

Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy, and Tradition

by Rodney Blackbird

René Guénon and others have detailed the fundamental objections integral tradition has to the syncretisms of the Theosophy movement, so prominent among Westerners attracted to eastern traditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Less well documented are the shortcomings of other, related, movements that have developed out of Theosophy and that have been at the apogee of their influence in more recent decades. The most important of these is undoubtedly Anthroposophy, a peculiarly European and Germanic offshoot of mainstream Theosophy, centered on the writings and teachings of Rudolf Steiner.

The Anthroposophical Society has been described by its critics, who characterize it as a type of “cult”, as the world’s “largest occult organization”. Based in Switzerland where it is housed in strange, ‘organic’ architecture, the design of Dr. Steiner himself, the Society describes its work as ‘Spiritual Science’ and perpetuates its founder’s distinctive amalgam of German esotericism and eastern Theosophy, as well as co-ordinating the many practical endeavors initiated by Steiner and by which he is increasingly well known, such as the Steiner (or Waldorf) education system. Throughout middle-class life in European countries, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the United States one is likely to encounter some aspect of the Anthroposophical Society’s activities. Health food stores sell a range of products made according to Steiner’s recommendations and carrying Steiner-endorsed labels; Steiner schools are in most major cities; a Steiner-inspired Church prospers; gardeners use Steiner’s system of organic composting and many other Steiner-connected ideas and products turn up in surprising places. In Australia, Walter Burley

Griffin, the architect who designed the national capital, Canberra, was influenced by Steiner's ideas, using his social and political theory of a 'Threefold Commonwealth' as the guiding principle of the city's organization. Although it is not numerically large, the Anthroposophical movement has been remarkably successful in establishing its presence and influence in some sections of contemporary Western society.

It is somewhat alarming to many ordinary suburbanites to discover beneath a respectable, middle-class and ostensibly Christian veneer, the movement's roots in European occultism and its highly unusual, if not bizarre, interpretations of traditional Eastern wisdom. It is now well-documented that Steiner had, early in his career, an unfortunate association with the magical (left-hand) organization, the O. T. O. (Ordo Templi Orientis), with the English satanist Aleister Crowley, and with several unsavory German species of freemasonry that are usually associated in the popular mind with 'Black Magic'. Steiner himself had recourse to terms like "occult" in describing his ideas and more than once hinted that he himself had some relation of destiny to Christian Rosencruz, the legendary founder of the Rosicrucians. These are not aspects of the movement that its adherents readily make known to the general public; instead, they foster the image of a productive, practical movement of ordinary citizens inspired to good works by Steiner's humane and insightful teachings.

Guénon, of course, was briefly taken in by Theosophy, and it is common enough to meet sincere seekers of the truth of tradition who, knowing no better, first seek a lost spirituality in the various forms of occultism that are abroad and that prey upon exactly such seekers. Steiner cannot be blamed altogether for the misadventures of his early career but, unlike Guénon, there never came a point in his life where he sought to attach himself to a living branch of the *philosophia perennis*, where he saw the coherence and accepted the unshakeable authority of the unanimous testimony of the great sages and saints, the true spiritual representatives of mankind. Instead, though he broke away from masonic-inspired ritual magic, and later saw through the pretensions of the leadership of the Theosophical Society, he forged his own syncretic system of 'occultism' that was intended, at length, to blaze a new path in the spiritual destiny of man.

Steiner at no point embraced or surrendered to an orthodox religion

or to any legitimate representatives of the world's integral spiritual traditions nor did he receive any orthodox initiation. Instead, he believed the era of the orthodox religions was fading and that he and Anthroposophy had a world-mission to point the way to a more spiritual order in a new era. At first Steiner saw this as the role of the Theosophical movement. In a short period of time he became the head of its German section and one of its most brilliant advocates. However, disputes with the leadership of the Society especially over the recruitment of a young Hindu boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti as 'World-Teacher'—arguably the lowest ebb of Theosophical folly—led Steiner to strike out on his own, taking a good number of German and other European Theosophists with him. After this he lectured widely and wrote voluminous works describing his own permutation of Theosophy and, in effect, declaring himself the prophet of a new "spiritual science" to replace the out-moded spiritualities of the old order. He crafted a world-view that explained why the old spirituality no longer satisfied the soul of modern man and how his "spiritual science" was the next vital link in humanity's spiritual destiny. In this Steiner was in the company of many other syncretists, from Crowley to Gurdjieff. Characteristically, these 'occultists'—confronted, it must be said, by truly world-shattering events such as the First World War—could find nothing in Christian orthodoxy, and had not the patience and perseverance needed to seek out the authentic roots of other traditions in the confusion of the modern malaise; they dispensed with tradition, declared it irrelevant to the crisis of the times, and offered their own 'systems' instead.

Guénon and other modern exponents of traditional wisdom, such as Coomaraswamy, were contemporaries of these 'occultists'; in contrast to them, they found the answers to the modern crisis in the universal and ageless wisdom of mankind, preserved and sanctified by the great, orthodox religions and their Scriptures. While they may have been tempted by syncretisms like Theosophy, they saw through them and shunned them thereafter. Steiner saw through Theosophy, but, like others of that generation, then went no further than to create his own syncretic parallel movement. It is perhaps unfair to group him with Crowley and Gurdjieff for he was, it seems, a sincere and modest man of good character and noble motive and of undoubted intellectual power. Despite being a type of self-proclaimed prophet, there was nothing of

the charlatan about him. It is probably one of the more significant but unacknowledged tragedies of early 20th century European intellectual life that Rudolf Steiner chose to concoct Anthroposophy from Theosophy rather than finding in Theosophy a bridge into Vedanta or some other expression of authentic metaphysics that might have given his thinking sure foundations.

The other feature that Steiner's syncretism has in common with pseudo-spiritual 'systems' devised in his time and since is the claim to bridge the gulf separating modern science from spiritual understandings of the world. Guénon, Coomarswamy, and such writers as Titus Burckhardt, were devastating in their critique of modern scientific paradigms, exposing the failings of the scientific world-view from first principles. Burckhardt composed what is arguably the most comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the Darwinian fallacy ever written. But Steiner, like Crowley and Gurdjieff, and many others besides, saw modern science in a more positive light and felt the need to create some mixture of old spirituality and new science supposedly befitting these modern times. In Steiner's case, he was not a mere pretender to scientific qualifications. He was recognized as a gifted student of the natural sciences and when still a young man was honored by an invitation to edit the scientific papers of Goethe. His doctoral thesis was a work on epistemology, later published under the title *The Philosophy of Freedom*, and it is recognized as a work of some enduring philosophical merit. Steiner was particularly impressed by the studies of Haeckel and other German pioneers of the modern, profane life-sciences and by an evolutionary approach to nature in general. He was critical of the modern sciences for what he recognized as a narrow, materialist perspective, and felt that pioneers like Haeckel could not see the full significance of their discoveries because their vision was confined to the material realm. Steiner, however, through "spiritual vision" or "clairvoyance" and "the methods of spiritual science", could see the broader, indeed cosmic, implications of these 'breakthroughs' in the natural sciences. Many 20th century syncretisms attempt to marry profane psychology or even quantum physics with spirituality. Steiner's 'system' is distinctive for its emphasis on the biological sciences. The Anthroposophical enterprise, in a way, may be summed up in this manner: Steiner sought to marry the new biological sciences with a spiritual view of the world.

“Spiritual Science”—Anthroposophy—is a hybrid of Steiner’s occultism, Theosophy and 19th C. German natural science. Typically, Steiner related such things as the geological history of the Earth as revealed by the modern earth sciences to ancient Hindu cycles or *yugas* of time. Madame Blavatsky and others had attempted to do the same, always claiming that the data of modern science only serves to confirm the ancient doctrines, but Steiner’s grasp of what modern geology had to say was far more formidable and his explanations far more convincing. Some of Steiner’s university teachers bemoaned his lapse into ‘occultism’ and felt that a potentially great German scientific mind had been squandered on nonsense, but Steiner developed a considerable following and his lectures had considerable appeal on the fringes of German intellectual life. His teachings catered to the cherished delusion—still abroad—that the modern sciences can in some way be turned to spiritual ends, that the monster of materialism can be tamed. He taught that the modern scientific mentality is, in fact, a break-through in human spiritual evolution—a new “ego-consciousness” has arisen in the world—and though it takes, necessarily, a destructively materialist form in its “early development” (the language of Haeckel’s embryology), it will—with the help of Anthroposophy—grow into a new, spiritual faculty to guide man in the next phase of his “cosmic evolution”. Steiner referred to the present age as the *Kali Yuga*, but in his estimation the *Kali Yuga*—the Dark age in traditional Hindu understandings—is an age of unparalleled opportunities for man and the advent of the modern sciences is the germ of his future spiritual being. We need only contrast this type of teaching with Guénon’s account of the *Kali Yuga* and the place of the modern sciences within it to see again how Steiner chose a path of syncretic fancy instead of submitting to the testimony of tradition.

As a religious teacher Steiner must also be counted as eccentric and syncretistic. The occultists and Theosophists of his early acquaintance had, all of them, a profound aversion for Christianity. People in revolt against their Christian heritage turn to such pseudo-spiritual movements precisely because they are ‘Eastern’ and exotic. Steiner, however, always insisted on the centrality of Christ among the ‘Masters’ acknowledged by Theosophy and his own break-away movement took an even more explicitly Christian form. The “Christ-event”, he began to teach—along similar lines to thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin—was the pivotal

moment in human spiritual evolution. But unlike de Chardin, Steiner was not seeking to marry evolutionism with Catholic orthodoxy; rather, the Christianity to which he wedded this evolutionism was a reinvention of many old Christian heresies of a dualistic character. There are, Steiner taught, two mutually opposed forces at work in the universe, and he named these by their Zoroastrian titles, *Abriman* and *Amazda*. “The Christ”, a highly evolved solar being (*Sonnenwesen*), he taught, is a reconciling force whose “Golgotha-event” brought into the stream of history mysteries previously only known to a select few. Steiner’s heritage of inspiration for this hotch-potch has been well described in Yuri Stoyanov’s recent book *The Hidden Tradition in Europe* where he documents the persistence of Manichaeism and other forms of dualism in medieval Christian heresy. Assembling a new version of these dualist creeds, analogizing *Abriman* and *Amazda* with other polarities, and reading the whole in the context of Biblical contortions of Hindu concepts such as “the *Akasha*”, Steiner devised a new Christian sect. He gave lectures on the “secret” meaning of the gospels—meanings only apparent to “spiritual scientists”—and on the sacraments and liturgy. He was careful not to demand that Anthroposophists practice Christianity as he described it—he insisted he was not seeking to create a new faith or amend an existing one, because “faith” is a feature of the consciousness of the old age, not the new—but he helped create an organized Church among wayward Lutheran clergy, with its own Anthroposophical theology and Rudolf Steiner’s sacraments.

The Roman Catholic Church investigated Anthroposophy and its various Christian branches and condemned them as heretical on numerous points of dogma in 1919. More comprehensively, Steiner’s Christianity seems to be lacking any higher theological dimension or any metaphysical foundations. The foundations of *all* Steiner’s work seem to be epistemological, stemming ultimately, as he said, from the *Philosophy of Freedom*. The authority for his radical revision of the Christian faith, and his pronouncements on a whole range of matters, from ancient Atlantis to modern pharmacology, was his own “seership.” The sacraments, he explained, and various exercises he had developed, and food grown according to his methods, and an education according to his indications, would all help evolve in others organs of spiritual perception apparently highly evolved in himself. Again, it must be stressed that Steiner

received no formal initiation in any integral initiatic tradition. He had a fair knowledge, no doubt, of certain undercurrents in German Protestantism, some of which may have a place in the fullness of the Christian mythos, but from even the broadest definition of the authentic Christian tradition his religious teachings must be counted as outside the bosom of sanctity.

It must be conceded, nevertheless, that there is, on the face of it at least, something very impressive about Steiner's work and that even from a strictly traditional point of view it deserves some consideration. Roger Lipsey reports, somewhat surprisingly, that Ananda Coomaraswamy had a brief interest in Steiner and was evidently approving of things he had heard about Steiner's activities. As Lipsey notes, no doubt Coomasaswamy would have recognized the fatal errors in Anthroposophy had he investigated it further, but he nevertheless heard favorable reports and evidently thought of Steiner in a category above the likes of Annie Besant, for instance.

We have so far stressed the failure of Steiner to place his work within the guiding framework of an integral tradition, and emphasized his marriage of the sacred with the profane, but there are also aspects of Steiner that conceivably serve to perpetuate fragments of living traditions, especially European traditions, and that should be given some cautious applause. Like many syncretisms, the standard works of Anthroposophy, numerous books and transcriptions of lecture series, are, for all but insiders, tortuously garbled with a vocabulary of Anthroposophical terms that it takes many years of devoted Anthroposophical study to master. But, now and then, as in his extraordinary lectures on bees or his challenging lectures on childhood cognition, one can recognize in Steiner an extraordinary capacity to *think out of phase*, a quality not unlike that found, if we may dare make the comparison, in Guénon too. Such minds can set aside the characteristic modes of thought of modernity and speak directly from age-old, perhaps primordial, patterns of association and identity. Evidently, Steiner could not see the metaphysical absurdity of the modern physical sciences as could a pneumatic mind like that of Guénon, but he could, all the same, speak as if from another time. This side of Rudolf Steiner comes through sources other than masonic 'occultism', Theosophy and evolutionary biology; it comes through Goethe, firstly, and then through alchemy, and, more importantly, through di-

rect acquaintance with vestiges of authentic folk traditions in central Europe. Not a great deal is known of Steiner's early life, but he grew up in the mountains of the Germany-Austria border and on several occasions is reported as speaking of certain "herb gatherers" he would meet on trains when young, representatives of the old "folk-consciousness" now giving way to newer forms of consciousness, he explained. In his lectures on agriculture, delivered in 1924 to a select group of Anthroposophist farmers,—lectures quite as remarkable as his lectures on bees—he prescribes methods for the enhancement of natural farming that are almost certainly adaptations of 'secrets' of traditional agriculture learned from peasants and such "herb-gatherers" in his youth. Steiner seems to have not only acquired many practical 'tips' from these early experiences, but an ability to see something of the symbols of nature. There are more than a few places in Steiner's work where one feels that one is confronted by a genuine acquaintance with a traditional mentality. This virtue, however, never extends beyond the cosmological. As soon as he ventures into matters with more direct metaphysical implications, Steiner is lost. On the one hand several of his lecture transcripts reveal a striking restatement of a traditional cosmological mind—a cosmological mind that might, for example, converse with that of a character like Plato's Timaeus of Locri—but on the other hand we find Steiner explaining to his audiences, in a work like the *Cosmic Memory* series, how the great sages of Islam had all reincarnated as 19th century German scientists, now that Islam was no longer needed (its world-historical role being over) and the world was being prepared, through science, for the New Age! Coomaraswamy was probably right to suspect something of value in Steiner, but on other counts he is easily dismissed. A "spiritual evolutionism" and a complex of misconstructions of sacred doctrines of the Eastern traditions, such as reincarnation, mar his work throughout.

It would be petty to belittle the practical achievements of various Anthroposophical enterprises. This must be conceded too. Steiner, it must be said, has, in a small measure at least, contributed something to the survival and rediscovery of traditional ideas. When one examines the decay of modern education and considers the utter soullessness of the modern curriculum, Steiner schools emerge as, in some ways, the only glimmer of hope for those who want to inculcate in their children a

knowledge of mythology, skill in traditional crafts, and such features of tradition as it is still possible to foster. It was refreshing for the present writer to witness the Principal of a Steiner school field questions about the Steiner education methods from inquiring parents several years ago. “What about religious education?” one of the parents wanted to know. The Principal explained that, in the Steiner system, everything is religious. “We teach religious mathematics,” he said. “And religious chemistry. And religious arts and crafts. But no, not ‘Religious Education’.” He explained that the Steiner philosophy did not accept a breach between the spiritual and the secular. This is closer to a traditional point of view than any that will be found in any other school system. But against these positive points is the fact that Steiner-trained teachers consider children “incarnating spirits” on an “evolutionary journey” and, conspicuously, God figures nowhere in their philosophy, except perhaps as an antiquated idea from the “old age” that, at best, prepared the way for the “spiritual scientific” understandings of today.

It is clear that, from a traditional viewpoint, Rudolf Steiner and his Anthroposophy deviate in significant ways from the canons of perennial wisdom. There is, throughout Steiner’s works, a tendency to dismiss and relegate to the past even the most profound expressions of the human spirit. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, seems to be regarded as a work that was important to the development of man in his spiritual adolescence, rather than as a timeless treasure that speaks with equal relevance to the human predicament in all ages. The spiritual heritage of mankind is diminished in the ideas of Rudolf Steiner by being made subject to a progressive evolutionism. We cannot say that Steiner was altogether ignorant of tradition; but he described it as a thing of the past and on that point alone must be counted as ignorant of what tradition truly is—the unanimous witness to Truth by the best of men in all times and places. Steiner supposed that the scientific revolution made this heritage obsolete, though the “spiritual scientist”, he said, should not overlook the early embryonic stages of man’s “development”. The wisdom of Lao Tze may have nourished the soul in former times, but now “scientists of the spirit” are needed to explain its “spiritual scientific” meanings which alone will nourish the new consciousness of modern man. This is a modern mentality in itself, no better than Newton standing upon the shoulders of giants.

On the other hand, one gets a sense of wasted genius from Steiner's works. It is similar to the sense of waste one gets from reading Nietzsche—a “volcanic genius”, as Schuon described him, who might, had he been born in another time, have been a great sage of the *via negativa*. Steiner is another flowering of a related German philosophic genius who, in another time, might have been an inspired polymath, an Avicenna (since he has Muslim sages reincarnating in modern Germany!) His complete works—lecture transcripts included—run into hundreds of volumes on an extraordinary range of topics. A reluctant admirer of Steiner once declared that he had read over fifty of his works without encountering anything that was pedestrian, yet consistently encountering material that was remarkable for flashes of insight that seem to come from another era. Steiner has had an impact in fields as diverse as agriculture, architecture, the visual arts, education and the treatment of retardation and cancer. He asked to be judged by his works not his words. But as Guénon points out in his critique of the Theosophical movement and its impact on the intellectual and spiritual life of the West, and as could equally be said of its Anthroposophical sister, the anti-traditional forces of modernity operate precisely by offering novelties and false syntheses, labyrinths of half-truths and vigorous but barren hybrids of East and West, old and new, to deflect systematically the best of men from the unanimous witness of the Truth. Steiner was so deflected, and Anthroposophy, as much as Theosophy, is a trap for those seeking an authentic spiritual path.

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