
Rezension / Book review

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Helmut Zander: *Anthroposophy. Rudolf Steiner's Ideas from Esotericism to Weleda, Demeter and Waldorf Education*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019)

Strange as it may seem, to this day an open dialogue between those who follow Rudolf Steiner and representatives of mainstream academia has never got properly underway. Why is this? The widespread opinion is that the cultural historian, Helmut Zander, is currently the author best placed to give a well-founded answer to such a question. He is credited with having proved that the founder of anthroposophy was simply a collector of cultural curiosities, a charlatan with an over-active imagination, who in the spiritual miasma of the early twentieth century gathered around himself a gullible coterie of truth-seekers, mainly using motifs from Anglo-Saxon theosophy, which he amateurishly laced with outworn ideas from the philosophical tradition of German idealism (Zander 2007). Zander's findings have been sharply criticised in anthroposophical quarters. Probably the weightiest criticism comes from the Stuttgart philosopher, Jörg Ewertowski. He questioned the narrowness of Zander's historical perspective with its leanings towards the thinking of Otto Gerhard Oexle (Ewertowski 2007; 2008, p. 100ff.; 2011, p. 221). But that would have been of little interest to anyone except a few specialists. To all intents and purposes, the monumental work of Helmut Zander had detailed the activities of the Theosophical Society in Germany with acerbic precision and located Steiner firmly at the centre of them. A very satisfying outcome, if only for the fact that it reinforced what everyone already knew. Hardly anyone noticed that the conclusions Zander came to had less to do with the precision and abundance of his observations, than with the countless presumptions, insinuations and mocking, often malicious comments with which his imposing work was peppered. Equally unremarked was the fact that Zander's freely admitted assump-

tion that Steiner's advocacy of the super-sensible was simply the imposition of an ideological superstructure left out of account what for anthroposophists was the heart of the matter. Nor did anyone wonder how such an apparently questionable construct as Steiner's spiritual world could possibly have produced such an astounding abundance of things that worked – a fact which, then as now, can no longer be denied. May I at this point insert what for me was the single most significant objection I had at the first appearance of the two volumes of "Anthroposophie in Deutschland": "The powerful personality that one quite naturally assumes to be behind any long-lastingly productive spiritual movement is nowhere to be found in Zander's pages. Instead, his voluminous work is haunted by a diffuse shadow, a pitiful, morally dubious featherbrain, driven by insecurity and ambition. How such a creature is to display the energy and competence required to start such a movement remains a complete mystery. Zander has performed the feat of totally eliminating from his narrative the genius of Rudolf Steiner."

In his new book, "Anthroposophy", Zander portrays in a sequence of loosely connected essays, a "bouquet of selective impressions" (p. 12), the current picture of the movement inaugurated by Steiner. Since the well-known SPIEGEL article of more than thirty years ago (Brügge 1984), this is the first attempt, from an external perspective, to risk a critical survey of the whole range of anthroposophical activities as they have developed since Steiner's death. Evidently the question his original work of 2007 left unanswered as to the connection between Steiner's teachings and their practical effectiveness would not let the author be. While here he has still not managed to

shed any light on the subject, the reader is nonetheless encouraged by an impressive abundance of carefully researched and meticulously backed-up information, some of which will be new even to insiders, to at least think about it. Zander has organised his observations under alphabetical headings, from *Al-natura* to *Waldorf education and worldview – religion – science*. We learn about *Judith von Halle*, about the *constitutional debate* within the Anthroposophical Society, about *races and racism*, about *sexuality* and the relationship between *men and women* within the anthroposophical milieu. There is also up-to-date information on topics that would interest the editors of BILD (the German equivalent of the SUN). Particularly impressive are the short pieces on anthroposophical *banks*, on *universities* set up by followers of Steiner, on bio-dynamic (Demeter) *agriculture*, on *medicines, cosmetics, curative education, hospitals*. In the essay looking in general at anthroposophy in practice there is a, for me, stunning remark about the diversity of these activities: “Every Waldorf school, every bio-dynamic farm and every anthroposophical clinic has its own profile. Indeed anthroposophists insist that every practical enterprise is an ‘individuality’. And the fact is that outsiders rarely manage to get a proper idea of this intra-anthroposophical pluralism. Anthroposophy commands a rich range of facets, the like of which other small religious or like-minded communities can only dream about” (Zander 2019, p. 187). With as much clarity as could be wished, this observation contradicts the widespread cliché that all anthroposophical establishments are regulated by a monolithic, central authority, located largely in Dornach.

A rich seam of Zander's new work are the numerous footnotes, with their references to further material in the internet. Here are quoted a number of dissertations and masters theses dealing with problems in the anthroposophical milieu. At least studies of this kind seem now to be permissible, albeit tucked away in inconspicuous corners. Zander himself continues to shy away from the key question of the anthroposophical “super-structure” supposedly invented by Steiner. He almost entirely overlooks all the thorough consideration devoted to this subject by anthroposophists themselves. Under the heading *reincarnation*, for instance, neither Emil Bock's classic study (Bock 1996) nor the well-founded “*Philosophie der Wiederverkörperung*” (“*Philosophy of Reincarnation*”) by Renatus Ziegler, one of the most competent philosophers of the anthroposophi-

cal movement, receives as much as a mention. For Helmut Zander, who as a theologian has thoroughly researched this tricky subject, the latter would be an ideal person to discuss it with. But apparently such a person is not supposed to exist.

One obvious candidate for inclusion here – *Goethe* – is missing entirely. The impressive profusion of publications about Steiner and the “Copernicus and Kepler of the organic world”, which anthroposophically inclined experts and other scholars have been churning out for decades, is resolutely ignored by Zander. As with his major work of 2007, however, the most glaring omission remains his failure to address Steiner's theory of knowledge, as contained in the book “*Von Seelenrätseln*” (“*Riddles of the Soul*”), his fundamental declaration of epistemological principle of 1917, in “*Die psychologischen Grundlagen und die erkenntnistheoretische Stellung der Theosophie*” (“*The psychological principles and epistemological status of theosophy*”), a lecture (oft-quoted by anthroposophists) given at the International Philosophy Congress in Bologna in 1911, and in the collections of later essays on anthroposophical research methods (Steiner 1961 and 1965). All these texts, by which Steiner brought his 1905 project of a “theory of esoteric scientific knowledge” to gradual realisation, deserve much more thorough discussion than they have hitherto been granted (Kiersch 2016).

In “*Riddles of the Soul*” Steiner delineates the relationship between empirical research, which takes sensory perception as its point of departure (and which he somewhat arbitrarily designates as “anthropology”), and his own “anthroposophy”, which begins from super-sensory experience. These two research methods seem, at first glance, to be as different as black from white and completely incompatible. Both, however, arrive through logical thinking at a picture of the human being, and if we proceed in an impartial way the pictures thus achieved are, he contends, compatible in every detail, like positive and negative photographic plates (Steiner 1983, p. 11ff.).¹

1. Possibly the first anthroposophist (certainly in the English-speaking world) to draw particular attention to the significance of “*Riddles of the Soul*” was Owen Barfield. A new edition of his “*The Case for Anthroposophy*”, which incorporates his translation of Steiner's text, came out in 2010 (Barfield Press).

This makes particularly clear that with his whole approach Steiner had no intention of replacing the open-ended, never-finalised research process, that Zander quite rightly identifies as the key feature of modern science, with a dogmatic system of absolute anthroposophical truths, as is still regularly asserted, not least by Helmut Zander himself. In “Riddles of the Soul”, through engaging with the arguments of an opponent, the aesthetician Max Dessoir, and of a potential partner in dialogue, the philosopher Franz Brentano, Steiner gives an exemplary model of how such an interchange could proceed. In the book's appendix he then outlines research findings of his own, among them his discovery of the nature of the relationship the three soul capacities of thinking, feeling and will have to the human body and “spirit”. This is of fundamental importance especially for anthroposophists involved in education and various forms of therapy, and has accordingly been widely adopted and applied, and its implications worked out in detail (Lutzker & Zdrzil 2019, with wide-ranging references). There is nothing of the kind to be found in the annals of Blavatsky-style theosophy. The central ideas of this Steiner had derived from his study of Goethe's organicism, and from many years of meditation upon the symbolic images in the latter's “Fairy Tale” from his “Tales of German Emigrants” (Kiersch 2011). What induces a competent historian like Helmut Zander to pass over all this without comment?

The conceptual framework of the sociology of science we owe to a Polish medical doctor by the name of Ludwik Fleck gives us a useful lead in coming to grips with this skewed state of affairs. As early as 1935 he had been reflecting on how scientific findings are arrived at, and the unexpected changes they go through. He describes how scientific dialogue, right down to the presentation of “facts”, is influenced by unconscious prejudices, assumptions and attitudes, by a specific “style of thinking”, that develops in the course of time among the members of a particular “thought community”, and, under the leadership of certain prominent “initiates” (sic!), compels all newcomers to conform (Fleck 1980, p. 129ff.). Using the observation of a bacterial culture through a microscope as an example – a procedure with which he, as a serologist, was very familiar – he shows how in the absence of clarifying concepts the observational field is at first confusingly multi-faceted, how from this profusion the skilled observer then selects details he recognises, while deliberately

ignoring others, how discussion among experts gradually clarifies what is important and out of this arises a “journal science” characterised by open questions, uncertainties and suppositions, how its provisional results then take shape as “handbook science”, and finally enter the sphere of “textbook science”, where only the solidly proven “facts” appear. Every science follows this path: from the sensing of a vague, confusing reality at the beginning of the research to the forming of concepts, established inevitably in terms of an unquestioned “style of thinking”, and regarded as the truth by the general public. This goes for Steiner's anthroposophy as much as for every particular science competing with other possible interpretations in the field of debate within the modern scientific community. The way the lay public accepts the authoritative – even if in principle provisional – pronouncements of science as proven truth is exactly the same as the way the tradition-bound community of anthroposophical fellow-believers accepts the contents of Rudolf Steiner's Collected Works as such. It does not follow from this that Steiner himself regarded his ideas or research findings as having absolute validity, as Zander purports to have proven.

Fleck's observations on the relationship between the esoteric circles of those “in the know” and the esoteric mass of the lay public are particularly interesting for the purpose of understanding the position of a researcher like Helmut Zander. Those who know, according to Fleck, do not simply instruct, they also adjust themselves to the expectations of their audience. This insight sheds a very informative light on certain irrational trends in the modern media, such as their poll-fetish and measurability mania. But also on the methods of Helmut Zander. The successful Steiner-researcher has to take account of the widespread feeling that it's up to him to make sure Steiner, the theosophical “guru”, is exposed. Anything that contradicts this feeling must be left out of the picture.

This need not imply that in discreetly passing over certain problem areas Zander is actively seeking to discredit Steiner or his supporters. As a member of the thought-collective of the modern scientific community he simply cannot but proceed as he does. What is irritating, however, is the apparent naivety with which he bases his utterances about what he confidently assumes to be the basic features of modern scientific research squarely upon the unshakable validity of ideas belonging to another time,

and thus upon a style of thinking that has long been in question. It is now many years since Gernot Böhme proclaimed “the end of the Baconian age” (Böhme 1993). Highly regarded nonconformists like Paul Feyerabend with his posthumously published “Naturphilosophie” (Feyerabend 2018), the American philosopher Thomas Nagel with his study “Mind and Cosmos” (Nagel 2013) have raised serious doubts (this is just the tip of a very large iceberg). And the current debates on the appalling ecological and economic consequences of the hitherto reigning scientific paradigm can only add to them. In his authoritative work of 2007 Helmut Zander

very successfully portrayed the circumstances under which Steiner's anthroposophy was able to develop, especially the life histories and specific contributions of those involved. This new book bears the same stamp, and for this we should be grateful to him. But his central thesis, that Steiner's life's work was nothing more than a sort of worm-cast of Blavatsky-style theosophy, is just as questionable as it ever was. The sub-title of the new book is misleading. Zander has sensitively and knowledgeably portrayed *Weleda, Demeter, Waldorf education* and the milieu in which they blossomed, but still has not done the same for *Rudolf Steiner's ideas*.

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