

Anthroposophy

The contemporary spiritual movement known as Anthroposophy emerged in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century as an offshoot of Theosophy. Over the past century Anthroposophy has become one of the most successful esoteric currents worldwide, known especially for practical initiatives that have gained public recognition in diverse fields, from education to agriculture to health care. Waldorf schools, biodynamic farming, Anthroposophical medicine, Camphill communities, and Weleda and Demeter products all form part of the Anthroposophist movement. Anthroposophy has also had a noticeable impact on modern artistic and literary tendencies and on the rise of Green politics. It is often seen as a prime example of the flourishing of alternative spirituality in today's world.

Anthroposophy was founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), one of the foremost Western esoteric teachers in the modern era. Steiner's life spanned German-speaking Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was born in the Austrian-ruled Habsburg Empire in 1861 and died in Switzerland in 1925, living most of his adult life in Germany. After initial forays into journalism, literary criticism, and philosophy, Steiner turned to mystical and occult topics in 1900. He joined the German branch of the Theosophical Society in 1902 and within a few months became its General Secretary. Steiner held this position for a decade before breaking away to found the Anthroposophical Society in 1913. He devoted the years after World War I to establishing a series of institutional frameworks for carrying his spiritual teachings into daily life: the first Waldorf school opened in 1919, followed by Anthroposophical medicine in 1920 and biodynamic agriculture in 1924. At his death a year later, Steiner – by that point a recognised if controversial figure in German cultural life – left behind a prodigious body of teachings and an organisational apparatus that would long outlive their founder.

According to internal figures from the Anthroposophical Society, the current membership totals roughly 45,000 worldwide, a third of them in Germany. The movement is particularly well developed in central and northern Europe, with a relatively high profile in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. Anthroposophy has also begun to generate a substantial scholarly literature, despite the general obstacles to scholarship on esotericism, and Steiner's ideas continue to spark public debate. Due in part to its schismatic origins as a spin-off from Theosophy, the history of Anthroposophy has been notably fractious. Rival camps lay claim to Steiner's teachings, and there are fierce disputes over their proper interpretation and implementation. Even the publishing rights to Steiner's voluminous work, including thousands of transcribed lectures, remain contested. Rather than a unified worldview or group, Anthroposophy is perhaps better understood as a disparate movement based on a shared conceptual inheritance, what Steiner called his "spiritual science".

In light of this convoluted background, Anthroposophy's complex tenets resist straightforward summary. Steiner borrowed significantly from Theosophical thinkers like Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant while introducing his own distinctive elements. Like comparable currents of occult thought around the turn of the twentieth century, Anthroposophy presented itself as an antidote to the debasement of modern life by materialism, intellectualism, and rationalism, which Steiner held responsible for alienating people from true spiritual experience and disrupting their connection to the cosmos. It was to be based not on revelation or faith but on cultivating individual powers of supersensible perception. Steiner described Anthroposophy as "a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe" (Steiner 1927, 13). Anthroposophy promised its practitioners direct individual access to the world of the spirit.

The fundamental tension within Anthroposophy derives from the contrast between this emphasis on personal spiritual experience and the extremely detailed descriptions of the "higher worlds" contained in Steiner's published works. Steiner insisted that these latter reports were based entirely on his own powers of clairvoyant perception, despite numerous similarities to previous Theosophical texts. For many Anthroposophists, Steiner's elaborate narratives of spiritual evolution, with their richly intricate specifics and inspiring sweep, are invested with virtually divine authority (Ahlbäck 2008). Steiner's

followers consider him an initiate, privy to mysteries long hidden from the masses, a herald of things unseen. This status stands uneasily alongside Steiner's repeated appeals to his readers to explore the "higher worlds" for themselves by following his indications for developing their own capacity for supersensible perception.

In a series of books published while he was the head of the Theosophical Society in Germany, Steiner spelled out the core principles of what he came to call Anthroposophy. These primary works include *Theosophy* (1904), *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* (1905), *Cosmic Memory* (1908) and *Outline of Occult Science* (1909). Continually revised throughout Steiner's lifetime, they offer partially contradictory accounts of the nature of human existence and the structure of the spiritual realm. At the center stands a complex chronicle of cosmic evolution derived largely from Theosophical sources, coupled with explanations of the role of karma and reincarnation in individual destiny. According to Anthroposophy, the spiritual world permeates all aspects of everyday reality; it is not separate from the physical plane, but suffuses it and shapes its contours. Spiritual reality is of a higher order than the mundane happenings around us; events in the material world are a reflection of impulses working themselves out in the spiritual world. The aim of Anthroposophy's path toward higher knowledge is to see past the limitations of ordinary consciousness and achieve authentic experience of the vastly more profound spiritual reality.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Anthroposophy as an esoteric doctrine is its pronounced Christian character. Steiner's cosmology is crowned by a complex hierarchy of angels and archangels, while the secrets of human history revolve around the "Mystery of Golgotha" two millennia ago. What Steiner called the "Christ Impulse" played a crucial part in his mature teachings, the redemptive power that could vanquish the forces of materialism, restore the proper balance to the course of evolution, and bring humankind to the fulfillment of its cosmic potential. But the figure of Christ that features so prominently in Anthroposophist spirituality is decidedly unorthodox. Steiner's Christ is both part of the traditional divine trinity and a solar deity or "Sun-Spirit". The current representative of Christ in the present stage of evolution is the Archangel Michael. Steiner's syncretic ingenuity wove elements from other religious traditions into this creative re-working of Christian imagery. His revision of the canonical Gospels presents Jesus, vehicle for the incarnation of the Christ spirit, as a fusion of Buddha and Zarathustra. The chief

adversaries of the Christ Impulse, meanwhile, are the demonic beings Lucifer and Ahriman, the former a familiar presence in conventional Christian contexts, the latter drawn from Zoroastrianism. Similarly inventive combinations of diverse materials proliferate throughout Steiner's works.

Anthroposophical concepts of the individual are just as complex. Steiner delineated four distinct components of the human form, at ascending levels of spiritual sophistication: the physical body, the etheric body, the astral body, and the I. Each is associated with different spiritual capacities and different degrees of occult insight. This arrangement reflects the hierarchical model underlying so much of Anthroposophist thought, with the physical body as the lowest and the I the highest aspect of the human being. Steiner's tripartite conception of body, soul, and spirit is structured in a comparable way. The body is mortal, the spirit eternal, and the soul mediates between the two. Distinctions like these are essential to Anthroposophy's model of karma and reincarnation, another instance of Steiner's adaptation of Theosophical ideas. Every human lifetime represents a particular incarnation or temporary physical manifestation of an individual spiritual core that reincarnates successively over many thousands of years. Spiritual advancement or regression are marked by different physical features and different life circumstances. Illness, for example, is a karmic phenomenon. Such beliefs indicate the extent of overlap between Anthroposophy and related esoteric worldviews.

Alongside teachings about higher worlds and the mysteries of the soul, Steiner offered a grand tableau of the evolution of the cosmos. In a compilation of often fantastically detailed descriptions, which he claimed were based on his clairvoyant reading of the Akashic record, Steiner portrayed the evolving universe from the distant past to the far future through a series of seven stages stretching across eons. Though named after celestial bodies – Saturn, Sun, Moon, Earth, Jupiter, Venus, Vulcan – these stages refer not to concrete locations but to the sequential development of the spiritual hierarchies whose operations form the foundation for all that exists. Much of Steiner's seminal *Outline of Occult Science* is occupied with elucidating this emanationist narrative in all its minute particulars. In *Cosmic Memory*, on the other hand, the focus is more recent. Here Steiner reconstructs the development of human races and civilisations during the course of the Earth stage of cosmic evolution, which is once again divided into seven eras: Polarian,

Hyperborean, Lemurian, Atlantean, Aryan, and two future eras still to come. Borrowing Blavatsky's terminology of "root races", Steiner devoted close attention to the Lemurian root race and the Atlantean root race (each further subdivided into seven sub-races) as well as the currently dominant Aryan root race. At the end of their age, Steiner explained, the now lost continents of Lemuria and Atlantis were destroyed, and the surviving remnants – "our Atlantean forefathers" – migrated to new lands to found the next cycle of civilisations. The link that Steiner posited between the Atlantis myth and the Aryan myth was common in occult texts around the turn of the twentieth century.

Due to its evolutionary framework, Anthroposophy's cosmology and anthropology are closely intertwined, and both can be difficult to reconcile with Anthroposophy's epistemology. The determinist and apocalyptic strands in Steiner's prolific output seem at odds with his promotion of a philosophy of freedom (Martins 2012). His ornate racial metaphysics are supposed to culminate one day in a "Universal Human" beyond the bounds of race and nation. Internal contradictions of this sort are not surprising in a movement as expansive as Anthroposophy, but they frequently conflict with adherents' self-perception. Though Steiner insisted on the coherence and consistency of his works over time, scholars have noted numerous incongruities. Steiner saw Anthroposophy as the proper heir of the treasured inheritance of German Idealism, Goethe, and the classical tradition, and he borrowed freely from literature, philosophy, the sciences and the arts. This eclectic background lends his teachings much of their dynamism and élan, while generating ongoing difficulties for his followers as they adapt his teachings to the modern world.

Despite these challenges, Anthroposophy has been remarkably successful in bringing esoteric precepts to life. Its influence on New Age spirituality and within the environmental milieu is plain. In its growing practical endeavors, above all Waldorf schooling and biodynamic agriculture, the Anthroposophist movement continues to display unusual vitality. There are now more than a thousand Waldorf schools worldwide, known as Steiner schools in some countries, and the current trend seems to point to continued expansion. They offer an alternative to conventional academic instruction and its standards of achievement, marketing themselves as an education that fosters creativity and individuality through an emphasis on imagination and a holistic approach to learning. In continental Europe as well as in Anglo-American contexts, Waldorf schools attract a

prosperous and cosmopolitan clientele and pride themselves on non-conformist practices, with ample attention to the arts and music. The appeal of Waldorf pedagogy lies in its promise of an educational experience in which "heart, head, and hands" form an integrated whole.

Yet the relation between Waldorf schooling and alternative education ideals remains ambivalent, due in no small measure to its Anthroposophical heritage. Waldorf pedagogy is teacher-centred rather than student-centred, and Steiner repeatedly insisted that teachers must exercise "unquestioned authority" in the classroom (Steiner 1995, 34, 61, 63). Critical thinking is often discouraged as inappropriate for children. According to the Waldorf model, every child develops through seven-year cycles premised on the stages by which souls incarnate into their bodies. In an esoteric version of the ancient theory of humours, each child is assigned to one of four temperaments: melancholic, sanguine, choleric, or phlegmatic. Physical traits are seen as the expression of spiritual factors; thus left-handedness, for example, is a "karmic weakness" that must be corrected.

Anthroposophist beliefs structure the curriculum and sometimes colour the public image of the schools; Waldorf representatives warn about the malign influence of the demon Ahriman, while Waldorf periodicals carry articles with titles like "Human beings are not descended from the apes". Teacher training frequently focuses more on Anthroposophy than on pedagogical skills (Quiroga 2015).

In some instances these facets of Anthroposophical education have sparked increased scrutiny of the Waldorf model. Critics charge that the recent success of Waldorf pedagogy is based on evasiveness regarding its Anthroposophist underpinnings. There are concerns about science instruction; educational scholars observe that Anthroposophy represents a "rehabilitation of mythical forms of thought" in the guise of science (Ullrich 2014, 135). Through the Waldorf movement, Anthroposophy has even become the subject of court cases attempting to determine whether the schools constitute religiously based institutions, a crucial consideration in the United States, where public funding might run afoul of constitutional requirements about the separation of church and state (Rhea 2012). These judicial proceedings have elicited indignant responses from Waldorf representatives, since Steiner's followers view Anthroposophy as a "spiritual science" emphatically unlike

traditional religion. Still, the various controversies surrounding Waldorf schooling do not seem to have hindered its ongoing global advance.

The growth of the biodynamic movement has not received as much attention as the rise of Waldorf education, but it nonetheless exemplifies Anthroposophy's accomplishments and uncertainties in the twenty-first century. Steiner inaugurated this unusually successful form of organic agriculture with a series of lectures in 1924, less than a year before his death. Esoteric principles are at the heart of the biodynamic method, which relies on astrological techniques in determining planting and harvesting patterns and homeopathic techniques in preparing compost and field additives. Like other proponents of organic cultivation, biodynamic practitioners reject artificial fertilisers and pesticides, but the biodynamic approach includes many distinctive features. It views the farmstead as a living organism and promises spiritual sustenance as well as nutritional sustenance. According to its advocates, biodynamic growing allows plants to absorb cosmic energies from the soil and the heavens and helps restore balance to the natural world. With its Anthroposophist foundations, it represents a marriage of the ecological and the spiritual, an attempt to heal the earth by converting esoteric axioms into practical means of sustaining life.

These aspirations fit well with recent trends. Despite challenges to their scientific legitimacy, biodynamic methods form part of a contemporary tendency to invest the growing and preparation of food with deeper meaning. Steiner's contribution to agriculture marks a conspicuous part of this "spiritual turn that looks to food as a source of the sacred in the everyday" (Norman 2012, 229). The biodynamic movement is well established in Germany, where Demeter products can be found far from the usual niche markets for organic goods. Weleda cosmetics and pharmaceuticals are a further example of biodynamic success, a popular and recognisable branch of naturopathic medicine. Biodynamic wines are particularly fashionable, and high-end sectors of the market have turned increasingly toward the cachet conveyed by the biodynamic label. According to data from Demeter International, Italy now has the second largest total acreage of registered biodynamic cultivation in the world, behind Germany. Unexpected as this outgrowth of Anthroposophy may appear, it is an important part of the movement's public face and a powerful reason for its continuing appeal.

Within the far-flung community of Steiner's followers, projects like Waldorf education and biodynamic farming are sources of pride as well as controversy. More orthodox believers contend with those who favour modernising Anthroposophist principles and adapting them to a secular society. Some adherents prefer to focus on other branches of Anthroposophy, such as Grail mysticism or Rosicrucian rituals, and have no trouble finding ample material in Steiner's works. There are sectarian and fundamentalist Anthroposophists just as in any other spiritual movement. One of the main challenges Anthroposophy faces today is the schismatic tendency inherited from Theosophy, a dynamic exacerbated by the lack of an internal culture of debate and longstanding Anthroposophist anxieties about critique. When disagreements arise, this legacy leaves little room for any option other than apostasy. As a consequence, internal disputes among Anthroposophists quickly escalate into all-out battles for the soul of the movement.

Beyond problems such as these, Anthroposophy's public institutions have invited increasing levels of external inquiry in recent years. Several related issues have been at the forefront of public discussion, harking back to debates that have dogged the movement since Steiner's day. One troubling tendency has to do with an ongoing proclivity for conspiracy thinking in some corners of the Anthroposophist milieu, a common trend in occult contexts. Another concerns the notable difficulty many Anthroposophists encounter in facing the movement's own past, including its complicated and compromised history during the Nazi era. With few exceptions, Anthroposophist treatments of such questions display an unabashedly apologetic character, making it all the harder for Steiner's followers to come to terms with the less agreeable elements of their heritage. Last, the unresolved ideological inheritance from Steiner's racial teachings continues to bedevil contemporary Anthroposophy. Controversies over the matter still reverberate, in the absence of critical Anthroposophist engagement. The problem is not merely Steiner's own obscure racial views, but their further elaboration by successive generations of his followers, from Germany to Norway to North America (Hansen 2015).

Scholarly debates on Anthroposophy have raised additional questions about Steiner's intellectual development and the relation of his pre-1900 philosophical works to his post-1900 esoteric teachings, revealing a lively range of viewpoints across the disciplinary boundaries of history, philosophy, and religious studies. Other assessments

examine the role of Orientalist assumptions in the Anthroposophist appropriation of Eastern spiritual traditions, or the status of individual insight within Anthroposophical variants of esotericism. At times these topics can impede meaningful exchange between scholars and believers. For many Anthroposophists, personal spiritual experience trumps critical reflection and analysis. Steiner's esoteric epistemology calls for an attitude of "devotion" and "reverence" while denigrating "critical judgment" (Steiner 1923, 9). Like other esoteric currents, however, Anthroposophy regularly invokes the rhetoric of science. Such claims are often unconvincing to scholars who consider Anthroposophy's conception of spiritual knowledge more akin to the dissemination of wisdom than the procedures of science (Zander 2007, 611). Anthroposophy nevertheless continues to enjoy a varied and animated scholarly reception.

Whether sympathisers or sceptics, observers of Anthroposophy recognise its standing as an uncommonly fruitful esoteric current. Its promise of spiritual and social transformation carries a potent allure, and even detractors acknowledge its ability to translate occult principles into practical action. Aside from crises of its own making, the movement faces a future of opportunity. But that future may require a thoroughgoing process of reformation and renewal from within if the movement is to escape the shadow of its past. It remains to be seen whether Anthroposophy can live up to this potential.

Peter STAUDENMAIER

Bibliography

- Ahlbäck, Tore. 2008. "Rudolf Steiner as a Religious Authority." In *Western Esotericism*, edited by Tore Ahlbäck, 9-16. Åbo: Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History.
- Brandt, Katharina, and Olav Hammer. 2013. "Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy." In *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, edited by Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, 113-33. Leiden: Brill.
- Chalker-Scott, Linda. 2013. "The Science Behind Biodynamic Preparations: A Literature Review." *HortTechnology* 23: 814-19.
- Ebbestad Hansen, Jan-Erik. 2015. "The Jews – Teachers of the Nazis? Anti-Semitism in Norwegian Anthroposophy." *Nordeuropa-Forum* 17: 161-216.
- Lindenberg, Christoph. 2012. *Rudolf Steiner: a biography*. Great Barrington: Anthroposophic Press.
- Martins, Ansgar. 2012. *Rassismus und Geschichtsmetaphysik: Esoterischer Darwinismus und Freiheitsphilosophie bei Rudolf Steiner*. Frankfurt: Info3.

- Norman, Alex. 2012. "Cosmic Flavour, Spiritual Nutrition? The Biodynamic Agricultural Method and the Legacy of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy in Viticulture." In *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, edited by Carole Cusack and Alex Norman, 213-34. Leiden: Brill.
- Oberman, Ida. 2008. *The Waldorf Movement in Education from European Cradle to American Crucible, 1919-2008*. Lewiston: Mellen.
- Quiroga Uceda, Patricia. 2015. "Waldorf Teacher Education: Historical Origins." *Encounters in Theory and History of Education* 16: 129-45.
- Rhea, Michael. 2012. "Denying and Defining Religion Under the First Amendment: Waldorf Education as a Lens for Advocating a Broad Definitional Approach." *Louisiana Law Review* 72: 1095-1127.
- Schmidt, Robin. 2011. "Anthroposophie – eine Übersicht zu ihrer Geschichte von 1900 bis 2000." In *Anthroposophie in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, edited by Rahel Uhlenhoff, 333-84. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 1923. *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment*. London: Putnam's.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 1914. *An Outline of Occult Science*. London: Theosophical Publishing Society.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 1927. *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*. London: Anthroposophical Publishing Company.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 1995. *The Kingdom of Childhood: Introductory Talks on Waldorf Education*. Hudson: Anthroposophic Press.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 2013 – . *Schriften – Kritische Ausgabe*. Edited by Christian Clement. Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog / Basel: Rudolf Steiner Verlag.
- Traub, Hartmut. 2011. *Philosophie und Anthroposophie: Die philosophische Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners -- Grundlegung und Kritik*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Ullrich, Heiner. 2014. *Rudolf Steiner*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Zander, Helmut. 2007. *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884–1945*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007.
- Zander, Helmut. 2011. *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie*. Munich: Piper.