

**Writing biographies on female religious leaders
Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Annie Besant between a “search for truth”
and “self-fulfillment”¹**

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It is impossible to reveal the whole truth about my life.²

As Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) herself declared, writing a biography to tell the “truth” about her life is an impossible task. Although, as this article will show, any biographical approach to history as such possesses distinctive weaknesses and is, therefore, criticised by several historians. The case of “Madame Blavatsky”, the co-founder of the alternative religious movement the Theosophical Society, as well as the case of her successor, Annie Besant (1847-1933), are, in various respects, exceptional in how clearly they represent the problems entailed in biographical writing, especially in regard to gender. As a result of leading the Theosophical Society which was devoted to form a universal brotherhood and to ‘encourage the study of Comparative religion, Philosophy and Science’³ and which played a major role in the exchange of religious ideas between the “west” and the “east” and in the formation of modern Buddhism, Hinduism, and Esotericism,⁴ Blavatsky and Besant are often identified with the society and its impact on the religious and cultural landscape of today.⁵ Blavatsky even published the society’s principal religious sources, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888); and Besant had a major influence on the Indian National Movement. After explaining the problems of biographical approaches to history, this article will exemplarily look at the specific ways in which biographies of Blavatsky and Besant have tried to “make sense” of their subjects – in particular as leaders of a religious movement. In the second part, we will illustrate where and why biographies on Blavatsky and Besant had problems to “create coherent subjects”: because they were *female* religious leaders within specific and changing feminist

¹ This article is the joint work of both authors. It is based on two term papers: Jessica Albrecht: “What distinctive weaknesses does a biographical approach to history possess? The case of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky”, University of Glasgow (2018); Jovana Perovic: “Annie Besants Wahrheitssuche und Selbstfindung. Manifestation kognitiver Entwicklungsprozesse”, Universität Heidelberg (2019).

² H.P. Blavatsky, in: Ursula Keller and Natalja Sharandak, *Madame Blavatsky: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2013), p. 7, tr. Jessica Albrecht.

³ http://www.theosophyqld.org.au/ts_aims.htm (accessed 26 March 2018)

⁴ Michael Bergunder, “Religion” and “Science” within a Global Religious History’, in: *Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, 16 (2016), passim.

⁵ See examination of biographies below.

discourses of their time. However, we maintain that gender can be a fruitful tool for biographical historical approaches and how this may be of use in the cases at hand.

Biographical lives and historical truth

Critiques on biographies by historians can be summarised into two major aspects. Firstly, a biography focuses on one individual life and is, therefore, limited to that lifetime in its analysis. The lifetime becomes the historical category, the historian views history through the lenses of the specific individual. However, as Ludmilla Jordanova argued, a lifetime is how people experience history and, therefore, a manageable and profitable category for analysing the past.⁶ This goes along with the notion of individual agency. According to Simon Dixon, biographies enable the historian to give room for the individual which is often invisible in the analysed networks of social and cultural forces controlling it.⁷ Contrastingly, Ian Kershaw noted that if a historical analysis looks at the role of a specific individual, this individual becomes an ‘indispensable part of the story’; a powerful individual shaping history.⁸ Yet, the historian must take into account the forces which produced the individual, that ‘provided the scope for the individual’s impact, and shaped or constrained that impact’.⁹ Consequently, a life time cannot be a historical category without overemphasising the individual in relation to its constituting context and, likewise, a person’s agency to historical change. However, according to Eric Hobsbawn, there is a ‘curiosity of human beings about other human beings’ and biographies can shape historical analysis.¹⁰ He suggested solving this problem by interweaving a person’s life with the historical context to answer the question as to how history shaped an individual’s experience.¹¹ A biography could provide insight into how the historical context enabled the individual to, in turn, change the context.

Secondly, and related to the historical relevance of a person as discussed above, are the consequences of whether the historian should study the life of *this* specific individual. ‘Whose lives are worth living? Whose lives are worth writing about? Whose lives are worth remembering?’¹² What role should “gossip” have in biographical writing? The biography is a special case in historical writing. It is neither bound to the academic historical discipline, nor does it follow specific regulations; it is a genre of its own.¹³ Therefore, not all biographies can be judged for their

⁶ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), pp. 45-7.

⁷ Simon Dixon, *Catherine the Great* (New York: Longman, 2001), p. 10.

⁸ Ian Kershaw, ‘Biography and the Historian: Opportunities and Restraints’, in: Volker Berghahn and Simone Lässig (eds.), *Biography Between Structure and Agency* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), p. 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawn, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. xii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹² Susanna Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005), p. xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

“historical correctness”. Susanna Scarparo even argued that, in order to write a coherent story, the biographer can rearrange events or, like Janet Nelson maintained: it is left to the biographer to decide what is “relevant”.¹⁴ In order to not describe a ‘mere scene-setting’, the narrated life must be contextualised, even if this contextualisation might be fictional, since ‘any truthful account of the past is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian’.¹⁵ On a more poststructuralist level, Ira Nadel agreed. In her opinion, every historical or biographical writing is selective. The historian can never know the truth of the past and, therefore, must accept its fictions. Biography goes further, since in this case the events of the past are strongly and clearly narrated, and must be wrapped in myths, must include fictional elements to provide the desired insight into human experience. This narration, however historical accurate it might be, never just records, but always ‘reinvents a life’.¹⁶

To sum up, biography’s main historical weaknesses are due to its constituting focus on one person’s life. On the one hand, putting one life into the centre of analysis risks to overemphasise the person’s impact and possibility of agency in relation to his/her historical context. On the other hand, the attempt to analyse this specific person, to understand how this individual influenced the past and how the past shaped the individual, creates the attraction of a biography, even though it accepts the need of a coherent but unhistorical narration. Thus, the biography stands and falls with the writer’s and reader’s desire of identification with the examined individual, may it be through the binding of narration and storytelling or through the impact of the person’s life on our own culture and time.

Madame Blavatsky – the creation of a founder

The aspect of identification is central to the biographies on Blavatsky at hand. As mentioned above, the writing of biographies is not limited to historians. Thus, many biographies on Blavatsky are written by Theosophists or other spiritual followers starting with the very first biography, *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky* (1886) by Alfred Sinnett, a strong advocate of Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society. Literature suggests that Blavatsky herself had a significant impact on her first biography and it was published in direct response to public allegations of fraud to minimise the impact they might have had on Blavatsky’s reputation.¹⁷ Sinnett’s biography was aimed at creating the image of the ‘ideal Madame Blavatsky’.¹⁸ Furthermore, he wanted to strengthen her authenticity and authority on spiritual knowledge. The central myths in Blavatsky’s life are her

¹⁴ Scarparo, p. xii; Janet Nelson, ‘Writing Early Medieval Biography’, in: *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000), p. 129.

¹⁵ Nelson, p. 129; Scarparo, p. xii.

¹⁶ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: MacMillan, 1984), pp. 206-9.

¹⁷ See discussion in: Keller and Sharandak, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, tr. Jessica Albrecht.

journeys to Tibet (1856 and 1868-1871) and her claim to have met her spiritual masters (Mahatmas) there.¹⁹ Since it was almost impossible to enter Tibet at that time, especially for a woman, these incidents are constantly debated. In general, the academic opinion denies or at least strongly doubts the possibility of Blavatsky entering Tibet, as the only supporting sources are Blavatsky's own testimonies. Most scholars agree that Blavatsky, members of the Theosophical Society, and other spiritual followers hold onto this claim for the purpose of legitimisation. At that time, Tibet symbolised the mystique, the unknown. Locating the Mahatmas there and insisting on having been there, whether or not it withstands a critical historical analysis, give Blavatsky the intended authority over wisdom and truth because they are part of producing the image of Blavatsky as initiated by the masters and following the predestined path to become the founder of the Theosophical Society.²⁰ However, Sinnett vividly narrated Blavatsky's journeys and her meetings with the Mahatmas drawing on her written and spoken testimony. In Gordon Strong's biography *Lion of Light: The Spiritual Life of Madame Blavatsky* (2013), written for Axis Mundi Books, a publisher who claims to offer 'wisdom from ancient teachings with new perspectives and interpretations', Blavatsky 'did manage to enter Tibet'.²¹ Sylvia Cranston, herself a Theosophist, however, was aware of the debates.²² In her book *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement* (1993), she devoted two chapters arguing against the critics who doubt Blavatsky's travels into Tibet due to the tough travel conditions and restrained entering possibilities for foreigners. In her opinion, Blavatsky was able to enter Tibet because she was accompanied by Indian men acquainted to the area and her wide knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism is used as main evidence.²³ This is an emic religious argument, one of many used throughout the book.²⁴ As shown, biographies on Blavatsky written by Theosophists or related individuals lack historical accuracy. Nevertheless, they illustrate how the myths surrounding Blavatsky's life are utilised for legitimisation and religious identification on the levels of authorship and readership.

Even if other biographies try to keep distance from judging or enhancing the myth, to avoid the mistakes made by other biographers, they also identify Blavatsky as a person whose life is deeply embedded with the Theosophical Society: they attribute the society's influence on religion and culture to her as an individual agent. In Goodrick-Clarke's *Helena Blavatsky* (2004), the story of her life is oriented along her works and ideas which formed the esoteric views of the Theosophical Society, resulting in the influence the latter had on modern religious culture. In this respect,

¹⁹ Subsequently, Blavatsky claimed to be receiving letters by the Mahatmas. The authenticity of these was one of the key allegation points mentioned above.

²⁰ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004), pp. 4-5; Keller and Sharandak, p. 77; Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), p. 81.

²¹ <http://www.axismundi-books.com/about-us.html> (accessed 27 March 2018); Gordon Strong, *Lion of Light: The Spiritual Life of Madame Blavatsky* (Winchester: Axis Mundi Books, 2013), p. 13.

²² <http://www.theosophyonline.com/ler.php?id=174> (accessed 27 March 2018)

²³ Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993), pp. 82 ff.

²⁴ See especially chapter 7 "Aftermath" and her claim that Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* foresaw 20th century science and psychology.

Lubelsky's *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (2012), and Lavoie's, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (2012) are particular impressive examples. The first, even though it is headed with '...Madame Blavatsky...', has only two chapters out of nine concerned with Blavatsky's life and writings. Instead, it mainly focuses on Annie Besant's and the society's impact on Indian nationalism in general. On the other hand, the second mentioned book is not a biography of Blavatsky as such. Nevertheless, its main part is a biographical analysis of Blavatsky and a review and historical contextualisation of her works. How contrastingly this might seem, both constellations would not be possible if it would not be generally accepted to identify Blavatsky with the Theosophical Society. However, this portrays the weakness of biographies of overemphasising the individual life in relation to its social context and its agency to historical change. In the case of Blavatsky, biographies tend to under-reflect her personal experiences and adapt emic narratives of imagining her as *the* creator of the society and its impact on religion and society. Paradoxically, biographies on Blavatsky overestimate her personal impact and agency in relation to the religious and social context that made her and her agency possible without an actual examination of her life or her personal experiences. There is one personal and intimate incident most of the biographies refer to: the first meeting of Blavatsky and the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Supported by his journal entry, the biographers describe how Blavatsky fascinated Olcott²⁵. Nonetheless, even this incident is set in the teleological narration of the origination process of the Theosophical Society, due to the desire to write a coherent story to enable the process of identification, as discussed above.²⁶ It appears like Blavatsky's name does not stand for her as a person, but for her works and the Theosophical Society which both continue to influence modern culture.

The example of Blavatsky reveals the biographer's balancing act between historical truth and fiction.

There is no "objective" reality, since any perception is subjective.²⁷

Even though they acknowledge the impossibility of unfolding the whole truth about Blavatsky, Keller and Sharandak set their biography, *Madame Blavatsky: Eine Biographie* (2013), to 'look more closely' than others did before, to build a portrayal of Blavatsky which neither elevates nor belittles her.²⁸ Likewise, we argued above that the case of Blavatsky clearly illustrates weaknesses of biographies. However, Keller and Sharandak ascribe this problem to Blavatsky's mythical and controversial nature and not to biographies as such.²⁹ They try to stay neutral in order to avoid the problems they detected in the former biographies. Nevertheless, they get criticised for lacking a

²⁵ 'Her features were instinct with power, and expressed an innate mobility of character ... what chiefly arrested my attention was the steady gaze of her wonderful grey eyes, piercing, yet calm and inscrutable: they shone with a serene light which seemed to penetrate and unveil the secrets of the heart.' Olcott, in: Strong, p. 20; I 'gave her a light for her cigarette; our acquaintance began in smoke, but it stirred up a great and permanent fire.' Olcott, in: Lubelsky, p. 77f.; also: Keller and Sharandak, pp. 119-121.

²⁶ Identification between Blavatsky, the TS, and the readership.

²⁷ Keller and Sharandak, p. 15, tr. Jessica Albrecht.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

thorough analysis apart from a plain description.³⁰ According to Nadel, examining the inner life or the interaction between the individual experience and historical context is the key of any biography. Hereby, the process of identification becomes possible.³¹ Therefore, even if the biography by Keller and Sharandak cannot be criticised for historical inaccuracy, the critique of a lack of analysis is appropriate, because, as stated by Nadel, Kershaw, and Hobsbawn, without the possibility of identification as well as an enhanced historical analysis, it does not fulfil the purpose of a biography.³²

Annie Besant – the search for self-fulfillment

The case of Annie Besant presents itself somewhat differently, due to the fact that she was not the founder of the Theosophical Society, but rather “finally” found her “true self” in it – or at least that is how her biographers explain her life quest which ends in leading the society, especially in India. This is how her life is often portrayed:

Born in 1847, Annie Besant enjoyed a strict Calvinist education through her governess, as a result of which she developed a deeply passionate love for the Christian figure of the Messiah.³³ Miss Marryat took on the role of religious identification in Besant's early childhood, while her father was sceptical of any form of religiousness and her mother, too, gradually began to distance herself from the doctrines of faith that were highly praised during Queen Victoria's reign.³⁴ Although Besant became aware of the religious influence of Miss Marryat's gospel in her late teens, attracted by ritualism and religious practice, she turned to Roman Catholicism in 1862, which she encountered on a trip to Paris. After intensive study of the writings of the ancient Church Fathers, she recognized in her independent Bible study the factual incompatibility of the individual Gospels, which for the first time fundamentally shook her faith.³⁵ Prematurely she dismissed these first doubts as a test of faith desired by God and married in 1867, with the intention of grounding her faith, the Protestant pastor Frank Besant.³⁶ The illness of her daughter Mabel in 1871 revived the already experienced doubts, which plunged Besant into a three-year crisis of faith.³⁷ Against the backdrop of her lived suffering, she struggled with the possibility of uniting the idea of God's

³⁰ Anna Lux, ‘Rezension von: Ursula Keller / Natalja Sharandak, Madame Blavatsky: Eine Biographie’, in: *Sehepunkte*, 14:9 (2014), <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2014/09/24682.html> (accessed: 27 March 2018)

³¹ Nadel, p. 207.

³² Nadel, p. 207; Kershaw, pp. 34-37; Hobsbawn, p. xiii.

³³ Janet Oppenheim, *The odyssey of Annie Besant*, in: *History Today Ltd.*, (1989), p. 12.

³⁴ Mark Bevir, *Annie Besant's Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought*, in: *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, (1999), p. 65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁶ Oppenheim, pp. 12-13.

³⁷ Bevir, p. 67.

perfect goodness with the Christian concept of eternal damnation and the general world-weariness that she experienced for the first time in her mother's role.³⁸ Besant saw herself grow out of the garment of Christianity and set out on a search for the true truth.³⁹ She placed a priori the demand of scientificity on her beliefs, which were only to be formed, whereby scientific knowledge was to gradually replace supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. But Besant's doubts could not be reduced to purely scientific ones. She sharply criticized the line of argumentation of the Christian belief system, which for her was coherently inadequate in justifying the existence of evil. Even before Darwin's theory of evolution became known, she was morally at odds with the Christian doctrines of eternal damnation and penance. For Besant, the imperfection of the human being could not be reconciled with the perfect nature of God. The guiding question of her work was the realization of a moral lifestyle within the framework of a secularized attitude to life.

The doubts experienced by Besant crystallized the guiding principles that were to accompany the young woman through her ideological changes. Humanitarian work as well as the premise of a natural order that presupposed an unshakable state of justice remained the guiding principles on which her work was based.⁴⁰ Her critical stance towards the Christian religion in 1873 had a negative effect on her already strained marriage relationship, which ultimately failed because of religious differences.⁴¹ Besant broke with the two cornerstones of Victorian society, which was based on the Christian religion and the family ideal. By 1874 Besant had rejected all the privileges of Victorian society that had been granted to her.⁴² By rejecting the Victorian principles as a guiding life orientation, she had to redefine her social role, which drove her to religious and social alternative concepts in which social roles were renegotiated within the democratic structures lived out therein.

After Besant had rejected the Christian doctrine in its entirety, she turned to a broadly conceived theism. According to it the so-called divine principle revealed itself in a pantheistic manner in nature, without being dependent on supernatural explanatory approaches or an external moral authority.⁴³ But Besant could not long call herself a theist, for as early as 1874 she extended her doubts to the existence of God. She became a member of the National Secular Society under the leadership of Charles Bradlaugh and devoted herself to journalistic work for the *National Reformer*.⁴⁴ Besant entered into safe territory by denying, through her atheism, not the existence of God, but the existence of a sensory apparatus suitable for perceiving the divine.⁴⁵ In 1885 she announced her membership in the Fabian Society, a movement within the socialist movement, which confronted her with sharp criticism, especially from Bradlaugh. Many secularists rejected

³⁸ Oppenheim, p. 13.

³⁹ Bevir, p. 68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

⁴¹ Oppenheim, p. 13.

⁴² Nancy L. Paxton, *Feminism under the Raj: Complicity and resistance in the writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant*, in: *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13(4) (1990), p. 339.

⁴³ Bevir, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Oppenheim, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Bevir, p. 76.

socialism because they saw in it a threat to the individual's rights of freedom. Besant and Bradlaugh's paths separated in 1887 due to the differences of opinion mentioned above.⁴⁶ According to Besant, the development that society had gone through from an anarchic egoism of the individual to an inclusive community reflected the biological theory of evolution on a social level. According to this, socialism should not only put an end to economic exploitation, but morally lift the individual out of his self-centeredness and establish the ideal of collective solidarity.⁴⁷

In her appropriation of socialist ideology, however, Besant did not neglect the individualistic-spiritual aspect that many socialists undermined in favour of the economic debate. Driven by her longing and striving for a higher good, she gave socialism a personal, religious-ritual aspect. A reduction of disparity in society was not to be the main purpose of socialism, but rather the moral enrichment and transformation of the individual on the basis of a new social order. Socialism did not sufficiently emphasise on the moral transformation of the individual, which is why Besant did not feel that her quest had been successful. In particular, her growing interest in the subjective world of perception of the individual distanced her from materialist atheism, which seemed to ignore phenomena of the human psyche due to a lack of rational explanations. Indeed, many followers of secular and socialist movements found themselves among those interested in spiritualism. It was only later that Besant was to recode their spiritual-mental insights into the physical sphere. Her secular radicalism gave way to socialism under the claim of a higher truth and science content, while socialism was later displaced by theosophy, which tried to examine psychological phenomena scientifically as well as spiritually. The approaches of the Theosophical Society to the same guiding questions that had led to a turning away from Christianity in Besant's youth took up both the scientific understanding of truth of the Western educational elite and the moral basis of ethical positivism.⁴⁸ Besant's devotion to the Theosophical Society represents a further disposal of the crisis of faith that permeated her life. After intensive reading of Blavatsky's main work *The Secret Doctrine*, Besant pleaded in 1889 to be introduced to the founder of the Theosophical Society. After Olcott's death in 1907, she officially took over the leadership of the Theosophical Society⁴⁹ and followed in the footsteps of her former mentor.

As we have seen, most of Annie Besant's biographers attempt to show her social and political work as the result of previous coherent patterns of thought in order to invalidate biographical inconsistencies. According to them, Besant endeavoured to ideologically fill the moral vacuum created by the Victorian crisis of faith without having to negate scientific truth. Her search for truth ended in a self-discovery within the Theosophical Society. Under the influence of Christian dogma, Besant later transformed her youthful self-confidence into a religiously and politically oriented

⁴⁶ Oppenheim, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Bevir, p. 83.

⁴⁸ Bevir., pp. 83-92.

⁴⁹ Oppenheim, p. 16.

sense of mission, which charismatized her public appearance and, combined with her eloquent choice of words, gave her presence an authoritarian touch.⁵⁰ The sense of mission that Besant had internalized in her youth in the course of her confrontation with Christianity, she was able to embed as a legacy of her previous lifestyle in the context of political ambitions and later Indian teachings, whereby the feeling of being chosen was continuously present.⁵¹ The question remains, where does the need – even in scholarship – to explain Besant’s deep involvement with the Theosophical Society through her childhood and years as a socialist come from?

Gender – the problem and the solution

One aspect of historical analysis which cannot be dismissed is gender. Gender is ‘one of the most important sources of social difference’⁵² and has to be an essential part of any approach to history. This is especially important for biographies. The self which is at the centre of any biographical study is always gendered.⁵³ No individual process of identification is separate from the ascription of one gender which, fundamentally, defines a person.⁵⁴ In the cases of Blavatsky and Besant, there has not yet been a distinct historical analysis in terms of gender, even though, as we will show, this would be fruitful in both cases and, especially, if examined together.

The Theosophical Society offered a platform for discussion of feminist thought and its social and political aspirations, but the society's attitude towards the work of feminist activists remained complex and was by no means homogeneous even within the organization.⁵⁵ Many women found the Theosophical Society inviting as a first point of contact for feminist activism, which was essentially included in the basic formula of the Society. Although the Theosophical Society had no explicitly articulated feminist reform programme⁵⁶, the egalitarian Theosophical principle appealed to women to break out of the chains of unifying social constructions that set limits to their spiritual development.⁵⁷ The Theosophical Society reached out to women who felt restricted by the boundaries of patriarchal society and offered the above-average intellectual talents, free-thinking

⁵⁰ Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Die Theosophin Annie Besant und die indische Nationalbewegung*, in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 32 (2) (1980), p. 119.

⁵¹ See also: C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, *Annie Besant* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1977); Theodore Besterman, *Mrs Annie Besant. A Modern Prophet* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.); Geoffrey West, *Mrs. Annie Besant* (London: Howe, 1927).

⁵² Angelika Schaser, ‘Women’s Biographies – Men’s History’, in: Volker Berghahn and Simone Lässig (eds.), *Biography Between Structure and Agency* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), p. 76.

⁵³ Scarparo, p. 157.

⁵⁴ Schaser, p. 76.

⁵⁵ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 155.

⁵⁶ Per Faxneld, *Blavatsky the Satanist: luciferianism in Theosophy and Its Feminist Implications*, in: *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 48 (2) (2012), p. 210.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2012.

tendencies and supernatural abilities of many a female member the desired space for expression, as well as the opportunity to integrate ideas socially and represent them politically.⁵⁸ Women who took leading roles in the Theosophical Society made a name for themselves and through their emancipated and controversially discussed lifestyles, they presented an alternative path in opposition to the two socially established female role models within marriage and motherhood.

Blavatsky represented the assumption which was common in spiritual circles that the androgynous and genderless divine principle would manifest itself in the material world by means of antagonistically acting forces in a dualism of mankind. Ultimately, esotericism relativized the significance of the sexes as dichotomy-extending dimensions, since the desirable Higher Self, the gender-specific store of experience merely as a developmental, not to say transitional stage, passed through in its spiritual evolution.⁵⁹ Besant, as many later Theosophists, praised the Indian tradition, glorified Hinduism as the cradle of ancient wisdom, and attempted to adapt to the Indian way of life in a holistic way and integrate it into society.⁶⁰ Many theosophical feminists used the notion of karma for their feminist arguments. Particularly the idea of reincarnation embedded in Hindu and Buddhist teachings was used to discuss the conflict-ridden relationship between women and men, but this attempt at explanation proved to be incoherent in itself and unsuitable for the purpose of reconciling the two sexes.⁶¹ During the early years of her stay in India (1893 - 1913), Besant avoided any criticism of the injustice of Indian women in public.⁶² Her defence of Hindu customs and traditions became a broad target for criticism by Indian social reformers, who tried to improve the position of women in their country without explicitly opposing the patriarchal order. She avoided advocating the right of widows to remarry because she attached so much importance to the ideal of Hindu love that she considered it impossible for a woman to feel a similar affection for another man. Besant found herself on the opposite side of British feminists who had made the moral upliftment of degraded and exploited Indian women the main concern of their activism.⁶³

Nevertheless, instead of situating both of the Theosophical Society's female leaders within the discourses of gender and feminism of their time, biographers of Blavatsky and Besant rarely even mention any notions of gender. Apart from Keller and Sharandak, there is no explicit reference to Blavatsky being a woman, let alone any examination of the consequences this had on how Blavatsky was perceived by her contemporaries or her gendered agency in the biographies at hand.⁶⁴ In

⁵⁸ Robert Ellwood and Catherine Wessinger, *The Feminism of Universal Brotherhood: Women in the Theosophical Movement*, in: *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations outside the Mainstream*, ed. Catherine Wessinger, (1993), p. 74.

⁵⁹ Dixon, p. 154.

⁶⁰ Anderson Nancy, *Bridge cross-cultural feminism: annie besant and women's rights in england and india, 1874-1933*, in: *Women's History Review*, 3 (4) (1994), p. 567.

⁶¹ Dixon, p. 160.

⁶² Nancy, p. 567.

⁶³ Nancy, p. 568.

⁶⁴ The basis for gendered agency is the thought that the way one acts or is able to act in society is related to one's bodily perception as a gendered being. This means, subjects are always gendered beings acting in discursive limitations which restrict the subject's agency to a gendered agency. See: Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

contrast, Keller and Sharandak emphasised that ‘Blavatsky is one of the most exceptional female personalities in the 19th century’.⁶⁵ However, utilising this feature for the legitimisation of their biography, Keller and Sharandak continued to argue alongside male centred historical writing. As Schaser demonstrated, the ‘biography worthiness’ tends to only apply on ‘exceptional’ women who are treated as ‘world-historical men’, thereby excluding women as such from biographical interest.⁶⁶ Anyway, apart from this note, Keller and Sharandak also did not expand on the relevance of gender in greater depth. In addition, Annie Besant was highly active in contemporary feminist discourses in Britain as well as India. However, this has led to some discrepancies in her biography, one of which was the issue of contraception. According to Besant, addressing poverty meant addressing the problem of overpopulation. Therefore, during her secularist and socialist years she vehemently advocated the distribution of contraceptives and devoted a great deal of public relations work to closing the information gap regarding contraceptive measures. It was only under the influence of Helena Blavatsky that Besant experienced a change of heart regarding human sexual behavior. Convinced that humanity would evolve spiritually in a forward process, she rejected unrestrained sexual intercourse and appealed to the idea of subordinating carnal needs to the spirit. She recognized the shadow risk that contraceptives posed: they could act as a free ticket to unrestrained sexual behavior and, in the course of this, promote sexual assault on women. According to Besant, sexual intercourse should only be consented to with the intention of reproduction.⁶⁷

Conclusion

As we have shown, instead of using Besant and Blavatsky to analyse the specific discourses of gender and feminism of their time and their interrelation with religion and esotericism, scholarship focussing on these two women struggled with attempts to “explain” their gendered appearances or feminist ideas. In order to “bring them in line” with the history of the Theosophical Society, they failed to see Blavatsky and Besant as theosophical female subjects in their own rights and constructed them according to mainstream theosophical thought. Instead of writing teleological narrations of Blavatsky’s life story leading to the creation and establishment of the Theosophical Society, there are notions of gender which should be examined: Her ‘androgynous appearance’ and ‘transgression of gender norms’ are prominent aspects in the myths, biographical questions, and contemporary scandals surrounding the ‘Sphinx’ and her role as a woman and, consequently, cannot be dismissed.⁶⁸ Likewise, Besant’s relationships to men, other women and her children have

⁶⁵ Keller and Sharandak, p. 12.

⁶⁶ Schaser, pp. 75-6.

⁶⁷ Nancy, p. 566.

⁶⁸ Lux; Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 23-5.

been the centre of debates regarding her theosophical beliefs, but not her theosophical feminism or conceptions of gender.

After all, in both cases a gender analysis is necessary and could certainly be of use. The examined overemphasis of Blavatsky's historical influence and personal agency can be avoided by applying a gendered analysis. In order to take into account the forces that produced the individual, 'provided the scope for the individual's impact, and shaped or constrained that impact', the biographer can look at the role of gender to analyse the (gendered) agency of an individual and how it came to be in its historical context.⁶⁹ Using gender as a tool for a biographical approach on Blavatsky, can help to undo the equalisation of her person and the Theosophical Society and to balance the emphasis of her historical impact.⁷⁰ Looking at Besant's life through the lens of gender can allow us to view her as a female subject within globally changing feminist discourses during her life time which highly influenced her – apart from theosophy. This can enhance our understanding of her as a globally acting agent within these discourses rather than a representative of *the* theosophical view on gender and feminisms.

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⁶⁹ Kershaw, p. 37; Schaser, p. 76; Lutz, Davis, 'Geschlechterforschung und Biographieforschung. Intersektionalität als biographische Ressource am Beispiel einer außergewöhnlichen Frau', in: Völter, Rosenthal, Lutz and Dausien (eds.), *Biographieforschung im Diskurs* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), passim.

⁷⁰ For a historical analysis on the importance of gender in the Theosophical Society, see: Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

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