

## Vera Hjelt and the calling of theosophical universal work, 1894–1904

This article discusses the theosophy of Vera Hjelt (1857–1947), who was inspired by Annie Besant. Hjelt led an active life as a schoolteacher, factory owner, writer, occupational safety inspector and member of parliament. Hjelt experienced a theosophical awakening at the latest during the summer of 1894, after which her theosophical endeavours in Besant's spirit and in imitation of her are revealed in Hjelt's letters to her friend Cely Mechelin. These letters have not previously been used in scholarly study. The article argues that it is not possible to understand the underlying ethos behind Hjelt's activities without considering her esotericism. In the worldwide unity of all creations, all bad deeds done to one were done to all. Thus it was essential to improve the working conditions of women in factories, for instance. When Hjelt experienced difficulties in her position as an inspector during the Voikka strike, and became an object of hatred amongst the workers against all her wishes, she was comforted by her theosophical thinking. This article for its part shows the many ways in which Western esotericism exerted an influence on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finnish culture, politics and policy making.

VERA HJELT had a multitude of professional roles in her life; she was a teacher, factory owner, writer and member of the parliament for the autonomous Finnish region for the Swedish People's Party in 1908–17.<sup>1</sup> She was the first female industrial safety

1 I am very grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their learned comments regarding my manuscript. I wish to thank *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* and especially Professor Anu Lahtinen for her kind permission to allow me to translate the original article,

inspector in the Nordic countries and the founder of Finland's Social Museum.<sup>2</sup> Through her various contacts she was linked to important Swedish-speaking networks, and through them, to Sweden. As we will see, Hjelt was theosophically awoken in 1894 and was among the first of the Finnish theosophists.<sup>3</sup> Situating her awakening within the context of the arrival of theosophical discourse in Finland, this article focuses especially on the inspiration Hjelt got from Annie Besant, and showcases an example of the

and the guest editors of the special issue in which the earlier version was published, Antti Harmainen and Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, for their invaluable help with the earlier version. Many thanks are also due to all the colleagues and audiences who have commented my ideas on previous stages of my work on Hjelt. This article is a part of my larger project on esotericism in Helsinki in the 1890s, this being a part of a research project (Uuden etsijät) on esotericism in Finland in 1880–1940, led by Leskelä-Kärki, and funded by the Kone Foundation.

- 2 Regardless of these many activities and her great contemporary fame, Vera Hjelt is no longer widely known in Finland, and she has not been the focus of historical study. There is, however, an excellent biographical article on her in the *National Biography of Finland*, but it is unfortunately not available in English. See Korppi-Tommola (nd). Within the field of social politics, Hjelt has been studied from the vantage point of occupational care. For these, see Vuolle-Selki 2016, 2013; Ahlqvist 2010; Toivonen 2008. Hjelt has been the focus of two Master's theses, see Taskinen 1966 and Ivars 1995.
- 3 For pioneering work on the onset of esotericism in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland by historians, see Leskelä-Kärki 2006: 205–91; Pollari 2009; Harmainen 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Kokkinen 2010. For a concise history of modern theosophy in Finland, see Granholm 2016.

multitude of the ways esoteric thinking has influenced Finnish culture, politics and even legislation, thus confirming that Finland followed the international theosophical currents.

Vera Hjelt was born in Åbo (Turku), but spent most of her professional life in Helsingfors (Helsinki). Her family belonged to the Swedish-speaking elite in Åbo but was not a very wealthy one, and she had to make her living from early on. She was first educated as a schoolteacher in Ekenäs (Tammisaari) and was later invited to Sweden to the famous Nääs School of Crafts to study *slöjd* (woodcrafts) pedagogy; she thus became one of the recognized pioneer proponents of the international *slöjd* fashion.

*Slöjd* occupied much of her life until the early 1900s, her life focusing greatly on teaching it in Helsingfors and elsewhere in the country; for some years she ran a factory manufacturing wood products, some of the products being substantial in size. That activity came to an abrupt end when the factory burned down in 1896.

In the 1890s, Hjelt was active in the women's movement and in initiating many philanthropic ventures. She edited a children's magazine titled *Sländan* – to mention only some of her activities. In her work as a politician, she focused especially on occupational care, and in general for the improvement of the workers' situation. Her party did not accept her most radical ideas, and she resigned as a member of parliament after voting against her party's ruling for an 8-hour working day in 1917. Along with her legislative work and teaching, her main calling in life was her occupation as an industrial safety inspector and later as the curator of the social museum she founded.

This article aims at making visible the hitherto unknown basis upon which Hjelt built her thinking and work. It focuses on the years from 1894 to 1904, the formative years of her theosophical thinking. It shows how her social conscience grew and was built upon a pervasive worldview, upon theosophy, and how she was especially inspired by Annie Besant (1837–1933). Through the example of Hjelt, this



Vera Hjelt. Photo by Charles Riis & Co. Mikkeli City Museums, CC BY 4.0.

article suggests that the esoteric currents of *fin-de-siècle* Finland were, similarly to international trends,<sup>4</sup> by no means marginal or trivial in that context as the actions of people like Hjelt influenced the very political and other elites of the nascent state.<sup>5</sup>

In the later nineteenth century, theosophy was internationally fashionable. The Theosophical Society had been founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in New York in 1875. Contemporaries considered theosophy to be a religion which combined the great world religions, Neoplatonism, Kabbala, ancient mythologies, and Freemasonry (Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 211–12, 217–19; Carlson 2015: esp.

38–43). Theosophy attracted many precisely because it did not require a certain faith or belonging to a denomination, and importantly, it did not preclude theosophists from belonging to a church as long as they committed themselves to universal brotherhood. The members of the society were encouraged to engage in comparative studies of religions, philosophy and natural sciences as well as in an exploration of the mysteries of nature and the latent powers of humans (Ahlbäck 1995: 12–18; Dixon 2001: 3–4; Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 217–19; Harmainen 2010: 7; Santucci 2012: 231–2).

4 Internationally, scholarly literature on the early phases of *fin-de-siècle* esotericism is extensive. As important, and in this context useful, pioneer works must be mentioned Oppenheim 1988: esp. 159–98; Owen 1989, 2004; Dixon 2001; Lavoie 2012; Mannherz 2012; Santucci 2012; Bensaude-Vincent and Blondel 2013; Burfield (1983) 2015. Kontou and Willburn 2012 is especially useful as an introduction to the field.

5 It should be noted that esoteric influences in the lives of Finnish politicians have been studied sparingly. In earlier studies these influences have been discussed as parts of the church political and freedom of religion discussion within the Lutheran Church at the turn of the century. See especially Juva 1960: esp. 260–97; Murtorinne 1967; Lindström 1973: esp. 61–4, 79–83, 103–7, 132–8.

The main sources used in this article are the letters written by Hjelt to her friend Cely Mechelin (1866–1950) who was also an active philanthropist and at least to some extent interested in esotericism. She was the only child of senator Leo Mechelin and Alexandra Mechelin. She was politically active and supported her father in his passive resistance against Russian oppression.

In her letters to Mechelin, unlike elsewhere, Hjelt writes openly about her theosophical interests and life-view. These letters dating from the year 1888 to 1942 are held in Cely Mechelin's collection at the National Archives. Only three letters can be dated to the 1880s, as the correspondence is more intensively conducted only from 1893 onwards. The collection includes some 170 letters from Hjelt of which most are eight pages long, but there are some that are at least twice that long, and some very short letter cards. Mechelin was very organized with her correspondence, and it seems she has kept most of her letters. There are however time gaps in the correspondence since the women did not write to each other when they resided in Helsingfors, or at their summer houses in Bromarv, at the same time. Therefore, the correspondence unfortunately by no means systematically covers their everyday lives – in fact, it tends to lean towards summers and especially the periods when the Mechelins resided in Stockholm.<sup>6</sup>

Hjelt's archival collection is held at the Åbo Akademi University Library. Unfortunately, the collection does not contain her correspondence save a few formal letters. For our purposes, the manuscripts for the series of lectures she held in Helsingfors on world religions are however interesting.<sup>7</sup> Useful, although not relating to her theosophical thinking, is the biography *Vera Hjelt. Banbryterska*, on which Vera Hjelt co-operated with its author, her niece Esther Hjelt-Cajanus (Hjelt-Cajanus 1948).

6 All these letters are located in the National Archives in Helsingfors, Cely Mechelin's Collection, box 3. In the following, to avoid unnecessary repetition, I will refer to the letters without specific archival details and with only the location Hjelt has given for writing the letter and the day in the form of day, month and year. All letters were written in the native Swedish of the two women. All the translations are by the author. The original Swedish forms of the used citations are given in notes, and Vera Hjelt's frequent underlinings are retained.

7 ÅAB, HS, Hjelt, Vera, vols 7, 12, 15, 16.

This article, as said, builds mostly upon Hjelt's letters which provide information which no other sources on her do. It is hardly untypical that this is the case since correspondence often offers a differing viewpoint on an individual from other available source materials. Within the sphere of correspondence, it was possible to 'talk' at least relatively confidentially, even across a geographical distance. Hjelt felt that through letters she could express herself more freely and more intimately to Mechelin than she perhaps ever could face-to-face.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Hjelt mostly kept her theosophical views private raises an ethical challenge. In using the letters the researcher effectively breaks the writers' confidentiality.<sup>9</sup> They reveal the writers' innermost, strongest feelings and thoughts that they chose to leave out of their public writing and talks. Hjelt seems to have kept rather quiet about her theosophy, although she was not secretive about her activities with the early theosophists in Finland.<sup>10</sup> For a scholar, it is challenging but essential to ponder whether studying her convictions takes historical study further enough forward to justify this exposure. I believe in this case that it does. It helps to make visible the strong influence that theosophy had on the *fin-de-siècle* thinking and worldview in Finland – just as it did elsewhere. I believe it to be important that we understand not only the intriguing complexity of the past, but also, through individuals, the processes that have helped create the world we now live in.

8 For a discussion on correspondence as historical source material, see Leskelä-Kärki *et al.* 2011.

9 On the ethics of using correspondence as sources, see Lahtinen *et al.*, 2011: 23–4. See also Kaartinen 2005: 205–44, and *Historiantutkimuksen etiikka* 2017.

10 In 1905, Vera Hjelt was among the eight signatories of a protest article in the Finnish theosophical journal *Omatunto* against Veikko Palomaa's controversial treatise on sexuality, stating that it did not represent, in their view, theosophical ideas of sexuality. On the dispute, see Ahlbäck 1995: 123–30. Veiling esotericist views was not altogether exceptional. For example for the discussion on Kersti Bergroth's veiled anthropology see Mahlamäki 2015: 230–9; for more on Kersti Bergroth, see Mahlamäki 2017.

## Background: early publicity for theosophy in the Finnish media

To make sense of Hjelt's theosophical awakening and to contextualize it in the Finnish esoteric time frame it is useful to take a look at the early media presence of modern theosophy in Finland. This will show how much was known about theosophy in 1894, which, as will be seen, was the latest date by which Hjelt's awakening could have happened.

*Helsingfors Dagblad* seems to have introduced modern theosophy to its pages in May 1884.<sup>11</sup> The story is quite substantial, stretching over three columns, with the title 'New religion in Paris', and reporting that since early May there has been a theosophical lodge operating in Paris. Olcott's presidency is mentioned, and Blavatsky is said to be practically a saint in India. Interestingly, the story offers information on the price of a subscription to its journal and a contact address, and summarises the main ideas of the Theosophical Society. The story itself is curiously condescending but at the same time constructed to inform the reader (*Helsingfors Dagblad* 2.5.1884). The reading audiences in Åbo received the news within a week (Åbo Underrättelser 9.5.1884). It may thus be said that in the spring of 1884 the Swedish-reading audiences both in Helsingfors and Åbo (and subscribers elsewhere) were able to find information both on theosophy and the Theosophical Society.

It seems that there was no extensive<sup>12</sup> media attention on the issue over the next two years. Then a magazine published a letter from England condemning 'esoteric Buddhism' and mentioning theosophy as a sort of schismatic movement within spiritualism which combined eastern learning with Blavatsky's 'scandalous spiritualist charlatanism' (*Tro och lif*

1.4.1886: 5–6). This contemporary Finnish view thus supports Jeffrey Lavoie's argument that modern theosophy was born out of and was inextricably linked to spiritualism (Lavoie 2012: *passim*).

In Finland, newspapers appear to have been quiet about theosophy until *Hufvudstadsbladet* wrote on the issue at the end of December 1886. The anonymous author presents theosophy as a 'higher hypnotism' and states that for those who want to appear more learned the title of choice is 'esoteric Buddhism'. For himself, he emphasizes, it is mere ordinary charlatanism, but he nevertheless suggests that those readers who are interested in the matter look for A. P. Sinnett's writings (*Hufvudstadsbladet* 28.12.1886). Regardless of this othering, mocking and belittling attitude, interest in theosophy was spreading in Finland. In January 1887 *Åbo Tidning*, summarized a story published by the Swedish *Dagens Nyheter*, which was subsequently echoed by *Wiborgsbladet* (*Åbo Tidning* 19.1.1887; *Wiborgsbladet* 22.1.1887). The topic was thus gaining visibility, and advertisements for theosophical books in bookshops gradually appeared, reflecting the spreading interest in the country; for example by late 1887, a Swedish translation of Sinnett's biography of Blavatsky was available for purchase in Finland (*Borgåbladet* 7.12.1887).<sup>13</sup> In the summer, *Vasabladet* reported on Countess Blavatsky's Paris affairs, her fashionable salon and some sensational events concerning theosophy (*Vasabladet* 8.6.1887). It is thus obvious that by 1887, theosophy was no longer known only to a select few; by now it was fashionable.

As if to confirm this fact, in the summer of 1888 *Borgåbladet* and *Uleåborgs Tidning* published a story entitled 'A small history of fashion' which playfully states that the 'greatest thing under the sun is not ... justice, truth, freedom, equality, hypnotism, theosophy, customs duty protection or women's emancipation, but fashion' (*Borgåbladet* 23.5.1888; *Uleåborgs Tidning* 5.6.1888).<sup>14</sup> Here, as we see, theosophy is

11 My timeline is based on searches on digitalized newspapers. As the quality of OCR of these is very poor, it is possible that regardless of my efforts to cross-check the results using various search terms, for instance, I have not found all references to early Modern Theosophy in Finland. In 1995, Tore Ahlbäck wrote on the early onset of theosophy in Finnish papers (a tour de force achieved without the possibilities of digital searches) (see also Granholm 2016: 263–4), and my searches show that the onset of theosophical awareness in Finland was earlier than he was able to present.

12 In the meantime, a passing mention of Blavatsky is made, pointing at the polemics that Blavatsky's notorious doings had raised. *Åbo Tidning* 2.8.1884.

13 In spring, Axel Frithiof Åkerberg's texts received attention when his articles 'Teosofiens verlåsig' and 'Materialism och teosofi' were mentioned to have been published in *Helsingfors Dagblad* 23.4.1887 for the abovementioned, and in *Åbo Tidning* 25.5.1887; *Helsingfors Dagblad* 26.5.1887; *Vasabladet* 28.5.1887 for the latter.

14 In September Blavatsky is mentioned in *Åbo Tidning* 18.9.1888.

listed with other fashionable words of the day; the reader is expected to know what it means. In 1889, theosophy pops up here and there and the first article on theosophy is published in a Finnish-language newspaper, *Lappeenrannan uutiset*.<sup>15</sup> As we can see, there was already a rudimentary knowledge of theosophy and its basic ideas in the late 1880s, and such terms as 'Eastern philosophy' or 'Eastern Buddhism' were known to the reading public in the final years of the decade in Finland. This conclusion is in line with Antti Harmainen's interpretation of early theosophic currents in Finland (Harmainen 2013: 82).

Theosophy was definitely in fashion by the time the Theosophical Society of Sweden was founded. The event was given attention in *Åbo Tidning* on 7 April 1889.<sup>16</sup> Even though we have no means of knowing which newspapers Vera Hjelt read during these years, it is reasonable to assume that as a member of the reading Swedish-speaking elite she was aware of the developments in the field.

In fact, we have some clues about this. First, Vera Hjelt's early letter to Cely Mechelin in summer 1889 hints that she had had free-spirited and spiritualist interests in the 1880s. Hjelt spent her summers with her 'old, intelligent, proper aunts' at the Toija manor in Kisko. The house was ancient but 'full of modern currents, modern free-spirited thoughts', she says (Toija gård 9.8.1889). It is possible that these

15 This article mentions that people interested in esoteric matters were divided into groups such as 'occultism, theosophy, kabbala and freemasonry'. *Lappeenrannan uutiset* 1.10.1889. In addition to these, theosophy was mentioned in relation to books in *Westra Finland* 25.5.1889; *Finland* 29.10.1889 discussed Olcott's trip to Japan. *Missionstidning för Finland* mentioned that Olcott's actions have made missionary activity difficult in Ceylon, and *Wasa Tidning* published an article on spiritualism by Georg Brandes on 24.9.1889.

16 The article presented the names of the Society's leading group and mentioned that even in Finland theosophical learning had received so much attention that it merited a closer look. The article refused to make a judgement. 'Without fundamental expertise on the matter, condemning the learning or the people involved is out of the question', it boldly stated. As Ahlbäck notes, this article in *Åbo Tidning* is a sign of theosophy being an answer to the challenges of the time: established religion was not enough for everyone; theosophy offered something that seemed to require attention and something connected to the aim to work for the best of one's fellow beings; Ahlbäck 1995: 22–3.



Cely (Cecilia) Mechelin, 30.5.1890. Photo by Charles Riis. Helsinki City Museum, CC BY 4.0.

thoughts were related to spiritualism, and they were definitely so in 1893 when she writes that she is reading to her aunt on politics and society and that she is 'quite taken with the spiritualist phenomenon' (Toija gård 18.8.1893).<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, she does not reveal more. Another clue to her possibly longer-lasting interests can be found in a testimony she makes to Alexander Aksakov in spring 1894 in which she states that she has been familiar with spiritualism since 1880, and for the past two years has been very interested in various phenomena, and read widely on the subject (*Psychische Studien* 1894: 351). Theosophy and spiritualism being in many ways intertwined, it was neither an extensive nor unusual move to shift from spiritualist interests to theosophical ones (Lavoie 2012) – an event which soon happened for Hjelt.

17 'Och jag är alldeles förtjust i detta spirituella fenomen.'

## Vera Hjelt's awakening

We can date the awakening of Hjelt's theosophical interests to, at the latest, the early summer of 1894, when she sparkled with enthusiasm for having found 'Eastern philosophy'. I consider it very likely that this discovery had been made in May as she was already working hard on the matter on 22 June 1894:

There is not more frighteningly heavy and intensive work than to work on one's inner development toward the right, good and beautiful ... Each day I fall more and more in love with the Eastern philosophy of which I have with me here a full library. With excitement, I follow these to me hitherto unknown thoughts. The study can capture me so that when the night falls, at 11, 12, I have to specifically decide to put the light out to give others a good night's rest. (Kisko 22.6.1894)<sup>18</sup>

The quotation reveals that she had not been familiar with 'Eastern philosophy' for very long. We can safely consider this philosophy to be theosophy; at that time speaking of, for example, free-spiritedness, Eastern philosophy, Buddhism, yoga, vegetarianism and homeopathy were typically connected to theosophy and other esoteric currents, and at the very least loosely tied to these.

Religious awakening may be an instantaneous event preceded by spiritual longing and searching. The writer and translator Kyllikki Ignatius could point to her own awakening occurring during a spiritual séance in which she was connected to her dead sister (Klinge 2006: 549–50). Similarly, such a moment was recognized by authors Kersti Bergroth (Mahlamäki 2015: 233–5) and Helmi Krohn. For

18 'Det ges inte ett mer fruktansvärdt tungt och intensivt arbete, än att arbeta på sin egen inre utveckling till det som rätt och godt och skönt är. Att varje stund vara på sin vakt mot öfvermäktiga fiender – tankar och känslor och ord – det är ansträngande. Jag är trött ibland, men icke modlös. Den, som är modlös, kan icke tro på att om och först i oändligheten nå ett ideal. Och det är som en lag för mig att tro på idealet. Jag har dag för dag allt mer förälskat mig i den österländska filosofin, af hvilken jag har ett helt bibliotek med mig. Det är med spännande intresse jag följer dessa för mig förut alldeles okända ideer. När kvällen kommer klo 11, 12 måste jag riktigt besluta mig för att släcka ljuset, för att lemna andra nattro, så kan detta studium ta mig med sig.'

Krohn, the spiritualism found after a long search in early 1929 was such a great event that it 'dislocated everything' (Leskelä-Kärki 2006: 257). In Hjelt's case, we have no certainty of such a specific, instantaneous moment. The letter quoted above however does suggest a similar awakening and inspiration to that which the author Minna Canth experienced in 1886 (Harmainen 2014b: 25–6; Juva 1960: 293–4) and on which she wrote to her friend Hilda Asp in the summer of 1887: 'I have begun to study Indian theosophy. It truly captivates me. I think of it days and nights. And I know now why I will be different from other people. It is my spirit that requires this' (*Minna Canthin kirjeet* 1973: 276).<sup>19</sup> Both Hjelt and Canth idealized spiritual growth and wanted to devote their lives to it. For this work, theosophy gave a useful basis for learning which, if and when they so wanted it, could easily be negotiated with their Christianity and their search for the divine (Harmainen 2014: 26–7). Theosophy inspired the likes of Canth, Hjelt, Ignatius and Krohn (Klinge 2006: 542–65; Leskelä-Kärki 2006: 205–91; Holm 2016: 105–64) who believed in humankind and the importance of doing good, to improve the world from an esoteric vantage point.

Theosophy now gave Vera Hjelt a direction. Nevertheless, she was painfully conscious that to awaken was not enough, since theosophy required continuous study. After six years of study she wrote in 1901:

However insignificant the end result, one needs to live years in experiment before one can have some sort of a conviction! How then could we expect of the general audience which does not have the will or qualifications to study to think that occult phenomena were anything else but in the best case, self-delusion. (Helsingfors 27.10.1901)<sup>20</sup>

19 On Pekka Ervast's conversion to theosophy in 1894 see Ahlbäck 1995: 88–9, on Pekka Halonen see Harmainen 2010: 47–8. On Minna Canth's religious views, see Majjala 2014: 307–28; Holm 2016: 77–82.

20 'Man måste lefva sig in under år i ett experiment huru obetydligt detta än må vara, förr än man kan ha någon öfvertygelse! Huru då kunna vänta att människorna i allmänhet, hvilka icke ha lust eller förutsättning för ett sådant sätt att studera, skola tycka att okulta fenomen äro annat än i bästa fall själfbedrägeri.'

Hjelt was thus deeply convinced of the necessity of study in order to develop as a human being. Her words resonate with Sederholm who wrote in 1895 that ‘Theosophy was both a scientific religion and a religious science’ (Juva 1960: 296). Hjelt, who knew Sederholm, wrote that esotericism was ‘A serious matter ... such a natural feeling that it could not be any other way. ... No detail is insignificant to me. Details are as atoms. They construct the whole and without them, no whole would be possible’ (Helsingfors 15.9.1894).<sup>21</sup>

It can be said that Hjelt’s study culminated in Helsingfors in the winter of 1900-1 when she held a private lecture series on world religions (ÅAB, HS, Hjelt, Vera, vols 7, 12, 15, 16; *Hufvudstadsbladet* 4.10.1900).<sup>22</sup> She was very proud of the series, and kept for her archive collection several copies of the manuscript, including two series of handwritten notebooks and typed copies (ÅAB, HS, Hjelt, Vera, vols 7, 12, 15). This hints at the possibility that at some point she considered publishing her lectures – as she published much this is even likely. The meticulous table of contents of her lectures give us an idea as to how her lectures followed on from each other; her topics were religious intolerance, natural religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jewish and Christian religion, Islam, Swedenborgianism and spiritism, the theosophical movement (which she notes is not a religion but a worldview), the upcoming of life, the spiritual soul, planes in the universe, the astral plane, Kamaloka, Devaka, the higher Triad and, finally, to conclude the series, the hidden aspects of religions. As we see, more than half of her lectures were on theosophy. Her sources for the lecture series were extensive, including ‘Besant’s works’, and ‘all theosophical writings’ (*ibid.*, vol. 7.)

But before she could reach this stage, to be able to lecture and to have read ‘all’, intensive study – combined with her day work, writing, editing and societal activities – caused not only joy but also severe

self-criticism. Regardless of her efforts, after a year of intensive study she felt she was ignorant of the basics of theosophy: ‘Ah, how ignorant I am deep down’, she would sigh in 1895. She wrote that daily she had to realize that she was not only boundlessly ignorant but also a blockhead (Toija 24.2.1895).<sup>23</sup> Her choice of word *dumhufvud* [lit. ‘stupid head’], which for us seems like unreasonable self-flagellation, however, stresses the meaning for her of her experience of having so much to learn. To fill in the gaps in her knowledge she would study, driving herself to exhaustion. At one point, she recognized that thorough contemplation of spiritual matters made her low-spirited, which she disliked. To mend this, she had to stop. In July 1897, during her summer vacation, she wrote that to gain new strength she had studied very little (Bromarf 9.7.1897).

Most of the time she read a great deal, though. Due to her lack of extended formal education, she never felt confident in her language skills, cruelly comparing herself to her more educated friends, fluent in several languages. But much reading was available in her native Swedish, and she read – among others – Annie Besant’s works systematically. She ordered the manifold publications printed by the Theosophical Society of Sweden from Stockholm, and bought them there as she visited Stockholm frequently. She also read older Western philosophical works that were intertwined with earlier Christian theosophy. Of these, especially Franz von Baader’s philosophical writings, published in Swedish in 1901, she read fresh from the printers. She was exalted: philosophy was wonderful! She was amazed at the fact that Baader had written – a hundred years earlier – of ‘astral matter, astral bodies and other matters strange to Western thought’ (Helsingfors 24.11.1901; Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 180–3).

Her letters reveal even more of her esoteric readings: she would interpret her dreams with the help of an Egyptian-Chaldean-Persian dream book (Helsingfors 10.11.1901), and in the winter of 1903–4 she read Camille Flammarion’s *L’inconnu et les problèmes psychiques* which had just been translated into Swedish (*Det okända och livets psykiska gåtor*). At first, she considered the work good, albeit boring in

21 ‘Det, som för mig är en allvarlig sak, önskar jag så varmt som jag inte kan säga, att också du skall intressera dig för och helst något sysselsätta dig med. Detta är ju en så naturlig känsla hos mig, att det alls inte kan vara på annat sätt. ... Ingen detalj är för mig en obetydlighet. Detaljerna äro som atomerna. De bilda det hela och utan dem vore ingen helhet möjlig.’

22 On the lectures see also Hjelt-Cajanus 1948: 116 which offers details on its dating that it is highly likely are wrong.

23 ‘Ack, huru okunnig jag ändå i grunden är’; ‘Det är riktigt löjligt att tänka sig med huru ringa mått af kunskaper vian [*sic*] ändå kan komma tillrätta här i denna så oändligt illusoriska världen.’

places, but later noted that it offered nothing new to someone who was knowledgeable in esoteric matters (Helsingfors 5.1.1904). This mention is a rare glimpse into Hjelt's confidence in her understanding of Eastern philosophy; perhaps after ten years of study in theosophy, she no longer felt her capabilities to be lacking, and could build a confident worldview which she thought she needed and which she had for all her life searched for. Especially essential for her was to understand the entity of the world. In this sense she was a hallmark of theosophy: for her, theosophy and knowledge went hand in hand and could not be separated.

### Annie Besant - the guiding light of Theosophy

Vera Hjelt thought that human beings had to do good, an idea which related well to the theosophical idea of universal brotherhood and with Annie Besant's emphasis on love. She - 'Red Annie' - had for a long time been notorious in Britain ever since having, at only 25, not only scandalously separated from her clergyman husband in 1873, but lost her faith too, and been sentenced to prison for promoting indecency by



Annie Besant, c. 1897. Wikimedia Commons.

publishing a book advocating birth control. Besant controversially spoke for female and child workers' rights and opposed the control of prostitution (Dixon 2001: 45-7). For Hjelt, women's occupational health and safety became her greatest mission in life. In this context, it is understandable that she left the political party she represented in parliament when she had to vote against the party line during the vote for an 8-hour working day in 1917 (Hjelt-Cajanus 1948: 246-8; Vuolle-Selki 2013: 87-91).

In 1889, Besant's conversion to theosophy had brought the Theosophical Society immense publicity. Because of Besant's high political standing, many who had previously shied away from it were now forced to reconsider their relationship to theosophy (Dixon 2001: 45-46). When Blavatsky died in 1891, Besant became the Society's brightest star - regardless of the fact that she became its president as late as 1907. After Blavatsky, it was Besant who especially brought women in to the movement. As Dixon notes, up to two thirds of the new members of the society in the 1910s were female (*ibid.* 67-72). The Finnish press, both Finnish- and Swedish-speaking, somewhat reconsidered their attitude toward theosophy after Besant's conversion: Besant was a much less controversial character than Blavatsky. Even Blavatsky's obituaries, in May 1891, had been very strongly worded although the earlier blazing depictions of her as a Russian witch were somewhat subdued in these.

Besant's social work within theosophy was swiftly noted in the Finnish papers: it was, for example, reported that theosophists had gone into competition with the Salvation Army in England as they had amongst other things founded a club for working women and a sewing school (*Kodin-ystävä* 2.1.1892: 4). It was considered that Besant's socialist influence within theosophy had brought out these new initiatives and on the basis of a clearer societal mission rather than merely an emphasis on the esoteric side of the movement, the Society became more legitimate.

### Serving a higher end in Besant's footsteps

Serving other people was for Vera Hjelt the essence of universal work that she called 'work for the world'. This was a term naturally closely tied to the theosophical concept of universal brotherhood. For Besant 'no soul can grow without raising with it the whole human race; no soul can stumble without sending a shock throughout the whole human brotherhood.'



Dixon notes that Besant ‘developed the same theme in lecture after lecture.’ For her, occult science ‘taught that emotions, like microbes can pass from one body to another’, and that one’s misery was everyone’s misery (Dixon 2001: 137–8; ‘Suomen Teosofinen Seura 30-vuotias’ (1937) 2007: 12).

It is very likely that the very lecture by Besant which Vera Hjelt’s friend Cely Mechelin heard in London in the summer of 1898 was linked to these ideas. She had written to Hjelt in detail about what she had heard, and of her impressions. It is unfortunate that Hjelt did not preserve her letters; we must rely only on Hjelt’s reactions to Mechelin’s letter. In her answer, Hjelt mentions how Mechelin’s words were ‘still really alive when I received the letter even though it had been on its way from London for a full week’ (Bromarf 13.6.1898).<sup>24</sup> Mechelin had described Besant and her lecture so well that Hjelt had not been able to sleep at night, and when she had finally fallen asleep in the morning she had dreamt of ‘you and Annie B., Annie B. and you and of all that which is enormous which sometimes moves in the human soul when one happens to get a firm glimpse of the Cosmos’ (*ibid.*).<sup>25</sup>

Hjelt was exceptionally shaken by the letter – she felt she had seen more deeply into things. Mechelin’s description of Besant’s lecture created this important instant of recognition and understanding. Hjelt writes that ‘it is so common that a human only goes along in rounds, tied to the giant ball among millions of balls and forgets that she has more to do than just to hold on tight and passively follow’. She describes further the unique moment she has experienced: ‘there are words that shake one up when she asks: is it I, this spiritually sleeping individual? Why do I sleep when millions are up – and labour?’ (Bromarf 13.6.1898).<sup>26</sup> I by no means wish to attest that Hjelt’s

social work commenced here – she was societally active before her theosophical awakening – but I propose that this forcefully strengthened her life values and gave an impetus for her to make active choices in life, especially considering becoming an industrial safety inspector and later possibly even, when she gave up on Mechelin’s prayers for her, to say yes to the candidacy for the parliamentary elections. She had said an absolute no to these suggestions once the equality vote became a reality in 1906, but gave in in order to be able to advance free-spirited politics and improve the position of those who suffered in the spirit of universal work.

The influence of theosophy is especially visible and significant in Hjelt’s consideration of her role as an industrial safety inspector in the difficult Voikka strike of 1904. The heart of the issue of the strike was the position of the numerous female workers at the paper mill in relation to the factory floor master, Schmitz, who was accused of sexual harassment. The workers forcibly removed the master from the factory. When Hjelt was trying to settle the situation, she considered that she did not have condemning evidence against the master and that the situation could have been settled by negotiation or at official court proceedings. Hjelt therefore lost the trust of the working women but she herself considered that she could not act for them because she was never given all the facts. She never defended herself in public even though she was publically condemned. This attitude is explained by her theosophical convictions: in November 1904, she wrote from Viborg that the worker’s unions shouted that she was useless and a low human being, that she had no spine as she did not resign. ‘But Cely’, she writes, ‘my spine is the peaceful conviction of my conscience that I could but be on the side of law and justice. I cannot resign because I have done right’ (Viborg 24.11.1904; Hjelt-Cajanus 1948: 155–81).<sup>27</sup> She considers that there could hardly have been a more suitable person in Finland to handle the situation because it was precisely she who had

this great theosophical consciousness that I am but a small instrument in a great matter – and that I can find happiness and joy in carrying this load. This thought has constantly been

sofver jag, då millioner vaka och – arbeta? Så förefäll det mig, då du skref om A. B.s föredrag.’

27 ‘Jag kan icke afgå för att jag gjort rätt!’

24 ‘Sådant kärt, godt, vänligt, välskrivet brev! Orden riktigt lefde ännu då jag mottog det, ehuru brevet varit en hel vecka på väg hit från London.’

25 ‘... drömde om dig och Annie B., om Annie B. och dig och hela det där väldiga som rör sig i människosjälens ibland, då man råkar få en fast blick på kosmos.’

26 ‘Det är så vanligt att man rullar med, kedjad vid det stora klotet bland millioner, millioner andra klot, och så glömmar man stundom att man har något annat att utsätta här, än att så godt man förmår hålla sig fast och passivt följa med. Men så kommer några ord och rycker upp en, man stirrar på sig själf och frågar: är detta jag, denna andligt sofvande individ? Hvarför

in my mind and I have been so wonderfully peaceful inside as if outer events and small matters really could not touch me. No resentment, contempt, hatred or such other has been transmitted to me. I am just so happy – calm! (Viborg 24.11.1904; Hjelt-Cajanus 1948: 155–81)<sup>28</sup>

She mentions the influence of theosophy on her concrete choices and writes that her old direction – this is no doubt her life before theosophy – would not have given her similar solutions to these work-related problems. Likewise, she would not have been able to face intrigues. Theosophy comforted her:

But when I look at matters theosophically, I see that this whole repulsiveness with its lies, cries, hatred etc. could as well do some societal good. Namely, I think that precisely because this whole case became so stormy and so widespread and because it could not be solved in a calm, peaceful manner, I believe that these thousands of masters in our workshops and factories will be somewhat more careful in their relations with the women working under them (Viborg 24.11.1904; Hjelt-Cajanus 1948: 155–81)<sup>29</sup>

Hjelt goes on to explain that it is natural that it is she who has been drawn to the matter and used for the advancement of good, albeit through evil, as people are so slack that they must be shaken up by such means. She does not care about her reputation,

28 '[T]y jag har detta stora teosofiska medvetandet, att jag varit ett litet medel för en stor sak \_\_\_ och kan finna t.o.m. lycka och glädje i att ha fått utföra det. Denna tanke har föresväfvat mig hela tiden och inom mig har jag varit så underbart lugn, likasom om de yttre händelserna och smådelserna egentligen alls inte skulle berört mig. Ingenting af grämelse, förakt, hat emot motparten eller dylikt har heller fastnat på mig. Jag är blott så lyckligt – lugn!'

29 'Men ser jag på saken teosofiskt, så finner jag, att ur hela detta elände med lögn, verop, hat o.s.v. likväl kan framgå någonting samhälligt godt. Jag tänker mig nämligen, att just för att historien blef så stormande och vidutbredd, och icke kom att göras upp på den stillsamma lagliga vägen, så tror jag, att dessa tusentals mästare i våra verkstäder och fabriker bli något aktsammare i sitt förhållande till de under dem arbetande kvinnorna.'

she assures Mechelin, for 'one individual is insignificant when thousands of women really do suffer under the pressure of their factory masters' (Viborg 24.11.1904; Hjelt-Cajanus 1948: 155–81).<sup>30</sup> She was happy to have been able to make this sacrifice. The point was not everything unpleasant that was said about her, but the fact that she was able to lessen sexual harassment in factories and thus improve women's position. No doubt Hjelt's social standing distanced her from working women. Looking from their angle, Hjelt carried with her the privileged gentry background and her high-status official role, but for Hjelt, the situation was clear in the light of theosophy. In 1898, she had straightforwardly stated: 'Annie B. is the one who has taught me the most, especially because she does not reject anything but also looks at the seed of truth in everything and in everyone's thinking'. Besant's free-spiritedness spoke to her especially, but she found in her role model other characteristics to imitate, such as devotedness and strong will (Bromarf 13.6.1898).<sup>31</sup> The example gave Hjelt an opportunity to be a heroine, just like Besant.

### Free from chains

It required constant work and active freeing oneself from the chains of conventionality to build oneself into a free-spirited individual who lived according to the ideal and who worked for the universal good. Going back to August 1902, we find Vera Hjelt writing a letter to her friend and pondering being in the service of a higher end. She had grown impatient with all that she was tied to. She felt that theosophy was always a stronger part of the search of herself and her mission in life. She felt everything had its proper time, even narrow-minded thinking. She missed the free spirit, she was tired of being a slave to her upbringing and of conventional lies, and she notes how difficult it is to observe the profound impact of childhood circumstances on one's mind. She wanted to rid herself of the current of tradition (Bromarf 1.8.1902). Her solution to this was to carry

30 '[S]å är ju en människa bra litet, mot att tusenden bland kvinnor värkeligen lida under mästarens förtryck.'

31 'Annie B. är den som lärt mig mäst, särskildt däri genom att hon ingenting förkastar, utan uppsöker t.o.m. en doft af sanning i alt och allas tänkesätt.'

out theosophical, universal work inspired by Annie Besant.

Hjelt writes that she lives according to theosophy. The way she specifies this is especially interesting. She clarifies that she does not live out of theosophy so that 'every letter of the alphabet might look true to me, not Theosophy as a system, but the spirit and truth, light and love, that spreads across all that is incomprehensible in existence, people, religions, and everything' (Bromarf 13.6.1898).<sup>32</sup> This we need to read literally: theosophy was in all of her, a filter through which to understand the mysteries of the world. It is not performance or fulfillment, but being *in* one's view of life, and in it, loose from its chains.

Because of this profound living in theosophy, it was an especially weighty moment in Hjelt's life when, after ten years of theosophical study, she met Annie Besant in Stockholm in September 1904. Here, her worldview again evolved into a new and profound experience. She analyses the emotions the Stockholm events caused in her: 'I am really quite happy! I have work, I'm relatively healthy, I have money to move around, I warmly love my friends, I do not fear death, and the boundless conviction in the eternal in existence and the great goal of everything does not leave me for a moment!' (Mariehamn 15.9.1904).<sup>33</sup> This conviction and inspiration probably were behind her responses to the situation in Voikka as well.

In her next letter, she comments a bit more about her feelings relating to her meeting Besant. She scribbles right up to the corners of the paper: 'My enthusiasm relating to my visit to Stockholm continues high. In my soul, I am still unspeakably happy. It is something I cannot understand in a moment. But perhaps I can one time describe to you what in my meeting with A.B. gave me this feeling of high happiness!' (Helsingfors 26.9., 28.9., 1.10.1904).<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately,

she did not return specifically to this in her subsequent letters. Pekka Ervast, a fellow theosophist from Helsingfors, also attended the Stockholm meeting and was likewise overwhelmed by Besant's magnificence. He describes how the grand hall was full of the audience holding its breath while Mrs Besant described the belief and love of truth seekers, the way the seeker would completely surrender to the service of the truth like a soldier, not fearing death. Ervast was spellbound (Ervast 1980: 129–30), very much as was Vera Hjelt.

We can shed some more light on her thoughts with another letter in which she writes about a copy of Besant's London lectures that she and her friends had copied out as a present to Mechelin. 'What she says is wonderful, you will see', she writes and stresses that Besant speaks to developed, highly educated people like no one else. She felt that Besant had come to this world especially for the needs of the soul of the developed human (Kuopio 18.10.1904). Without a doubt, she felt this need in her soul, to put it to use in her work.

When she tells her friend that she had also sent Mechelin a short biographical text on Besant, Hjelt ponders that it ends in a similar understanding of her own. This is that what Besant speaks of as

the worldview of the future, something that we are not on our way, a new phase which has all the long-awaited, originally 'mystical' looking, phenomena but which become clearer and clearer until they can become the focus of universal study; now they have been that for individuals here in the Western countries. And we do not believe anything that has not been proven true in the West. Theosophy goes further. It says: do not only deny possibilities, this way you do not have to believe but only to note it yourself. (Kuopio 18.10.1904)<sup>35</sup>

ännu. Jag är alltfortfarande så obeskrifligt lycklig i mitt sinne. Det är någonting som man inte i ett tag kan förstå. Men kanske kan jag engång förklara för dig hvad det var i mitt sammanträffande med A.B. som gaf mig den där känslan af hög lycka!' Triple underlining in the original. This is a long letter composed on various days.

35 'Den afslutas i öfverenstämmelse med min uppfattning, att "detta" hom talar om är framtidens åskådningssätt. Det är någonting, som vi hålla på att gå in uti nu. Ett nytt skede, med alla sina långt förut anade företeelser, som till en början synts "mystiska", men

32 '... ty teosofin lever jag af. Icke så, att hvar bokstaf i det man kallar teosofi skulle synas mig sann. Icke 'systemet teosofi', utan andan och sanningen, ljuset och kärleken, som genom den spridt sig öfver det obegripliga i tillvaron, öfver människor, religioner och allt.'

33 'Jag är egentligen bra lycklig! Arbetet har jag, ganska frisk är jag, penningar har jag att röra mig med, mina vänner älskar jag varmt, döden är jag icke rädd för och en gränslös öfvertygelse om det eviga i tillvaron och det stora ändamålet med allt – lämnar migh icket ett ögonblick!'

34 'Min entusiasm från Stholms vistelsen står lika hög

Hearing and reading Besant and being amazed at her productivity influenced Hjelt's writing and thinking on it. The question of writing never seems to have left her. After her awakening to theosophy in 1894, she pondered on the fact of how she had in her youth only written amusing texts. Now – she was about to turn 37 in August – everything was serious, responsible and greater. She consoled herself that there was perhaps something deeper in the future – and the truth itself (Toija 9.7.1894). She returned to the question of her writing 20 years later. In June 1914 she was in Baden, Switzerland and wrote to Mechelin: 'I have searched for time for fiction writing all my life but I have always had to put it on a shelf to wait for the time being and it will perhaps remain there until the second incarnation. Prosit. I have been somewhat useful instead' (Baden 8.6.1914).<sup>36</sup>

### In the spirit of universal work: conclusions

It goes without saying that in her contemporaries' minds, Vera Hjelt had indeed been 'somewhat useful'. She was active in various fields and politically she practised in the footsteps of her idol, Cely Mechelin's father, senator Leo Mechelin, to promote a liberal worldview. In her parliamentary legislative work she was uncompromising in the matters she considered important and good, especially so when she advanced social legislature. In looking only at her first ten years as a theosophist, this work could not be fully addressed here, and it remains the duty of future scholars to ascertain the role of theosophy in her day-to-day parliamentary work.

As I have shown above, theosophy created in Hjelt's life a strong ideal of the good human being, a good life, and a proper purpose. On this, she built her understanding of her own self, but also her professional and political activities. This has previously gone unnoticed and remained invisible since the

som klarna allt mer och mer till dess de kunna bli föremål för den allmänna forskningen; nu ha de varit det blott fr den enskilda [hos oss i västerlandet](#). Och vi tro ju inte på någonting, förr än det är konstateradt här i västerlandet. Teosofin går ännu längre. Den säger: förneka blott icke möjligheterna, "så behöver du icke tro, blott konstatera själf!"

36 'Men det där skönlitterära har jag ju sökt tid till under hela mitt lif, men alltid fått lägga det på hyllan tills vidare och där ligger det väl till en annan inkarnation. Prosit. Jag har ju varit litet nyttig istället.'

strong, esoteric foundations of her worldview and of universal work can only be seen properly in her hitherto unstudied letters. They do reveal a passionate theosophist for whom life in the footsteps of Annie Besant was a dream come true.

From the point of view of scholarship, it's stirring to realize how easily such a central element in someone's life can go unnoticed. This should make us constantly question ourselves whether our interpretations are trustworthy. Are we able to recognize the barely visible currents underlying words and deeds? Cover-ups and forgettings of the past have inevitably had an influence on the ways, for example, esoteric movements have been seen as marginal in historical studies. It has been especially so for a long time in Finland where it has been only in recent years that we have seen a systematic historical study of the subject. Both esotericists themselves and historians have been guilty of these past cover-ups. Admittedly, historians have ignored the effects of religion *per se*, as they have considered it to have had little influence on 'greater matters', religion being seen as a matter for the private sphere.

Vera Hjelt's life depicts how esoteric thinking could manifest itself as a building block of someone's worldview. Thus, *fin-de-siècle* esotericism has had a great influence on all levels of Finnish society. For Hjelt, Annie Besant was the greatest guiding light who brought to her life an understanding that she was material for the great universal work. She looked at this work in Besantian spirit and was convinced that she would carry it out all her life. This view included a firm idea of sacrifice which was visible in her attitude to the criticism she received in the course of the Voikka strike. This sacrifice very likely included the idea that the making of the sacrifice was to be left invisible and unspoken. Theosophy was for Hjelt a worldview and a conviction which spread out above all of her doing and thinking like an invisible but strong fabric. ■

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