

Anthroposophy and Religion

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A behind-the-scenes look at the Christian Community.

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WHEN Rudolf Steiner came out fully on to the public scene in the last culminating phase of his life, after the end of the first war, he often referred to his work as *anthroposophisch orientierte Geisteswissenschaft*. This was the term which had ripened over the years as the most adequate name for his teaching. It was *Wissenschaft*—science—in the exact meaning of the word. The observation of fact, the penetrating thought, the searching question, the weighing up of possibilities, the freedom from preconceived ideas, all the qualities which make the scientific attitude, were present in his method. But it was a science which refused to be confined to the material field, although it should never be overlooked that Steiner was a scientist in the material field, too. His reading and factual knowledge of material science, including theoretical and applied physics, and theoretical and applied chemistry, were phenomenal. But his new and specific sphere of research was the Unseen. For this purpose the spirit part of man had to be developed according to those scientific methods which he has explained in his fundamental books.

Once this was done, he could say that "Anthroposophy is a knowledge of all that which the spirit organism of man can observe in the spirit world in the same way in which the sensory organism of man observes the physical world." And he applied the full conscientious scientific discipline of mind to his exploration of the Invisible. Hence he founded a true *Geisteswissenschaft*, a science of the spirit. And it was "anthroposophically orientated." It opened a new epoch in the history of occultism. Until Steiner, all occultism had been *theosophically* orientated, derived from ancient wisdom, handed down and taught in mystic schools and occult societies. Its original sources lay in an ancient form of human consciousness. It was based on visions received as the result of subtle changes in the physiological conditions of the human organism.

Steiner broke with all this. His starting point was the dormant faculties of higher knowledge in a human consciousness which has undergone a scientific training. These faculties could be trained to become conscious apart from their physical organs—*leibfrei*. And the human being, himself the "anthropos", was the key to the riddles of the universe. Man the Unknown was to become Man the Known. In this way his science of the spirit was "anthroposophically orientated."

The Spirit-World which Steiner's method opened up for first-hand scientific observation and research, revealed itself as a world of tremendous energies sustaining life, sensation, thought; a world

of beings differing in their degrees of consciousness; a world of dynamic events reacting on the physical universe. Though approached in this epoch-making new manner, it was of course the same world with which the great religious systems of humanity in their several different ways had endeavoured to maintain contact through teaching, through prayer and ritual. It was the world covered by the whole majestic doctrinal structure concerning God, heaven, life after death, the last judgment, which Roman Catholic Christianity regards as final and entrusted to the Roman Church for ever, and which Protestant Christianity regards as unknowable to man's reason and an object of faith only. Now this world had become an accessible field of scientific research by the awakened spiritual power of a human consciousness, and a method had been developed by which the practice of this research could be taught.

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This situation must raise the most far-reaching questions imaginable. It touches on the innermost nerve of man's spiritual life. In actual fact, however, the full implications of this revolution have only gradually become apparent. The relevant questions have still largely to be formulated and sorted out with patience, with reverence and with an open mind. This momentous process is not really served by quick posers such as: Is Anthroposophy a new religion? Has Anthroposophy superseded religion? Is Anthroposophy compatible with religion? Such questions, natural as they may be, oversimplify the issue.

Rudolf Steiner himself treated the problem as one which emerges and grows with the expanding life of the impulse which he injected into human evolution. When interviewed on the subject, he said many different things to different people at different times. But it is possible to trace one fundamental line of thought and direction in this matter which goes through the whole of his teaching. The principle is, as far as I can see, formulated for the first time precisely in a short essay, written early in the century, which has been published in the first of the three little volumes entitled *From the Contents of the Esoteric School*.

"Theosophy is not a religion", Rudolf Steiner writes in this early essay, still using the earlier term Theosophy, but meaning Anthroposophy, "but a means for the understanding of the religions. Its relationship to the religious documents is the same as that of mathematical truth to the documents which have been written as mathematical textbooks. Mathematics can be understood from their own sources, the laws of space can be perceived without reference to an old book. But if one has perceived them, if one has absorbed the truth of geometry, one will estimate all the more highly that old book which has placed these laws for the first time before the human mind. It is thus with Theosophy."

The statement is clear. But it reveals also the core of the

problem. "Theosophy is not a religion", the statement says emphatically. But as it continues it shows that the subject-matter of Theosophy is the same as that of religion, or at least as that of the religious documents. And as Theosophy or Anthroposophy is the fresh discovery compared with the old book, is it not natural that it should be taken as superseding "the old book", however much one may affirm that it is itself not a religion?

Some ten years later, on the threshold of reaching the general public, Rudolf Steiner gave a public lecture at Liestal in Switzerland (11.1.16) on "The Task of Spiritual Science and its Building at Dornach." This lecture, available as a separate publication, is among the best introductory material for inquirers. Apart from a plain fundamental exposition of the task of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner deals with a number of popular questions and misconceptions.

One of these questions is "how Anthroposophy is related to the religious life of man." Rudolf Steiner says: "Religions are facts in the historic life of the human race. Spiritual Science can indeed go so far as to study the spiritual phenomena which in the course of evolution have appeared as religion. But Spiritual Science can never wish to create a religion, just as little as Natural Science can harbour the illusion of being able to create anything in nature.... Neither need the intensity with which anyone practises his religion and his ritual services be in any way impaired by that which he finds in Spiritual Science."

In this representative public statement, Rudolf Steiner draws the line even more definitely. Religion is recognised as one of the great facts of life. It is acknowledged as resting on its own ground, like the natural phenomena of creation. Anthroposophy can study them as Science does, but cannot create them.

There, for the purposes of this public statement, the matter ends. But the student of Steiner's work in general has still an unresolved question in his mind. Is not the very method of anthroposophical research, even irrespective of its object, bound to have a religious flavour? And often its object is religion itself. Steiner's Anthroposophy is by no means simply a study of comparative religion, or a higher criticism of sacred texts. It speaks, in a sense, the same language as religion. Its approach to spiritual realities, and of course to spiritual beings, is of necessity devotional rather than analytical, or at any rate it grows more devotional the further it progresses. No reader of Steiner's fundamental textbook on "How to Attain Knowledge of Higher Worlds" can overlook the stress which is laid on devotion and reverence. It is an indispensable quality of mind for the explorer into the Invisible. There is, indeed, a special lecture on "The Mission of Religious Devotion," which Steiner gave in 1909 in Berlin. Where, then, in spite of seemingly categorical statements, is the real difference?

Let us look at one more quotation from Steiner's writings. We

choose a passage from his *Letters to Members* of the year 1924, so that we may have a representative utterance from the beginning, the middle, and the end of his anthroposophical career. In the first of these "Letters" (20.1.1924), Rudolf Steiner gives the following moving description of Anthroposophy:

"If Anthroposophy to begin with has its roots in the insight into the Spirit World already gained, its branches, leaves, flowers and fruits grow into all the fields of human life and action. With the thoughts which reveal the beings and laws of the spirit world, it extends its call into the depth of the creative human soul: the artistic powers are called forth. Art receives a universal stimulus.

"It makes the warmth which radiates from the uplifted gaze to the spirit flow into hearts: the religious sense awakens in true devotion to the Divine in the world. Religion receives a profound deepening.

"It opens its fountains and the charitable human will can draw from them. It makes alive the love between human beings and thereby creates impulses for moral action and true social practice.

"It fructifies the observation of nature through the germinating power of spiritual vision and thereby turns mere knowledge of nature into wisdom of nature."

Many students of Anthroposophy will enthusiastically confirm from their own experience what Rudolf Steiner says. Not least those who through Anthroposophy have had their religious life quickened, and the many who only through Anthroposophy have found their way again to what had been a lost country. But on the other hand it cannot be denied that a considerable number of men and women who were estranged from religion did not feel inspired by Anthroposophy to embrace religion, again or for the first time, but took Anthroposophy itself, bona fide, as a substitute. They accepted and practised it as a form of spiritual life which replaced religion for them. I think I am right in saying that today at least half the members of the Anthroposophical Society treat Anthroposophy in this manner. It is a very subtle problem and it is not at all easy to express a judgment on the rights or wrongs of the matter.

At one time, however, Rudolf Steiner himself seems to have felt somewhat uneasy about this development. In a "cycle" given in Berlin in the early months of 1917 and published under the title of "Cosmic and Human Metamorphosis", he included what can be regarded as one of the most profound lectures on the Mystery of the Trinity. In the course of this lecture (20.2.1917), he went out of his way to make an unusual interpolation (*Einschaltung*), as he called it.

"At this point", he said, "I believe I ought to make an interpolation which is important and which should be really well understood, particularly by the friends of our Spiritual Science. The

matter should not be represented as if spiritual-scientific endeavours were intended as a substitute for the life and practice of religion. Spiritual Science can in the highest degree, and particularly concerning the Mystery of Christ, be a support, a foundation for the life and practice of religion. But Spiritual Science should not be made a religion; but one ought to be clear that religion in its active life and living practice within the human community kindles the spirit-consciousness of the soul." And Steiner proceeds further to say that the spirit-consciousness which is attained in a living religious practice can lead to the desire for more detailed spiritual knowledge, such as is made available in anthroposophical teaching, which in return can become a further support for the religious life. In other words, Steiner outlines here the idea of an interaction and mutual support between Anthroposophy and religion. He implies a basic and necessary differentiation of function between the two, which should, however, be co-ordinated for the benefit of the spiritual seeker.

This "interpolation" had an important historic consequence. It caused a number of young Anthroposophists to approach Rudolf Steiner with the question whether he regarded an independent movement for the renewal of religion as desirable or necessary. This approach took the form of a short, carefully worded memorandum in which this interpolation was quoted as the prime cause for the enquiry. Rudolf Steiner responded at once with a degree of ready co-operation which astonished the enquirers. The result was the foundation of the Movement for Religious Renewal known as "The Christian Community", the name given to it by Rudolf Steiner himself.

This foundation revealed Rudolf Steiner himself as an event in the history of religion. For through his instrumentality nothing less occurred than a re-statement or re-creation of the sacramental mysteries of Christianity, together with a new priestly succession. Rudolf Steiner himself did not assume the priestly quality, but as Initiate conferred it on Friedrich Rittelmeyer, the first head of the Christian Community, in whom the new succession has its beginning. One has to go far back in history in order to find standards of comparison. The figure of Moses comes to mind, who instituted a new priesthood through his brother Aaron without accepting priestly office himself. Referring to the foundations of the Christian Community, Rudolf Steiner wrote, "I cannot but reckon this experience as one of the solemn festivals of my life". (*Goetheanum*, II, 32).

In many ways we are still too close to these events to appreciate fully their historic consequence and significance. But it is clear that with the birth of "The Christian Community", religion, and in particular Christian religion, entered altogether into a fundamentally new epoch, and with it a new factor entered the relationship of Anthroposophy to religion. For the first time in 2,000

years it has become possible to unite complete freedom of thought and belief with the full cosmic reality of sacramentalism. For it is a fundamental principle of the Christian Community that both priests and members have complete freedom in their personal spiritual life and research. The "Creed" which Rudolf Steiner gave and which, I think, will one day be universally recognised as one of the most inspired new documents of Christianity, does not contain the formula "I believe". It is a sequence of twelve affirmative sentences covering the mysteries of Christianity in such a manner that the contemplation of this document, the meditative use of it, will lead the seeker in complete freedom to a growing insight into these mysteries.

On the other hand, the Seven Sacraments grouped around the "Act of Consecration of Man", the renewed Eucharist, like the planets around the sun, have become in their rebirth through Rudolf Steiner the pattern and archetype of creative human activity in the spirit of Christ. Their spiritual power is directed towards the transformation of the earth and of nature as much as towards the healing of human souls.

For the first time in Christian history we have to-day a true Infant Baptism, and not only an adaptation for children of a baptismal Ritual for Adults. For the first time in Christian history we have a Confirmation which meets the psycho-somatic condition of the adolescent, for the first time a Marriage Service which recognises the full spiritual equality of man and woman, for the first time Last Rites—a Service of Anointing as well as a twofold Funeral Service—which accompany the departing soul with full knowledge through the Gate of Death and into the Spiritual World; and, above all, for the first time a Communion Service in which the Sacred Presence of Christ can be clearly understood by the modern mind, and therefore worshipped in full spiritual freedom by the modern Christian. And so for the first time in history it has become possible to combine the two supposedly irreconcilable extremes of Christianity, Catholicism and Quakerism, in a living "Quaker-Catholicism" or "High Church without Dogma"—names which have been given to the Christian Community by observers from outside.

With Rudolf Steiner's help, it became possible also "to take the Bible back to the Altar". The immense amount of new light which Steiner has thrown on the origin and meaning of the sacred Scriptures made an entirely fresh treatment of the Bible possible. The Gospels especially could be shown as a path to the living Christ rather than as a plain record of the historic Jesus. Among the biblical scholars of the Christian Community, Emil Bock, to whose memory an article in this number is devoted, was an outstanding figure.

Besides these two spheres of religion mentioned hitherto—the

"priestly" task and the "prophetic" task, to give them their traditional names—the third element, the "pastoral" task, has been equally renewed through Rudolf Steiner's work. Apart from his general comprehensive presentation of the nature of man and of the interplay of the living body with soul and spirit which in itself opens up a truly modern approach to "pastoral" problems, Rudolf Steiner laid the foundation for co-operation between priest and doctor through a special course on Pastoral Medicine, in the last weeks of his public life. It can be imagined what it means that, for the first time, the facts of reincarnation and karma can be brought to bear by Christian ministers on the problems of sin, guilt and forgiveness, and the burdens which individual souls may have to bear can be understood and eased in the light of that truth. Compassionate service, friendliness, neighbourliness, in short all the social attitudes which one expects to find in a religious Community can be lifted in the light of Steiner's teaching from the level of moral obligation to the level of imaginative love. In this new quality of community life there lies a valuable safeguard against the dangers of self-centredness and spiritual egotism which so easily affect the solitary seeker.

While the new sacramental organism, with its new priestly succession, was given by the Initiate to the Christian Community alone, the other gifts of religious renewal can be freely shared by anyone else. They can be shared by other Churches, they can be shared by Anthroposophists. However, Rudolf Steiner took pains to explain that it should not be regarded simply as a matter of course that members of the Anthroposophical Society become members of the Christian Community, or vice-versa. It should be, in each case, a clearly considered decision. People must be free to join the Anthroposophical Society without changing their Church, if they so wish; and people must be free to join the Christian Community without being committed to go to anthroposophical lectures or meetings, if they so wish.

In itself, this distinction is so natural and reasonable that it should not present any practical difficulty. It must be said, however, that at the beginning a measure of confusion prevailed.

It was perhaps inevitable that in the first few months after the foundation of the Christian Community, a number of Anthroposophists joined the religious movement without adequate discrimination. When Rudolf Steiner saw the danger of this development he found ways and means to stop it. In a celebrated lecture (Dornach, December 30, 1922), he drew a firm distinction between the functions of the anthroposophical and the religious body: they are as different from each other, he said, as the circulatory and the nervous system in the human being. And he added that those who had found their way into Anthroposophy have no need for religious renewal. It cannot be denied that this lecture caused a hostile attitude against the Christian Community among

a number of Anthroposophists.

I have hesitated in referring to this incident, since it belongs perhaps rather to the internal history of the Anthroposophical Movement. But my attention has been drawn to the fact that this lecture is not seldom referred to as an orientation on principle regarding Anthroposophy and religion, and it therefore needs to be considered in this context. Taken by itself, without its historical setting, it can indeed be bewildering. But in the historical mood at the time when the Anthroposophical Society passed through heroic growing pains in becoming a world movement, Steiner had to ask his followers to support with single-minded devotion the Anthroposophical Society, and not to have their spiritual energies and material resources preoccupied in the interests of a young and perhaps attractive sister movement, which had really set itself special tasks and had undertaken to break new ground.

Those of us who are left as witnesses of those times and events can fully understand and appreciate the reasons which prompted Rudolf Steiner to speak as he did on that occasion, which was indeed only one night before the fatal tragedy of the burning of the Goetheanum. But perhaps we have also a responsibility to hand down to the growing number of students who today take an interest in Steiner's works, something of the living circumstances in which this or that directive was given.

Perhaps the most significant comment which Rudolf Steiner himself gave to this controversial lecture is this: "What must be sharply differentiated in the field of ideas comes together again in the human being." (*"Was in der Idee scharf getrennt werden muss, im Menschen vereint es sich wieder."*) Anthroposophy and religion must be sharply differentiated in the field of ideas, but in the human being they come together again. No doubt this differentiation could be more clearly seen if it were more adequately realised that religion does not only, or perhaps not even primarily, cultivate the individual spiritual life, but has its principal function in acts of communal worship and in the formation of communities. Of course, the study of Anthroposophy also brings people together in groups and societies and may lead to a variety of social undertakings. But it is in the nature of things that the earnest and consistent pursuit of the occult path of higher development demands in the first place the activity and advance of the individual, while the formation of community is one of the chief terms of reference of religion, which links the worshipper also with the wider brotherhood of man. Before the altar, the highest Initiate and the humblest believer can meet on terms of equality.

As a helpful corollary to this it may be added that Rudolf Steiner described it as the task of Anthroposophy and the Anthroposophical Society to advise people in a general manner on their spiritual development, and as the task of religion, and specifically

of the Christian Community, to help people in their problems of life and destiny. Furthermore, he regarded it as a matter of course that for the great events of life—baptism, marriage, burial—Anthroposophists should turn to the Christian Community. In fact, he set the example for it himself.

It is evident that the problem threatens to become one-sided, and perhaps even somewhat unreal, if one treats Anthroposophy and religion in terms of a primitive “either”—“or”. The relationship is more subtle. I have always found it helpful that on occasion Rudolf Steiner compared the relationship between the Anthroposophical Society and the Christian Community—and by implication between Anthroposophy and Religion—with the relationship between the three functionally differentiated spheres of the Threefold Commonwealth. He who understands the one will understand the other, he said. For in Steiner’s conception the three functional spheres of the Threefold Commonwealth are also “clearly differentiated in the field of ideas, but come together in the human being”. This indication is wonderfully illustrated in the monumental lectures on “Cosmology, Religion, and Philosophy”, which Rudolf Steiner gave in Dornach from September 6–15, 1922, in the evenings of the first week of the foundation events of the Christian Community.

If Rudolf Steiner could have stayed with us longer, if he had not been so tragically taken away from us at a comparatively early age and at a crucial moment in the development of the Anthroposophical Society, I believe he would have said and done many more things—perhaps contradictory on the surface—to elucidate this important subject of Anthroposophy and religion. But whatever he might have done—in a sense it is rather futile to entertain such speculations—he would have safeguarded above everything the freedom of decision for the individual in this matter. It is quite possible that he made some apparently contradictory remarks on purpose in order that no one should be able to misuse his authority and to dogmatise on the subject. The most un-Steiner like attitude is taken up by people who pick out one single statement and say: Now here Dr. Steiner has made it exactly clear what he thinks about Anthroposophy and religion. In the last analysis, the relationship between Anthroposophy and religion is not an academic problem—only hairsplitting intellectuals may be attracted to a theoretical discussion of the subject—but a problem of life which individual people will solve differently, and perhaps even solve differently during different periods of their life. And they must be left free to do so.

Some complicate the issue by introducing the question of “need”. Do I “need” religion, they ask, if I have Anthroposophy? This question seems to me as intelligent as if someone asks, Do I need to drink tea in the afternoon if I have coffee for breakfast?

Of course there is no “need” to do so. But many people will witness to the enrichment of their lives which comes from having both. And they should be left free to do so.

There is one side to the problem which has arisen more insistently and universally than in Steiner’s life-time: the religious education of children and the religious life of young people. More and more anthroposophical families have children, and many hundreds of children go to Rudolf Steiner schools every year. A conscientious observer is bound to admit that the laying of the foundation of a living religion in the hearts of the children is a serious problem. Rudolf Steiner hoped for a close co-operation of Anthroposophists with the Christian Community in this sphere. This hope has not yet been quite realised.

It might appear from much that has been said that the problem—Anthroposophy and Religion—is largely a domestic affair among followers of Steiner. But this is not the case. I believe that the manner in which disciples of Steiner deal with the matter will set the pattern for an increasing number of people, as time goes on. Steiner’s Anthroposophy, in the widest sense, is beginning to infiltrate into our civilisation. It may split our civilisation into two camps. The camp in which the reality of the Spirit and of the Spirit-World is taken seriously, will be the minority. It will add immeasurably to its strength if its members know how to combine Anthroposophy and religion.

Ultimately this combination touches on the same mystery as the relationship of man and woman. Rudolf Steiner refers to this remarkable parallel in a set of lectures on “Reincarnation and Karma” (Stuttgart, February 21, 1912). He talks there about “Faith” and “Knowledge” in the same sense that we have been talking in this article about religion and Anthroposophy. And Rudolf Steiner explains: “For him who recognises the spiritual facts the matter is clear. The same relationship which exists in external life between the sexes, applies to the relationship between Faith (Religion) and Knowledge (Anthroposophy). . . . Indeed, the parallelism goes so far that we can say: ‘Just as a human being changes his sex in his subsequent incarnation, so that as a rule he alternates between male and female, so as a rule an incarnation more open to religion (*mehr gläubige*) is followed by one more open to knowledge (*mehr vernunftgemäss*).’ . . . As a rule these facts produce mutual stimulus and supplementary experience.”

Perhaps with this statement Steiner speaks the final word. There may be “bachelors” of Anthroposophy and of religion. There may be difficult marriages between the two. But there will also be happy marriages.

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