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# Are Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf Schools 'Non-Sectarian'?

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**Dan Dugan and Judy Daar**

**P**ublic funding of schools in Milwaukee and Detroit operated by a cultlike religious sect is a new crack in the wall of separation between church and state. The establishment in law of this separation was a great social innovation of the American Revolution, and publicly funded non-sectarian schools are the flesh and blood expression of this principle. The courts for the most part have stood firm against the general funding of openly sectarian schools. The "Lemon" test, referring to the Supreme Court ruling, *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (403 U.S. 602 1970), provides that, under the establishment clause of the First Amendment, the primary effect of a government action must not be to advance religion. The Supreme Court has also clearly ruled that a state may not design or modify the curriculum of its schools in order to further religion at the expense of non-religion or to further one set of religious beliefs over others.

The establishment of publicly funded Waldorf schools should be cause for alarm for anyone who is concerned with preserving the separation of church and state, because these schools are the missionary arm of a religious sect hiding behind a façade of propaganda and dissimulation. We do not make this assertion lightly: one of us had a child in a Waldorf school for a year and half; we have attended many open houses and lectures at four Waldorf schools, studied forty books by founder Rudolf Steiner and many by his followers, read Waldorf teacher training texts, and several academic theses, and monitored periodicals of the parent Anthroposophical Society for several years.

## Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy

**W**aldorf schools are the most visible activity of the international Anthroposophical Society, which has been called "the most successful occult religion in Europe" by Sven Ove Hansson, a Swedish skeptic.<sup>1</sup> Other writers refer to it as "the most developed contemporary instance of Western esotericism"<sup>2</sup>; and a "highly organized occult group."<sup>3</sup>

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Anthroposophy emerged from the spiritual confusion of turn-of-the-century Germany, part of a burgeoning of exotic and occultist religious activity not unlike the 1960s' "New Age" explosion in America. The Anthroposophical Society was created by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who had led the German section of Theosophy, but split off to form a group that would follow his personal revelations of the "spirit world." The sect developed to maturity during the social and political turmoil Germany suffered during and after World War I.

The group's activities include Anthroposophical Medicine (in Europe the sect has its own hospitals), Biodynamic Agriculture, Eurythmy (dance) schools, Camphill Villages for the developmentally disabled, and a church, Christian Community. Its most effective outreach program is the Waldorf schools.

Their numbers demonstrate the extent of their success. Over five hundred schools exist worldwide, including about 125 in the United States, and the number is growing steadily. Although they are called Waldorf schools here, in honor of the first such school created in 1919 for children of the workers at a Waldorf-Astoria factory, they are also known as Steiner schools, and in some parts of Europe simply as the Free Schools.

## Doctrine

**I**n Steiner's doctrine, Christ is a sun god come to earth, not to redeem humanity from sin, but to help the human race balance between the influences of the Zoroastrian gods of light and darkness, Lucifer and Ahriman. Steiner's revelations typically blur religious, scientific, and historical topics. His version of history includes epochs on the lost continents of Lemuria and Atlantis, which he claimed to have read with "clairvoyant vision" out of the mythical "akashic record."

Steiner derived some of his central concepts from Hinduism (via Theosophy): reincarnation, karma, and polytheism. He mixed in the dual gods of light and dark from Zoroastrianism, and fit it all into the geocentric cosmology of medieval Europe, where humanity is positioned in a cosmic hierarchy below nine classes of supernatural beings. The occultist doctrine of correspondences, expressed in the formula "as above, so below," is the unifying principle. Seven planets correspond to seven epochs of history, twelve constellations of the zodiac to parts of the body, four elements to human tempera-

ments, and so on, in elaborate detail. These magical correspondences describe the universe as one living spiritual web of being.

Steiner's mystical world view is deeply pessimistic. He foretold, among other things, the reincarnation of the dark god Ahriman early in the twenty-first century. In this respect, Anthroposophy is not unlike evangelical Christianity with its propensity for millennialism.

After World War I, having failed to inspire world leaders to adopt his utopian political system, Steiner founded a school system so that Anthroposophy could at least start the process of raising the evolutionary stage of souls who would be reborn in future generations. Steiner states emphatically, in the manner of all religious dogmatists, that *his* revelation is the only truth, and that all other traditions and ways of knowledge are erroneous.

## The Attractive Qualities of the Schools

**H**ow and why do non-Anthroposophists choose to send their children to schools that disseminate these unusual ideas? Waldorf schools hold open houses for parents, but the sect's stranger beliefs are invisible unless one knows where to look. A visitor sees beauty everywhere and dedication in every staff person. Colors, lighting, and artwork are carefully chosen with loving attention to human feelings. The walls are painted in blended pastels, using a special wet layered technique that yields a shimmering effect. Prints of great works of art adorn the walls, along with student art, and collections of beautiful natural objects change with the seasons. The arts of storytelling, drawing, music, and drama are incorporated into lessons in all subjects. The teachers are as dedicated as Catholic nuns. They greet each student with a handshake and eye contact every morning. Primary teachers stay with their classes up through the grades, becoming surrogate parents. It isn't surprising that the physical beauty and nurturing atmosphere of the schools, and the idealism of the teachers, prove to be almost irresistibly attractive to parents.

## Deception

**B**esides their seductive beauty, these schools use deliberate deception about their purpose and organization to attract the children of outsiders. From the beginning, Steiner planned to attract the general public by systematically concealing the objectives of the schools and the contents of their curriculum. As he wrote in 1920, while trying to obtain state approval for his school:

We must worm our way through. . . . [I]n order to do what we want to do, at least, it is necessary to talk with the people, not because we want to, but because we have to, and inwardly make fools of them.<sup>4</sup>

A visitor might understandably assume from the use of Christian symbolism that Waldorf schools are Christian. Parents who are Christians, or who are willing to have their children educated within the Christian tradition for the sake

of a superior education, might be willing to choose these schools on this basis, just as many non-Catholics choose to send their children to parochial schools. In addition, Waldorf teachers say that along with Christianity, other religions are studied as part of the spiritual history of mankind. But would so many parents enroll their children in Waldorf schools if they knew the strange beliefs of the founder, the principles that motivate the teachers, and the extent to which those particular beliefs and principles influence what is taught? Though the teachers say that, in spite of their personal belief in Steiner's religious teachings, they use only his pedagogical techniques professionally, we know otherwise.

Anthroposophists are evasive when asked about Steiner's occultist doctrines, but the pedagogy is based on the whole work of Steiner, and the totality of his writings should be investigated by public school boards considering proposals for public alternative Waldorf schools. Steiner's world view can be found in books from Anthroposophical presses on sale at Waldorf schools. If these beliefs were arranged in a creed, and parents were asked to agree to them, it is likely that the schools would be very small indeed, with only a couple of dozen children of believers in each school.

There are no textbooks, but inquiring parents could, if they looked, find books by Steiner containing occultist religious, pseudoscientific, and racist statements typical of Germany in the 1920s. Nonetheless, Waldorf teachers have assured the authors that the schools are "non-sectarian," admitting only that some of Steiner's teachings are "difficult."

We don't know what material the Anthroposophists provided to the Milwaukee and Detroit school boards, but the San Francisco Waldorf School gave the authors a paper that contained the following deceptive statements:

How much of Anthroposophy and of Steiner's ideas are taught to the children in a Waldorf school?

None. On the day Rudolf Steiner opened the first Waldorf school, he stated firmly, "It is not our intention to teach growing human beings our ideas, the contents of our world-conception. We are not aiming at education for the sake of any special dogma." Although there is a worldwide Anthroposophical Society, whose members invariably are supportive of the Waldorf schools, *there is no connection between the schools and the Society.* [Emphasis added.]

Are the schools religious?

In the sense of subscribing to the tenets of a particular denomination or sect, the answer is No. However, the schools are "religious" in a higher sense of the word, and they are based on the Christian perspective of Western civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Compare this with Steiner's private conferences with the teachers of the first Waldorf school:

[Y]ou people who work at the Waldorf School must help to support the whole Movement . . . the Waldorf School can put itself on a broad basis and thus be a pillar for the whole Anthroposophical Movement.<sup>6</sup>

That this policy continues to the present day is amply attested by the contemporary Anthroposophical writer Gilbert Childs:

Waldorf teachers must be anthroposophists first and teachers second.<sup>7</sup>

. . . it must never be forgotten—and one must be emphatic about this—that the *whole* of teaching matter and method in Steiner schools is aimed at developing within each child the consciousness that spirit permeates everything in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Artist, writer, and former Waldorf teacher M. C. Richards summarizes the religious nature of the schools thus:

One could say that Waldorf education has a hidden agenda. Its curriculum is described in terms common to public schools in general: arithmetic, writing, reading, . . . But in Steiner schools the dimensions of these subjects are threefold: they are artistic, cognitive, and religious.<sup>9</sup>

### Anthroposophy in the Curriculum

**T**his contradictory policy affects the teaching in two ways: by the direct teaching of doctrine, of which some zealous teachers are more guilty than others, and more commonly by the omission of information that conflicts with doctrine. Sect beliefs leak into the classes because of the teachers' commitment to bring these "facts" to the students. Often, simply through ignorance, they accept Steiner's ideas on a subject without being aware the rest of the world thinks otherwise. As Steiner argued:

You must make the children conscious that they are being given the objective truth. And if this sometimes appears to be anthroposophical, anthroposophy is not to blame; it is that things have to be like that, because. . . . The matter itself leads to it becoming anthroposophical.<sup>10</sup>

In other cases, the teachers believe that doctrines of the sect are advanced scientific knowledge they are privileged to be able to present. A sixth-grade physiology class in a Waldorf school, for example, will include lessons on "the twelve senses" and how they correspond to the signs of the zodiac. Steiner's "post-Atlantean epochs," the latter part of this reading of "akashic record" of the "evolution" of the earth, are presented as the objective framework of history. Art consists of copying the teacher's illustrations from the board, and practicing Steiner's wet-on-wet watercolor meditations on "pure color." Much time is spent in repetitive geometric drawing, intended to give appreciation of the "qualities" of "pure numbers."

Any knowledge that conflicts with Steiner's eccentric doctrines is simply omitted. Steiner taught that the heart doesn't pump blood, so although Waldorf students may draw beautiful diagrams of the human circulatory system, they will never learn how it works. He taught that light is pure spirit, and that Newton was wrong: light cannot be divided into colors. Waldorf graduates are unlikely to have a clear notion of the electromagnetic spectrum, despite having taken physics in both grammar and high schools.

Long-term Waldorf teachers are pious Anthroposophists, dedicated to preserving and promulgating Steiner's world view. Over the center of the blackboard, where Catholics would

put a crucifix, we have seen a Waldorf teacher put a painting of the sun. Another classroom we visited gave the top center position to a picture of a dancer, left arm angled up and right arm angled down. This is a depiction of a sign for the sun god, the swastika.

Waldorf classes always begin with a prayer. The following Steiner verse is recited daily in grades one through four:

The loving rays of sun  
Give me the light of day;  
The spirit power of soul  
Within my limbs I feel;  
In sunlight shining clear  
I reverence, O God,  
The power of human strength  
Which Thou so graciously  
Hast planted in my soul.<sup>11</sup>

To the uninformed this might look like a generic prayer, acceptable to any deistic religion. If one knows that Anthroposophists honor a sun god, however, the text reads quite differently.

In Milwaukee, where the school board has chosen to fund a Waldorf school as a public alternative school, Waldorf master teacher Betty Staley reports that the prayers have been retained by the simple expedient of changing *God* to "the light within."<sup>12</sup> The use of the word *God* in Waldorf class prayers was already, in the 1920s, a conscious accommodation to public sensitivities. Anthroposophical writings usually refer to "the gods" rather than "God." These changes were consistent with Steiner's policy of camouflage. As he counseled in 1920,

[W]ith these things the outer form is of the utmost importance. Never call the verse a "prayer" but a "school opening verse." Do see to it that people do not hear the expression "prayer" used by a teacher. This will go a long way towards overcoming the prejudice that this is an anthroposophical school.<sup>13</sup>

All Waldorf students take two special subjects that are purely Anthroposophical spiritual exercises, painting and Eurythmy. Students take painting classes continually, but in them they learn only one technique, year after year: Steiner's wet-paper watercolor method. Waldorf students learn and use other illustration techniques in their regular class time, but the painting classes are special. All the students paint the same pictures. Waldorf painting classes have nothing to do with creativity or self-expression. Their secret intention is to work on the students' subconscious by meditation on pure color and symbolic images.

Eurythmy is taken by all students twice a week. Like the painting, it is a spiritual and "therapeutic" exercise. Eurythmic gestures represent the consonants (twelve, corresponding to the zodiac), vowels (seven, planets), musical keys (twelve), intervals (seven), and geometric figures. The gestures are devoid of meaning except to the initiated, who accept Steiner's claim that Eurythmy is the actual language of the angels.

One of the most obviously cultlike qualities of the Waldorf schools is their rejection of outside ideas, both in pedagogy and in the subjects taught. They have their own methods,

which they have received from their master. Since Steiner is dead, there can be no modification or development.

Waldorf teachers go only to Waldorf teacher training and enrichment institutes. They don't take college courses or enroll in regional or national teacher organizations. Waldorf students are similarly isolated. For example, the San Francisco Waldorf School's science classes don't go to the Exploratorium, San Francisco's world-famous "hands-on" science museum, because the theories taught there conflict with Steiner's revelations.

Waldorf primary school students never touch a computer. The public explanation for this is that a child shouldn't use anything before he can understand how it works. The private reason is that computers are believed to be an incarnation of the evil spirit Ahriman.<sup>14</sup> This is a good example of how concealed doctrine has a deleterious effect on the curriculum.

## Milwaukee

How is it possible that two public school systems, Milwaukee and Detroit, have begun funding these religious schools in spite of the Supreme Court decisions? Both Milwaukee and Detroit have had long-established private Waldorf schools. The new schools have been created as public "alternative" schools.

Dr. Robert Peterkin, the Milwaukee Superintendent of Schools, began the public Waldorf program there after meeting the founder of the private Detroit Waldorf school, Dr. Rudolph Wilhelm, a retired professor of medicine who is also the president of Americans for Choice in Education. Dr. Peterkin viewed videos prepared by the Anthroposophists and visited a Waldorf school in Chicago. Apparently seduced by the attractive appearance of the system, he invited the top guns of the U.S. Waldorf school movement to act as advisors.<sup>15</sup>

It is no surprise that they determined the teachers for the new school would have to be trained by people from the Waldorf movement. Public school teachers were then subjected to indoctrination in Anthroposophy. According to Waldorf master teacher Betty Staley, the teachers studied:

. . . the biography of Rudolf Steiner; the development of the child; the basic Waldorf curriculum and its relation to child development; the four temperaments; the importance of the teacher's working on his/her inner life through group exercises; and the processes of transformation of the self through the arts.<sup>16</sup>

The first indication of irregularity is that the biography of the founder was at the top of the agenda. The next items exemplify the sect's habit of redefining common terms to their special meanings. When Anthroposophists speak of "child development," they are referring to Steiner's three seven-year stages (mystical numbers) in which the child's soul gradually reincarnates from the spiritual world; and the "physical," "etheric," and "astral" bodies are brought into what he calls their proper relationship to foster the incarnation of the "I" that has been "evolving" between death and rebirth. "The four temperaments" refers to Steiner's revival of medieval

psychology. Waldorf teachers classify personalities as sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic, or choleric, and treat children differently according to their types. "Group exercises" are Steiner's meditation practices. Staley reported that the new trainees took to the Steiner doctrine enthusiastically.

## Conclusion

Waldorf schools are designed to promote the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, and those teachings are indisputably religious. If it's a Waldorf school, it must be religious. The claim that Anthroposophically trained Waldorf teachers can keep religion out of the classroom is transparently false. In light of our understanding of the totalistic nature of Anthroposophy, we are very skeptical of any claims that legitimate public schools can be founded using Steiner's pedagogy.

The school boards of Milwaukee and Detroit have put themselves in a very difficult position. Perhaps without intending to do so, they have created schools that violate the U.S. Constitution. The school boards did not fulfill their obligation to investigate thoroughly the alternatives proposed. Any further attempts to "clean up" the teaching in the schools as presently established would only result in another layer of deception. It might be possible to establish schools that take many of the good Waldorf school ideas into a secular environment, but this could only be done by people not indoctrinated by Anthroposophical training. If these school boards are looking for creative alternative solutions to educational problems, they should dissolve the existing Waldorf schools and start over. Their mistake underlines the need for constant vigilance to protect the wall of separation.

## Notes

1. Sven Ove Hansson, "Is Anthroposophy Science?" *Conceptus* 25, no. 64 (1991): 37.
2. Geoffrey Ahern, *Sun at Midnight: The Rudolf Steiner Movement and the Western Esoteric Tradition* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England: Aquarian Press, 1984), 15.
3. James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1976), 61.
4. Rudolf Steiner, *Conferences with Teachers of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart*, vol. 1, 1919 to 1920 (Forest Row, East Sussex, England: Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, 1986), 125.
5. Wade B. Holland, *The Waldorf Schools: 32 Questions and Answers*, 2d ed. (Inverness, Calif.: Children's Book Service, 1981), 8.
6. Rudolf Steiner, *Conferences with Teachers of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart*, vol. 2, 1921 to 1922 (Forest Row, East Sussex, England: Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, 1978), 59.
7. Gilbert Childs, *Steiner Education in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1991), 166.
8. *Ibid.*, 176, Childs's emphasis.
9. M. C. Richards, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner, Education in America* (Irvington, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1980), 164.
10. Rudolf Steiner, *Conferences with Teachers at the Waldorf School in Stuttgart*, vol. 3, 1922 to 1923 (Forest Row, East Sussex, England: Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, 1980), 53.
11. Steiner, *Conferences with Teachers*, vol. 1, 55.
12. Betty Staley, "The Urban Waldorf Program in Milwaukee: Waldorf Education Comes to the Public Schools," *Renewal* 1, no. 1 (1992): 11.
13. Steiner, *Conferences with Teachers*, vol. 1, 45.
14. David B. Black, *The Computer and the Incarnation of Ahriman* (Spring Valley, N.Y.: St. George Publications, 1981), 35.
15. Staley, "Waldorf Program in Milwaukee," 8.
16. *Ibid.*, 9.