

Albert Schweitzer's Friendship with Rudolf Steiner

Date Unknown

My encounter with Rudolf Steiner took place on the occasion of a theosophical conference in Strasbourg. If I'm not mistaken, it was in 1902 or 1903. Annie Besant, with whom I was acquainted through Strasbourg friends, introduced us.

At that time Rudolf Steiner acted in connection with the Theosophical Society, not so much because he shared its convictions, but because he found in its members the possibility to find understanding and interest for the spiritual truths which he had to make known.

I knew that he had completed a study of Goethe's works in Weimar. He of course knew nothing of the young Strasbourg University instructor [Schweitzer] who was occupied with Kant's philosophy and the problems of the life of Jesus research. He was fourteen years older than I.

The language mostly used at that theosophical conference was French. So they counted on me, because I spoke German, to take care of the Austrian guest, which I gladly did. I arranged it so we were neighbors at meals during the conference. From the beginning on he was the talker and I the listener and questioner during our conversations.

Before we had consumed the soup, the discussion arose of itself about his studies on Goethe in Weimar and about his [Goethe's] Weltanschauung (world view). I immediately became aware that my neighbor possessed extensive knowledge in the field of natural science. It was a great surprise to me that he spoke of the need to recognize the importance of Goethe's knowledge of nature. In his researches he had been able to penetrate from superficial knowledge of the sense world to a more profound knowledge based on its spiritual being. I knew something about Goethe's natural scientific writing and the places where he sought a perceptual knowledge.

My table partner realized that he had an attentive listener beside him. He held a lecture. We forgot that we were supposed to be eating.

In the afternoon we stood around together, not paying much attention to what was happening at the theosophical conference.

When the discussion turned to Plato I could participate more. Steiner surprised me here as well, in that he revealed to me hidden and not yet appreciated aspects of Plato's knowledge.

When Steiner asked me what concerned me especially in theology, I answered that it was research into the historical Jesus. Well, I felt the moment to have come in which I could take the conversation in hand and began to lecture him about the state of the life of Jesus research and about the problem of which Gospel contained the oldest tradition. To my astonishment, a discussion about this subject did not come about. He let me lecture on without saying a word. I had the impression that he was mentally yawning. I got off my theological social scientific high horse and put it in the stable, and waited for what would come.

And something remarkable happened. One of us, I don't remember which, began to speak of the spiritual decline of culture as the fundamental, unnoticed problem of our time. Thus we realized that we were both occupied with it. We had not expected it of each other.

A lively discussion resulted. We learned from each other that we had both taken on the life mission of working for the emergence of a true culture enlivened by the ideal of humanity and to encourage people to become truly thinking beings.

We parted with this consciousness of belonging together. A re-encounter wasn't decided upon. But the consciousness of togetherness remained. We each followed the activities of the other.

To take part in Rudolf Steiner's flights of thought in the spiritual sciences was not granted me. I know though that he elevated many people through this and made new men of them. His disciples have made excellent contributions in many fields.

I have continually followed Rudolf Steiner's life and activities with heartfelt participation. The successes until the First World War, the problems and hardships which accompanied them, the courageous efforts in the post-war confusion to create order through his teachings about the Threefold Social Organism, the founding of the Goetheanum in Dornach, where his thought-world found a home, the pain caused by its destruction by fire on New Year's Eve 1922/23, the courage with which he went about its reconstruction, and finally the spiritual greatness which he retained in tireless teaching and activity during the suffering of the last months of his life on earth.

On his part, he also didn't lose sight of me. When in 1923 my *Verfall und Wiederaufbau der Kultur* and *Kultur und Ethik* were published together, he took note and was appreciative of the analysis of the cultural problems offered in them in a

lecture, whereby he made no secret of his regret that I undertook the solution to the problems with only profound ethical thinking and without the help of spiritual science.

During my meeting with him his face with the wonderful eyes made an unforgettable impression on me.

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Albert Schweitzer also reported on this meeting to the director Bruno Walter:

"The result was that I continually occupied myself with him [Steiner] and was always conscious of his importance. What we had in common is that we both want to have culture stand in place of un-culture. This bond arose in Strasburg. He expected culture from ethical thinking and the knowledge of spiritual science. According to my nature, I had to stay with letting it arise through concentration on the true being of the ethical. In this way I came to the ethics of "Reverence for Life" and hoped for the impulse for the emergence of culture from it. I know that Rudolf Steiner regretted my remaining in the old way of thinking. But we had both experienced the same responsibility to lead men to true culture again."

Albert Schweitzer reported to Camille Schneider in Strasburg in 1951:

"Our goals are the same. Our paths are apparently different. Whereas Rudolf Steiner as spiritual researcher advances towards the experience of Christ by means of exercises, thinking and mystic, I have attempted through thoughtful knowledge of the eschatological content of his teachings to encounter Christ Jesus. And I encounter him daily in my work with the blacks of Africa. From this twofold experience I derive the foundation of my life's ethic. That is what matters to me."

In 1922, after the First World War, Albert Schweitzer visited Rudolf Steiner in Dornach. Camille Schneider reports:

"...Albert Schweitzer informed me that he once visited Rudolf Steiner in Dornach. He couldn't say exactly in what year. He spoke with him about the necessity, after the First World War, for a new penetration of cultural life with religious impulses and that he recognized him to be a great man, who with comprehensive knowledge and astounding wisdom transforms all the information and opinions we hear or read daily without always

understanding their deeper meanings. 'An initiate in the sense of Edouard Schuré', Dr. Schweitzer added, because shortly before we had spoken about Schuré and his book 'The Great Initiates'."

Emil Bock dates this meeting in autumn, 1922:

"Many years ago – it was 1922, we were in preparation for the founding of the Christian Community – in Dornach, and I went to Dr. Steiner in order to ask him something. He received me with glowing eyes: Just think! Albert Schweitzer was with me today. He is really an important personality."

Several months before his death, Schweitzer again emphasized what was most meaningful in his encounters with Rudolf Steiner. He wrote in a letter from Lambarene to the composer Karl von Balz on June 14, 1965:

"Perhaps it will interest you to know that Rudolf Steiner and I were friends, although we didn't have the same ideas. It was a deep friendship. We were happy about every meeting."

These excerpts are from the German language book Der Andere Rudolf Steiner, Pforte Verlag, Dornach, Switzerland, 2005. The first Albert Schweitzer quotation is from his memoirs.

Translation: Frank Thomas Smith

Albert Schweitzer OM (Order of Merit) (14 January 1875 – 4 September 1965) was an Alsatian polymath (an individual whose knowledge spans a substantial number of subjects, known to draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems). He was a theologian, organist, musicologist, writer, humanitarian, philosopher, and physician. A Lutheran minister, Schweitzer challenged both the secular view of Jesus as depicted by the historical-critical method current at this time, as well as the traditional Christian view. His contributions to the interpretation of Pauline Christianity concern the role of Paul's mysticism of "being in Christ" as primary and the doctrine of justification by faith as secondary.



He received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize for his philosophy of "Reverence for Life", becoming the eighth Frenchman to be awarded that prize. His philosophy was expressed in many ways, but most famously in founding and sustaining the Hôpital Albert Schweitzer in Lambaréné, French Equatorial Africa (now Gabon). As a music scholar and organist, he studied the music of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach and influenced the Organ Reform Movement (Orgelbewegung).

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