

A Critical and Constructive Analysis of

A World Religion by Annie Besant

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I have rarely encountered a religious argument that I felt was so right and so wrong at the same time. Annie Besant was promoting her vision of a global religion based on mystical experience, and in this was anticipating others who were later to make the same argument. Three that come to mind are the Jesuit Karl Rahner, the German theologian Dorothea Soelle and the American “eco-theologian” Thomas Berry. Soelle has said that the Christianity of the next century will either be mystical or it will be dead. All, I believe, are right but, as I will argue below, it is critically important to know what exactly the terms “mystical” and “mysticism” mean. Besant is wrong, I believe, in thinking that this envisioned future religion could be constructed by what she calls “a mighty synthesis ... into which all the world-faiths shall be built and know themselves as one.” Nothing in history or common experience of human nature would suggest that this would achieve the desired end. Nevertheless, it must be said the Besant was ahead of her time and other “World Religion” initiatives in sensing that the way forward must be by making immanence central. What she does not see is that this would be in effect to redefine religion and call for the creation of a new religious paradigm.

There has long been a sensed need, almost a hunger, for a universal religion, which has existed alongside the world’s different and conflicting religions which have come to birth over the centuries. This paradox persists and has become more urgent as wars have become increasingly destructive. Annie Besant was writing and teaching in a period of great social advancement and optimism, and this address, which expresses her mature thought after years of spiritual journeying, was given only three years before the Great War – the “war to end all wars” – visited unimagined destruction on Europe and the human family more generally. Her optimism may be contrasted with the fears for the future of man as expressed in W. B. Yeats’ famous poem, “The Second Coming”, written in 1919:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world ...*

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.*

Yeats could see Christianity, once a unifying and idealistic global force, being succeeded by some new kind of universal, anti-religious horror.

Annie’s religious vision was matched by a secular vision of a future world of peace and prosperity, in which under the impulse of evolution humans had become wiser and more ethical and the nations were united in a world parliament. Of the many who held this belief, none was a more powerful advocate than H. G. Wells, who threw himself into the creation of the League of

Nations after the First World War. The League was to end in failure and the Second World War was to destroy his enthusiasm entirely and replace it with the kind of despair that Yeats had earlier expressed. For him, however, it was the failure of evolutionary hope rather than Christianity that he wrote about in his last work *Mind at the End of its Tether*, written in 1945. Being so committed to the theory of human evolution, Wells could not take refuge in the Hindu and Buddhist belief in a world cycling between good and bad, and found himself forced to acknowledge that while human nature may once have seemed to be on an upward trajectory, it had now come up against an impossible barrier in its inherently destructive and self-destructive nature. Now he could see no future for our species: in his words, “there is no way out or round or through.”

Annie Besant had changed her religious position several times as she matured, but remained to the end a theosophist, believing that a one-world religion, based on a fusion of eastern and western religious traditions, could in the long term provide an answer to the fear and negativity expressed by Yeats and Wells. How justified is her vision of a religiously unified world today, when the clouds not only a nuclear war but of global catastrophe of other kinds are gathering? I believe it is still valid, but only if it takes into account scientific knowledge which has emerged since she was writing and a hard look is taken at the logistical problems which she does not address in her talk. By “logistical” I mean the problems of organisation, propagation and authority which face all religious innovators. The great German social theorist Max Weber summed them when he said that religious advance can be driven forward by the charisma of the visionary, but it will regress after his or her death if their inspiration is not replaced with a robust organisation.

Besant was writing when we believed that our galaxy was the only one in existence, whereas today we know that it is only one of hundreds of billions. In 1911 we knew little about the structure of the atom and there were still many top class scientists (like the Nobel Laureate Ostwald) who did not even believe that atoms actually existed. An equally famous scientist Ernst Mach called said they were nothing more than “mathematical fictions”. The most important discovery since then however, has been that what we call the universe is expanding, for the implications of that fact have profoundly affected science and religion and changed them forever. For both it provides a totally unexpected creation story, which may be welcomed or rejected. It supports belief in a creating force of some kind and thus potentially makes science an ally of religion, and puts atheistic scientists on the defensive, for it forces them to take up a basically unscientific position that the emergence of our universe was an effect without a cause. Both science and religion are in agreement that neither logic nor observation can tell us anything of the cause of the cause. In the end escape from this impossible conundrum may come simply in accepting that I know that I exist and that I did not create myself.

Religion takes a radical new turn from the new cosmology, which genuinely is “the new good news”, for if everything that now exists was there in the beginning in some latent form, as the human being is latent in the two cells of the ovum and sperm, the doctrine of divine immanence goes mainstream. Suddenly the once almost heretical belief of Quakers, Sufis and Bahai that we humans have “that of God within us” starts to make scientific and experiential sense. Science unintentionally has given us a new kind of “God”, a new kind of “man” and a new kind of religion, as yet in the womb of history. The quotes around “God” and “man” must be added, for the words no longer mean what we or Annie Besant assumed they meant. She asks in her address, “How shall we find that which unites?” and half the answer comes from a new kind of science with which orthodox science of all kinds has yet to come to terms. What can be said is that if the human species is to continue evolving, it will be essentially a religious responsibility,

for the new science makes us co-creators. For that we must first work out a blueprint that will go beyond historical figures who were taken to be perfect human beings.

Besant is surely right in saying that “Mysticism unites, for all the Mystics of the world agree on the fundamentals of the spiritual consciousness. [They] reinforce each other; and on the development of the Spirit in man the religion of the future must depend.” However, to unite a human species so deeply riven by religious, economic, cultural and language differences is a massive task, and many would consider it impossible. Besant’s paper is at its weakest here, for while she is surely right in saying that mysticism unites, she leaves the term undefined and puts forward only one very questionable strategy, namely a “mighty synthesis” in which “every religion contributes something special to the making of the World-religion of the future.” History and logic show us how unworkable this will be, for if this new religion is genuinely new in being a call to mysticism (however defined) it will be treated, as it always has been, as a foreign body and arouse immediate hostility. Most major religions, Buddhism and Judaism being exceptions, have experienced outbursts of immanentism, and in every case they have been repressed, often cruelly. We can see this in the Sufis and the Bahai in Islam and the Béguines and Quakers in Christianity. What they preached as the good news aroused violent emotions and accusations of heresy and blasphemy. The Quaker missionary Mary Dyer was in 1660 “hanged like a flag for others to take example by” in the colony of Massachusetts, originally settled in the cause of freedom of religion. The point is worth emphasizing, since any new world religion on the same principles cannot expect to be welcomed by existing institutions, the so-called “great faith groups”. It will be felt as a foreign body, because it will be a foreign body. The doctrines of *advaita* and *theosis* are only unnatural, however, if we regard human nature as fixed and static. An evolutionary perspective changes everything, for as we look forward to a higher future, as Besant does, we are insensibly defining a “new natural”. If mysticism is defined in such phrases as “living in the Presence” or “doing the will of God”, such a hopeful syncretism as Besant proposes is doomed from the start by the fact that Buddhism rejects and condemns belief in any kind of divinity as just another illusion that one must get rid of in the enlightened quest to achieve the state of non-suffering. Some deeper thought about the nature of spirituality is required.

In the Jewish, Christian and Moslem tradition spirituality, enlightenment is inseparable from commitment to “doing the will of God”, but this is dangerously ambivalent phrase and concept. It has been the cause of many wars and, as has been pointed out, was tacitly the motto for the Nazi SS, whose daggers were inscribed with the words *Gott mit uns*, God with us. To the ordinary secular intelligence today “doing the will of God” is at best a nonsense and at worst self-delusion, a psychopathology. Yet we recognize that rare individuals like Jesus, for whom doing the will of his father in heaven was, as John’s gospel puts it, “meat and drink” are in some way special and more humanly advanced. In his *Spiritual Letters* Abbot John Chapman advises a correspondent that if, hypothetically, she should be asked what she was doing, her instinctive response should be “in general doing God’s will, but specifically at this moment washing the dishes or walking the dog” [I paraphrase], his point being that the spiritual calling leads ultimately to an *habitual* awareness of a higher power, as against the peak experiences on which New Age spirituality focuses or, as an esoteric friend once put it to me, “getting blissed out.” (Evelyn Underhill, who authored the influential work *Mysticism* and who knew Chapman well, said that he knew more about prayer than anyone she had ever encountered.) Chapman’s point I take to be that God-awareness should always be at least in the background except in times of meditation, when it comes into the foreground and become more intense and, literally, absorbing. That is rare, if not unique, advice in a religious market where meditation techniques, like TM, mindfulness and mantra meditation and Krishna consciousness, etc., compete for attention. I believe that the whole question of what spirituality actually is needs to be opened up

and, as I have written elsewhere, some radically new insight is emerging from the science of neurology. Overall, identifying self-will with the will of a creating power makes powerful sense, once the individual accepts responsibility for bringing to birth the human being of the future. If it be assumed that the species has evolved and is still evolving, it is a logical and inspiring conclusion that we not only can be co-creators but must be. Perfecting evolution becomes the central pillar in a new religious vision. In this respect, there seems to be a deficit in Besant's vision of a universal religion.

As regards the structures and praxis which a world religion will need, it would not be fair to demand that she deals with them in a short and introductory address, but they are of vital importance. There is a tacit assumption that the term "world religion" must include everyone, much as every English person is assumed to be a member of the Church of England, but the reality is entirely the opposite. Those who have the sensitivity and commitment and, to be blunt, the hunger to experience a higher self probably comprise no more than a half of one per cent in developed countries and are non-existent in some parts of the world. The question of structure, therefore, hinges on how these few are to come together to form a critical mass and, after that, propagate their new good news, not by slick marketing or Jihad but because their listeners recognize in them a quality of life, a happiness, a vitality that they want to have themselves. A world church that is to be different and better than existing churches must offer communication with the divine and self-transformation as explicitly as a baker's shop offers bread to those who have a physical hunger. It would be neither appropriate nor possible in this brief commentary to say much more than that, but one essential must be accepted, that to be transformed from normally human to God-centred must of its nature be a long journey, and the rather glib phrase "lifelong learning" takes on a new meaning. The future state depends on getting the praxis right, and in this respect there is much to learn from religious traditions. The normal person will do almost anything to avoid the death of self which is preached in the gospels, and yet genuine mysticism is inseparable from an overwhelming – or at least a developing – sense of one's old familiar self being replaced or transformed into something previously unsuspected.

It must be an intellectual journey, which many spiritual writers deny, but at its heart is the experience of a state where words, logic and imagination must fall away. In this respect, it is perhaps worth noting that the *Spiritual Exercises* initiated by the founder of the Jesuits and widely promoted and praised are going in the wrong direction insofar as they aim to stimulate the imagination, whereas mystical awareness comes, when it is switched off, a point often emphasized by Besant's protégé, Krishnamurti. Whatever form it may take, it will surely be marked by the following:

- A growing and habitual sense of oneness with creation, with the cosmic consciousness which has conventionally been regarded as either a rare and unpredictable "peak experience" or a gift given only to mystics.
- creating power, a firm sense of the purpose of existence and the meaning of one's life
- An underlying tranquility arising from a sense of self-fulfilment in process.
- A deepening awareness of the mutual responsibility we have in bringing out the divinity in each other as well as in our self.
- A deepening sense of responsibility for the planet.

- A felt need for new socio-political structures and new kinds of community to propagate the new awareness.
- A new sense of “religious group” as the community of all who have been given the gift of seeing and have chosen to develop the kind of consciousness outlined above.
- A new sense of global and trans-national identity, going beyond Paul's epoch-making statement that in Christ "there is no longer Jew and Greek, slave and master, male and female".

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