

# **Spiritual Entrepreneurs: Competing Theosophists and the Making of Alternative Spirituality in the Swedish Press (1900–1925)**

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## **ABSTRACTS**

Zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs liess sich in der schwedischen Gesellschaft die Entstehung eines öffentlichen Interesses an Esoterik und asiatischen Religionen – kurz ausgedrückt: an „alternativer Spiritualität“ – beobachten. Während dieser Zeit reisten zwei führende Theosophinnen, die Amerikanerin Katherine Tingley und die Engländerin Annie Besant, nach Schweden, wo sie als „Spirituelle Unternehmerinnen“ gut besuchte Vorlesungen hielten. Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie die schwedischen Medien zwischen 1900 und 1925 durch die Berichterstattung über diese zwei Theosophinnen Wissen über alternative Spiritualität produzierten. Basierend auf zwei Konzepten der postkolonialen Geschichtsschreibung – den *go-betweens* von Kapil Raj und den *contact zones* von Mary Louise Pratt – beschreibt der Artikel, wie Besant und Tingley als historische Akteurinnen „zwischen Kulturen“ Institutionen und Orte bewusst dafür einsetzten, ihre Botschaften in Schweden zu verbreiten. Anhand der Analyse von Beschreibungen der Aktivitäten dieser Akteurinnen und den Reaktionen des Publikums in der schwedischen Presse zeige ich, welche Auswirkungen die mediale Wissensproduktion über transkulturelle Spiritualität hatte: Erstens verschob sich mit der Zeit die Faszination für die Theosophie zu einer Vorliebe für „genuin indische“ Spiritualität. Zweitens wandte sich das schwedische Publikum – größtenteils Frauen der Oberschicht –, die ihr Vertrauen zuerst in europäische oder amerikanische Frauen als spirituelle Vermittlerinnen setzten, immer stärker indischen Männern zu, welche in ihren Augen die „östliche Spiritualität“ verkörperten. Drittens fanden die von den „spirituellen Unternehmerinnen“ propagierten apolitischen Zukunftsbilder bei Zuhörerschaften aus dem Bürgertum und der Oberschicht Anklang, weil ihnen sozialistische Lösungsansätze nicht als tragfähige Alternativen erschienen. Schlussendlich deute ich darauf hin, dass die schwedische Empfänglichkeit

für "exotische" Spiritualität sowie auch die Position Schwedens an den Rändern imperialer Politik die idealen Bedingungen schufen, unter welchen Botschaften zur alternativen Spiritualität gegeben, aber auch herausgefordert und neugestaltet werden konnten.

Around the First World War, an interest in esotericism and Asian religions – or, simply put, "alternative spirituality" – could be observed in Swedish society. In this period, the American and English theosophist leaders Katherine Tingley and Annie Besant travelled to Sweden, where they gave well-attended lectures as "spiritual entrepreneurs". This article explores how knowledge of alternative spirituality was produced through the Swedish media's description of the theosophist leaders between 1900 and 1925. Based on two concepts developed in postcolonial historiography – Kapil Raj's "go-betweens" and Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones" – the article discusses how Besant and Tingley, as actors in-between cultures, could utilize institutions and geographic places to disseminate their messages in Sweden. By examining how the Swedish press described the actors' activities and the public's perceptions, I argue that the knowledge on transcultural spirituality produced by the Swedish media triggered several consequences: First, that a fascination with theosophy shifted to a preference for "genuine Indian" spirituality. Second, that the publics – consisting mainly of upper-class women – who previously invested their trust in European or American women as spiritual mediators eventually turned to rely directly on Indian men, whom they perceived to be embodying "Eastern spirituality". Third, that the apolitical visions furnished by the spiritual entrepreneurs were attractive to upper-class and bourgeois publics, who did not consider socialist solutions as viable alternatives. Lastly, I suggest that the Swedish receptivity for "exotic" spirituality, as well as Sweden's location at the margins of imperial politics provided ideal conditions for narratives on alternative spirituality to thrive as well as to be challenged and reconfigured.

## 1. Introduction

In 1899, the American Theosophist leader Katherine Tingley visited Sweden for the first time on a quest to proclaim a new Theosophical coalition: the "Universal Brotherhood". As a comment on Tingley's mission, the Swedish women's magazine *Idun* reflected on the appeal of spirituality at the turn of the twentieth century:

*One may hold whatever opinions one wishes about the feasibility of the coalition's programme, but one thing is indisputable: this 'Universal Brotherhood' is a remarkable expression of the times in our end-of-century era, rich in strong spiritual movements.*<sup>1</sup>

The "end-of-century" curiosity for spirituality did not wane, and in the first decades of the twentieth century, representatives of opposing spiritual movements seemed to consider Sweden as an important site to spread their messages. Sweden eventually became highly fought over as a spiritual marketplace, and in autumn 1907, *Dagens Nyheter* – one of Sweden's most prominent newspapers – almost alarmedly reported on a forth-

1 Katherine Tingley och det 'Universella Broderskapet', in: *Idun* 12 (1899) 76, 1899, p. 1.

coming Theosophic “protest meeting” between two opposing strands of Theosophy. This encounter was instigated by two “Theosophical popes” who had already “made propaganda in the Swedish capital” which, as the daily noted, “the public should hold in fresh memory”.<sup>2</sup>

The Theosophical leaders alluded to as “popes” were the above-mentioned American Katherine Tingley and the Theosophist president of India and Europe Annie Besant. The main questions at stake were: Whose spiritual message and organization would win the trust of the Swedish publics? How did Sweden come to be regarded as an interesting marketing place for Theosophical leaders to articulate their “propaganda”? And how did the Swedish media participate in creating not only narratives of competing Theosophists but also in contributing to new ideas on spirituality?

When Idun noted the era’s strong spiritual movements in 1899, the interest in spirituality had already grown considerably during the last decades of the nineteenth century in Sweden just as in the rest of Europe and North America. Theosophy – formulated as esoteric teaching by Helena Blavatsky in 1875 – was certainly not the only aspect of the Swedes’ interest in spirituality. Still, its message seemed to attract distinguished followers such as artists, poets as well as the Swedish king Oscar the II. During the period under study (1900–1925), representatives from several Theosophical societies visited Sweden repeatedly, arriving from the United States of America (USA) and India to offer their views on spirituality with the Swedish public, which were thoroughly reported on by the press.

A significant feature of Theosophy was the incorporation of various strands of sources, such as occultism, spiritism, “Oriental” religions and scientific models, into a spiritual synthesis. Depending on who was advocating the teaching, differentiating theories on spirituality were emphasized. Since Theosophy came to represent not one but a number of alternative views on spiritual matters, I will use the concept of “alternative spirituality” as describing a “bricolage” of belief systems contained within the term Theosophy.<sup>3</sup> This article, then, is about how knowledge – or rather knowledges – on alternative spirituality were being shaped and negotiated by the Swedish publics and daily press in the first decades of the twentieth century. The article also endeavours to study how Sweden – despite or thanks to its location at the margins of transimperial politics – served as a platform for “spiritual entrepreneurs” to test and promote their messages for European publics.<sup>4</sup>

This study can thus be placed at the intersection of the history of Western Esotericism, the History of Knowledge, and Global Intellectual History. It seeks to reconstruct the

2 Teosofier mot Teosofier. Vad är skillnaden?, in: Dagens Nyheter, 29 October 1907, n.p.

3 See C. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, London 2004.

4 The concept of “publics” referred to are by the scholar in American studies, Michael Warner’s notion of on the one side *a* public as a physical audience in a lecture hall or theatre and on the other, *the* public as discursive publics such as readerships. See M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, in: *Public Culture* 14 (2002) 1, pp. 49–90.

role three components played in the production of knowledge on alternative spirituality: actors, places, and the press.

Scholars working within the History of Ideas and Comparative Religion have discussed Swedish interest in alternative belief systems. Inga Sanner has put forth the concept of “moral utopianism” where similar ideas on individual moral development and social critique could be found across diverse groups such as Unitarians, free-thinkers, Anarchists and Theosophists at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> David Thurffjell has shown how notions of Swedishness were co-constructed in relation to alternative spirituality, and Per Faxneld has convincingly demonstrated the impact of Theosophy and esotericism in Sweden at the turn of the last century in terms of cultural history.<sup>6</sup> Building on this research, I aim to investigate how the American and English Theosophist leaders Katherine Tingley and Annie Besant received the Swedish publics’ and the press’ attention as representatives of alternative spirituality, or, as I will argue, as “spiritual entrepreneurs”. By exploring the portion of History of Knowledge that addresses the movements, shifts, and circulations of knowledge production, my first argument is that these “spiritual entrepreneurs” were empowered to create their versions of alternative spirituality by dint of their cultural and geographical mobility. Resorting Kapil Raj’s concept of *passeurs culturels* or “go-betweeners” enables me to investigate how Besant and Tingley could operate in between societies and groups by traversing different geographical and cultural fields. Raj suggests that this maneuverability allows the go-between to function as a “third element” or a “nomadic expert”.<sup>7</sup> For Besant and Tingley, who spent long periods in Europe, this meant that they could benefit from their position in between to claim unique knowledge from their American or Indian Theosophical milieux, as well as claiming expertise on how Theosophical spirituality could be applied in Europe, in this case Sweden. Historian Kris Manjapra has noted how the Theosophical movement was a catalyst for spiritual orientalism in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. This interest grew stronger when many Europeans felt an urge to turn their gazes towards a romanticized and spiritualized “East” in order to find alternatives to western industrialism and militarism in the years before and after the Great War.<sup>8</sup> This also held true for the Swedes, who did not participate in the war: an immense interest for alternative spirituality was to be found in Stockholm as much as in Berlin. Even though this desire for spirituality seemed to be comparable in diverse places in Europe, I ask if places per se played a role in the making of alternative spiritualities. The historian Isaac Lubelsky, for instance, noted how Annie Besant and Katherine Tingley decided to go to Sweden – on separate quests – in

5 I. Sanner, *Att älska sin nästa såsom sig själv: Om moraliska utopier under 1800-talet* [To love your neighbour as yourself: On Moral Utopias in the 19th century], Stockholm 1995.

6 D. Thurffjell, *Det gudlösa folket: De postkristna svenskarna och religionen* [The Godless People: The Post-Christian Swedes and Religion], Stockholm 2015; P. Faxneld, *Det ockulta sekelskiftet: Esoteriska strömningar i Hilma af Klint's tid* [The occult turn of the century: esoteric currents in Hilma af Klint's time], Stockholm 2020.

7 K. Raj, *Go-Betweeners, Travelers, and Cultural Translators*, in: B. Lightman (ed.), *A Companion to the History of Science*, Chichester 2016, pp. 39–57.

8 K. Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2014, pp. 64, 68 and 98–100.

June 1913 to contend “for the same potential publics”.<sup>9</sup> As will be further discussed, this was also the case in 1907, when the Theosophical leaders visited Stockholm within just a couple of months, resulting in a direct conflict between Theosophists in Sweden. Hence, my second hypothesis is that Sweden, due to its geographical and cultural situatedness, was considered to be fertile soil to disseminate spiritual messages by go-betweens. To examine the impact of places in the making of alternative spirituality in Sweden, I will use Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones”. Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power”.<sup>10</sup> In this article, I will study how specific sites, such as the island of Visingsö, where Tingley decided to open a school, enabled the making of alternative spirituality.

The reports in the Swedish media focused on three levels: on the spiritual agents themselves, the places they operated in, and the publics they attracted. Arguably, this was a remediation and, thus, a reconstruction of how the alternative spirituality was advertised and received. Consequently, and this is my third and final point, I propose that the Swedish media had considerable agency in the production and dissemination of this new spiritual knowledge. The source material thus mainly consists of articles from the Swedish daily press, including the most prominent dailies as well as reports from rural newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Theosophy in Sweden

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), Henry Olcott (1832–1907), and William Judge (1851–1896) in New York. In addition to the idea of finding scientific explanations for spiritual phenomena (an approach stemming from idealistic evolutionary theory), Theosophy built its theories on Hinduism and Buddhism, which intensified with Blavatsky’s and Olcott’s move to India in 1879.<sup>12</sup> After the relocation to India, global interest in Theosophy gradually increased, and by 1885 the Society had 121 lodges worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

Sweden appeared to be a particularly fruitful place for the Theosophical Society to progress. First, the highly popular and influential Uppsala philosopher Christopher Jacob Boström (1797–1866) proposed an idealistic philosophy similar to the teachings of

9 I. Lubelsky/Y. Lotan, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism*, Sheffield 2012, p. 242.

10 M. L. Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, in: *Profession*, 1991, p. 34; M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 2008, pp. 7–8; Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, p. 39.

11 Approximately 80 articles have been examined mainly from the Stockholm-based dailies *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Stockholmstidningen*, and *Aftonbladet*, as well as the Göteborg-based dailies *Göteborgsposten*, *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, and *Göteborgs Aftonblad*. A few articles from rural papers, such as *Höganäs Tidning* and *Trelleborgstidningen* have also been examined.

12 W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden 1996, p. 449; Lubelsky and Lotan, *Celestial India*, p. 87 and p. 101.

13 Lubelsky/Lotan, *Celestial India*, p. 87 and p. 101.

Theosophy. Furthermore, a group called “believers in rationality” (*förmuftstroende*) took a liberal stance towards religiosity, and their journal *Sanningssökaren* (The Seeker for Truth, 1877–1893) gradually turned towards Theosophical ideas.<sup>14</sup> In 1889, *Teosofiska Samfundets Svenska Afdelning* (The Swedish branch of the Theosophical Society) was founded, which in 1891 became the Swedish Theosophical Society. Five years later, members from Denmark, Finland, and Norway joined the Society, which led the association to change its name to Scandinavian Theosophical Society.<sup>15</sup> A second reason for the intense interest in Theosophy in Sweden was the friendship between the Countess Constance Wachtmeister, the wife of the Swedish Secretary of State, (1838–1910) and Blavatsky. Wachtmeister joined Blavatsky on journeys through India and Europe and cared for Blavatsky towards the end of the latter’s life. Eventually, Countess Wachtmeister became, by her own right, an appreciated lecturer of Theosophy in Sweden and Europe and developed a friendship with Annie Besant.<sup>16</sup> A third reason for the Swedes’ curiosity about Theosophy was presumably owing to the Swedish king Oscar II’s interest in the Society. His Theosophical propensities generated attention in the press when he, for example, attended Katherine Tingley’s lectures in 1899.<sup>17</sup> It is, however, notable that there were also critiques directed at Theosophy, mainly by the Protestant church that regarded Theosophy as a form of Buddhism (and hence heathenism), as well as by radical writers and intellectuals on the political left, who considered Theosophy to be “modern superstition”.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the general interest in Theosophy continued to grow at the beginning of the twentieth century, and distinguished writers and artists such as Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940) and Carl Larsson (1853–1919) were attracted to its teachings.<sup>19</sup> By 1913, no less than 36 Theosophical lodges had been founded throughout Scandinavia, 22 of which were in Sweden. This number can be compared to the 67 lodges in England and Wales and 14 lodges in Germany in the same period.<sup>20</sup> After Blavatsky’s death in 1891, the international Society split, and by 1895 it was divided into two factions: The American Section of the Theosophical Society, with its headquarters in New York with William Judge as its leader, and the International Theo-

14 E. Petander, *Theosophy in Sweden*, in: H. Bogdan/O. Hammer (eds.), *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia*, Leiden 2016, p. 578.

15 In 1898, the Society had eight Swedish lodges, one Norwegian, one Danish, and one Finnish lodge. Three hundred and six members were registered: 266 Swedes, twelve Norwegians, eight Danes, and twenty Finns. In 1895, the Scandinavian sub-section had grown enough to gain status to be organized directly under the international headquarters in Adyar, India as *Teosofiska Samfundets Skandinaviska Sektion* (Scandinavian Section of the Theosophical Society). Petander, p. 579.

16 Lubelsky/Lotan, *Celestial India*, p. 87 and p. 110.

17 *Konungen på teosofmöte*, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 September 1899, n.p.; *Universella Broderskapets möte*, in: *Svenska Dagbladet*, 19 September 1899, n.p.

18 Sanner, *Att Ålska Sin Nästa*, p. 329; Petander, *Theosophy in Sweden*, p. 580.

19 Faxneld, *Det Ockulta Sekelskiftet*, p. 81.

20 R. Vernon, *Star in the East: Krishnamurti: The Invention of a Messiah*, London 2000. (The low number in Germany was due to the split, when the former Theosophical German leader, Rudolf Steiner formed his Anthroposophical Society in 1913.); *The Theosophical Convention 1912*, in: *Supplement to The Theosophist*, March 1913, p. 8; Interview with Monica Ostelius, Deputy Secretary-General of The Swedish Theosophical Society Adyar, 7 June 2021.

sophical Society, based in Adyar in India with Henry Olcott as president and Annie Besant (1847–1933) as co-leader.

Both Henry Olcott and Annie Besant visited Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century. Though Olcott was the formal leader, Besant garnered the main attention of the Swedish media, who called her “the Priestess” of Theosophy even before she became president of the Theosophical Society.<sup>21</sup> Annie Besant had a background as a journalist and had been active in socialist politics and first wave feminism before her encounter with Blavatsky in 1889.<sup>22</sup> The Swedes knew her as an apt agitator. Despite some critical reports after her shift to Theosophy, the attitude of the press was welcoming towards Besant when she visited Sweden for the first time in 1894. The conservative daily *Aftonbladet* described her as “an exceptionally talented and warm hearted woman”, and the liberal *Göteborgsposten* reported how “her words were received with lively applause by the very numerous audience”.<sup>23</sup>

However, in 1896, the press reported a sharp warning from Besant that an “untrustworthy lady” named Katherine Tingley had claimed to be the incarnation of Madame Blavatsky, a claim that, according to Besant, should not be taken seriously.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, when Tingley visited Sweden for the first time in 1899, the interest was tangible, and the headlines in the liberal *Dagens Nyheter* were built up for thrill: “SHE is here.”<sup>25</sup> So, who was “she”? Katherine Tingley (1847–1929) came from New York and was a social worker when she met Judge, who then was the leader of the American section of the Society. At the time of Judge’s death in 1896, Tingley became the leader of the American section, which she then named The Universal Brotherhood. During her first years as president, Tingley went on marketing tours through Europe, Egypt, India, and Australia to convey Theosophy to large publics and to advocate her educational project called the “Raja Yoga School”.<sup>26</sup> Sweden was singled out as one of the key sites (in addition to California and Cuba) in building her utopian education project, and she obtained – according to her own account – the support of Swedish King Oscar II to use royal land on the island of Visingsö to establish the school.<sup>27</sup>

21 Mrs Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgsposten*, 21 May 1894, n.p.; *Teosofernas drottning Annie Besant*, in: *Höganäs Tidning*, 11 August 1904, n.p.; *Annie Besant i Stockholm*, in: *Aftonbladet*, 12 September 1904, n.p.

22 Lubelsky/Lotan, *Celestial India*, pp. 116–117.

23 *Skandinaviska teosofiska samfundets första årsmöte*, in: *Aftonbladet*, 22 May 1894, n.p.; *Mrs Annie Besant*, in: *Göteborgsposten*, 22 May 1894, n.p. It should be noted that *Aftonbladet* had a background as liberal daily, but became during this period increasingly conservative.

24 *Hvar Finnes m:me Blavatskys Själf*, in: *Arbetet*, 31 October 1896, n.p.; *Om Hvertannat. Hvar Finnes m:me Blavatskys Själf?*, in: *Aftonbladet*, 29 October 1896, n.p.

25 *Universella Broderskapets kongress. HON är här*, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 September 1899, n.p.

26 The choice of name ‘Raja Yoga’ is not obvious, but it is worth pointing out that Swami Vivekananda – a key figure in introducing the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to North America – held a series of lectures under the name ‘Raja Yoga’ in Tingley’s home city New York the winter 1895–1896. The transcripts of the lectures were printed under the same name and was widely circulated in the esoteric intelligentsia of New York. It is therefore possible that Tingley picked up the concept of ‘Raja Yoga’ when she was about to initiate her school project. For a discussion on Vivekananda’s lecture series, see E. De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, London 2004, p. 149.

27 Petander, *Theosophy in Sweden*, p. 582; *Teosoferna å Visingsö*, in: *Göteborgs Aftonblad*, 19 September 1913, p. 9.

Between the turn of the century and the Great War, Besant and Tingley visited Sweden several times, gaining loyal adherents.

When Besant visited Sweden in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the dailies described her publics in Sweden as large and keen, with women in the majority.<sup>28</sup> Deferentially, when Besant was coined “the Queen” of Theosophy, she answered by declaring to *Aftonbladet* how important the Swedish Theosophists were for the cause.<sup>29</sup> The Swedish curiosity for Theosophy, however, seemed to be great enough to hold more than one “Queen”. When Besant’s competitor Tingley arrived in 1899, the publics were described in a similar vein: large, anticipatory, and consisting mainly of women.<sup>30</sup>

Besant and Tingley were not only contesting in claiming to be the legitimate successor of Blavatsky; they also represented slightly different Theosophical ideals. When Besant visited Sweden in 1904, her lectures addressed esoteric models of life, death, and the human mind in the usual combination of science and religion.<sup>31</sup> However, this bold mixture of topics did not appear to convince the Swedish publics entirely. *Dagens Nyheter* reported that opinions were divided on whether the subject of “the new psychology” was relevant and asked if science and religion would help the human “enter her full, real life”.<sup>32</sup> *Aftonbladet* noted that the audience “seemed rather ungrateful”, concluding that “Stockholmers are probably not that interested in psychology, and even less so when it is ‘new’ and served in English”.<sup>33</sup> This last notion concerning language could, of course, owe to the fact that Besant lectured about an unfamiliar topic in a foreign language. The remark, however, should also be seen in light of the fact that the Swedish bourgeoisie felt closer to German culture and language in the 1900s than to the Anglo-Saxon world. This was also mirrored in the allocation of language hours in the grammar school at the time, where German represented the main subject, apart from Swedish.<sup>34</sup>

While the publics and the press were not entirely convinced by Besant’s scientific-religious messages, things looked slightly more promising for Tingley. Even though *Dagens Nyheter*, in 1899, conceived Tingley’s speeches about subjects such as “love as the

28 Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgs Handels- Och Sjöfartstidning*, 5 September 1890, n.p.; Mrs Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgs-posten*, 21 May 1894, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgs Aftonblad*, 22 May 1894, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 January 1898, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Stockholmstidningen*, 18 January 1898, n.p.; Teosofernas drottning Annie Besant, in: *Höganäs Tidning*, 11 August 1904, n.p.; Annie Besant i Stockholm, in: *Aftonbladet*, 12 September, 1904, n.p.

29 Skandinaviska Teosofiska Samfundets Första Årsmöte, in: *Aftonbladet*, 22 May 1894, n.p.; Liander, G. Halfdan, Mrs Annie Besant, in: *Svenska Dagbladet*, 9 September 1904, p. 4.

30 Konungen på teosofmöte, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 September 1899, n.p.

31 Betydelsen af lifvet efter döden, in: *Göteborgs-posten*, 7 September 1904, n.p.

32 Den nya psykologien, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 September 1904, n.p.

33 Annie Besant i Stockholm, in: *Aftonbladet*, 12 September 1904, n.p.

34 Swedish universities had been influenced by German academia during the nineteenth century. This interest in Germany was also to be found in the Swedish domestic politics where German political strivings, such as universal suffrage and parliamentarianism, was seen as new and progressive. Moreover, King Gustav V (the successor to Oscar II, and coronated in 1907) was married to Victoria, the granddaughter to the German Emperor Wilhelm I. A fact that probably played part in Gustav V’s attempts to influence the parliament towards German friendly politics. However, in 1916, the Swedish parliament took a clear stance towards neutrality. Å. Thulstrup, *Svensk Politik 1905–1939: Från Unionsupplösningen till Andra Världskriget* [english translation], Stockholm 1968, pp. 13–15 and p. 85.



conqueror” and “the importance of knowing oneself” as “rather vague”, the Tingleyan messages were perceived as not only being more precise but also more popular in 1907.<sup>35</sup> Reporting on her lecture at the Stockholm Opera House, the conservative daily Svenska Dagbladet dwelled devoutly on Tingley’s explanations on the “divine nature” of the human being and reflected on how Theosophy could offer new ways of getting in touch with this inner divinity, showing “the right way to live”.<sup>36</sup>

These examples give glimpses into the differences between Besant’s and Tingley’s messages. By the end of the 1900s, Tingley’s concept of the “divine nature” seemed – at least according to the press – more attractive and easier to digest than Besant’s obfuscating proposition of a “new psychology”. It was, however, not the actual messages that were intensely debated in the press reports on the public appearances of the leaders of the Theosophical Societies. Their habitus and outward appearances attracted at least an equal amount of attention.

### 3. Staging Spirituality

When Besant and Tingley visited Sweden in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Theosophist’s public appearances took place in lecture halls usually frequented by the Swedish bourgeoisie, such as The Academy of Sciences or The Royal Music Academy. These venues were fitting for the Theosophical message of combining not only science and religion but also art. However, when Katherine Tingley chose the Royal Opera House with its stage for theatrical performances as the location for her lectures in 1907, a new component was added: performativity. Svenska Dagbladet described how “the doors of the Royal Opera opened” and it was filled “from floor to ceiling” with an audience consisting of “nine-tenths of ladies”.<sup>37</sup> The Opera’s auditorium, accommodating more than a thousand spectators, seemed like an appropriate space for Tingley to get her message across. To promote Theosophy, according to Tingley, the construction of a spiritual stage was necessary.

Already in 1899, the newspapers had reported on Tingley’s lectures, mentioning that the halls were adorned with “banners, flags, garlands, pennants, greenery and flowers”. Additionally, lyrical pieces such as “The Death of Siegfried” from Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* were performed between the speeches.<sup>38</sup> Tingley’s choice of clothing also became a tool for enhancing the spiritual character, on the opera stage she was attired in a long, white, Greek theatrical costume decorated with flowers.<sup>39</sup> Components like floral halls,

35 Universella Broderskapets kongress, in: Dagens Nyheter, 13 September 1899, n.p.

36 Katherine Tingley på Operan, in: Svenska Dagbladet, 21 September 1907 p. 8.

37 Ibid.

38 Universella Broderskapets möte i går, in: Svenska Dagbladet, 19 September 1899, n.p.

39 Konungen på teosofmöte, in: Dagens Nyheter, 19 September 1899, n.p.; Katherine Tingley på Operan, in: Svenska Dagbladet, 21 September 1907, p. 8.

atmospheric music, and Greek costumes contributed to a sense of something ethereal, romantic, and timeless, thereby emphasizing the messages of her esotericism.

Edmund B. Lingan, a scholar of Theatrical and Performance History, refers to Tingley's dramaturgical presentations as "spiritual theatre", instrumentalized for educational purposes to pass down the Theosophical wisdom originally articulated by Blavatsky. Performing was a cornerstone of Tingley's perception of Theosophy. When she founded the American Raja Yoga School in Point Loma in 1900, she built an outdoor Greek theatre with a seating capacity of about 2,500.<sup>40</sup>

Annie Besant, on the other hand, lacked such an affinity for performing, nevertheless the Swedish press seemed more interested in her appearance and skills than in her spiritual messages. An often reoccurring note was her eloquence as a lecturer. Although her talks were sometimes perceived as "a bit peculiar" or "clerical", she was described as "undoubtedly one of the best speakers of our time".<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the liberal and conservative papers meticulously described Besant's "Indian-inspired" dresses and shawls, the dot on the forehead (marking "high caste among the Hindus") and her "picturesque white costume to recall India, the homeland of Theosophy".<sup>42</sup> This fascination with fashion and style led the Malmö-based social democratic daily *Arbetet* to speculate that the governing bourgeoisie lacked education, since these articles only dwelt on "the skirts and hairstyle, and the piquant history of the Theosophist's lady", but not at all on "the matter".<sup>43</sup>

Theosophy as a spiritual alternative to the established forms of Christianity in Europe and America comprised, as mentioned, of an eclectic set of components from different areas and cultures, and Theosophist leaders, Besant and Tingley, thus had the liberty to include different messages in their deliveries of spirituality. They also had, as go-betweens moving between different geographic and cultural locations, a leeway to perform and combine elements in their spiritual delivery in ways that would likely have been difficult for stationary or national actors who dwelled in only one cultural context – in this case, the Swedish – to fulfil. By being in-between contexts, cultures, and subjects, their spiritual messages could be unspecific and open for many different interpretations – a promising precondition to gain the interest of large publics. Therefore, Tingley's offer to show "the right way to live" combined with eccentric costumes and performative elements, and Besant's (seemingly complex) scientific-religious messages with markers pointing to the fountainhead of spiritual wisdom, India, were undoubtedly fascinating for the Swedish audiences.

40 E. B. Lingan, Katherine Tingley and the Theatre of the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society, in: E. B. Lingan (ed.), *The Theatre of the Occult Revival: Alternative Spiritual Performance from 1875 to the Present*, New York 2014, pp. 29–61.

41 Fru Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgs Aftonblad*, 22 May 1894, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Stockholmstidningen*, 18 January 1898, n.p.

42 Mrs Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgsposten*, 21 May 1894, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Göteborgs Aftonblad*, 22 May 1894, n.p.; Annie Besant. Ögonblickbild För Dagens Nyheter, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 23 May 1894, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 January 1898, n.p.; Fru Annie Besant, in: *Stockholmstidningen*, 18 January 1898, n.p.

43 Ett Nyktert Ord, in: *Arbetet*, 24 January 1898, n.p.

#### 4. Spiritual Battlegrounds

The arenas where Besant and Tingley presented their messages can be regarded as spatial, institutional, and geographical contexts, in which alternative spiritualities were tried out. I consider the sites where the go-betweens met the Swedish publics as forms of contact zones: as social environments that enabled conversations and new knowledges on alternative spirituality to take shape. However, the places where the Swedish publics could encounter alternative spirituality in the form of Theosophy were not without tension. Regardless of the presentation and the staging of spirituality – Besant’s scientific-religious delivery or Tingley’s spiritual theatre – the targeted publics were primarily the bourgeoisie, and particularly upper-class women in Sweden’s urban centres. By using well established, prestigious venues such as the Academies and the Opera, alternative spirituality could appear reliable and trustworthy in the eyes of the bourgeois clientele. By combining known and unknown elements, such as Wagner’s music and Blavatsky’s notions of Theosophy, a well balanced, exoticized spiritual knowledge, fit for the upper-class publics, was produced and made viable by the spiritual go-betweens through these arenas. In 1896, Besant warned, as previously noted, about Tingley’s lack of credibility; a statement that was eagerly disseminated by the press. The strained relationship between the English and American leaders further deteriorated in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> In autumn 1907, when both Tingley and Besant visited Sweden, Stockholm became the main battleground of the two Theosophical leaders. Though both Tingley and Besant were cautious in critiquing each other when lecturing or being interviewed in Sweden, their mutual disapproval was palpable. Tingley deemed the Adyar faction to be “on the wrong track”, while Besant considered herself the sole legitimate leader of Theosophy.<sup>45</sup> These opinions were based on two scandals, in which the Adyar faction was involved: for one, the accusation of paedophilia against Besant’s ally, Charles Webster Leadbeater’s (1854–1934), in America and Great Britain. Secondly, the controversial election of Annie Besant as President of the Society after Olcott’s death in July 1907.<sup>46</sup> An important part of the battle, however, was played out in the Swedish press when Tingley’s followers organized a protest meeting in the Musical Academy against the Adyar Theosophists, accusing the group of “perverted immorality”.<sup>47</sup> This protest triggered a flow of articles and, above all, letters to the editors of *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*. Some readers were astonished and shocked that the Theosophist champions of lofty spiritual teachings could plummet to such petty conflicts, while others emphasized that Besant’s defence of Leadbeater was immoral.<sup>48</sup> As consequence, some journalists voiced mistrust about the Theosophical leaders.

44 Lubelsky/Lotan, *Celestial India*, pp. 237–246.

45 Catherine Tingley tolkar teosofines grundsanningar, *Dagens Nyheter*, in: 17 September 1907, n.p.; Mrs Annie Besant till Stockholm, in: *Aftonbladet* 18 September 1907, p. 4.

46 Lubelsky/Lotan, *Celestial India*, pp. 237–246 and pp. 292–295.

47 Ett teosofiskt protestmöte, in: *Aftonbladet*, 30 October 1907, p. 6.

48 Examples of letters to the editors: Teosofernas inbördes tvist, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 November 1907, n.p. Three letters,

Interestingly, the main point was less the apparent differences of spiritual views but rather the fact that they were women. The social democratic *Arbetet* not only criticized the shallow reports by the liberal papers, but also questioned the Theosophical movement in general. While the battle raged in the liberal papers, *Arbetet* wrote satirically that the conflict was only about the “fancy title”, and since two women were fighting, one could “easily understand the rest”.<sup>49</sup> Joining in in such misogynistic interpretations, the small-town daily *Trelleborgstidningen* noted that it was no wonder that the ladies were fighting since “the two skirts have never tolerated each other”.<sup>50</sup> This derogatory notion of women as spiritual leaders had been made earlier in the daily, *Telefon*, with a columnist noting that the “latest worldwide humbug”, Theosophy, had finally reached the northern latitudes, where two “old tarts” were considered to be gods.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, even though such caustic comments occasionally appeared in the press around 1907, this was just a breeze compared to the storm that would gather when Besant and Tingley returned to Sweden in 1913.

In the lead up to the visits by the two leaders in 1913, *Svenska Dagbladet* stated: “It is perhaps not altogether inexplicable that the two foremost representatives of Theosophy should thus meet so closely in our country. They certainly have quite important interests to look after here”.<sup>52</sup> Apparently, Sweden played an important role in Besant’s and Tingley’s spiritual entrepreneurship.

In 1900, Tingley’s utopian educational institute, The Raja Yoga School in Point Loma, outside San Diego in California, opened to the public. Shortly afterwards, Visingsö, a scenic island situated in the Lake Vättern in the southern Swedish county of Småland, became the site Tingley chose to build the European equivalent of the reformist boarding school.<sup>53</sup> Spiritual education was on the agenda, and the school was planned as a meeting place for Swedish youth to cultivate both body and soul under American Theosophical guidance. By midsummer of 1913, the construction of the Raja Yoga School in Visingsö would begin. During the same period, the Theosophical Congress took place in Sweden. The press noted that “Madame Katherine Tingley” would arrive a month before the ceremony to oversee the construction of a Greek amphitheatre at Visingsö that was large enough to hold 1,500 spectators.<sup>54</sup> When midsummer approached, *Dagens Nyheter* reported in detail on the upcoming three-day inauguration programme. Distinguished actors from the Royal National Theatre were announced to perform, and Theosophy students from Point Loma were to act in Tingley’s drama “The Aroma of Athens”. In addition, living tableaux of Swedish home life from the twelfth century were promised.<sup>55</sup>

in: *Svenska Dagbladet*, 4 November 1907, pp. 9–10; Meddelande från allmänheten, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 November 1907, n.p.; *Insändare*, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 November 1907.

49 *X:et*, Sådant händer, in: *Arbetet*, 29 October 1907, n.p.

50 *Veckan*, in: *Trelleborgstidningen*, 18 September 1907, p. 36.

51 *Beskedlige Svensson*, in: *Telefon*, 21 December 1894, n.p.

52 Annie Besant till Stockholm, in: *Svenska Dagbladet*, 10 June 1913, p. 11.

53 *Petander*, Theosophy in Sweden, p. 582.

54 Teosofikongress å Visingsö, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 May 1913, p. 4.

55 Den teosofiska fredskongressen på Visingsö, in: *Dagens Nyheter* 6 June 1913, p. 5.

The renowned artist Julius Kronberg would also donate his entire atelier to the Raja Yoga School on Visingsö.<sup>56</sup> Visingsö was being prepared to serve as a platform for Tingley's Theosophical model, and the scene combined international Theosophy with ancient Greek features, Swedish pre-modern history, and contemporary art.

While the press had an expectant spirit before the midsummer programme, the tone was quite different after the event. On 25 June, *Dagens Nyheter* described how the days became an “indefinable mixture of beauty and paltriness” and asked how Tingley could have possibly “allowed such abominable gibberish”? The audiences had walked out from the plays and abandoned the sites.<sup>57</sup> But the actual bone of contention was not what was seen as a pompous and misguided spectacle, but that Visingsö had been chosen as the site for Tingley's alternative spiritual endeavour. In particular, the cathedral chapter in Växjö emphatically disapproved of the project. A little over a month after the congress, *Svenska Dagbladet* travelled to Visingsö to investigate on the spot the “great battle between American smartness” and ancient Swedish homebuilding. The result was a full page report in the daily. Visingsö was described as the “supreme place among Sweden's oldest cultural settlements”, where the “high priestess” of Theosophy from “Yankee land” had settled like an uninvited guest.<sup>58</sup> Although the article marked scepticism towards Tingley's spiritual message packaged in the spirit of American marketing, the basic problem seemed to be that Visingsö would transform into a Theosophical training centre.

The press raged, representatives of the Church of Sweden contested the project, and the domain board opposed any construction activity on the island.<sup>59</sup> What was supposed to be Tingley's great project in Sweden – to create a contact point for cooperation, transcultural encounters, and bilingualism – instead became a locus for her ideas to be openly criticized, ridiculed, and condemned.

An asymmetry emerged between city residents and the rural population, between “American” and “Swedish” values, and between alternative spirituality and established Christianity. The go-between's unique position to combine the known and the unknown that seemed fruitful in the Stockholm bourgeois venues became a head on collision at Visingsö. One explanation for this could be that the publics in the refined settings of the Academies and the Opera in Stockholm were rather homogenous, coming mainly from the bourgeois strata of society, while the project at Visingsö drew the attention of a much broader audience: probably working-class publics who had a larger distance from cosmopolitanism and alternative spiritualities, and who were thus possibly more inclined to express their dissatisfaction. From this point of view, Visingsö as a contact – or rather conflict – zone could function as an enabler to express criticism and distrust of alternative spiritualities. The bucolic site in Småland did not become the adaptable meeting place that the bourgeois metropolitan environments represented. Instead, it became a

56 Raja Yoga-skola på Visingsö, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 June 1913, p. 5.

57 Tingley-teosofernas kongress på Visingsö, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 25 June 1913, p. 6.

58 Visingsö under mrs Tingleys spira, in: *Svenska Dagbladet*, 9 August 1913, pp. 8–9.

59 *Ibid.*; *Estetisk svinskonsoppa*, in: *Göteborgs Aftonblad*, 1 July 1913, p. 4; *Teosofernas omstridda planer på Visingsö*, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 August 1913, p. 5; *Teosoferna å Visingsö*, in: *Göteborgs Aftonblad*, 19 September 1913, p. 1.

battleground where spiritual and cultural values clashed. As a result, shortly after the Raja Yoga School's first building stone was ceremonially laid on Visingsö in midsummer 1913, the project was put on hold.

## 5. The Fall of Theosophy in the Swedish Press

While Tingley's reputation declined in the summer of 1913, Besant seemed to keep the publics in awe. At least momentarily. When Besant visited Stockholm on 13 June, *Aftonbladet* reported in an extended article "Mrs Besant in Stockholm: Grand tributes on arrival" how "large groups of elegant ladies with magnificent bouquets of roses" as well as a few men with "exotic" looks were waiting at the platform where Besant's train arrived. Many of the ladies in the crowd "cried of emotion" at the sight of the Theosophist leader.<sup>60</sup> However, in the interview, a new and slightly disturbing topic surfaced for the Swedish readers: a schism between Besant and the German section of the Theosophical Society. The point of contestation was Besant's advocacy campaign for a new Messiah-like World Teacher.

Jiddu Krishnamurti was a Brahmin boy living with his father and his siblings close to the Theosophical Society in Adyar. In 1909, when Krishnamurti was 14 years old, he was "discovered" by Charles Leadbeater, who saw Krishnamurti as the new World Teacher. A cult was swiftly organized around this Messiah idea, and Besant founded the Order of the Star in the East in 1911. Even though the father, Narayaniah, had given permission to his two sons – Krishnamurti and his brother – to visit England's Theosophists in 1911, he had not approved a second visit in 1912, on which Besant insisted regardless. Consequently, Narayaniah sued Besant for kidnapping in 1913.<sup>61</sup> The leader of the German Theosophical section Rudolf Steiner reacted strongly to this child abduction and the Messiah-cult. When the Swedish *Aftonbladet's* journalist asked Besant about the conflict, Besant had just expelled Steiner from the Society and closed the German lodges down.<sup>62</sup> In the interview, Besant appeared in control over the situation, questioning Steiner's credibility and declaring the young Krishnamurti's suitability as the new World Teacher.<sup>63</sup> The day after, when asked about details on Krishnamurti in an interview by *Dagens Nyheter*, Besant explained that the "spreading rumours" were just part of political intrigue and that even though she wanted to support the national movement in India – a cause she was deeply involved in –, she was sceptical of the nationalist "anarchists" who tried to reform spiritual young men into "fanatics" for spreading their revolutionary messages. Her mission was, thus, to save these youngsters from fanaticism, and Krishnamurti was one of them. The journalist concluded acquiescently that it was difficult to

60 Huglek, Mrs Besant i Stockholm. Storartade hyllningar vid ankomsten, in: *Aftonbladet*, 14 June 1913, p. 6.

61 Lubelsky/Lotan, *Celestial India*, pp. 295–300.

62 Steiner had by that time, taken 55 of the lodges to his new project: the Anthroposophical Society. Vernon, *Star in the East*, p. 86.

63 Huglek, Mrs Besant i Stockholm. Storartade hyllningar vid ankomsten, in: *Aftonbladet*, 14 June 1913, p. 6.

be suspicious of such a fascinating woman.<sup>64</sup> Even though Besant got away by using her rhetorical skills, painting Narayaniah's charges against her as a case of nationalist fanaticism, and even though the journalists accepted her evasive answers, Besant's construction of a Messiah was soon considered problematic.

By 1913, general apprehension towards Theosophy and its precepts began surfacing in the press. A flood of articles addressed not only Tingley's abortive project at Visingsö but also Besant's Messiah campaign, of which the abduction as well as the marketing of a very young man for spiritual matters was met with repugnance. The main question in this controversy appeared to be whether the leaders of the respective Theosophical factions, regardless of provenience, had credibility and legitimacy.

Former Theosophists who had quit the movement stepped forward, declaring that it was no surprise that Theosophy was "going down the drain" with women running the show.<sup>65</sup> In *Aftonbladet*, a series of articles was written by the ex-Theosophist Anna Maria Roos. Addressing the ambiguous answers delivered by Besant concerning the propagation of Krishnamurti as a new Messiah, Roos asked point blank: "Should Theosophy be resisted?"<sup>66</sup> Academics contributed to the discussion, and professor of psychology, John Landquist, wrote a thorough and crushing article about Theosophy in *Dagens Nyheter*.<sup>67</sup> If the critique had been coming mainly from left wing dailies before 1913, the liberal and conservative papers had now joined the chorus of disapproval.

Nevertheless, the public's reception of the Theosophist leaders were not entirely attuned to the press' devastating critique. While the debates in the press intensified around 1913, the public's fascination with Besant at her lectures in Stockholm seemed to have remained unchanged. The sold out auditoria proved, according to the Stockholm-based daily *Stockholmstidningen*, "attracted receptiveness" and "devote attention" to Besant.<sup>68</sup> The same held true for Tingley. During her next visit to Sweden in 1922, the press, once again, reported full auditoriums with several "well known personalities" in the audience and the female element forming a distinguished majority.<sup>69</sup> However, in accordance with how the press had perceived the Theosophist spectacles in 1913, the report's author was not impressed and interpreted Tingley's message as doubtful. Despite the described enthusiasm of the discursive public, the journalists clearly displayed a mistrust in the Theosophist message. These examples show how the press' narration of the Theosophist leaders seemed, at least in some cases, to be in opposition to the public's perceptions.

Looking at British newspapers around the years 1913 and 1914, a general debate on Theosophy was not prevalent. However, the court case of Besant's abduction of Krishna-

64 Selim, Annie Besant i Stockholm. Ett samtal med profetissan från Östern, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 June 1913, p. 4.

65 Huglek, Teosofernas eget hus, in: *Aftonbladet*, 27 June 1913, p. 5.

66 A. M. Roos, Bör teosofin motarbetas?, in: *Aftonbladet*, 8 July 1913, p. 9; A. M. Roos, Teosofisk Polemik, in: *Aftonbladet*, 22 July 1913, p. 6; A. M. Roos, Krishnamurti som världsfrälsare, in: *Aftonbladet*, 6 December 1913, p. 4.

67 J. Landquist, Beträktelser inför den teosofiska invasionen, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 June 1913, pp. 9–10.

68 Annie Besant, in: *Stockholmstidningen*, 16 June 1913, n.p.

69 Katherine Tingley på tribunen, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 February 1922, p. 7.



murti and his brother did occupy the British dailies.<sup>70</sup> In the German press, the narratives around the British-led Theosophical Society experienced an abrupt – and negative – change of direction following Besant’s expulsion of Rudolf Steiner from the Society in 1913. To draw the conclusion that the rupture between Besant and Steiner could be connected to the political tensions between Great Britain and Germany preceding the Great War might be far fetched. Nevertheless, by 1913–1914 Theosophy was not of particular interest to the German dailies.<sup>71</sup>

What was it then that made Sweden such an important place for debates on Theosophy? Drawing on Kapil Raj’s conception of *passseurs culturels* and the mobility of go-betweens, one could argue that Sweden’s location at the margins of imperial conflicts played a part. Tingley and Besant were spiritual go-betweens, and regardless of the style of performativity, they traversed cultural boundaries. Activities that could be polarized in countries closer to imperial politics, such as Besant’s support of the national movement in India, her radical dismissal of the German theosophists, or Tingley representing a new and up-coming – and possibly threatening – empire, were not really sensitive matters in neutral Sweden. On the contrary, the flexibility, cosmopolitanism, and the innovative tinge of the spiritual go-betweens were observed with interest and fascination. My argument is, hence, that Sweden functioned as an ideal site for the leaders of Theosophical Societies to try out rhetorics and modes of performance to strengthen their overall position as spiritual entrepreneurs. Operating at the margins of imperial politics offered freedom for the go-betweens to fuse different components into unique mixtures of spirituality and to promote themselves as knowledgeable and credible agents of alternative spirituality, at least until the press’ gushed critique towards the theosophist ladies in 1913.

## 6. Epilogue and Conclusion

A few months after the summer of the Theosophist misadventures in 1913, a new actor entered the stage: the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in literature. With him, a shift occurred in the making of alternative spirituality in the Swedish press.

In 1920, a year before Tagore – due to the war – could visit Sweden for the first time, the journalist Ragnar Sjöberg reflected in *Aftonbladet* on how Tagore’s poetry filled a religious need. Sjöberg described this spirituality as a fluid conception of God, a belief that would appeal to the modern Westerner, who “under no circumstances wants to know of any dogmas”. Sjöberg summed up Tagore’s message as a “synthesis of East and West”.<sup>72</sup>

70 Examples of this can be seen in: *Surface and Essence*, in: *Daily Herald*, 19 June 1913, p. 4; *Mrs. Besant’s Appeal*, in: *Liverpool Echo*, 16 January 1914, p. 6; *Mrs. Besant and two Indian boys*, in: *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 28 January 1914, p. 9; *Mrs. Besant and the Mystery of Re-incarnation*, in: *Weekly Dispatch London*, 10 May 1914, p. 7; *Mrs. Besant Wins Appeal*, in: *Daily Herald*, 26 May 1914, p. 5; *Mrs. Besant’s Teaching*, in: *Clarion*, 31 July 1914, p. 4.

71 Search by text: “Theosophie”; “Annie Besant” at <https://digipress.digitale-sammlungen.de>.

72 Rabindranath Tagore till Stockholm i afton?, in: *Aftonbladet*, 10 August 1920, p. 7.



Even though the Theosophist messages presented by Besant and Tingley had components of “the East”, Tagore came to represent what was perceived in the press as “authentic Eastern spirituality”. So, what were the components of Tagore’s spiritual concepts that the Swedish press saw as authentic?

When the Swedish dailies announced in November 1913 that the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore had won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the journalist at Svenska Dagbladet wrote how the “spirit of the dreaming Indian millennia” was inherent in Tagore’s poetry.<sup>73</sup> Göteborg’s Aftonblad spoke of *Gitanjali* – the collection of poems for which Tagore received the Nobel Prize in Literature – as “religious songs, mystical in their disposition”.<sup>74</sup> A considerable body of the articles, however, primarily focused the poet himself as an image of embodied spirituality. On the front page, Dagens Nyheter presented Tagore as “Indian poet, musician and Brahmin mystic” with a drawing depicting Tagore in white, loose fitting clothes with closed eyes and his hands clasped on his crossed legs.<sup>75</sup> When Tagore finally arrived in Sweden, eight years after the announcement of the Nobel Prize, the image of the “wise man” prevailed. Svenska Dagbladet wrote about Tagore’s “Christ-like” face.<sup>76</sup> Aftonbladet described Tagore’s entrée at the Stockholm Central Train Station as something close to an epic event:

*In his black velvet cap and long brown, curiously cut coat or robe, with the still, good eyes in the faintly bronzed face in a frame of flowing grey curls and long grey beard [...] he was like one of the good old sages in some tale from the Arabian Nights.*<sup>77</sup>

These examples show how the Swedish press perceived the Indian Nobel Prize winner as a spiritual agent at the intersection of “East” and “West”. Tagore was described as a wise Oriental as well as a Christ-like figure. This image of Tagore as a prophet informed the Swedish reader of how salvation and spirituality could work together. Sweden, tired of the Theosophical battles and performances, seemed still open for alternative spirituality but would now instead be inclined to the Indian “wise man”.

A possible conclusion is that the fascination with western mediated oriental wisdom in the form of Theosophy gave way to a preference for “genuine Indian” spirituality. After the Great War, Besant never visited Sweden again. Tingley, however, returned to Sweden in 1922 to redeem her reputation. The year after, in 1923, Besant sent the Ceylon-born Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa to Stockholm. Jinarajadasa was elected vice-president of the Society in Adyar in 1921 and travelled widely to promote Theosophy. Juxtaposing the press’ reports of Tingley’s and Jinarajadasa’s visits illustrates what I identify as a shift

73 En hindu får årets litterära Nobelpris, in: Svenska Dagbladet, 14 November 1913, p. 9.

74 Rabindranath Tagore. Årets Nobelpristagare i litteratur, in: Göteborgs Aftonblad, 14 November 1913, p. 6.

75 Nobelpristagaren i litteratur i år: Indiska skalden Rabindranath Tagore, in: Dagens Nyheter, 14 November 1913, p. 1.

76 Vår indiske gäst intime, in: Svenska Dagbladet, 23 May 1921, p. 3. And in Dagens Nyheter, the countess and author Fanny Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, described Tagore as the “gardener”, alluding to Christ: F. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, A Message of Welcome, in: Dagens Nyheter 24 May 1921, p. 6.

77 En intervju med Indiens vise man Rabindranath Tagore, in: Aftonbladet, 24 May 1921, p. 1.

in perception of alternative spirituality after the Great War towards an “authentic” spirituality, which was perceived as having its roots in India.

When Tingley’s film “Katherine Tingley’s Youthful Dream and Its Fulfillment” was launched in Sweden in 1922, *Dagens Nyheter’s* journalist criticized Tingley for portraying herself as a woman with supernatural and almost Delphic qualities. The project was consequently dismissed as “exclusively propaganda”.<sup>78</sup> However, when the same paper reported on Jinarajadasa’s visit the year after, the enthusiasm was tangible. The daily observed that the contrast to Tingley’s “American ‘geschäft’” was “grotesque”. Instead, the publics could rely on the trustworthy Indian doctor’s “pure and faultless” Theosophical message.<sup>79</sup>

I argue that this reaction not only expressed a weariness with Tingley and her Theosophical theatre and doubts about Besant’s World Teacher project. It also conveyed a trust toward what was seen as Indian, genuine, and “pure” spirituality, a tendency expressed in the media that started with Tagore receiving the Nobel Prize and was consolidated by descriptions of actors such as Jinarajadasa. Hence, one outcome would be that the Swedish dailies took part in constructing a shift from preferences for Theosophical spirituality delivered with mixed elements such as performativity or vague science-religious connotations to a spirituality that seemed to come unabridged from the cradle of mysticism: India.

A second conclusion pertains to the gender dimensions of this story. The spiritual go-betweens who gained the new attention were all men. As shown, journalists often implied that part of the Theosophical conflicts was due to the leaders being women. Derogatory cognomens such as “old tarts” or “skirts” were used in the press. Nothing like this occurred in the reports about the Indian men, who instead were described as “wise” or “faultless”.<sup>80</sup> This gender asymmetry can be seen in the discursive publics as well. When reporting Besant’s and Tingley’s lectures, the press noted that ladies in the audience were numerous and that only few men were in attendance. Yet, when actors such as Tagore and Jinarajadasa entered the Swedish media landscape, the audiences suddenly seemed to be evenly distributed between men and women.<sup>81</sup> I suggest that this shift in gender of the speakers, as well as of the discursive publics, affected the making of spiritual knowledge. When the Theosophical ladies mainly attracted women in the audiences, the reports were initially enthusiastic. Over time, the credibility of Theosophy waned, and the creative mix of spiritual elements presented by Besant and Tingley were viewed with ridicule. Instead, the press promoted the messages delivered by the Indian men as

78 Madame Tingley på film, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 March 1922, p. 6.

79 Indisk teosof drar riktlinjer för kulturen, in: *Dagens Nyheter*, 7 September 1923, p. 10.

80 However, when the Swedish Academy announced that Tagore would be the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, a few rural dailies expressed derogatory notions on Tagore as a Bengali poet. Expressions that had disappeared when Tagore visited Sweden in the 1920s.

81 For a more extensive discussion, see J. Selander, *Between East and West, Prophecies and Entrepreneurship, Science and Faith: Knowledge production of alternative spirituality in Swedish press and public 1899–1926*, Masters Thesis, Stockholms universitet, 2018.

authentic by referring to the air of trustworthy, ancient wisdom that they exuded. A plausible conclusion, thus, would be that the media lobbied for men as the more credible spiritual entrepreneurs.

It was mainly the Swedes from the upper-classes and bourgeoisie who showed interest in Theosophy. This was mirrored in sophisticated venues used by the Theosophical lecturers such as the Royal Opera in Stockholm and descriptions of the discursive publics as “elegant” and “noble”.<sup>82</sup> Besant and Tingley were, in a sense, representatives of an international cultural elite, of which the Swedish upper-class counted itself to be a part, or at least wished to be associated with. The third conclusion is, hence, on class. It is hard to tell if there was any correlation between class and the fact that the publics at Visingsö left the venues. Nevertheless, some tentative assumptions can be made. During the period examined, a general disillusionment with humanity developed in all political parties, in Sweden a distrust that took on an epic proportion when the Great War commenced. The Social Democratic Party, which grew stronger in Sweden, fought for solid action plans to make life bearable, such as eight-hour working days. The conservative parties, on the other hand, did not provide such encouraging outlooks for the voters.

One hypothesis I would like to propose is that the somewhat apolitic visions furnished by the spiritual entrepreneurs were attractive to upper-class and bourgeois publics, who did not consider the socialist solutions as viable alternatives. This would mean that the already substantial interest for spirituality prevalent in the upper-class social strata grew even more vital for the bourgeoisie audiences when the spiritual message could show ways to regaining trust toward humanity that was free from (social) politics. When the press then reported on the upper-classes’ involvement with the spiritual entrepreneurs, they thus contributed to the entrenched understanding that interest in spiritual alternatives was in some senses reserved for the bourgeois publics. Thereby, knowledge about spirituality was produced, that offered meaningful and non-political alternatives for the bourgeoisie.

These conclusions, I suggest, were in certain respects conditioned by the fact that Sweden was located at the margins of imperial politics. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Sweden offered geographical and institutional spaces that functioned as a leeway to actors moving in-between cultures to try out their versions of spiritual entrepreneurship: sites that, other than the imperial centres, were allegedly free from political polarizations.