

How can we have dialogue with Rudolf Steiner?

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In 2009 Maria Jenny-Schuster died at the age of 102. She was the last surviving anthroposophist who had actually met Steiner in person. While it was still possible right into the 80's to encounter people who had even been individual pupils of Steiner, that charismatic stream of direct contact has now dried up. The practice of anthroposophy is now in the hands of a community of commentators, in which no one has the prestige of, as it were, "speaking from the horse's mouth". Thus it is no longer possible to have direct dialogue with Steiner.

The only kind of dialogue now possible is that which involves the interpretation of his printed words – or at least so it would seem from the outside. This historicising of Steiner is happening at a time when transformative tendencies are on the increase in the anthroposophical scene – or so it appears to me. I could back this up with a host of detailed observations, but these are already familiar to those who are active members of this scene. Instead, therefore, I would like to present a few systematic perspectives on this situation based upon the sociology of religion, and fill them out with selected observations.

Science – but which one?

Steiner, a child of the 19th century, endowed anthroposophy with a high claim to the status of science. The ideals of objectivity and scientific empiricism were leading ideas for him. In the 20th century this concept of science has hit a crisis: today we are faced not just with one, but with multiple conceptions of what constitutes science. This means that anthroposophy, through dialogue with the academic world, must decide among these various conceptions. The other side of this is that it eases the strain of the debate, for the simple reason that extra-anthroposophical science no longer holds a monopoly on the question, but will be defending one option or another.

Steiner becomes remote

This also means, of course, that Steiner will increasingly be seen as a historical phenomenon, as is already apparent in a variety of ways. An indication of this is the new critical-historical series of important works being brought out by a very reputable academic publisher. When here the textual variations of different editions are open for perusal, the author's creativity and flexibility are rendered clearer: Steiner, while remaining the spiritual master and dogmatist he always was, also appears as a man who all through his varied life keeps trying to formulate his ideas in new ways. For instance, what does he mean by "theosophy" in 1904? And after the revision of 1918? And in 1922?

Such academic discussion on basic texts can quickly produce practical consequences. For instance, the Christian Community is in process of debating possible changes to the wording of the sacraments given by Steiner. But in contrast to previous heated debates on such matters, these ones are apparently very amicable. Also the recent controversy about the stigmata and the self-proclaimed visionary experiences of Judith von Halle has been conducted in a relatively sober manner – in the 1930's such a one as Valentin Tomberg was expelled from the Anthroposophical Society for claiming higher knowledge similar to Steiner's. With the present case it seems that those from whom resistance might have been expected, namely the traditional anthroposophists, are precisely the ones who accept Judith von Halle. Nonetheless, one fundamental problem associated with the conflicts that arise among anthroposophists is more likely being smoothed over in these debates than solved: namely, how are "absolute", basically non-negotiable claims to truth to be dealt with? That, after all, is ultimately the nature of "higher" knowledge, which was Tomberg's and is von Halle's central concern.

This relaxed attitude to the "esoteric" cannot be expected of the world outside anthroposophy. In Kassel-Witzenhausen a professorship in bio-dynamic agriculture has been revoked, because it does not meet academic criteria: the esoterically based investigation of "etheric life-forces" was found to be unacceptable. On the other hand, the two anthroposophically based universities of Witten-Herdecke and Alanus / Alfter are now well established, because they aspire to upholding the normal scientific standards in spite of, or in addition to, their adherence to Steiner. In them, however, what becomes of the core of anthroposophy – higher knowledge?

Individualisation – pluralisation

Individualisation and pluralisation are hallmarks of the current state of society, and thus also of anthroposophy. Individualisation alters the role of institutions, such that in many cases they are simply no longer needed; for a long time now we have in various ways had anthroposophy without the Anthroposophical Society. The steady decline in the latter's membership is to a considerable degree the outcome of this individualisation. Not much can be said in objection to this impression, which also holds for other organisations of this kind. As a consequence the Anthroposophical Society has a preponderance of older members who are likely to be conservative in their institutional loyalties. There is a dearth of youth – and the Goetheanum is constantly wrestling with funding problems.

For anthroposophy the second factor, pluralisation, means firstly that it is faced with ever stronger competition in the "worldview market". But pluralisation is also at work within anthroposophy. This becomes clear when we consider, say, the disparity between "Dornach" and a journal like *Info3* – Ken Wilber cheek by jowl with Rudolf Steiner, is this normal? Just like finding Chi-Gong and Yoga being practised in many catholic monasteries? It would, in any case, do no harm to increase the internal pluralism of anthroposophy. And it is scarcely possible to direct the course of this, for such channels of direct control and sanction as there are on the anthroposophical scene are – no matter what the "sect-trackers" might think – probably rather weak.

One special aspect of the dynamics of pluralisation arises through the spread of anthroposophy internationally. The founder of Sekem, Ibrahim Abouleish, says things in German which are very different from what he says in Arabic. And the growing number of non-German-speaking Waldorf schools in the world at large means that new versions of anthroposophical educational methods are emerging and changing the whole character of this movement so long centred in Germany. In the long run, not only the majority of Waldorf schools will exist (as is already the case) outside Germany, but also the majority of Anthroposophical Society members. One doesn't need to be a prophet to see that the centrifugal forces will then increase.

Innovation

Anthroposophy in the 20th century has been much more than tradition management. Among the innovations one of the main ones is a new definition of the role of Rudolf Steiner. For many nowadays he is much less the

guru or initiate who revealed a system of ultimate truths, than a key to the enabling of the individual search for meaning. In this I see one of the great shifts that have taken place. It is dramatic in comparison to how Steiner was viewed as a person and the way his works were interpreted in the early decades.

This shift in the style of commitment, of course, has consequences for the shape of things in practice. Here again I will single out the field of Waldorf education. Some central components of the original pedagogical programme are becoming foreign to it. The contents and methods as put forward by Steiner have not been sufficiently reviewed and reformed in the intervening hundred years – that is long overdue. In the meantime, however, there are a number of Waldorf schools where – very much in contrast to what critics presume – one simply would not recognise that teaching is being done according to Waldorf principles. These hasty reactions to the slow pace of reform are already being referred to as “rampant modernisation”.

At the same time, state schools are adopting pedagogical elements from the reform movement. As a result, Waldorf schools are losing their special role, they are more readily comparable. And in the Waldorf world innovations are now likely to occur in schools that tended to be conservative or traditional, such as Uhlandshöhe in Stuttgart. Then there are tiny schools, where the traditional idea of what constitutes a class has been given up, even in favour of introducing multiple age groups, as in Seewalde – a style of teaching that moves away from Steiner’s notion of a karmically defined class community. Still others offer elements of Waldorf education without the Waldorf label, such as the “learning workshop” in Kiel, which was founded by former Waldorf teachers. There is already much talk of “Waldorf light”: a cocktail of progressive content, self-determined learning and holistic methods – with head, heart and hand, but without any objectivistic aspiration to scientific status and without theosophical occultism?

Identity

To live as an anthroposophist does anyone still need the Anthroposophical Society or movement? In many respects, as previously mentioned, apparently not. Non-anthroposophical society has, in the meantime, adopted many of its alternative cultural inventions: complementary medicine has now penetrated into state institutions. While Demeter was the largest producer when the organic movement was on the rise, bio-dynamic agriculture has now fallen behind *Naturland* and *Bioland*. And people who have nothing to do with anthroposophy now use the GLS Bank, *hessnatur*, *Alnatura* or *Tegut* without bothering about their spiritual background. This poses the question: for the practical applications of anthroposophy does one still need to know the Steinerian worldview behind them, or can the practical fruits be peeled away from the ideas that bred them? Does Waldorf work without theosophy? Without Goethe? Ultimately; without anthroposophy?

In considering whether a single anthroposophical identity is feasible, there is one question which I find singularly interesting: In the course of its pluralisation, why has anthroposophy not become atomised long ago? To be honest, I have no entirely satisfying answer to this question. It could be regarded as relating to two dimensions: The one is that there is a small area of consensus in Rudolf Steiner’s works, the interpretation of which can only be controlled with direct sanctions to a very limited extent, and together with this there is the attractiveness of the fields of practical application, which enable the practitioner to be highly selective in his relation to Steiner’s works, with the result that one can easily avoid “uncongenial” passages.

The other might well have to do with the fact that Steiner’s ideas complement each other in a dialectical structure. The classic picture of anthroposophy is that it promised, and continues to promise, the meaning of everything. Nothing would be left unexplained: birth and death, life in the beyond, man and world and spirit, economy and education and art, theories of knowledge and of history and a comprehensive account of human medicine. At the same time it promised maximum freedom: individual attainment of knowledge, no dogmas, no submission to authority. That theory and practice (may) lie far apart goes without saying. But the principle was: Steiner gives me everything, but I don’t have to believe any of it.

This programme, however, is also teetering, chiefly for two reasons: Today even the natural sciences do not aspire to provide a scientifically grounded explanation of everything. Such a claim has become implausible, and perhaps also the desire to fulfil it weaker. At the same time there is the universal perception of absolute

freedom in the matter of constructing a worldview. The great enemies of freedom, the ideologically doctrinaire state and the state supported religious orthodoxies, have given up this role.

How will anthroposophy develop in the future? I see two possibilities: It can take a conservative route, by establishing a line of demarcation between itself and society, made possible by identifying a stable brand-name and building a sharply defined identity. Or it could take a liberal attitude, which would network with the cultural environment, be open to collaboration and thereby make allowance for the alteration and adaptation of its brand name.

The conservative path has every chance of ending in the ghetto, while the liberal one could lead it to dissolve into society at large. Usually what happens is that one tries to find a middle way: while this is less risky, it is also less attractive.

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