
Book Review

Dan McKanan, *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), xvi + 289 pp., \$21.67 (pbk), ISBN: 9780520290068.

Rudolf Steiner (1861--1925) was the founder of anthroposophy, an esoteric worldview that also has given birth to numerous practical initiatives, notably Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, and innovation in social finance such as the community-supported agriculture (CSA) movement, which began as an anthroposophical idea. Steiner was well known (if controversial) during his lifetime, but during the following fifty years, the movement became very insular. During the 1970s, the various practical initiatives that Steiner inaugurated began to blossom, often quite apart from the Anthroposophical Society proper.

This is an exemplary book and a cause for celebration: a judicious, balanced, and well-informed discussion of Rudolf Steiner's work, published by a distinguished university press. At long last, Steiner is moving into the mainstream. Dan McKanan, who is on the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School, has focused on two aspects of anthroposophy: bio-dynamics and the threefold social order (but he has also added a good chapter on the Camphill movement). Moreover, he treats principally the years since 1970, when, as he puts it, a 'self-dispersing tendency' trumped an earlier 'self-reinforcing' one. The basically insular culture of the Anthroposophical Society gave way to the much more open culture of a movement. I think that this is largely an accurate picture. Let me also say, as a shorthand, that his understanding of the processes central to biodynamics as fundamentally alchemical, with all that implies, is right on target.

The heart of this book is this narrative, which is impossible to summarize in a few words. Instead, let me simply praise it, and leave the details to the many readers that this book deserves. He confesses to having an 'emic' or insider's approach to environmentalism, and an 'etic' or outsider's approach to anthroposophy. His book certainly reads this way. As one with an 'emic' view of anthroposophy, and an 'etic' view of environmentalism, I marveled at his knowledge of the multifarious and subtle ways that bio-dynamics and the threefold social order are interwoven with the ecological movement more broadly. A perfect example is that Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), which in some sense launched the whole environmental movement, grew out of her interaction with two anthroposophists' lawsuit against Con Ed over the spraying of DDT. Let this one example stand for many others.

And although I do have some criticisms of his views on anthroposophy proper, I must also say that I feel very much that I am having a conversation with an insider there, too. Over and over, McKanan uncannily homes in on the sore points of the

movement, especially in his chapter 'The Boundaries of Anthroposophy'. The first sentence of McKanan's book proper states, 'This is not, primarily, a book about Rudolf Steiner' (p. 1). But in the end, it is. Thus I feel I must take issue with certain points in the book, in the spirit of friendly and respectful conversation.

The first point of contention appears on page 2. It is a simple metaphor, but because it holds rhetorical priority in his argument, it bears the danger of setting the wrong tenor for his whole study. McKanan compares Steiner's influence to a seed that disintegrates into chaos so that creativity could 'flow in from surrounding cultural networks' (p. 2). This is certainly not true. It is much more true to say that many people have taken one or another part of anthroposophy and sought to apply it, while leaving the other parts aside. This hardly means that the other parts have disintegrated; they persist, and await later understanding.

The second main point of contention has to do with race, which is indeed the sorest of sore points for the Society. It is true for example that the Waldorf curriculum *has been* Eurocentric in the past, but this is changing very quickly, especially as Waldorf education expands into developing nations. In North America, Waldorf is also making great efforts to serve diverse clientele, but the main sticking point is purely economic. In California especially, there are numerous Waldorf charter schools that are completely diverse. And I must disagree that 'anthroposophy's version of Christianity makes little use of the Hebrew Bible' (p. 195): this is simply false, as belied by Steiner's numerous lectures on precisely that topic, including a whole cycle of lectures on Genesis.

A central component of Steiner's views on race is not emphasized strongly enough, namely the component of *time*. In the distant past, race did matter, but beginning with what Steiner called the Mystery of Golgotha (i.e. the Passion), it matters less and less. Steiner says many times in many places that we should aspire to eliminate racial and national prejudices. He looks forward to a future in which race will disappear. This does not excuse the very small number of Steiner's startlingly and bizarrely racist comments, and I for one have no trouble disavowing them completely. But for someone of his generation, Steiner was on the whole very enlightened about race. Peter Staudenmaier's claim that anthroposophy was tied by race to fascism through 'its familiarity, its participation in and influence by central cultural currents of the era' (p. 199; Staudenmaier 2014: 27) is ludicrous on its face: Steiner cannot be made guilty by association, especially since he swam against the cultural currents in so many regards.

This brings us to Staudenmaier's critique of anthroposophy. It saddened me greatly to read: 'Staudenmaier's academic publications display still more nuance and contain insights that students of anthroposophy would do well to consider' (p. 274). Staudenmaier is an extremely Manichaean Marxist who has no patience for non-Marxist worldviews. Staudenmaier's book *Between Occultism and Nazism* devotes only the first of its nine chapters to Steiner himself, and he paints Steiner not so much as a racist as a German nationalist, 'Germany's savior'. This is a ridiculous accusation that is easily disproved: scan through his 'basic books' and other fundamental works such as the *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, and you will find that the word 'deutsch' does not even appear.

But let us end on a positive note. I resonate very strongly with McKanan's account of anthroposophy's 'four significant gifts to environmentalism': cosmic holism, a homeopathic model of social change, an appropriate anthropocentrism, and a vision of planetary transmutation. It is a wise perspective indeed.

References

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