

## **Types of discourses about Anthroposophy in relation to Waldorf education (Part 1)**

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper (in two parts) outlines various types of discourses of Anthroposophy from the perspective of scholars of Waldorf education, offering a commentary on each one. The aim of the paper is to help provide a framework for scholars, students of Waldorf education, teachers and anyone who wishes to make informed judgements about the possible relationships between Waldorf education and anthroposophy. It makes a basic distinction between an individual's relationship to anthroposophy, which can be based on belief, conviction, or experience and which they are totally free to have, and the position of an institution like a school or university to the theory underpinning Waldorf education. The main problem that Waldorf education has in being taken seriously by the academy and the public is the association with esoteric and apparently unscientific aspects of Anthroposophy. Gaining acceptance for Anthroposophy as a legitimate science of the spirit is worth striving for but Waldorf education cannot wait that long. The discourses described include the charismatic nature of the anthroposophical movement, whether it is a religion or ideology, whether everything published in Steiner's name is Anthroposophy, Anthroposophy as a 'theory of everything' or grand narrative, Anthroposophy as an esoteric schooling and path of meditation and finally as a science of the spiritual. In the final section the paper addresses the possible role of Anthroposophy in teacher education and as a basis for Waldorf education. I argue that Steiner should be referenced like any other author, and anthroposophy should be referenced as a cultural phenomenon and studied using the appropriate hermeneutic methods. Ultimately if anthroposophy is seen as a spiritual activity of thinking and not as a body of knowledge, the relationship between Waldorf education and anthroposophy is not one of formal allegiance but of individual activity.

**ABSTRAKT.** In diesem Artikel (in zwei Teile) werden verschiedene Arten von Diskursen der Anthroposophie aus der Perspektive der Waldorfpädagogik skizziert und kommentiert. Ziel des Artikels ist es, Wissenschaftler\*innen, Studierende der Waldorfpädagogik, Lehrkräften und allen, die sich ein fundiertes Urteil über die möglichen Beziehungen zwischen Waldorfpädagogik und Anthroposophie bilden möchten, einen Rahmen zu bieten. Es wird grundlegend unterschieden zwischen der Beziehung eines Individuums zur Anthroposophie, die auf Glauben, Überzeugung oder Erfahrung basieren kann und die jeder für sich frei wählen kann, und der Position einer Institution wie einer Schule oder Universität zur Theorie, die der Waldorfpädagogik zugrunde liegt. Das Hauptproblem, das die Waldorfpädagogik hat, um von der Akademie und der Öffentlichkeit ernst genommen zu werden, ist die Verbindung mit esoterischen und scheinbar unwissenschaftlichen Aspekten der Anthroposophie. Die Anerkennung der Anthroposophie als legitime Geisteswissenschaft ist erstrebenswert, aber die Waldorfpädagogik kann nicht so lange warten. Die beschriebenen Diskurse umfassen die charismatische Natur der anthroposophischen Bewegung, ob es sich um eine Religion oder Ideologie handelt, ob alles, was in Steiners Namen veröffentlicht wird, Anthroposophie ist, Anthroposophie als „Theorie von allem“ oder große Narrative, Anthroposophie als esoterische Schulung und Meditationsweg und schließlich als Wissenschaft des Spirituellen. Im letzten Abschnitt befasst sich der Artikel mit der möglichen Rolle der Anthroposophie in der Lehrkräftebildung und als Grundlage für die Waldorfpädagogik. Ich vertrete die Auffassung, dass Steiner wie

jeder andere Autor referenziert und die Anthroposophie als kulturelles Phänomen betrachtet und mit den entsprechenden hermeneutischen Methoden untersucht werden sollte. Wenn Anthroposophie als eine geistige Aktivität des Denkens und nicht als ein Korpus von Erkenntnissen verstanden wird, ist die Beziehung zwischen Waldorfpädagogik und Anthroposophie letztlich nicht eine der formalen Zugehörigkeit, sondern eine der individuellen Aktivität.

## Introduction

Many people within Waldorf education are unfamiliar with the idea that anthroposophy is not a unified doctrine, a single, coherent body of ideas, and that there may be multiple versions of what anthroposophy can be seen as. It may upset them to have to address this possibility because it disrupts the understanding they have hitherto lived with. I would not raise this uncomfortable subject, if I didn't think it was important.

Against a background of medial and academic criticism of the anthroposophical foundations of Waldorf education, many individuals and also organizations across the international Waldorf movement (e.g. the Associations of Waldorf schools in Germany, Finland, Denmark) have recently been discussing the relationship of Waldorf education to anthroposophy. There are several reasons for this debate. The first has to do with the fact that the criticism of Waldorf almost exclusively has to do with anthroposophy and not the education as such, which is generally well regarded, and continues to be popular among parents (though less so with prospective teachers).

In spite of the growing academic interest in Waldorf education, as evidenced by the growth of academic publications (see. Tyson, 2023, Hsueh, 2022), „Waldorf education is viewed critically by educational science, whereby the main criticism is not directed at Waldorf education itself, but at the anthroposophy behind it“ (Schieren, 2015, p. 128, see also Schieren, 2023, p. 2). In the German-speaking academic world, the general tenor can be summarized in Heiner Ullrich's often quoted phrase: „Strange anachronism or forward-looking model...Impressive practice and dubious theory“ (Ullrich, 2012, p.220). Although this appears to be mainly true of some fields of German educational science, given the historically central position of the German-speaking Waldorf movement, it is deemed important to counter this. As long as Waldorf education is identified with anthroposophy as a whole and as long as many of its leading representatives make the same identification, this attitude is unlikely to change soon, frustrating as this is for those who are responsible for the presentation of Waldorf education in the public sphere.

In the conclusion of their recent book on the international reception of Waldorf education, Hoffmann & Buck (2024) note that while the distance between Waldorf and Anthroposophy has increased over the generations since the 1920s and across a wider variety of teachers, most practitioners continue to identify with Steiner and Anthroposophy, albeit in an increasingly informal way. They note that this distancing is particularly evident in countries (such as Finland and the Netherlands) where Waldorf education is more integrated into mainstream education. There is considerable variation from country to country in the extent to which Waldorf teachers (and parents) orientate themselves towards Anthroposophy, often related to the provision and nature of Waldorf teacher training.

Further reasons for this questioning include the anecdotal evidence – in the absence of published research on this – that ever fewer teachers show active interest in anthroposophy beyond what is implicit in the education, and even fewer are active members of the Anthroposophical Society (which may be seen as a criterion for identifying as an anthroposophist). This suggests a de facto gap between Waldorf practice and anthroposophical practice. It is widely claimed in Germany and some other countries, that Steiner texts are no longer read in the teachers' meetings (which has traditionally been seen as anthroposophical activity) and some, perhaps many, teacher education programmes keep the study of Steiner texts to a minimum because they are often difficult to understand. My experience in Waldorf professional development internationally suggests that many teachers looking back on their Waldorf training do not make a clear connection between the ideas in Steiner texts they studied and actual classroom practice. In fact, when asked what aspects of

anthroposophy they see as most relevant, they answer, the curriculum, the stages of child development, the festivals, the threefold structure of the main lesson and learning process and the inner work of the teacher. Strictly speaking, few of these aspects can be directly identified as anthroposophical as such. One could also say that the anthroposophical ideas ‘used’ in Waldorf education are largely derived rather than direct, mediated by ‘experts’ to novices by word of mouth or through secondary, explanatory literature (by which I include podcasts, digital texts, YouTube videos etc.) and of course, through participation in communities of practice. The question of whether and to what extent Waldorf practice is (or should be) based on embodied knowledge of practices, understandings of anthroposophical ideas and anthroposophical practice, and to what extent, is ambivalent.

Another, perhaps decisive, reason is the more general sense that Waldorf education needs reviewing, renewing, re-visioning, re-positioning, and representing anew. In June 2025, the Association of Waldorf Schools in Germany (*Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen*) sent out an appeal to all members in June 2025, of which this is an extract.

Figuratively speaking, our school landscape is like a garden. Many powerful things grow there – relationships, commitment, ideas. At the same time, we as a school movement have grown very quickly in recent decades and have observed that confusion has accumulated: processes that have become obsolete, structures that no longer work, traditions that have become habits.

Despite all the care we have taken so far, our garden landscape now requires attentive and courageous intervention. It is no longer enough to prune here and there and plant something new. We need to take a close look:

- What should be preserved because it is alive and sustainable?
- What needs to be replanted so that it can flourish again?
- What has become overgrown over the years and needs to be cut back decisively?

If we take a closer look at our school landscape, we find that there is:

- no current mission statement for Waldorf schools,
- a loss of substance, which is evident, for example, in the declining interest in training and further education for Waldorf teachers, a lack of interest in federal meetings and an increasing disappearance of subjects typical of Waldorf education,
- no unifying vision with regard to current social challenges, a shortage of teachers, declining student numbers (Project Group: Transformation, 2.6.2025, translation by the author)

## Discourses and positions

I suggest that part of the process referred to above also includes clarifying the relationship of Waldorf education to anthroposophy. In order to answer this question, we must first clarify; “what do we mean by Anthroposophy?” There are a number of possible answers, each of which makes assumptions, some of which may be taken-for-granted, some are based on personal experience, some on conviction, some are supported by various authorities, but they always represent a particular perspective from a certain standpoint. We can call these various positions, *discourses on Anthroposophy*. All these discourses are valid for those who hold that position, yet none can be said to be the definitive ‘right answer’ to the question, though some of these discourses take the position that they know what the ‘right answer’ is. Christian Rittelmeyer (2023), who is not an anthroposophist, has written a book exploring ways of engaging constructively with Steiner and anthroposophy, because he thinks Steiner has important ideas to contribute to our times. He suggests a number of ways of doing this, which he refers to as *discourses*, which is why I have adopted his use of this term.

Each of these discourses can be positioned along a spectrum, which could be from loyal believer to total skeptic, or from novice to expert.



Figure 1 A spectrum of positionality

We can also speak of a hermeneutic approach that can either be described as *benign* or well-intentioned or *skeptical* (Felski, 2012, see also Rawson, 2021). A benign or empathic position means trying to reconstruct the intentions of the text/author with an open and generous mind. A skeptical interpretation looks for weaknesses and inconsistencies in order to demolish the whole. Kiersch (2021) has recommended a perspective of ‘hermeneutic benevolence’ within Steiner Studies, citing Sparby that “using this principle acknowledges that the strongest concept of an idea or a position is the one that can be subjected to the most effective critique” (Sparby, 2020, p.32). The benign position does not ignore weaknesses but puts them into the overall context and seeks to identify the intentions of the whole, which may be a process of reducing the complexity of the details to an overall gesture. Nevertheless, a benign hermeneutic stance sees meaning even in the most trivial details. An example is Steiner’s attitude towards Goethe in his essay ‘Goethe as Father of a New Aesthetic’, when it became known that all Goethe’s estate had been made available to the nation.

Some people might have shrugged their shoulders at the zeal of the scholars who took care of even the smallest remnants of Goethe’s legacy and treated him like an expensive relic that should by no means be looked down upon in terms of research. But Goethe’s genius is inexhaustible and cannot be surveyed at a glance; we can only approach it more and more from different angles. And everything must be welcome. Even what seems worthless in isolation gains meaning when we consider it in the context of the poet’s comprehensive world view (GA 30, pp.23-24, MR trans.).

The salient point here the multi-perspective approach to understanding and it is such an approach, I suggest, that we need in order to understand Steiner. This article specifically chooses the perspective of Waldorf education today, but there are of course other perspectives. At the other end of the spectrum of positionality, we can find Helmut Zander’s (2019) vast and skeptical exploration of the minutiae of Steiner’s anthroposophy. One could say that he loses sight of the wood for the trees precisely because of his single perspective. Using multiple perspectives one can build up a multi-layered view of a body of work or a phenomenon. Steiner used this model when he founded the Waldorf School, when he suggested that the teachers should work together to form a collective organ of receptivity (woven from the perspectives of each participant) to ‘presence’ the emergent future (“Into the chalice of courage falls a drop of the light of the times bestowed by the ruling spirits of our age” Steiner, 2020, p.19, first lecture 21. 8.1919). Otto Scharmer (and Katrin Kaufer, 2025) offer another version of this presencing.

The purpose of describing these various discourses is primarily to offer orientation to anyone wishing to position themselves or indeed as a theoretical basis for research and positionality is an important aspect of criticality (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The arguments made here are not exhaustive and can readily be extended. This article is written from the perspective of a Waldorf practitioner to look at the status of anthroposophy in relation to Waldorf education. It makes no judgements about anthroposophy as a whole. This fluid taxonomy of discourses is intended as a heuristic, a lens for looking at the relationship.

The following triangle offers us a tool to self-assess our position both in terms of benign-skeptical and insider-outsider positions.

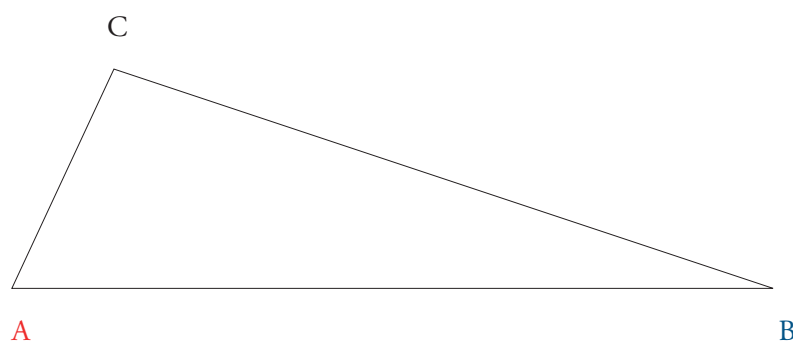


Figure 2 A triangle of positionality in which AB is the spectrum of positions from benign to skeptical and C represents the position taken. AC represents the distance or proximity of the person positioning themselves from Waldorf education, i.e. as an insider, C is close to A.

## My position

I wish to make my own position clear at the outset. As a member of the Anthroposophical Society in Germany, a member of First Class of the High School of Spiritual Science and having been a member of the College of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum for 15 years, and a Waldorf practitioner since 1979, I would describe myself as an anthroposophical insider *and* a representative of Waldorf education. I believe, for reasons I explain below, that Waldorf education should establish itself as an educational approach in its own right, with its own theory and practice. I agree with Frank Steinwachs that this is “about positioning Waldorf education as an independent pedagogical movement that has to constantly reinvent, reform and reposition itself in its current contemporaneity, since today’s perspective ...differs from the pedagogical reality of 1919” (Steinwachs, 2014, p. 116).

I believe that Waldorf education can academically justify its foundations, in ways that anthroposophy as a whole cannot yet do. In this I align myself with Johannes Kiersch’s response to Klaus Prange’s book ‘Erziehung zur Anthroposophie’ (1985, *Education Towards Anthroposophy* – a word play on Carlgren’s well-known book *Education Towards Freedom*). In an exchange of views in the respected journal *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (1986), Prange repeated his accusation that anthroposophy could not be considered in any contemporary sense scientific and therefore is not a valid basis for a modern educational practice that wishes to be taken seriously (and be publicly funded). Kiersch was permitted a final short response to Prange. There he wrote,

Contrary to Prange’s assumption, I am not at all of the opinion that Steiner’s anthroposophy as a process of generating knowledge and as a pedagogy is not sufficiently secured in theory. I assert this – in the expectation of being criticised for it by some of my anthroposophical friends – explicitly *only* for Steiner’s pedagogy. This, admittedly, requires a more precise anthropological and educational-theoretical justification in many details (Kiersch, 1986, p.555, author trans.).

Since Kiersch wrote that, the task of establishing a theoretical account of Waldorf education is well under way (e.g. in English, Dahlin, 2017, Rawson, 2021, 2025, Schieren, 2023), even though the necessity of this is not universally acknowledged within the Waldorf movement. It is true that Waldorf education *as a practice* does not need an academic theoretical foundation, but it does if it wants to take its place in the landscape of major educational ideas and if practitioners want to counter accusations that it is based on irrationality, and therefore unsuited to being studied at university or being recognized, let alone funded, by the state. Without this basis, schools can be accused of being part of a private cult and closed as a risk to the public, as is happening in some countries. The task of establishing the credentials for anthroposophy *in general* is likely to take longer. My stance is that it is not the task of Waldorf education to justify anthroposophy *as a whole*, important though that is in the long run.

## Positions

There is no doubt that the question of reviewing and perhaps realigning the relationship between Waldorf education and anthroposophy touches many people personally who identify biographically with anthroposophy. This makes the question both emotive and threatening. People have quite individual understandings of anthroposophy. For this reason I would like to make the following distinction between three basic and equally valid positions,

1. an individual's personal relationship to anthroposophy,
2. the official position an institution like a school, whether private or public, or a teacher education programme takes, and
3. the position taken by a formal, theoretical account of the ideas underpinning Waldorf education.

This third standpoint requires a little further explanation. In my various publications over the past 10 years, I have attempted to present a new version of 'Waldorf education-in-the-present' (see particularly Rawson, 2021, Rawson and Bransby, 2025). This approach draws on Steiner's educational ideas and 100 + years of Waldorf practice, but also draws on other compatible and relevant ideas. This is not just about re-branding ("old wine in new bottles") nor pruning the dead wood from the vine, it is about developing new practices that respond to the new demands made on education by the 'polycrisis' (Sousa and Moss, 2024) we find ourselves in. Of course, my new version of Waldorf education has no authority but depends for its validity on the judgement of peers and whether teachers find it useful.

The discourses, which will be briefly outlined and commented on below are not exclusive. In fact, most positions span several discourses. The discourses include anthroposophy as:

1. charismatic movement,
2. world view,
3. identical with Steiner's complete works,
4. grand narrative,
5. a modern esoteric spiritual path through the School of Michael,
6. a set of pathways of spiritual schooling, meditation and contemplative practices,
7. a science of the spirit,
8. not limited to what Steiner said or wrote,
9. and as the basis for Waldorf education.

## The discourses

### 1. Anthroposophy as charismatic movement

The Greek and Hebrew etymology of charisma points to the spiritual power of leadership conferred by divine grace, and the term is used in this sense, for example, in the Pentecostal movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and in contemporary Charismatic Christianity, which is based on an assumption of direct divine inspiration (as opposed to through sacraments or mediated by a priest). Max Weber (1922/1947) borrowed the term charisma from religious studies to describe a form of leadership based on a charismatic person who attracts other charismatic people who found a movement after the leader's demise. The emphasis in Weber's usage is on the followers who attribute the powers of charisma to the leader rather than the leader claiming any special status. With each successive generation, the charisma weakens, and the founder's



teachings become canonized and eventually begin to petrify and fossilize. Bruce Uhrmacher (1995) has used Max Weber's concept of charisma to explain the development of the Waldorf movement, and Helmut Zander (2008, p. 160) has done the same to explain the development of the anthroposophical movement, and indeed this is a useful heuristic for understanding the charismatic effect of Steiner and his works on his followers. The difference, however, is that Uhrmacher uses the metaphor analytically and without value judgement, whereas Zander uses it to support his accusation that Steiner used his charisma to manipulate people (see Uhlendorf, 2011, p. 18).

The problem of charismatic movements is that if they retain their focus on the origins as these become canonized and ultimately fossilized, their creative force gets weaker over time.

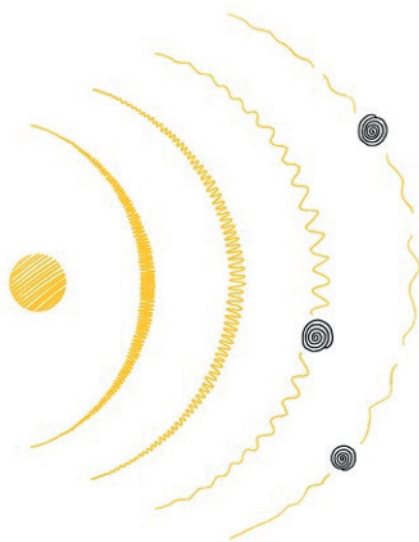


Illustration 1 This graph illustrates the decline of the charismatic impact of Steiner and his immediate successors and the subsequent 'fossilization' of anthroposophical ideas.

Ultimately charismatic movements end up guarding their traditions, fighting schisms and maintaining shrines - or they regenerate themselves in distributed and 'globalectic' networks. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2012) coined this phrase globalectic to suggest a non-hierarchical network of points of cultural activity. We can show the first trend in graphic form as follows.

### *Commentary*

The description of Anthroposophy as a charismatic movement is a sociological perspective that reflects certain aspects of Anthroposophy as a social movement. In the case of Waldorf education, the charismatic leader attracted charismatic followers, who then led a dynamic and expansive movement to establish Waldorf schools and move outwards across geographical and cultural spaces. The international Waldorf movement was often established or influenced by charismatic personalities, who interpreted Steiner's ideas in idiosyncratic and culturally situated ways (Rawson, 2024).

In my view, the Waldorf movement has also been characterized by a paradox gesture that has not always been recognized, namely that whilst adapting to local cultural contexts it nevertheless relied on an identification with a heroic foundation narrative that validates innovation only through reference to the origins of the Waldorf School, as these have been understood.

The anthroposophical movement as a whole has followed a similar trajectory, though perhaps with a closer identification with the Goetheanum as the locus of the General (i.e. global) Anthroposophical Society (and movement). The Waldorf movement has its teacher education centres and its elected national and

transnational representative bodies (such as the European Council of Steiner Waldorf Education). Johannes Kiersch pointed out the dangers of the anthroposophical movement becoming a „self-made creed“, with the following misguided beliefs that Anthroposophy „proclaims universally valid truth...does not need to develop...the teachings of Anthroposophy are scientific facts...anthroposophists must not be otherwise ideologically bound...the School of Spiritual Science is a sacred secret....and hierarchically ordered“ (2018, p. 118). Kiersch also notes that Steiner was well aware of these risks and spoke out against them, particularly around the time he re-founded the Anthroposophical Society.

## 2. Anthroposophy as world view or ‘Weltanschauung’

As in so many aspects of Waldorf and anthroposophy, translation matters. *Weltanschauung* is usually translated as world view, though also as ideology or even religion. As Zander notes, around 1900 the terms worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and religion were synonymous, which prompted him to regard Anthroposophy as a religion, which he justifies with the statement,

To me...the categorization [of anthroposophy] under religion seems fundamentally legitimate, insofar as Steiner answers the classical questions of the theological encyclopedia - the constitution of the world, the position of man(sic), his relationship to God/the divine - in the implementation of his system. The fact that he developed a Christology or religious school celebrations within this system is a consequence of this approach“ (Zander, 2001, p. 293).

Indeed, as Kiersch (2018) has pointed out, some anthroposophists do relate to anthroposophy as if it were a religion with elements of worship. These include devotional images of Steiner and his wooden sculpture, known as the Representative of Humanity, which is widely understood as an image of the Resurrected Christ, images of which are displayed in prominent places in institutions. Much of the secondary literature has a hagiographic tone and there have even been elements of pilgrimage (to the Goetheanum). Steiner's Christology, including texts such as the Fifth Gospel also give the impression that Anthroposophy is religious and Christian.

However, Steiner insisted that the Waldorf School should not be seen as a „worldview school“ (*Weltanschauungsschule*). He emphasized this in his speech at the introductory course for teachers at the new Waldorf school,

We do not want to establish a worldview school here at the Waldorf School. The Waldorf School should not be a worldview school in which the children are crammed full of anthroposophical dogmas. We do not want to teach anthroposophical dogmatics, Anthroposophy is not a subject matter, but we strive for the practical application of Anthroposophy. We want to translate what can be gained in the anthroposophical field into real teaching practice (Steiner, 20th August 1919, 2019, p.32. MR trans.).

This passage contains several important statements that can be interpreted in different ways. It unequivocally emphasizes that no anthroposophical ideas should be taught in the school. What this includes and excludes is ambivalent and has been interpreted very generously over the years. An example of this is the fact that Steiner's cultural epochs are part of the history curriculum, although this periodization is not supported by current science (see Zech, 2020). The argument that perhaps Steiner was right and science is wrong, only emphasizes the point I am making; if one only relies on anthroposophical sources, which cannot be verified, then one is teaching anthroposophical beliefs or dogma, and students have the right to know what the current scientific consensus is.

It is worth recalling that the well-known Van Baarda Commission (2009) in the Netherlands, which investigated whether Steiner's texts reveal him as racist, was set up because a parent reported that her child had copied statements about race based on Steiner from the blackboard into her main lesson book. Not long ago, some teachers in Germany were still teaching about Atlantis (probably citing Plato rather than Steiner). When Steiner said 1923 that “it is a slander when it is said that anthroposophy should be taught in Waldorf schools” (Steiner, GA 304a p.141, The Hague, 19 November 1923, MR trans.), we get a sense that the accusation might have had serious consequences. Steiner was clearly trying to avoid the school being labelled



anthroposophical. The teaching was to be inspired by an anthroposophical understanding of the developing human being, but not be identifiable as anthroposophical. Steiner preferred the term method-school to world-view school (see Rawson & Bransby, 2025 and Wiehl, 2019 on what Steiner meant by this).

### *Comment*

The issues that this raises, are manifold. The belief that everything Steiner said must be true because he was a spiritual initiate, leads to un-reflected acceptance of everything Steiner said or wrote and the risk of blinkered views and imposing fixed concepts rather than ‘reading’ the phenomena, quite apart from indoctrinating under-age young people. Secondly, this attitude carries an implicit assumption of infallibility, which is also a kind of fragility, because it can lead to the fear that ‘removing any brick’ of belief from the wall of the anthroposophical world view, the whole structure would be undermined. Such un-reflected beliefs often oversimplify what Steiner actually said or wrote, and the context in which he did so. The infallibility mentality leads to a sense of anthroposophical exceptionalism, that that ‘we’ know something that the rest of the world doesn’t. This may give believers a degree of certainty but also means that any evidence to the contrary, really does weaken the whole.

In my view there are good reasons why Steiner did not want the Waldorf School, and by implication Waldorf education, to be seen as anthroposophical. When Emil Molt asked him to start a school for the children of the workers in his factory, it became apparent that he was no longer working within the framework of the Anthroposophical Society as the vehicle for practicing and promoting anthroposophy. There was no question that the workers would need to be anthroposophists, though the historical irony is that only a few years after the school was founded, hardly any of the workers’ children were still in the school. They had been replaced by middle class, frequently anthroposophical families (a fact that is often absent from the charismatic Stuttgart Foundation Myth as it is narrated around the world). Today, it is not required that parents be anthroposophists (though in some places an anthroposophical lifestyle is expected), any more than it is necessary if one drinks Demeter quality French wine or buys biodynamic fruit and vegetables at the supermarket, or uses Weleda toothpaste, or even banks with the GLS. This fact has been fundamentally misunderstood by generations of Waldorf ‘fundamentalists’ or loyalists as Oberman (2008) calls them. The question as to whether Waldorf teachers (or biodynamic farmers or GLS bankers) need to be, or indeed should be anthroposophists is answered pragmatically in the negative. Many, perhaps even most, are not formally anthroposophists nor informally practitioners of anthroposophy. Though, I think we can agree, they should understand what they are doing.

The reluctance of some anthroposophists to acknowledge the implications and effects of Steiner’s use of race theory (amply documented by Rawson, 2025, Martins, 2012 and Schmelzer, 2025), or worse, the assertion that what he said about races is true, illustrates anthroposophical fragility and exceptionalism (compounded by the fact that few people have read that widely in Steiner’s works). The term fragility is a specific reference to white fragility (diAngelo, 2021), which is the self-image of white people that they are race-less and fully innocent of structural racism and when this is pointed out to them, they react defensively. Anthroposophical fragility manifests in the belief that Steiner could not possibly have said anything derogatory about races because of his commitment to a philosophy of freedom, which sees all generic categories (e.g. being a woman, being non-white, being gay) as superseded by the state of freedom and thus an anthroposophist by definition cannot be accused of structural racism (even if they know the meaning of this term). The fragility comes to expression when individuals and institutions claim to be colour blind and open to anyone, and in the irritation that anyone could question this. The exceptionalism arises in the insistence that Steiner’s ideas are adequate to deal with any social or cultural issue that arises and that no further ideas are needed. If only the threefold social theory (including ideas such as social and anti-social forces) were implemented, there would be no social injustice including racial, cultural or gender discrimination and that Steiner’s spiritual exercises are the best antidote to such problems. For any person who feels excluded, discriminated against or simply not taken seriously, anthroposophical fragility and exceptionalism are not welcoming gestures. It is legitimate to ask why none of the well-known leaders of the civil rights, women’s emancipation or LGBTQ

movements have drawn on Steiner's works for inspiration. One can ask why people of colour and migration background or who identify as LGBTQ are underrepresented in anthroposophical institutions and Waldorf schools. The lengthy process of arriving at a common diversity and anti-discriminatory statement for 28 European countries (ECSWE, 2025), reflects on the one hand considerable cultural differences between the countries and the fact that it was possible to arise at a common statement through a democratic process of consultation.

### **3. Anthroposophy is identical to Steiner's complete published works- the GA discourse**

The GA discourse stands for the idea that Anthroposophy is identical to the content of the 350 volumes of Steiner's collected works.

#### *Commentary*

The habit of using the collected works as an encyclopedia, or as a source of suitable quotations to embellish 'sermons', without contextualizing the words chosen, is not a serious way of working. In 350 volumes it is possible to find all kinds of details that don't necessarily fit into a coherent and reliable bigger picture. Scholars such as Zander can do the same thing to denounce Steiner- it works both ways. It is very hard for anyone to thoroughly study Steiner's complete works, even today with the possibilities of using digital search engines. This is one of the reasons that there are few, if any really definitive studies of Steiner's unbelievable range of work. Even if we assume that Steiner was a multi-talented polymath, he was nevertheless unlikely to have been entirely consistent, given that he rarely had time to go back over and correct many of the texts that were published, often relying on others, notably his second wife Marie Steiner, whose own interpretations and priorities no doubt played a role.

The central problem of using Steiner's collected works as an encyclopaedic reference work is that his various works, in the form of books, published articles (and those not published at time of writing), transcripts of lectures, notebooks, correspondence, sketches, models, paintings and sculptures, is that these works need to be interpreted and contextualized. Michael Zech has described Steiner's works as a self-referential system that was constantly in a process of development, as a "differentiated whole, in which each individual utterance is a pointed fragment that always refers to the whole, thus pointing beyond itself" (2019, p.128). By drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of critical and dialectic understanding of texts as fragments, and on Gadamer's hermeneutics, Zech describes the process of interpreting Steiner's works through reflection as a process that,

...changes the meaning of its originator, because he is no longer accorded the original or sole authority to interpret it. Rather, the work, understood as a fragment, stands both in the context to which it directly refers and in that of the world in which it is to be valid. By including the dimension of what has been said and not (yet) said, critique allows a work to experience its expansion from the background of its self-evaluation. In this respect, it does not make sense to ask what the authors meant by their work, but rather the only question that can be asked is how it is realised in the thinking recipient. However, this blurs the line between the work and its critical reception in a principally open poetic and autopoietic process (Zech, 2019, p. 130).

In other words, Steiner's thoughts, as expressed in his texts, have a self-referential validity within their own context, but through the act of reflection and interpretation, the reader becomes co-author, and the meaning of the text is thus extended. As Ulrich Kaiser (2020) has shown, Steiner's lectures - perhaps his most effective means of communication - had the effect of transforming his original audience by temporarily transporting them into another state of consciousness, as a great actor or musician on stage can. The hermeneutic method of reading Steiner's education lectures is described below. Thus, Steiner's complete works are only the starting point of a process of inner transformation that each reader has to enact through reflective and reflexive activity, rather than taking them as a series of established facts. If the complete works comprise anthroposophy, then this refers to the transformative process of interpretation.

As Johannes Kiersch (2010) has noted, there were often no words in the German language for the experiences he had and he made use of a wide range of sources for his terminology, including inventing words, which the German language facilitates. David Wood (2013) cites Steiner as saying that he borrowed the method of modifying the 'letter in order to promote the spirit' from Fichte. "For Steiner, all his terms are interrelated and chosen with care, and one must not dogmatically remain at the single word. Instead, the student has to actively bring all the meanings of the different terms together in order to form a more comprehensive concept" (Wood, 2013, p.183). Mostly Steiner used existing terminology, though giving the words new meanings.

Students writing a Master or PhD theses on Waldorf education and who wish to reference Steiner have to be critical about how they cite his texts. This means contextualizing the passages they cite, showing how this is interpreted within the current Waldorf discourse and how it relates to current practice. For example, instead of simply stating Steiner's claim that reading children's temperaments is important pedagogically, Steiner's theory of temperaments needs to be discussed in detail, how it relates to other theories of temperaments, or indeed to other theories about interpreting children's behaviour, or reference should be given to competent literature that does this. Then the writer needs to show how the 'theory' of temperaments is applied and what evidence there is, if any, about the usefulness of this approach. This is the same as would be done with any other theory of child development. If the student is working in other languages than German, they have to compare available translations. Rittelmeyer (2010) did this in an exemplary way (in German) as a model for demonstrating how one can work with Steiner's ideas in a heuristic way.

#### 4. Anthroposophy as grand narrative

The term metanarrative or grand narrative (*grands récits*) was coined by Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) and refers to totalizing narratives that offer a comprehensive account of historical events, experiences, social and cultural phenomena that invoke a kind of universal truth or claim to be universally valid. In fact, it is typical of Enlightenment narratives that they are based on assumptions that are deemed universalist ideals such as freedom, human rights, universal laws, principles and truths, rationalism, notions of education and culture, and so on. This is not to say that the notion of universal human rights, for example, is not valid, but rather to acknowledge that such ideas are not given facts.

With the term *postmodern*, Lyotard wanted to consider the effect of modernity *in the present* and he expressed a disbelief and mistrust of metanarratives in his famous critique of modernity. In particular he wanted to say that post-Auschwitz, and following the work of Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, Enlightenment values can only be relativized. Following Auschwitz as a symbol of the ultimate consequences of totalizing world views and following the hard-won recognition of postcolonial perspectives (Varela & Dhawan, 2020), the high ideals of the 'Western' Enlightenment are not entirely invalidated, but they no longer have any claim to exclusivity or precedence. Whether in the fields of science, religion or art, Lyotard argued that knowledge and moral values are relative. It would be fair to say, this view has become widely accepted, even at the level of public opinion. It is often overlooked that Lyotard wrote his report, commissioned by the Council of Universities of Quebec, to look at the impact of information technology the role of knowledge in digital knowledge economy.

We live in an age of general skepticism towards all knowledge claims and, apart from fundamentalists, who are characterized by the fact that they have a total commitment to one version of reality, people tend to avoid absolute explanations. One does not have to agree with Lyotard to appreciate the tendency he is addressing. Seyla Benhabib (1984), for example, criticizes Lyotard's analysis on the grounds that his view of the incommensurability of different languages makes consensus impossible, that by dismissing all metanarratives one limits the possibility of using common frameworks to understand history and pursuing collective action on behalf of social justice based on reasoned arguments. Lyotard summarized what he intended by the term postmodern, "I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives...The narrative function is losing its functors, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great soul" (1984/1979, xxiv).

### Commentary

The analogy of Steiner's works as grand narrative is simply to point out that treating anthroposophy as a universal 'theory of everything' is problematic when the context changes, as it undoubtedly has. To take one small but significant example, Steiner's lack of emphasis on the long-term effects of slavery and colonization, which some other contemporaries were aware of (Rosa Luxemburg to name one), appears in retrospect a kind of blind spot, likewise his lack of awareness of non-European cultures and his reliance on orientalist translations and interpretations of Eastern, non-European texts (see Myers, 2006). The point about postmodernism (and poststructuralism and postcolonialism) is to interrogate tacit, unconsidered assumptions and take multiple perspectives on the central ideas within any system. A postmodern perspective on Steiner, becomes a *post-Steiner* stance. This does not mean that Steiner is passé, out of date, or no longer relevant and we need to put Steiner behind us- far from it. The term 'post-Steiner', which I used in an online talk on International Campus Waldorf series- and which inevitably drew vehement criticism and sincere requests not to use it- simply means looking at Steiner-in-the-present, looking at Anthroposophy from the perspective of the present, from the multiple perspectives we have today, and taking the past 100 + years into account. We must not regard Steiner's texts as ahistorical; they clearly belong in a historical context. As Jörg Ewertowski puts it:

Steiner's immediate background... is formed by the now historically outdated epistemological questions of Neo-Kantianism and the equally historically outdated natural science of Haeckel. It is therefore important for us to re-read Anthroposophy against the background of the questions that have characterized the academic humanities from Dilthey to the present day and continue to do so - in other words, to deal intensively with Steiner's content, but also to adopt different points of view from those taken by Steiner himself. It is impossible to repeat the same perspective. This is the phenomenon of the historicity of our existence (2010, p.20).

## 5. Anthroposophy as the School of Michael

Towards the end of his life, Steiner published the *Anthroposophical Principles. The path of knowledge of Anthroposophy. The Michael Mystery (Anthroposophische Leitsätze, GA 26)*, usually referred to as the Leading Thoughts. In this work Steiner describes anthroposophy as a path to the spiritual in the human being and from there to the spiritual in the universe. In the form of short aphoristic sections and essays, it summarizes many of the core themes of his entire anthroposophical work. Karl Unger (2007), a close collaborator of Steiner, writes that Steiner developed a completely new language for Anthroposophy in the last year of his life. Previously, he had often adapted his lectures to the interests and consciousness of his listeners in a particular place at a particular time. Now, according to Unger, in his last year Steiner was addressing the whole of humanity and at the same time, tying Anthroposophy more closely than before to the Anthroposophical Society. In the guiding principles, said Unger, Steiner made it clearer than before that through the methods of observation and contemplation of anthroposophy one can grasp the supersensible structures of the human being by experiencing the things of the world from within, from the soul, as a kind of reversal of sensory perception. The ideas of our sensory experiences are preserved in the spirit and placed in relation to other concepts, detached from their sensory context. In this way, we expand the boundaries of our knowledge by mentally connecting with reality.

### Commentary

Steiner's 185 *Anthroposophical Guiding Principles* are a distillation of the whole of Anthroposophy and as they belong to the last part of his life, one could dispense with a large part of the complete works and concentrate only on these aphoristic statements with their commentaries. Summarized in a small book, the guiding principles are the closest thing to a definitive anthroposophical teaching. The text form is suitable as a stimulus for contemplative meditation (Zajonc, 2010), as a topic of dialogue, but also as a guide through the whole of Anthroposophy. Unger (2007) is also very helpful here, as he has found a clear epistemological approach to the Leading Thoughts.

Since much of the Leading Thoughts is esoteric and needs to be understood in relation to the mantric Class Lessons of the High School for Spiritual Science, the method of 'reading' them goes beyond reading for information, even beyond hermeneutic reading for understanding. It requires a transactional 'reading' that is contemplative. Steiner intended this to be the case for some of his major books such as *Philosophy of Freedom*, *Theosophy* or *Occult Science*, but in comparison to the Leading Thoughts, these works still seem historically situated. This is no doubt a very important discourse, but not one, in my view that is essential to practicing Waldorf education.

## **6. Anthroposophy as an esoteric path of schooling and contemplative practice**

Steiner offered a wealth of meditation exercises, contemplation exercises, mantras and verses for the development of consciousness, thinking, contemplation and meditation. Many verses summarize core ideas of Anthroposophy in poetic form, such as the *Calendar of the Soul* and the *Mantras of the Class Lessons*. The arts of Eurythmy and Speech Formation are also pathways of schooling consciousness and experiencing reality through and beyond the senses. Steiner's descriptions of the spiritual dimension, including after the death of the physical body are also meant as inner preparation for spiritual experience through contemplation. Steiner gave specific meditations for teachers (collated in the booklet *Towards a Deepening of Waldorf Education*), which experience shows are highly to be recommended, but not prescribed, for the simple reason that spiritual practice has to be done freely out of insight.

### *Commentary*

Today we have access to many forms of meditation and spiritual schooling. As Russel Williams (Taylor, 2015), a meditation teacher I have worked with, and many other meditation teachers recommend, the meditation you actually do, is the most important one. Steiner always emphasized that meditation should be a free act, not a duty or an expedient activity. One could add Goethean observation (Bortoft, 1996, Holdrege, 2005, 2013, 2018), to the list of contemplative activities, though this is not strictly speaking anthroposophy, it is certainly a useful exercise for Waldorf teachers.



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