

Anthroposophy in the Light of the Steiner Studies Academic Journal

by Richard Cooper

The acknowledgement from academia of anthroposophy and Rudolf Steiner's clairvoyant worldview is bound to bring interest and criticism. What is a modern person to think when they hear of biodynamic-agriculture preparations, buried in the ground with crystals and cow horns? – to hear that in the full moon, armies of gnomes can be seen marching in the fields; or when Steiner asserts that in the future, androgynous man will create life through the larynx ...? – People from all walks of life, from doctors, to business people to artists came to build the original First Goetheanum (1913-1922), as a spiritual scientific temple, and continue to work in professional fields inspired by anthroposophical ideas and initiatives. Historically, and at present, to some, all this reveals fascinating new views of spiritual life; while to others, it raises *profound* scepticism.

The soon to be launched, Steiner Studies academic journal ⁱ (January 2020), will be published by Hartmut Traub (Alanus, Anthroposophical University) near Bonn, Germany and Christian Clement (Professor of German Literature and Language at Bingham Young University Utah, USA). Both have written extensive works for the establishment of the research of anthroposophy and Rudolf Steiner as an academic discipline. Christian Clement has published an 8-volume work on Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy, in German. Hartmut Traub's *Philosophy and Anthroposophy: The Philosophical Worldview of Rudolf Steiner* (2011) is a study of Rudolf Steiner's philosophical indebtedness to Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814, founder of German Idealism). *Esotericism and the Academy Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012) from Wouter Hanegraaff, (University of Amsterdam), provides an example description of the broader academic field:

“Academics tend to look on ‘esoteric’, ‘occult’ or ‘magical’ beliefs with contempt, but are usually ignorant about the religious and philosophical traditions to which these terms refer, or their relevance to intellectual history.”

Christian Clement is a case in point. Clement was able to bring together official anthroposophical publisher Rudolf Steiner Verlag and distinguished Fromman-Holzboog German publishing house for his 2015 work. In *Rudolf Steiner: Writings on Mysticism, Mysteries and Religious History* (2015) he examines and cross references numerous editions and transcripts of Steiner from the pre-1900 philosophical days of his early writings to the post-1900 esoteric nature of his Theosophical and Anthroposophical writings. Rudolf Steiner's work provides a rich source of primary material for comparative analysis of terminology: for example, Steiner uses terminology and descriptions creatively; lectures across Europe were given specific to time, place and audience; while mantras gave imaginative and poetic expression to his philosophy. ⁱⁱ Clement has drawn criticism for over-intellectualization in defense of the esoteric and praise for providing academic frameworks for further research. Peter Staudenmaier (Marquette University Wisconsin) in his review of Clement's work, highlights:

“*Though the sanitized Steiner makes a more attractive candidate for admission to the academy, he is scarcely recognisable in an esoteric setting.*” ⁱⁱⁱ

Steiner Studies academics have various interpretations of Rudolf Steiner's work and character. It is surprising to read for example, Friedwart Husemann's article (in the Swiss published *Nachrichtenblatt* 27 October, 2019) where he describes Steiner Studies academics and prominent public anthroposophists working to discredit, misconstrue and subvert Rudolf Steiner's work. For example, Helmut Zander's work, describes Steiner's family background as the source of his

‘authoritarian charisma’ (Steiner’s father removed him from school). In Helmut Zander’s case opposition to Steiner can be contextualized by his starkly opposed spiritual standpoint. In an interview entitled *‘Rudolf Steiner Universal Genius? Universal Dilettante?’*^{iv} Helmut Zander states that as a theologian, he sees fundamental differences between Christianity and Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy; Zander asserts that we can only hope in life for *‘very limited and regional personal knowledge’*; as opposed to Steiner’s *‘hope of absolute knowledge’*. However, a similar tone also comes from anthroposophical institutions: Hartmann Traub (Alanus) speaks of Steiner as having never got over a very childish catholic view of Christianity, and of having taken much of his Philosophy of Freedom (1984) work straight from Fichte. As explained by Jost Schieren, Rudolf Steiner’s proposed “sympathy” for the understanding of anthroposophy is considered unscientific.

Part of the desire of this tendency to break with the past, to reject Steiner and move on, has been the result of a drive for an ‘updated’, socially collaborative anthroposophical ‘brand’.^v New initiatives and institutions for research need to be positioned on the market. From this perspective, the traditional image of anthroposophy is not seen as useful: for example, many Rudolf Steiner lecture transcripts and texts without footnotes are academically regarded as untrustworthy; the ‘traditional’ fin de siècle mood of esoteric and complicated early twentieth century German history, including German Idealism, is felt to be best left behind; and for many academics, anthroposophical infighting is an example of repressive ‘sect-like’ intrigue. To have outgrown the fixed forms of the past and to want to strive toward new opportunities in society is understandable. However, the wish from some anthroposophical academics to over compensate with negative disavowals of Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy seems disingenuous. The positions of esoteric science versus academic science are not irreconcilable; it is precisely the fact that Steiner brought esoteric research and academic scientific training together in the first place that makes him an extensive source for research.

Universities Set the Tone

State accreditation and academic acknowledgement are closely linked. Jost Schieren explains how the Science Council of Germany’s decision to grant accreditation to Alanus University (2010) was due to its ‘discursive concern with the works of Rudolf Steiner in relation to art and science’; while the refusal to accredit the Mannheim Academy (2011) was explained as due to educational theory and methodology that was ‘extra-scientific’ and influenced by ‘a particular worldview’. Notably, the problems of the anthroposophical ‘worldview’ also arose in the case of Kasel-Wizenhausen, where a professorship in bio-dynamic agriculture was revoked due to esoteric research of ‘etheric-life-forces’. When dealing with accreditation, Jost Schieren stresses the importance of ‘open dialogue’ rather than a ‘vigorous apology’ of anthroposophical views, to help adapt anthroposophical terminology to an academic framework. According to Heiner Ulrich (University Mainz) research based on the anthroposophical worldview often presents problems of what he calls dogmatic knowledge, visionary experience and lack of ‘conscious detachment and unresolved openness of scientific method’.^{vi} In ‘the scientific credibility of anthroposophy’ (Alanus University 2011) Jost Schieren clarifies:

“At the door of science anthroposophy has hitherto knocked in vain. This is all the more serious, in that the scientific mentality is one that sets the tone of our time. The universities, its representatives, are the institutions that determine the values and goals of modern society.”^{vii}

Jost Schieren states that he is aware of the dangers of being perceived as an academic ‘club’ opposed to the anthroposophical worldview, yet, when asserting that ‘universities set the tone’ his

own rhetorical tone is revealing: as well as *'to knock at the door of science in vain'*, later in the article, he refers to *'soul observation'* as the *'blade that can cut through the thorny hedge and wake the slumbering Brier Rose with a kiss'... to wake mankind from its slumber* : these are clearly the expressions of a more idealistic and indeed anthroposophical worldview. Jost Schieren's position becomes clearer in the following; when he outlines his ideological position with regard to scientific and academic authority:

"Once such a change to a scientifically oriented approach is consistently implemented, anthroposophy will acquire a new public image. It will be perceived as open to discussion and dialogue. The formulation contained in Karl Popper's *'The open society and its enemies'* could then apply to anthroposophy and anthroposophists. The general import of what he says is as follows: "Closed systems, immunised against all criticism, are incapable of progress, smother all intellectual independence and creativity and eventually perish through their own inflexibility. Open systems, by contrast, which are willing to risk the refutation of even the most seemingly indispensable truths are not only more humane, but prove to be more productive and successful. Scientific as well as political systems are not acceptable unless they are capable of learning and self-correction". (Herzinger, 2002) ^{viii}

Even though we may broadly agree that anthroposophy should be 'open to discussion and dialogue', what of those 'closed' anthroposophists that don't learn to adapt to the productive and successful 'system' and then perish ...? And the scientific approach to be implemented? It sounds unfortunate, as if flexibility and openness are to be forced to fit with a public image decided on by academics. Furthermore, Karl Popper's *'The open society and its enemies'* (1945) is a product of its time and thoroughly political. ^{ix} In a recent Info3 (German anthroposophical magazine) article, from a number of Steiner Studies academics and public anthroposophists entitled *'Open anthroposophy and its opponents'* (August 2018) ^x, a similar tactic has been employed: In the Info3 article, the slogan Open Anthroposophy appears to have been borrowed from Popper, in a move to denounce writers associated with two alternative publications (*The Europaer* and the *Nachrichtenblatt*) as representative of 'closed' anthroposophy. When exercising this awkward tactic of using authoritative statements in public media to denounce opponents; the result unfortunately, is that it causes both positions to then polarize and accuse the other of insularity.

Anthroposophical Consciousness

Sympathy is a process by which we increasingly come to identify with the world around us. Part of this process is an ethical one. Antipathy closes us off to a part of reality whereas Sympathy opens us up to it. For materialistic science the lower definition of ego limits our knowledge of the world to subjective personal interpretation. Out of a sense of responsibility for ourselves and the world, spiritual science operates out of a higher conception of our ego. The ego does not only form our personality, but has an underlying and creative relation to the natural and spiritual world. This can be experienced in the fact that empathy and sympathy are feelings we may have for a sensual experience: for example, the being of a tree, the beauty of a plant or an animal in nature, or the seasons and the stars; we live in intimate experience in participation with life processes in sensual and soul experience. Through 'thinking' the human being has at the same time, the drive to understand and bring the relationship to nature to consciousness. Each event and part of the environment is also waiting for our own raising of consciousness; in potential, nature experiences itself at a higher level through this relationship with humanity. As human beings interwoven with humanity and world, mankind collectively strives toward higher knowledge of spiritual scientific

laws. 'Sympathy' therefore awakens us to our true sense of ego, and can bring a renewed impulse to the academic scientific disciplines.

There are far reaching historical implications in the split between academic science and spiritual science, yet there is already cross-over in many existing psychological and philosophical disciplines. The '*Connecting events: experienced, narrated and framed*' work of Egil Asprem (Steiner Studies contributor) and Ann Taves, (2016) explore memory images and consciousness in a cognitive psychological approach. They speak of 'intended' and 'unintended' actions to highlight how our 'private' formation of memory and will is influenced by the 'public' socio-cultural setting; for example, in group events such as political debates. They further analyse esoteric and religious experience: the visualization of ourselves in 'memory events' and in 'dream events', as imaginative and changeable according to cultural and experiential 'setting'. In 'The Sublime Object of Ideology' (1989) Contemporary Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek adds to this. In what Žižek calls the *return of the repressed*, he speaks of symptoms in our biographies that prompt our further investigation; for example, repeated themes in relationship difficulties that point toward a recurring motif. He uses the cartoon Tom and Jerry – where the characters continually bash each other on the heads with various dangerous objects, yet nothing serious happens – as symbolic of the process whereby experiences repeat until we recognise the original '*symptomatic trauma*' behind the outer event. These are observations, that lead in a similar direction to Rudolf Steiner's descriptions of 'Karma Research': Insight and understanding is the result of inner work and empathy not only for other people in our biography but also how ourselves and others are integrated in the history of the world around us.

There have been a number of "symptomatic traumas" in the history of anthroposophy. Steiner's death on 30 March 1925 and the burning of the first Goetheanum, New Year's Eve 1922/3, were surrounded by intrigues and speculation. At that time, public media in anthroposophy were also used to exchange negative and defamatory attacks; debates became politicized and polemical. All these dynamics reflected the political events in the surrounding world until the Second World War. After Steiner's death, the controversy over the leadership of the society continued without Rudolf Steiner at the helm; the last action took place in 1935 with the division of the Anthroposophical Society, in which many members were expelled. In contrast, Rudolf Steiner's teachings in the last years of his life are prescient. The meditations of the First Class (1924) were given in response to Ita Wegman's question about a modern form of spiritual training, like the former spiritual mysteries. In "Hour Sixteen" Steiner talks about how we can call to mind a picture of our life as a "*flame-of-life script*"; but he also describes how when our ego experiences purification after death; we can perceive our deeds as they were experienced by others. When we see and feel this effect in meditation, the experience can be disconcerting and morally disturbing, but through inner work we can evoke what he calls the strength of "soul-atonement". On reflection, this seems particularly pertinent to social conflicts. But Steiner takes it to a deeper level: A further step in meditation is the realization of what he calls "*spirit-redeeming powers*": through this power, our actions can be freed from their affliction to and from others, and our actions in relation to humanity and the spiritual world can be deepened.

There are symptoms in society that ethics is being reconsidered at a deeper level. Two stories stood out in a current issue of the New York Times. First, David Brooks describes global liberal capitalism as too thin: "Populism around the world results from the feeling that national cultures are under threat. Secondly, in contrast to collective influences on society, a personal dimension of historical dynamics can be seen. In the recent confrontations between the city of Prague (Czech Republic) and China. Prague's mayor Zdeněk Hřib recalled that at an official New Year's Eve reception for diplomats, the Chinese ambassador had demanded that he "kick out" the Taiwan representative (reflective of China's one-China policy against Taiwan's independence). Hřib replied

that they would not "throw out" their guests in the Czech Republic. In response, Chinese officials threatened to cancel the Prague Philharmonic's tour of China and ask the orchestra to sign a document denouncing the major. The group refused and the tour was cancelled. For the Czech people, political denunciations were reminiscent of earlier communist times. Before the fall of the Soviet Union (1991) there was a perceived stability of capitalism against socialism. In the last 30 years, political identity is increasingly being called into question; these seem to be symptoms that ethics is being rethought; that in an underlying sense, humanity is trying to imagine what of a fair and free society might look like.

Future Perspectives

Rudolf Steiner has written on the biblical apocalypse in relation to anthroposophy, and the long-term development of humanity.^{xi} Yet, taking our cue from Steiner Studies' academic Jost Schieren, we may develop spiritual insight for ourselves in a rejuvenated perception and thinking^{xii}. In the first chapter of the Bible's Revelations, the Son of Man stands before John, with '*a countenance as the sun shines in its power*', '*with eyes of fire*', and '*his voice as the sound of many waters*'.^{xiii} Normally regarded, the light of the sun is the power of 'this world', it illuminates the perceptual world of the senses; – In the development of perception in thinking, imagination is intensified, enabling us to see back into 'events' with an imaginative power. For anthroposophy, spiritual science is built on an inclusive gesture of sympathy; feelings are not repressed or denied but are the source of perception for the world and its mysteries.

While conflicts in popular media arise through public relations and the needs of political identity, a feeling of brotherhood for the world and others can bring with it a collective gesture of atonement and empathy which opens us up to deeper spiritual perspectives. Outside the halls of academia as much as those within, the wider dialogue for anthroposophy remains an eternal one. What we have tried here to outline is how Anthroposophy in the light of the Steiner Studies journal highlights some core principles of 'spiritual science': anthroposophy stands once again in history before a chance to develop a new, and rejuvenated esoteric.

ⁱ **Steiner Studies, International Journal for Critical Steiner Research**, "founded by Christian Clement (Brigham Young University in Provo (Utah) and Hartmut Traub (Alanus Hochschule, Germany)).

ⁱⁱ Rudolf Steiner, **The Meditation Path of the Michael School**, sixteenth hour, Perseus Verlag, Basel (2011) Rudolf Steiner speaks of 'life's fiery script' seen in the record of the deeds of our biography.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Staudenmaier, **The Higher Worlds meet the Lower Criticism: New Scholarship on Rudolf Steiner**, 2013 Correspondences 3 (2015) 93-110.

^{iv} Swiss Info Talks interview with Helmut Zander (13 March 2011) '**Rudolf Steiner Universal Genius? Universal Dilettante?**

^v Helmut Zander, **From a colloquium on anthroposophy** at the Alanus University, (2013) ROSE Journal Volume 4 Number 2 pp. 138-141. (suggestions for an updated anthroposophical brand)

^{vi} Jost Schieren, **The scientific credibility of anthroposophy**, ROSE Research on Steiner Education, Alanus Hochschule of Arts and Social Sciences, Vol2 Number 2 pp.90-98, December 2011. p.92.

^{vii} Ibid, Jost Schieren, p.92.

^{viii} Ibid, p.96. Herzinger, R. (2002). "The open society and its enemies". Against sceptical do-gooders: One hundred years ago, the philosopher Karl Raimund Popper was born. In: DIE ZEIT, 31/2002.

^{ix} **Karl Popper (1902-1994)** generally regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of science of the 20th century. Under totalitarianism and 'group think', the truth can be lost. However, critical attitude does not mean that the truth is found. It is interesting to compare Karl Popper's '*Open society and its enemies*' with French philosopher and playwright, Jean Paul Sartre's '*No Exit*' (1944), where characters are locked in a closed room together for eternity.

^x Editor Info 3, **Open Anthroposophy and Its Opponents – Statements**, June 25, 2018. (– 'conspiracy theories and theorists', Jens Heisterkamp refers to the Swiss anthroposophical magazines, The Europaer and the Nachrichtenblatt).

^{xi} Rudolf Steiner **The Book of Revelation**, 5-22 September 1924.

^{xii} Herbert Witzmann (1998) Of developing spiritual insight out of perception, thinking and 'soul observation', Jost Schieren, **The scientific credibility of anthroposophy**, p. 93.

^{xiii} J.N. Darby translation The Bible **Revelation 1:12-16** Kingston Bible Trust (1980).