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Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy – A Complex Relationship

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In this article, I shall attempt to throw l ight on this connection and explain it from different aspects. First, I shall briefly present Rudolf Steiner's life path and teachings, i.e. the anthroposophical worldview, and then I shall show how Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education, viewed the connection between Anthroposophy and Waldorf education. Subsequently, I shall explicate why and how this connection has been subject to criticism from various sides. Finally, I shall present two ways that try to elucidate this connection and justify it before its critics.

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I. Introduction

Waldorf education (Steiner education) is one of the most well-established and largest alternative education approaches in the world. This educational approach was created out of the Anthroposophical worldview founded by Rudolf Steiner and relies on the teachings of Anthroposophy. However, the relationship between the educational practice in Waldorf kindergartens and schools and the worldview behind it is complex and multi-faceted, both from the internal point of view of those who work from within Waldorf education and from the critical point of view of external researchers. Indeed, Waldorf education has been criticized and attacked in many ways over the years, particularly for these reasons.

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II. Steiner – Anthroposophy – Waldorf Education

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), scientist, philosopher, author and mystic (Barnes, 1995; Hemleben, 1984; Steiner, 1986) founded his teaching of "Anthroposophy" in the beginning of the 20th Century (Steiner, 1971; 1972; Zander, 2007). After passing through the customary academic training in his time – a training in Natural Sciences and a doctorate in Philosophy – and after working for several years in established cultural and academic settings (as a journalist, lecturer, literary critic, and scientific editor), he joined the Theosophical movement in the beginning of the 20th century, and then, after a while, became the head of the German Theosophical Society. In 1912, following disputes with the heads of the Theosophic Society, he decided to leave it and founded the Anthroposophical movement (Hemleben, 1984; Steiner, 1986, chapter 31).

Over the years, until his death in 1925, Steiner wrote numerous books and articles and gave thousands of lectures in many countries in Europe on various Anthroposophical topics (Hemleben, 1984). Spreading the knowledge from a source he termed "the supersensible world" or "the spiritual world" (Steiner, 1971; 1973) became his mission in life. He devoted the last years of his life to what he saw as the imbuing of European culture with various spiritual impulses out of Anthroposophy. Steiner created, through lectures, articles, and working with people from a variety of fields the basis for creating art, medicine, agriculture, social movement, science, special education, and education based on Anthroposophy (Zander, 2007; Lachman, 2007).

In his writings, Steiner claimed that only through spiritual development, and the creation of what he called "organs of spiritual perception" (Steiner, 1947) is it possible to truly know the human being and the world.

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According to him, the world that one's ordinary consciousness is aware of is only a minuscule part of a much larger world, which harbors the answers to the deeper questions of human existence. Steiner did not see his teaching as being contradictory to the scientific paradigm and therefore called it "Spiritual science" (German: Geisteswissenschaft). Steiner believed that "Spiritual Science" continues the scientific paradigm that developed in the West from the 15th–16th Centuries onward but expands to other areas of life (Steiner, 1972).

According to Steiner, Anthroposophy does not differ from conventional science in its methods of inquiry – only in the objects of its inquiry: while natural science explores everything perceptible to our senses, Anthroposophical research delves into that which is hidden from our eyes and the other external senses (ibid). Steiner's expansion of natural scientific methods to the transcendental realm was not popular in his time and nowadays has many critics as well (Ullrich, 2015; Zander, 2007). Later on, we shall see that in the field of education, too, this very point occupies a central position in the dispute between Steiner and his followers and various researchers.

Waldorf Education is based mainly on Steiner's books, lectures, and research, over several years during which he was director of the first Waldorf school (Steiner, 1975), as well as on the works of those who followed in his tracks, who work in this field and research it to this very day. This educational path can be characterized by the following principles:

Application of developmental thought: Waldorf education is based on developmental psychology that stems from Steiner's spiritual research (Steiner, 1975b; 1980). At its foundations, we find the division of childhood into three periods of six to seven years each (from birth to age 6–7, from age 6–7 to age 13–14, and from age 13–14 to age 20–21). In each of these periods, educational efforts are directed toward cultivating different qualities, such as activity, the senses, play, and movement in the first one; art and aesthetics, stories, and working with soul moods in the second; and in the third one – abstract thinking, professional handwork in the workshops and various crafts, and involvement in the community (Easton, 1997; Edmunds, 2004; Steiner, 1975b).

A holistic view of the child and educational processes: In his educational writings, Steiner wrote again and again about educating and teaching from the totality of the human being (Steiner, 1983). He is referring to a holistic multi-faceted view, of teaching processes, education, and supporting children. This holistic view is expressed in many characteristics of Waldorf schools (Easton, 1997). These characteristics include, amongst others, a balance between intellectual, artistic, and physical areas; the fact that each pupil goes through all areas and subjects until the end of school, and is educated through many varied fields of activity and learning, without choice or specialization (not even in high school); if possible, combining all age groups within the same campus, from kindergarten till class 12; and including special education pupils in the schools, as an essential part of the human educational landscape that every child should meet (Edmunds, 2004; Goldshmidt, 2017).

The importance of artistic experience in every teaching and educational process: The term "art of education" appears many times in Steiner's lectures and educational writings. He referred from various angles to the crucial role of art and artistic processes in the school. Waldorf schools make use of art as one of the most important tools in several ways – by positioning art as an important field of study in itself; by using artistic means as a significant methodical tool in every field of study; and through an aesthetic approach to the school's interior and its external environment (Steiner, 1975b; Edmunds, 2004).

Joint management – a teachers' republic: From its very beginning, the Waldorf movement placed at the center of its educational work the ideal of "republican management" – a management method that is not hierarchical but collaborative, one that gives every teacher autonomy and the ability to influence. Of course, this tendency is applied differently in different countries, but it can be found today in almost every educational capacity inspired by Anthroposophy (Leber, 1991).

III. The Connection between Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy

Waldorf education was created, developed, and designed from the Anthroposophical worldview. Steiner wrote and lectured about the possibility that Anthroposophy will inspire education already in the first years of the 20th century, over a decade before the first Waldorf school was established, when he still taught and lectured as part of the Theosophical Society:

> An anthroposophical insight into the being of man must provide the most fruitful and the most practical means for the solution of the urgent questions of modern life. In the following pages we shall endeavor to prove this for one particular question — the question of Education. (Steiner, 1965, p. 14).

The first school was founded in 1919 by his student, Emil Molt, who explicitly requested Steiner to create an educational framework based on anthroposophical knowledge (Barnes, 1995; Richter, 2006). Steiner himself, in many lectures and teachers' conferences, while he was director of the first school, emphasized the Anthroposophical basis for the kind of educational practice he wanted to establish, and the importance of the deeper study of Anthroposophy by teachers for their work (Steiner, 1975, 1980, 1983).

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The connection between the Anthroposophical worldview and Waldorf education manifests in Steiner's spiritual conception of the child's being, and the recognition that in every girl and boy, there dwells an individual, original and unique spiritual being. By continually begging educators to work from what he called the "Anthroposophical knowledge of man" as a source of their educational work (Steiner, 1980; Goldshmidt, 2017); to direct their attention to the question of Karma and repeated lives, which is a significant component of Anthroposophical knowledge (Goldshmidt, 2017); in the holistic approach of Waldorf Education; in its developmental emphasis; in placing artistic creation at the center of teaching processes; and in cultivating feelings of reverence among pupils, until puberty (ibid).

Ullrich summarizes this deep connection in the following words:

> The inevitable conclusion is that Anthroposophy provides the master key to understanding the whole structure of Waldorf education, from the curriculum to educational practice in the actual classroom. To this day, the founder of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) remained the main figure for the students of this approach (Ullrich, 2015, p. 91).

Equally, the deep affinity between Anthroposophy and Waldorf education manifests in the Waldorf-Education-inspired teacher's training (Goldshmidt, 2017a). In the course of this training, the students study R. Steiner's basic books, delve deeply into his educational writings, practice the Anthroposophical meditative-spiritual path, and engage in creative work in a wide variety of arts that grew out of Anthroposophy (ibid.; see also Gabert, 1961).

How did R. Steiner view the connection between the Anthroposophical worldview and Waldorf education?

Already in the opening speech he gave to the intended teachers, a few days before the opening of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany, in August 1919, Steiner emphasized the connection between the Anthroposophical worldview and the education he founded: "The Waldorf school will be living proof of anthroposophy`s great potential… No worldview will be taught in the Waldorf school; it is not our aim to fill the children's heads with anthroposophical teaching. Anthroposophy is not what is to be taught: We strive rather to apply anthroposophy and what can be gained from it for education in general and for the method and practice of teaching in particular." (Steiner, 2020, p. 16, 17). A little later, he explained how he saw this connection:

> By founding the Waldorf school, we do not want to found a school for a worldview, in which we shove Anthroposophical dogmas down the children's throats. We do not want to teach any Anthroposophical dogmas, Anthroposophy is not teaching material, but we strive to apply Anthroposophy in a practical way. We want to apply that which we attained through Anthroposophy, in educational practice. Religious education will be given within the different religious communities. We shall apply Anthroposophy only in our teaching methods (p. 206).

At the end of his life, after managing the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart for five years and founding several more schools in Germany, as well as one in Holland and in England, Steiner returned to this topic during a meeting with teachers' representatives from Switzerland. He recommended them to open Waldorf education in Switzerland not as an independent school movement, but rather as a source of inspiration for all schools who wish it, since:

> "Anthroposophical pedagogy emerged from a methodological development of learning. This is a methodical school, not some kind of political trend, but a practical methodical school. This is not some kind of religious belief, not Anthroposophy in the sense of religious faith, but a methodical school… I have said it a long time ago: with goodwill, the educational method that we are talking about here can be applied everywhere (Steiner, 1994, p. 165, 166).

Anthroposophical philosophy, according to Steiner, should remain so to speak "behind", not influence the pupils directly, and be a source of inspiration for the teachers only:

> Steiner-Waldorf schools, of which there are now around 1000 across the world, are non-denominational, co-educational schools founded on the above philosophy and the knowledge gained from 'spiritual science'. Steiner's philosophy itself is explicitly not part of the curriculum but forms the epistemological and philosophical underpinning to school organization, curriculum, and pedagogy (Oberski, 2011, p 14).

Steiner wanted to see Waldorf Education as practical proof of the inspirational power of the Anthroposophical worldview. During his last years, he invested most of his efforts in the attempt to inspire many diverse fields of action and culture with anthroposophical knowledge (Hemleben, 1984; Zander, 2007). However, it was important for Steiner to emphasize, that Waldorf education is not an education to a particular worldview, and certainly not to Anthroposophy, but an education and cultivation of the whole human being, regardless of religion or any kind of worldview (Richter, 2006; Steiner, 1975).

Thus, Steiner saw a separation or boundary between the tenets of Anthroposophical worldview and what is done with the pupils in the classroom. What he wanted to see in classrooms was not Anthroposophical knowledge, but teaching methods that are inspired by this knowledge. We shall expand on this point further below.

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IV. Criticism Regarding the Connection of Anthroposophy and Waldorf Education

Waldorf education has been much criticized, mainly around its connection to Anthroposophy. For example, Adir Cohen concludes the chapter about Waldorf education in his book "A Book called Man" (Cohen, 1983) with the following words:

> Rudolf Steiner's educational teaching has much to interest us, both in terms of its goal and ways. And even if we cannot accept its basic assumptions… (i.e., Anthroposophy, G.G.), his great educational understanding and interesting educational methods make an important contribution to educational thought (.176).

In the German-speaking realm, where Waldorf education has been working for over 100 years and is the largest and most well-established form of alternative education, researchers' criticism is directed precisely at this point (Schieren, 2015). Klaus Prange (Prange, 1985, 2005), Ehrenhard Skiera (Skiera, 2009), and Heiner Ullrich (Ullrich, 1986, 1988, 2015), who belong to the most vehement critics of Waldorf education, note in their writings that Waldorf education's reliance on Anthroposophy is not scientific and colors this education with a religious, mystical and belief-based hue. For example, this is how Ullrich concludes his argument:

> Waldorf education is entirely based on the Anthroposophical view of man and the world. This determines not only their teaching methods, but in diverse and sometimes indirect ways, it also determines the content of the curriculum and its topics of study. No other approach of the classical canon of progressive education has a culture that entirely relies on a single worldview, like Waldorf education (Ullrich, 2015, p. 173).

Schieren (2015) summarizes the main points of criticism that arise from the writings of these researchers in the context of the affinity between the Anthroposophical worldview and the educational act in Waldorf kindergartens and schools, as follows:

- Waldorf education relies on a spiritual-mystical influence – Anthroposophy – and hence lacks a scientific basis.
- In Waldorf education, the educators act without supervision, and do not base their work on logical thinking, but only on the writings of Steiner and his followers.
- At its basis, Anthroposophy is a kind of spiritual gospel, which means that there is no differentiation between science and faith in Waldorf education.
- Anthroposophy attempts to find a uniform totality of knowledge, including in the field of education, which is why it leaves the scientific context and wanders off to spaces that are inaccessible to examination and logical inquiry.
- In Waldorf education there is a tendency to create causal contexts based on Karma and repeated lives (p. 140).

This criticism can be summarized as claiming that Waldorf education in essence relies on a system of dogmas and beliefs, all of which originate in a spiritual path – Anthroposophy – that originates in the ideas of one person – ideas whose origin is mystical and hazy, and in any case lacks any scientific basis. The foundations of Waldorf education are therefore metaphysical and cannot be examined and investigated by theoretical scientific inquiry. Hence, the foundations of Waldorf Education have no scientific validity.

Schieren summarizes the problem with the following question: "What then is the place of Anthroposophy in Waldorf education? Is there an acceptable scientific way to manage this problem?" (ibid.)

Over the years, educationists and researchers from the field of Waldorf education and Anthroposophy tried to handle the criticism according to which the Anthroposophical worldview does not conform to scientific standards, and hence Waldorf education relies on an unstable, religious and mystical basis, in several ways, as follows: 1). By expanding the fields of science and changing the prevailing paradigm to include esoteric knowledge as well (Kiene, 1984; Majorek, 2015); 2) by conducting scientific and historical research while comparing Anthroposophy to other spiritual streams (Hanergraaf, 2012; Kiersch, 2008; 2011, 2015; Ravagli, 2014); 3). By applying scientific tools and methods to the Anthroposophical knowledge itself (Clement, 2020).

The conflict between the conventional foundations of science and the Anthroposophical worldview perhaps created a deep and interesting philosophical discussion, which can be important for other spiritual worldviews as well, but in the author's opinion, it is less relevant for responding to the criticism directed at Waldorf education. I shall explain this in more detail below.

V. The Question of Inspiration Versus Method

As arises from what was said above, Steiner himself tried to solve the issue by separating the teachers' training and their inspiration through Anthroposophical writings – and the teaching content in school, which, he emphasized, should be "clear" of any Anthroposophical influence. Anthroposophy should only live in the methods of teaching:

> And so, in the first place, the Waldorf School arose as a general school for the workers' children. It was only 'anthroposophical' in the sense that the man who started it happened to be an Anthroposophist. Here then, we have an

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> educational institution arising on a social basis, seeking to found the whole spirit and method of its teaching upon Anthroposophy. It was not a question of founding an 'anthroposophical' school. On the contrary, we hold that because Anthroposophy can at all times efface itself, it is able to institute a school on universal-human principles instead of upon the basis of social rank, philosophical conceptions of any other specialized line of thought. (Steiner, 1986, p. 203)

This line of thought leads, as we have seen, to a separation between the Anthroposophical worldview as such, and the contents learned in Waldorf schools. The role of Anthroposophy should become a source of inspiration for the teachers and educators only, and must in no way be passed on to the children themselves. Schieren (2015) expresses this view as follows:

> The point of Waldorf education is not to be a means of practical realization of the Anthroposophical worldview… but to create the best possible conditions for the development of children and youth: the children themselves are in the center… within the context of Waldorf education, Anthroposophy has no pure/absolute status, but only the status of a means to an end, it is supposed to serve as s means of developing and creating a good educational path (p. 145).

Indeed, as arises from research done on Waldorf school alumni (Randoll & Peters, 2021; 2016), and from the author's own experience in the field, there is a separation between the Anthroposophical worldview, which is intended for the teachers (for those who want it) – and the content learned in Waldorf schools. The pupils are not exposed to this worldview, and it does not manifest in the contents that are taught at any stage (ibid). Most of the teaching methods are inspired by Anthroposophical knowledge about child development, but the way this occurs is that this knowledge forms a kind of burden the teachers carry but is not spoken about with the children.

However, the question of contents is much more complex. Despite Steiner's unequivocal words (see above), he himself, in his lectures and seminars with the teachers of the first Waldorf school, mentions in several areas contents directly inspired by the Anthroposophical concept world – for example, in his instructions on how to teach Zoology in the lower school, as well as botany and history (Richter, 2006; Steiner, 1975),

One can tentatively say that the Anthroposophical concept world is passed indirectly to the pupils through the teaching methods. Let us take as an example teaching the world of animals in the lower school. Here, Steiner wants to demonstrate the relation between man and animal and conceive the shape of the animal as arising from the human form. He says that animal shapes are a kind of one-sidedness of the whole human being. His teaching method on this subject was to teach the various animal forms from the forms of the human body and its various systems. Although not teaching Anthroposophical content directly, this does convey them through the teaching methods.

To expand this dilemma, clearly every teacher brings along some kind of worldview, which is expressed through what he says, his manner of teaching, and the values he/she teaches, more or less overtly. Teachers who are inspired by the Anthroposophical worldview will pass qualities and values from this worldview to their pupils – which is something that we see in every educational path, especially a unique one that has a clear identity of its own.

VI. Ideology and Education

> "Without a narrative life has no meaning. Without meaning learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention" (Postman, 1995, pp. 3-4).

In his book The End of Education (1995), Postman claims that the school has lost its purpose (end), or its narrative, which is why it reached its end. Without purpose, or what Postman calls "grand narrative", he claims that there is no justification for holding children for so many hours in educational institutions. A Grand Narrative is a larger story, a comprehensive conceptual system, or in other words, an ideology. A grand narrative provides answers to the greater questions of life, questions that direct our actions and our thoughts: "*Know from where you come, and where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning*." (Pirkei Avot 3, 1).

> Educational narratives are derived from grand narratives about the good life: the life worth living (Harpaz, 2020).

Hence, every educational process, educational setting, or educational event arises, first and foremost, from a worldview, an ideology – whether consciously or subconsciously. (Harpaz, 2020; Noddings, 2016).

It is the nature of education to discuss the questions of a worthy life or the question what a worthy image of man is. And this is not a scientific question, but a question of values (ibid). Some will even say that it is an art (Eisner, 2002). There is a constant gap between the educational act and scientific research: "Educational research has become very good at gathering and reporting scores and statistics, but it still cannot tell us what to do about the problems underlying the numbers (Noddings, 2009, p. 23)... Scientific research can serve as a thought basis for an ideology of educators after it had been established. Science itself does not determine what it is: "Scientific research has no answers to the question of what worthy education is. The answer to this question expresses the preferences of the one who gave it." (Lamm, 2002, p. 54).

By nature, educational and learning processes are influenced by the educators' worldview. These carry

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their worldview within them, more or less consciously, and this worldview influences their pupils. The educators' worldview influences their own educational methods and thus, obviously, it affects their pupils as well. The question of what determines this worldview, is very complex, and in any case, scientific research probably weighs only little in this decision:

> People do not choose an education of a particular kind because research proved its efficacy, and they certainly do not choose it because research has chosen its "rightness". They choose it because an ideology acceptable to them dictated to them this kind of education (Lamm, 2002, p. 54).

Lamm goes one step further and claims that even the science of education is ideologically biased.

> Nowadays, at the age of science, most educational ideologies are concealed as science… the prevalent educational theories in our times present their preferred goals as if they were necessary conclusions of scientific research, whereas, in fact, they have nothing but ideological preferences of their formulators. (Ibid, p. 52)

Thus, the question is not whether behind educational processes or an educational approach there is a worldview, for it is always there. The question is, how and whether this worldview affects the pupils, and in this regard, it is most significant to ask: To what degree are educators aware of this influence, and can they control and direct it according to relevant standards and the right measure?

Most researchers' criticism of Waldorf education is that behind it there is an unscientific, irrational, and mystical worldview. Precisely such criticism can also be directed toward church schools, ultra-orthodox schools, or religious public schools. In every form of religious belief, we have to do with an unscientific, irrational, and faith-based worldview. But this is not only true to education systems that are influenced by and originate from institutionalized religion. The other alternative educational approaches lack a scientific foundation as well. Thus, for example, the democratic educational approach did not stem from scientific research or view, but from a liberal-democratic worldview, according to which every person – including children – is entitled to the right to choose and to be treated as an equal in all walks of life. Montessori education is based on Maria Montessori's research – just like Steiner, she was a single person who founded an educational stream – and her scientific basis is doubtful as well (Gustafsson, 2018; Marshall, 2017).

Educational innovation, breakthroughs, and the development of successful educational systems do not stem from scientific research but from educational work, usually by groundbreaking educators, who are inspired by some unique worldview, ideas, or conceptual thought. As we have seen, scientific research can examine educational approaches, research them, and compare them – but they do not create them: "All research findings in the field of education are either accepted or rejected by educationists based on ideological filters" (Lamm, 2002, p. 47). And he concludes this situation from a historical perspective:

> "20th Century rhetorics was amazing in its richness, whereas the educational act was depressing in its mundaneness. The abundant rhetorics… gained the name "information boom"… only a very small part of all this abundance manifested in educational practice or had any real influence on it." (Introduction).

Hence, criticism of Waldorf education as arising from a mystical or faith-based worldview is irrelevant, in my opinion, because every educational approach arises from some worldview, which in turn relies mainly on forces of feeling and faith, and not on scientific research.

In secular public schools, the worldview is not as clear as in religious education or the alternative one, because educators in this educational institute often have many varied worldviews. Therefore, uniformity and common direction are much weaker there than in ideological education approaches. This is both the weakness and the strength of the public education system. If we view the subject positively, we can say that in public education there is more chance of diversity, openness, and a wider worldview. However, public education always faces the challenge of having a clear direction. The issue of scatteredness and changing trends, both in the surrounding culture and in the policy of the Ministry of Education, can of course have an adverse and destabilizing effect.

So the question we face is not whether an ideological worldview stands behind one educational approach or another; nor is it whether this worldview is rational and scientific. Behind every eduational stream and every teacher, there stands some kind of worldview, which is not rational and does not originate from scientific research. This is true for public education, religious education, all types of alternative education, and, of course, Waldorf education as well.

I think that the relevant question here is the degree to which educators are aware of their worldview and how they work with it in educational and methodical processes. To refocus on Waldorf education, we can say that those working in it, by virtue of their training and its clear spiritual and ideological direction, are well aware of the spiritual direction they are in – Anthroposophy – and in the best case, they are also aware of their ability to influence their pupils. As we saw above, Steiner himself was conscious of the danger of an illegitimate influence of Anthroposophical contents on the pupils of the first Waldorf school, and kept warning against it (Steiner, 1980).

Undoubtedly, this is a great challenge facing Waldorf educators today, and the entire educational approach. The influence of Anthroposophical content

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may be conveyed through teaching methods, stories and narratives, conversations, and many even less overt ways. Raising awareness for this topic, both in teachers' training, teachers' conversations, and in the dialogue between the school community and the teachers, can help prevent any inappropriate influence.

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