians sought remedies to immediate administrative and social problems and those of the not too distant future; they distrusted visionary constructs. Her telos is influenced by Owen, Fourier, and Blanc and displayed a faith in the capacity of man to fashion a more perfect existence on the basis of co-operation and harmony. To Mrs. Besant, her visionary concept was not a hypothetical construct; she is certain that the complete and absolute reconstruction of society was possible and outlines it with planned precision even if she modestly claimed that her views were only suggestive. The vision rests on the future organization of industry and the reconstruction of the manner of producing and distributing wealth in her ideal state. Her central motif is that cooperation should replace competition; and the private organization of industry, with its resultant anarchy, should be replaced by a democratically organized society where the fruits of labor would be possessed not by the community as a whole but by the producers themselves. As a deliberate architect of change, she sees the inevitability of its coming, and it is her intent to explain how the future Socialist State

should be constructed and to expedite its apparent evolution. She dreamed of a nobler life on earth, based on the elimination of the sources of conflict, abolition of poverty, industrial democracy, "Self-ruling workshops" much like Blanc's cooperative producers' societies, and cooperative settlements much like Fourier's. In an extremely naive way, she saw in the "Social Workshops" and "County Farms" a way to eradicate the evils of unemployment. These were supposed to drive the private capitalist out of business by their greater productivity and efficiency, another naive assumption. Self-sufficiency, communalism, and cooperation were the key concepts of her principles of the new social order. However, the reconstruction of industry placed the trade or industry as the basic industrial unit in society and falsely identified workers' control with the control by the community of the means of production. It seemed very much as if, to Mrs. Besant, the future society should be organized largely along the lines of an industrial enterprise, it being identified with the growth of individual freedom and the cessation of class antagonisms and class distinctions. The basis of her society was the group, as it was to Fourier, a unit of self-sufficiency elaborately organized to achieve maximum productivity and the individual good in an atmosphere of cooperative harmony.

Since her early training under Miss Marryat, Mrs. Besant had been impressed with the value of education. Like Owen and Plato, she believed that society had the responsibility to ensure that the young be trained in the proper virtues. The shaping of social equality was essential to her Utopian society, where youth were exposed to music, poetry, gymnastics, art, history, and language. It was not the making of a class of "guardians" or the Philosopher King which was her aim, but workers cap-

able of adapting both learning and technical skill, both "hand and brain," to social reconstruction. In so doing, each individual fulfilled himself or herself. Her education was not of an elitist sort, in an elitist society, but free compulsory education--long a Fabian ideal--was a purposeful end to a better individual and a more just society void of class distinctions.

Her pre-eminently technical Utopia appears somewhat of a static society, allowing for little change. It is an actualized ideal blueprint of how things must be; and Mrs. Besant, as with many Utopians, was determined to reshape the world to conform to her own ideals. It implied a new view of man and society, the new industrial community transforming the aggressive instincts in man and the lust for power into cooperative endeavor. Education, as with Plato and Skinner, is an important element in the transformation of man's nature. It was a total change in man, not the regeneration of a few, but the transformation of all into knights errant in search of a harmonious order. With the disappearance of competition and the aggressive traits of man, the new world of Mrs. Besant becomes almost magically harmonious and orderly. The distinction between the leader and led evaporates as each unites in a common cause once the change in the economic, political, and social order of society is effected. The new society is not only inevitable but indefensible in the light of principles of justice and morality. Her view of the new order is related to the perception of her role in society as the articulator of change, and is, quite possibly, a product of her own personal experiences and development. It was not a critique of contemporary society but a way for man to reshape his destiny and that of society, to become, as with Tillich, completely human in ethical cooperation. There could not

be for Mrs. Besant anything chiliastic or eschatological about her new Jerusalem. As with many a Utopian, she seeks to effect deliberate change in a deliberate way, to direct the course of human events and to reconstruct the basic goals and values of society. Her idealized state reflects a little of the vision of William Morris and Karl Marx in which men live in healthy surroundings cherishing to the full the bounties of the earth--when the worker is no longer alienated from the means of his production and the capitalist, who seeks a profit in creating a demand, no longer exists.

Theosophy is idealistic and Mrs. Besant now turns to it to seek her new Utopia. Man, she sadly realizes, is incapable of a noble altruism in a material world governed by the laws of economics and Western secularism; and the focus shifts to a new basis of Theosophic morality upon which to construct a more idealized social order. The "science of conduct" of Theosophy is erected upon the principles of Unity of life, Karma, Sacrifice, and the Brotherhood of Man. Man, being a spark of the Divine substance, seeks his immortality in brotherhood and service. In its fundamental truths of the Immanence and Transcendence of God and Solidarity of all living beings, is based its compelling system of ethics, being natural laws to be followed by men as by nations. All life being interrelated, each stemming from one Divine source, none could harm another without doing injury to himself. Thus the right principles of conduct to be followed are the laws of Theosophic morality which are very necessary for the uplift and reconstruction of man and society. The Utilitarian ethic of the "general good" is no longer sought in purely secular or economic terms or in the ways of Western science.

As a Secularist, Socialist, and Theosophist, Mrs. Besant sought

an ideal of human brotherhood. Her Utilitarian ethic of the "general happiness," which was the basis of her Secularist morality, implied a universality of fellowship. It set an ethical standard to be attained, calling for the cultivation of the feelings of social concern which bound all men into a common bond. She turned to Socialism in 1885, recognizing that the inevitable evolution of society led to a conscious co-ordination and cooperation among units in society, as opposed to the incessant competition and strife of laissez-faire. Socialism represented at the time the coming of a new era, extolling a higher ideal for man than being the victim in a scramble for wealth where the strong and ruthless trampled on the weak and dispossessed. The Link with Stead expounded her vision of this secular salvation. The growth of factory legislation directed against privilege, injustice, and exploitation, the regulation of relations between the capitalist monopolist and the worker, and the state as an organized community and the organic nature of society were all silently but resolutely ushering in the dawn of a new Brotherhood of Man. Socialism was the expression of a strong moral impulse, an ethical system devised to bring man to a new state of consciousness where mutual help and cooperation were the ends to be sought. It remained a passionate affair of "heart and mind" geared to cooperation, brotherhood, service, and a new concept of society. The principle of brotherhood could be extended in ever widening circles to cover the totality of mankind. It was seen that workers in a single factory, who cooperated as equal partners to a common goal, were capable of greater productivity. The spirit of cooperation and brotherhood could be extended from the smaller unit in society to the larger, eventually enveloping the nation and the entire human race. Collectivist Socialism,

to Mrs. Besant, was a step towards a true Brotherhood of man which reached fruition in Theosophy.

Theosophic ideals were based, inter alia, upon the principles of Brotherhood and Unity. As a Secularist, service to man replaced faith and salvation. "Truth" lay in unbridled freedom of thought. The rational man could determine the laws of nature that bound him in human fellowship, geared to the general happiness. Theosophy had as its law the mystic creed of a spiritual unity of all men, hence none could harm another without doing injury to Humanity as a whole. An organic unity knits men into a Universal Brotherhood, a concept not unknown to Marcus Aurelius. Man in fulfilling his duty in service becomes God-like and helps elevate the human race to a greater spirituality.

But in Theosophy, men were no longer equal. Where once the general happiness was capable of being achieved by all men and Socialism was to be expounded, demonstrated, and implemented by each; now it was only the enlightened few that could regenerate man and society in the light of Theosophic beliefs. It was the responsibility of the wise, the morally best, and the most spiritually evolved, to govern and to indicate the lines of change, to guide the unlearned and ignorant in the true ways of morality and Brotherhood. The ardent equalitarian turns elitist; man in the mass is now to be feared and distrusted, and it is those having knowledge and superior wisdom who have the right to rule and guide. The "guardians" of Plato are the Theosophic elite of Mrs. Besant. The State, once seen to limit its function to a minimum so as to allow for the free play of individual interests, later becomes Collectivist in its object to secure the maximum of good to the community through collectivist enterprise--the best government being that which administers the most--is now

the focus of all loyalties. It is a repetition of the Greek ideal. Man finds his greatest glory in service to the State. Man is not only divided into the categories of the enlightened and the profane, but society is divisible into three distinct classes, a Platonic concept, where each exists for the satisfaction of mutual wants, harmony, and order.

Mrs. Besant, like Plato, is concerned with discovering a cure for "stasis." From an atheistic humanism devoted to individual freedom of conscience and thought, she turned to a secularized Socialism and later to a version of Theosophic unity reminiscent of Medievalism where man's unity was a reflection of his unity with Divinity, a view not unknown to Plato in his vision of "the Good" which, as the sun, was the only true reality. Unity was possible, to Mrs. Besant, not as Hobbes supposed in the Leviathan but through cooperation on a world-wide scale as with the Stoics. As a Secularist and Socialist, conflict in society was caused by dogma, inequality, the division of classes based on the possession of the means of production, monopolism, ignorance, and superstition, all of which set man against man and allowed the privileged unbridled power. Its cure once lay in her Utilitarian morality and the economic reconstruction of society, each aimed at universal brotherhood and cooperation. As a Theosophist, division and conflict were products of man's alienation, not from the factors of production, but his loss of unity with God. Mrs. Besant finally returns to Augustine; man loses his essence in his loss of faith. It is only when man reflects the Unity of God, to be found in the Logos, and is in tune with the Laws of Evolution and Sacrifice that he can achieve perfection in a world of absolute harmony.

Mrs. Besant's concept of "Rights" and "Duties" is related to her organic conception of society. As a Socialist, her organic concept of

Society owed its inspiration as much to biology and an other-worldly psychic quality as to the historical and sociological. At any rate, it is clear that if society was to survive, man must place his Duty to the social organism above his Rights. Man, to Mrs. Besant as with Aristotle and Rousseau, could only reach his highest development in a social state, though Mrs. Besant makes no mention of a "state of nature." As a Socialist, Mrs. Besant discards the theory of natural rights and insists that Rights are not anterior to society but a growth and development from the social state. The Rights of Man, as conceived by Mrs. Besant, now appear almost Hobbesian in content, being a desire to gain as much as he can. This being so, any accent on Rights would lead inevitably to social fragmentation where men, as isolated units, warred against each other and disrupted the fabric of society. Thus, any society which placed Rights above Duty was no society at all. Also, since society was shown to be proceeding from a stage of uncivilized barbarism and competition to associated order, from monarchy, feudalism and "primitive individualism" to co-operation, the accent on Rights would necessarily check its on-growing evolution. The accent on inalienable Rights as a Secularist gives ground to Duty. In Theosophy, man becomes truly ethical and spiritual, a part of the Cosmic Order when he finally realizes that at his own level of development it is his Duty to act in accord with the Divine Will, being the necessary principle of Right conduct. His special Virtue, in an ordered and graded society, was to demonstrate the qualities of Reverence, Affection, and Benevolence; but above all to express his Duty in service to the ends of the State. In so doing, he demonstrates his greatest moral duty and preserves the organic structure of society.

Law and morality were indivisible to Mrs. Besant. She did not add to the intellectual stature of legal theory or jurisprudence but had an idealized conception of what the laws ought to be in terms of her Utilitarian morality. Law, being the embodiment of reason and a rule of conduct, it was moral if it increased the general happiness. Law was not what the State says it is, in the Positivist sense of the Command of the Sovereign. Also, man to Mrs. Besant and Owen was a victim of his situation. Punishment ought therefore to be rehabilitative and not punitive. Crime was largely a moral disease to be cured by a better environment and proper measures of criminological and penal reform. It was the duty of society to reform the criminal, since it was society that was responsible for his criminal acts. Her personal experiences in court, particularly in the case of Mabel, were translated into the cause of legal Reform. The Law, to Mrs. Besant, had to be in keeping with her ideals of equity, morality, and justice, particularly in the case of the laws of marriage and divorce. Like Bentham, she attacked law as the product of custom and precedent. To be on all fours with her concept of the general happiness and abstract justice, a change in the legal position of the married woman derived from Ecclesiastical Law and hoary usage was sought. The aim of the law for Mrs. Besant as for Bentham was to secure those conditions which allowed the individual his greatest freedom. Bentham thought this would result if the individual was permitted to pursue that which he felt was best for him in unfettered isolation. To Mrs. Besant, it meant that man would have the opportunity and freedom to seek the welfare of others, the "general good." For Bentham, unlike Mrs. Besant, the law was divorced from such notions as abstract justice or morality. To Mrs. Besant, law was relative to morality. Law

was not inspired by or felt to be in keeping with the moral law of God or supernatural revelation and was necessary to her code of Utilitarian conduct. Mrs. Besant's legalistic activism brought about much change, particularly in the admission of women to the Inns of Court and perhaps a change in matrimonial jurisdiction from Ecclesiastical Courts to those of the Common Law. Mrs. Besant was a determined expository legalist who defined and exposed specific legal wrongs and sought to redress them through Parliamentary action and public opinion. Justice and liberty were a passion for Mrs. Besant, and the Law was a major instrument to Reform though she often carried her views to an extreme as in her advocacy of salaries to be paid by the State to both Counsel and Bench.

Emerson in his Essay on Self-Reliance writes that, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," and apparently Mrs. Besant concurred. It is fortunate that she did so, for in each of her phases she contributed significantly. Her visionary ideals, Secularism, Socialism, liberty, the law, and the perfection of man cannot be idly dismissed. Her thought, though a curious mixture of scientific thought and moral judgment, is fashioned to bring about change. Man is not only what he is, but also what he ideally ought to be as seen in both secular and metaphysical terms. One cannot really agree with Geoffrey West that she gave nothing to the world or made little impression upon her contemporaries.<sup>1551</sup> Even if her ideas are sometimes loosely constructed, it seems typical of those who react with intensity to their times and are

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<sup>1551</sup> West, Annie Besant, pp. 171, 168.

constantly searching for an ideal vision. These lines of Emily Bronte  
portray this restless searcher for illumination:

I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:  
It vexes me to choose another guide:

## APPENDIX

### PRINCIPLES AND OBJECT OF THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

"The National Secular Society has been formed to maintain the principles and rights of Freethought, and to direct their application to the Secular improvement of this life.

"By the principle of Freethought is meant the exercise of the understanding upon relevant facts, and independently of penal or priestly intimidation.

"By the rights of Freethought are meant the liberty of free criticism for the security of truth, and the liberty of free publicity for the extension of truth.

"Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to actions the issue of which can be tested by experience.

"It declares that the promotion of human improvement and happiness is the highest duty, and that morality is to be tested by utility.

"That in order to promote effectually the improvement and happiness of mankind, every individual of the human family ought to be well placed and well instructed and that all who are of a suitable age ought to be usefully employed for their own and the general good.

"That human improvement and happiness cannot be effectually promoted without civil and religious liberty; and that, therefore, it is the duty of every individual to actively attack all barriers to equal freedom of thought and utterance for all, upon political, theological, and social subjects.

"A Secularist is one who deduces his moral duties from considerations which pertain to this life, and who, practically recognising the above duties, devotes himself to the promotion of the general good.

"The object of the National Secular Society is to disseminate the above principles by every legitimate means in its power."

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