

Dr Annie Besant

(Speech delivered at the Memory of Dr. Anne Besant at Convention at Adyar Chennai, December, 1993)

One hundred years ago Dr. Besant came to India not as a casual visitor but with a great reputation and accumulated wisdom. She adopted India as her motherland, dedicated herself to the regeneration of the ancient culture and civilization of the country and strove for the freedom and liberty of its people.

During her resplendent career, she was engaged in an intensive search for truth, passing from Christianity to Atheism and Fabian Socialism, until she reached the haven of spirituality. As recorded in her own words:

And thus I came through storm to peace, not to the peace of an untroubled sea of outer life, but to an inner peace that outer troubles may not avail to ruffle – a peace which belongs to the eternal, not to the transitory, to the depths not to the shallows of life.

During her forty years of life in India from 1893 to 1933 Dr. Besant galvanized Indian life. She strenuously worked for its all-round regeneration. She implanted self – respect in a land of slaves to orthodoxy and obscurantism. She made India feel proud of Indian culture and religion. She removed the dross of superstition covering the Hindu religion and presented a burnished picture of it.

Secondly, she emphasized the spread of education not of the Macaulayan type, but in a form which would help develop creativity, initiative and self – confidence. Condemning the existing education system Dr. Besant said that its object was to serve foreign rather than national end, to make docile government servants rather than patriotic citizens and perpetuate British Raj and the incapacity of Indians to manage their own affairs. Guided by her a number of schools were started under the auspices of the TS all over India. She also established the central Hindu college; and helped to create a new Central Hindu University. Further, she devoted herself to the emancipation of women and organised the Women’s Indian Association with the help of Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa; an excellent network of the organisation was established throughout India. The scout movement was also introduced in India by her and a world jamboree was held at Madras.

What holds society together is the voluntary observance of moral and physical laws by the vast majority of the people. A government is able to maintain order only because the law-breakers are few and the law-abiders are many. If the situation were reversed, then society would fall apart and disintegrate. What makes the majority observe the moral and secular laws? Is it fear of State action or punishment?

Everyone is aware of the dictum that justice could allow nine criminals to escape but not one innocent person to be punished. What would be the state of society if nine criminals escape every time, for one conviction?

It is not, therefore, the fear of administrative punishment that makes one observe the laws but a subjective check, the reproof from conscience that holds one back from misdeeds. Every human being has experienced that inner voice to a smaller or greater degree. The one who blunts his conscience by repeated rejection of the reproof

soon grows immune to it and ceases to experience it. But the generality of people feel it, heed it and desist from doing wrong.

This conscience or inner voice is developed by faith in divinity and in the Supreme Being. You may call the Supreme Being by whatever name you like, Allah, Brahma or Christ, but accept we must the reality of the ultimate Supreme Being. That all religions preach the same ideals and goals and that they are equal was one of the loftiest concepts Dr. Anne Besant gave to the world and more particularly to India. She preached the brotherhood of religions as a corollary to the brotherhood of man. In her struggle for Home Rule, she wanted the Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis and people of all religions to unite and strengthen the demand for freedom. She said : ‘Do not let your ship of nationality be shipwrecked on the rocks of religious hatred and religious suspicion.

But harmony among religions was not a mere political expedient with Dr. Anne Besant: it was an article of faith. To her, religion was the instrument to make the world a better and happier place for all those who inhabit it. If we analyse the scriptures of each religion we will find that all religions have the same objective.

In the Bible of Christianity, in the Koran of Islam and in the Vedas, the concept of one God, the Supreme Being is emphasized. The *Bhagavadgita* speaks of the Supreme Lord strengthening the faith of every devotee in whatever form he may worship. “In whatever form any devotee seeks to worship me, with faith, I make the faith in him unwavering.”

All the religions are paths to divinity and are therefore equal in efficacy and respect. If we probe further, we find that every religion preaches morality, righteousness, kindness, love, selflessness and so on. These are, indeed, the requisites of a peaceful, orderly and harmonious society.

The most ancient religion Hinduism describes the qualities that make a devotee dear to the Lord. In the *Bhagavadgita*, the Lord says, “One who hates none, is friendly and compassionate to all beings, free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pain and pleasure, forgiving, contented, steady in meditation, self-controlled, with firm conviction, with mind and intellect fixed on me such a devotee is dear to me.”

The Hindu is expected to practise *Dharma*. The sage of Kanchi, the senior Sankaracharya once asked me to find an equivalent for *Dharma* in English. *Dharma* is used to denote charity, justice, duty, fairness, religion, righteousness and so on but it comprises all these.

The Buddha propounded the eight-fold path for salvation: Right Belief, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Exertion, Right Remembrance and Self-Discipline and Right Concentration of Thought. In short, he asked people to follow the path of *Dharma*.

He said,

Hatred ceaseth not by hatred,

Hatred ceaseth by love.

Not by wrath should a person conquer wrath,

The unworthy by the worthy should he overcome,

He should overcome the niggardly with gifts.

By truth one who doth falsely speak.

Next in point of time comes Christianity. In the Ten Commandments as well as in the Sermon on the Mount emphasis has been laid on right conduct and right behaviour.

Jesus said:

*Ye have heard that it hath been said,
An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
But I say unto you
Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek
Turn to him the other also,
If a man take away thy coat,
let him have thy cloak also.*

Gandhiji once said that it was the *New Testament*, especially the Sermon on the Mount, that awakened him to the rightness and value of Satyagraha.

Jesus also said:

*Thou shalt love God.
Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.
Love your enemies.
Bless them who curse you.
Do good to them who hate you.*

A later faith in the world, Islam, is full of like exhortations to do good to others, to show compassion, to spend money on the orphans, the needy, to conquer anger, not to covet, to observe humility, to show gratitude.

That is why the poet Iqbal sang that religion does not teach bitterness or hatred among people.

Religious tolerance has also been emphasized in the Revelations in Chap. 109 of the Koran:

*In the name of Allah, the gracious, the merciful
Say O ye disbelievers !
I worship not that which you worship:
Nor worship you what I worship;
And I am not going to worship that which you worship.
Nor will you worship what I worship.
For you your religion, and for me my religion.*

It is obvious from the foregoing that each one should practice truthfully, faithfully and scrupulously his religion and then there would be no disharmony in life. The fact is that no one follows his religion honestly but uses religion for creating discord.

Former President of India, Dr. Zakir Hussain, a protagonist of religious harmony said: "If the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, Buddha's philosophy of Compassion, the

Hindu concept of Ahimsa and the passion of Islam for obedience to the will of God *can* combine then we would have succeeded in generating the most potent influence for world peace.”

Dr Annie Besant believed in the Theosophist’s motto: “There is no religion higher than the Truth”