

Annie Wood Besant (1847–1933)

Annie Wood Besant was a social activist who advocated for women's access to birth control as well as marriage reform, labor reform, and Indian Nationalism in the nineteenth century in England and India. In her early career, Besant was involved in various social and political advocacy organizations including the National Secular Society, the Malthusian League, and the Fabian Society. Besant gave many public lectures and authored various articles in support of secularism, workers' rights and unionization, and women's rights. In 1877, Besant and her colleague Charles Bradlaugh republished the pamphlet *The Fruits of Philosophy*, by Charles Knowlton, on reproduction and contraception. Besant and Bradlaugh were tried for violating the obscenity law that prohibited the publication of obscene material, including sex and contraception. Later in her life, she converted to theosophy and moved to India where she joined the Theosophical Society. In India, Besant campaigned for Indian self-rule and became the president of the Indian National Congress. Besant, through republication of *The Fruits of Philosophy* and many public lectures and writings on women's rights, expanded public knowledge of birth control.

Besant was born to Emile Roche Morris and William Burton Persse Wood on 1 October 1847 in London, England. Besant spent the first three years of her life in London with her older brother, Henry, and younger brother, Alfred. After the death of both her father and younger brother, Besant, her older brother, and their mother moved to Harrow, England. Due to financial strain following the death of her husband, Besant's mother sent Besant to live with Ellen Marryat, a friend of the Besant family. Marryat, a wealthy resident of Harrow, ran a private school for several children of impoverished families and ensured Besant received a quality education. According to Besant's autobiography, Marryat educated her in geography, language, science, religion, and instilled in Besant a sense of independence and duty to her society.

After she finished her education with Marryat in 1863, Besant continued to independently study theology while living with her mother in Harrow. In 1866, she met and became engaged to Frank Besant, a reverend in the Anglican church. In her autobiography, Besant states she was initially uncertain about her engagement and postponed their wedding for fourteen months. In her autobiography, she described how she unsuccessfully attempted to break off their engagement during those fourteen months. Besant wrote in her autobiography that she was unaware of the politics involved in marriage, like divorce and property legislation and she describes this as her first exposure to politics. Despite that, Besant married her fiancé in December 1867.

After one year of marriage, Besant met William Prowting Roberts, a family friend and lawyer who routinely represented poor women and children in the Labor Movement. Individuals in the Labor Movement were largely socialists who campaigned for improved working conditions for the poor. Besant made daily visits to Roberts's office, during which time she observed him advocate for labor unions, improved working conditions, and Irish independence. She credited Roberts as her first tutor in radicalism, or the idea that the working class should be considered a governing body that is entitled to rule itself.

According to her autobiography, after observing Roberts for some time, Besant sought to express herself and her political views in writing. In 1868, Besant wrote a short story titled "Sunshine and Shade: A Tale Founded on Fact," about a young married couple. She sent the story to several magazines for publication. A magazine, *Family Herald*, accepted the story, and Besant received her first payment a few weeks later. In her autobiography, she documented her excitement over being compensated and her disappointment in realizing that she had to give the money to her husband, as she could not legally own property at the time. After publishing several other short stories,

Besant submitted a novel to the Family Herald, titled *The Lives of the Black Letter Saints*, about unrecognized religious figures in the Church of England. The magazine declined to publish Besant's novel due to its political nature.

According to Besant's autobiography, the birth of her children Arthur and Mabel in 1869 and 1870 temporarily halted her writing career and illuminated her discontent with her role as a wife and mother. In the early 1870s, Besant learned that landlords would not employ unionized farm workers and joined the movement of agricultural laborers seeking to improve work conditions. Besant sympathized with the laborers, because of her history with Roberts. Her support for farm workers right to unionize caused tension in her marriage, as her husband supported the rights of the landlords. At this time, Besant also began to lose faith in the Church of England and decided not to attend Christian services anymore. After refusing to attend Communion in July 1873, she legally separated from her husband.

After her separation, Besant and her daughter moved to London to live with her mother. She wrote articles criticizing religion and the hypocrisy of the Church of England for Thomas Scott, a rationalist who argued that people should make choices based on logic rather than on religion or spirituality. While writing articles for Scott, Besant met Charles Bradlaugh, the founder of the National Secular Society based in London, England. Members of the National Secular Society sought to remove the influence of the church from the government because they disagreed with the ideals of the Church of England. Bradlaugh was also the editor of the related secular newspaper, *National Reformer*, which published controversial articles about topics like controlling overpopulation, religious criticism, unionization, and trade. In 1874, Besant joined the National Secular Society and began to write a weekly column for the *National Reformer*. As part of the Society, Besant gave many public lectures on government reform and women's rights, particularly addressing marriage and birth control. In her first public lecture in 1874, "The Political Status of Women," she criticized the idea of marriage, discussed the importance of family limitation, and promoted women's emancipation. Besant advocated for family planning, or the idea of limiting the number of children a family has. She supported the spread of information, particularly information about birth control and methods of contraception, in an effort to prevent overpopulation.

To address the public need for education about family planning, in 1877 Besant and Bradlaugh republished *The Fruits of Philosophy: The Private Companion of Young Married People*, originally written by Charles Knowlton, an American physician. In *The Fruits of Philosophy*, first published in 1832, Knowlton described the reproductive organs, mechanisms of conception, and various methods of promoting and preventing pregnancy. The pamphlet also advocated for the use of birth control to plan families and prevent overpopulation and poverty. The publication was illegal under the Obscene Publication Act of 1857 for its discussion of sex and contraception.

When Besant and Bradlaugh republished the pamphlet, they were arrested for violating the act. In the case against Besant, the solicitor general argued that the primary goal of *The Fruits of Philosophy* was to enable unchaste and immoral behavior, and therefore, the work could be classified as obscene. Besant argued that access to information about family planning was a right that all women were entitled to. She said that the book did not promote unchaste behavior because the happiness of the family was dependent on limiting its size. She also argued that physical facts should not be considered indecent. After five days of trial, the jury ruled that the book did violate the standards of morality at the time, but that Bradlaugh and Besant's intentions in publishing the book were not immoral. However, Besant and Bradlaugh were not convicted, instead they were instructed to discontinue publication of the pamphlet. When they did not, they were retried in 1878. Besant and Bradlaugh protested, however, and the charges were ultimately dropped.

While the trial was going on in 1878, Besant helped to found, and served as the secretary for, the Malthusian League. The Malthusian League was based on the writings of Thomas Malthus, particularly his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, in which Malthus claimed that overpopulation was inevitable because human's ability to reproduce was greater than the earth's ability to sustain the growing number of people. The Malthusian League advocated for access to contraception and family planning in the 1870s as a way to prevent overpopulation and poverty. Throughout the 1870s, Besant was active in both the Malthusian League and other socialist politics and, in 1878, she held leadership in the socialist reform group, the International Labor union. By the late 1870s,

the scandal of Besant's trial and her involvement in controversial organizations led her husband to take permanent custody of both her children.

In 1879, Besant was admitted to the University of London in London, England, where she studied botany and physiology. She was one of the first women to be accepted to the college, though she was ultimately unable to obtain her degree due to her professor's concerns that her social views were too radical. During the 1880s, Besant also was involved with the Fabian Society in London, another group that advocated for socialism and government reform. Furthermore, she served on the London School Board in 1888, where she promoted medical examinations and meal programs for impoverished students. Besant also wrote for *The Link* from 1888 to 1889, a journal that promoted unionization and free speech in association with the Liberty League.

In 1891, Besant converted to theosophy after interviewing theosophist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Theosophists maintained that enlightenment and salvation could be achieved through spiritual relationships and intuition. Besant joined the Theosophical Society, initially formed in New York City, New York and later headquartered in Chennai, India. In 1893, Besant visited Chennai, India, for the first time. In India, Besant published several works on her conversion, including *Theosophy and the Law of Population* as well as her autobiography, which details her transition away from Malthusian and socialist beliefs. In 1907, Besant became president of the Theosophical Society in Chennai. During her time as president, Besant helped established the Central Hindu College, a school for boys that founded on theosophical principles, in Varanasi, India. Three years later, in 1911, Besant helped found the Banaras Hindu University, a public university in Varanasi, India. The university opened in 1917.

In the early 1900s, Besant was introduced to a South Indian adolescent named Jiddu Krishnamurti, who lived with his family on the grounds of the Theosophical Society headquarters. Many in the Society claimed he was the future World Teacher, or a spiritually enlightened individual destined to lead mankind. While leaders of the Theosophical Society trained Krishnamurti to become the next World Leader, Besant cared for him and took responsibility as his legal guardian.

Besant continued to be a political activist after her transition to theosophy. After moving to India, she advocated for Indian independence, as India was under British control at the time. Besant joined the Indian National Congress, a political organization which sought to address social issues. In the early 1900s, one of the primary objectives of the Indian National Congress was to allow for more participation from the middle-class in India in the British government. In 1914, during World War I, Besant argued that India, which was still a British colony, should not participate and should make a clear stand for independence.

In 1916, Besant established the All India Home Rule League in Madras, a political party which demanded Indian independence. For the next several years, Besant and the organization worked to build local branches across the country, and mobilize demonstrations and public meetings. In the summer of 1917, Besant was arrested after publicly protesting the British colonial government. Following her arrest, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League threatened the British government to launch protests if she were not released. Besant was released after nearly four months. In December 1917, Besant became president of the Indian National Congress. She was the first woman to hold that position. Besant was president of the Indian National Congress for one year until the end of World War I.

Besant continued to advocate for representation of working Indians in the British-Indian government throughout the 1920s. Throughout the 1900s, Besant also traveled extensively lecturing on theosophy in the United States. She remained the president of the Theosophical Society in India for almost twenty-five years until her death. At the age of eighty, Besant traveled back to Europe to visit twelve countries in three weeks. In 1931, at the age of eighty-four, Besant fell down stairs at the Theosophical Society headquarters, and never fully recovered. She remained ill for several years before her death on 20 September 1933 in Chennai, India.

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