

Reflections on the Evolution of Consciousness Inspired by Ray McDermott's "Racism and Waldorf Education" Douglas Sloan

These are some fragmentary, personal reflections that in no way presume to be a full response to Ray McDermott's article. Nor do they claim to be in any way an official anthroposophical or Waldorf response. They are the reflections of a person who is an anthroposophist and who is deeply committed to Waldorf education. This commitment to Waldorf stems from the author's conviction that what Waldorf education has to bring to today's children is desperately needed worldwide, and that Waldorf education is intended and was intended by Rudolf Steiner from its beginnings, to be for all children irrespective of nationality, religious and cultural backgrounds, and racial/ethnic distinctions. These comments are, therefore, also written in the conviction that a movement committed to serving all children must take with utmost seriousness every suggestion that it is in any way, inadvertently or otherwise, in thrall to attitudes and practices that would hinder the carrying out of this commitment. Among the most invidious of such hindrances are the pervasive racist attitudes, practices and social structures of the contemporary world in which we, all of us, too easily participate as long as we are unconscious or cease to care. The task of identifying and rooting out all vestiges of racism requires a work of self-examination that must be continuous and pursued in utter seriousness. One mark of our genuine commitment to the children, and of our maturity as a movement, will be the extent to which we enter into serious dialogue with serious critics to determine the validity of their criticisms, and, if necessary, to do something about them.

In these remarks I will not take up every point raised by Ray McDermott, for that will require a larger effort than is here possible. I will focus mainly on one of the central issues raised by him; namely, the evolution of consciousness as presented by Rudolf Steiner. And because this is in itself a vast subject, I will, of course, only be able to deal with certain aspects of it, aspects which seem to me central.

Before turning to the evolution of consciousness, however, it is important to state unambiguously that wherever racism may be found existing in Waldorf education, it must be repudiated. This is the position of the leadership of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America as expressed in the statement of its chair, David Alsop, quoted by McDermott. And this must mean, of course, that we take seriously and look at the charge that some of Rudolf Steiner's own statements are racist, either because they are uncritically culture-bound and carry the racism of an earlier time, or because we have lost the context in which they were originally spoken and, thus, without this context, take on racist meanings in our present time. In this case we must straightforwardly repudiate racist statements wherever we find them, even if they are Steiner's own words.

This we can and must do in order to remain true to Rudolf Steiner's own deepest and most fundamental insights and intentions. We can see this in two respects. In the first place, Rudolf Steiner emphasized again and again, as McDermott notes, that we not accept anything uncritically, even from him, that everything be examined. This was not an occasional admonition from Rudolf Steiner but one he repeated throughout his life. "Think for yourself," can be seen as a major motif running through all of Steiner's work.

In the second place, the central emphasis of all that Rudolf Steiner presented is that the true worth and identity of every human being is the individual self. A red thread through all his written and oral presentations was that we learn to recognize the true human being in the other person, beyond all differences of religion, nation and race. In fact, he said that, while the notion of race may have meant something in the remote past, we must "understand clearly that the concept of race has ceased to have meaning in our time," and that this will continue to be increasingly the case in the future.¹ The true worth and dignity of every human being is to be found in the individual self. Of course the individual realizes

the full richness of its humanity through experiences in different cultures and times, which impart variety, wisdom and beauty to the human soul and which are to be respected and valued accordingly. But the final worth of every human being is lodged in the individual self and cannot be taken away by any person or any thing.

It was for this reason that Rudolf Steiner established the Anthroposophical Society as a radically open community. The Anthroposophical Society, he said, “must seek to unite people of all races and nations, and to bridge the divisions and differences between various groups of people.”² The Society was envisaged and established by him to welcome into its membership persons of every religion, or nonreligion, of every class, of every race and of every philosophical/life outlook.

It is perhaps worth noting how ironic it is that in the 1990s Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy and Waldorf education are being charged in some quarters as racist. In Steiner’s own time, and even more so in the late 1920s and 1930s, the opposite was the case. In the early ‘20s Steiner himself was being attacked, even to the extent of assassination attempts being made on his life, by proto-Nazis in Germany who considered him a threat to nationalistic claims of German and Aryan superiority. By 1933/34 the attacks increased. The Nazis, various folk and nationalistic groups, the Ludendorff movement, for example, and others calling for racial purity flooded the public with newspaper articles, brochures and lectures attacking the non-Aryan and un-folkish anthroposophy and the international, pacifistic and even Marxist tendencies of the Anthroposophical Society.

Above all they attacked the “friend of Jews, Rudolf Steiner,” stressing what they saw (rightly so) as the fundamental opposition between the Nazi race-thinking and the human universality of Rudolf Steiner’s world conception. In 1935 the Nazis outlawed the Anthroposophical Society, and in 1938 they closed the Waldorf schools on the grounds that the free, self-determining individual developed by Waldorf education had no place in the Third Reich.³

Today Waldorf schools exist worldwide: in South Africa (including the first and longest standing integrated schools in the townships of South Africa, having worked there as such long before the end of Apartheid); in the slums of Sao Paul, Brazil; in Muslim communities of Egypt; in Kibbutzim of Israel; in a community of Native American Lakota in this country; and also now in Japan, Peru and India, as well as in Europe and North America. If there are elements of racism among anthroposophists and Waldorf schools, from whatever sources, it is essential they be eliminated because they run directly counter to the heart of Rudolf Steiner’s overarching vision for humanity and the task he set Waldorf education from the beginning, that of working for and supporting in every way the full development of the universal, individual human being.

Let us then give some attention to Rudolf Steiner’s description of the evolution of consciousness, for in it can be seen essential clues also to his understanding of the main tasks of our time. The picture presented by Rudolf Steiner is that of a change in human consciousness that begins in primordial times from an original state of oneness and identity with the cosmos, a state of consciousness which Owen Barfield describes as one of “original participation.”⁴ In this state of original participation in the cosmic consciousness the human being experienced the wisdom and life of the universe but was so permeated by this larger, universal consciousness as to have little sense of individual identity and sense of self, and almost nothing in the way of individual freedom.

Over long periods of time, however, this primal sense of oneness with, of participation in, a larger, cosmic consciousness began to give way to an increasing sense of separation from the whole, with an accompanying, growing sense of individual self-consciousness and self-identity beginning to develop. Over millennia-long periods of time the individual human being separated from the original participation in cosmic consciousness and gradually began to acquire a real sense of genuine self-consciousness and

self-identity in the process, a sense of individual self-identity which has become more and more a defining mark of our modern consciousness.

Rudolf Steiner has not been the only person to describe this evolution of consciousness. A number of scholars in our century have begun to explore the evidence for such an evolution of consciousness, examining shifts in cultural ways, changes in religion, art and science, different attitudes toward self, nature and society and changes over time in the meaning and uses of words.⁵ Of all the investigators of the evolution of consciousness, however, the most detailed accounts are those of Rudolf Steiner. We cannot enter into this detail here, but we can address some of the misunderstandings that Ray McDermott vividly indicates must be avoided.

It is important to see that Rudolf Steiner's description of the evolution of consciousness has two sides. He observes, as have other investigators of the subject, that the fading of the original participation or immersion in cosmic consciousness could be, and was, experienced in different ways. One way of experiencing it was as a deep sense of loss, a loss of the divine ground, a retreat and death of the gods and the loss of a world of nature alive with spirit and meaning. Much in the historical record of ancient peoples gives expression to this deep experience of loss and the sadness that accompanied it.

Another way of experiencing the separation from original participation in cosmic consciousness, however, was as a growing sense of inwardness, a building up of an identity within, an identity of one's own no longer derived primarily from the cosmos, from the gods, from nature, from the ancestors, from the group. The fading of cosmic consciousness created a space within which a new sense of inwardness, individual identity and, gradually, new possibilities of individual freedom could arise. The loss of cosmic consciousness was also accompanied by the appearance of a new kind of thinking, a thinking experienced by the individual increasingly as one's own, no longer as a participation in the consciousness of the gods or of nature.

Positive potentialities can be seen emerging in this evolution of consciousness; so too, however, can be seen enormous, new negative and destructive potentials. Individuality, for example, connected with the potential for freedom, also holds the possibility of ever-greater separation, isolation and alienation from all meaning and love. Individuality cut off entirely from a larger matrix of meaning soon becomes the rugged and rapacious—as well as the lonely and desperate self so familiar to modern experience. Rational thinking cut off from a larger matrix of meaning and wisdom soon becomes a destructive, mechanistic rationalism, manipulating persons and taking the world apart.

Rudolf Steiner described the evolution of consciousness from both these sides. He anticipated later criticisms of the modern, western, technological mindset. He described the loss of traditional wisdom as just that, a loss, a loss which must be made good. He says repeatedly that, if this modern consciousness is not transformed, it will wreak destruction and death throughout the world. At the same time, Rudolf Steiner did what few others have done.

He looked to see whether there are aspects of this modern consciousness that can provide a starting point for its own transformation, a transformation that can enable it to recover the ancient wisdom without the loss of its own unique, positive possibilities. And he finds that potential for transformation precisely in those areas of modern consciousness most vulnerable to going awry: 1) individuality and 2) modern, rational, conceptual thinking. These he says can be transformed, and that, if they are transformed, they actually hold the possibility for recovering the ancient wisdom that has been lost, recovering it in an integral connection with the new possibilities now open to *all* human beings for the realization of universal human dignity, freedom and love.

Now we must ask: Can this view of the evolution of consciousness be interpreted in such a way that it is seen as favoring some human beings and cultures at the expense of others?

Apparently it can be so interpreted, and Ray McDermott has given some examples of the forms this can take. The evolution of consciousness McDermott says can be interpreted to mean 1) the favoring of rational science over traditional, intuitive wisdom; 2) the favoring of Christianity over Judaism and, let us add, other religions; and 3) the favoring of Europe and North America over Africa, Asia and by implication the rest of the Southern Hemisphere.

In my brief comments I shall argue that these are, indeed, *misinterpretations*, and, further, that if the evolution of consciousness as described by Steiner is lost to our understanding, either distorted by such misinterpretations or rejected by others because of these misunderstandings, the critical possibilities of a life-giving human future and world will also be lost.

First, does Rudolf Steiner's account of the evolution of consciousness favor western, rational, technological science over traditional ways of knowing? McDermott says that, although Rudolf Steiner acknowledges that the emergence of scientific, technological rationalism involves a loss of more spiritual ways of knowing, each step along the way, nevertheless, "promises a cumulative progress." To my knowledge Steiner never employs such an expression as "the promise of cumulative progress" to describe the evolution of consciousness. And, if one insists on using it anyway, at least two basic qualifications have to be made. First, the process that Steiner describes is always in terms of loss and gain, real loss of traditional wisdom but only potential gain in new possibilities, which in fact are not always realized. Moreover, Steiner is insistent that in the modern period, from the beginning of the fifteenth century on, everything lies in the hands of human beings themselves to realize the potential. Nothing is "promised." Without humans now working to transform, deepen and enliven modern rationalism, the human future looks bleak indeed.

And what does this deepening and transforming of modern scientific consciousness mean for Rudolf Steiner? It means precisely a new valuation and recovery of traditional wisdom in integral unity with the new possibilities for individual freedom, love and human worth. This is not a privileging of modern western culture over traditional culture, but the possibility of a knowledge transformation that can bring both together in a new unity. It is the possibility of a recovery of what has been lost in traditional wisdom together with the fulfillment of human rationality and individual dignity and freedom that as yet remain only unrealized potentials in modern consciousness.

At this juncture one can see the unique strength and importance of Waldorf education. First, the rich and flexible curriculum of Waldorf education can provide resources for recognizing and affirming the culture in which the children have been born and live. Second, Waldorf education provides resources for acquainting students in an exciting, loving and respectful way with knowledge of cultures other than their own. And, third, of no small importance, Waldorf education can equip its students with the thinking capacities necessary for living fully in modern culture itself with self-confidence, care and creativity. It is significant that the Native American Lakota people are establishing a Waldorf school because they have seen in the Waldorf approach an education that will enable their children to affirm and maintain living contact with the spiritual and communal traditions of their own people, and at the same time acquire the capacities and understandings necessary to make their way in the modern world with full self-confidence.

It is sentimental to suppose that the scientific-technological juggernaut of modern rationalism can be stopped simply by trying to reclaim traditional cultures and ways of knowing. Scientific-technological rationalism is worldwide and rapidly pushing into the last remnants of traditional cultures-interestingly, often at the invitation and behest of those cultures themselves. In fact, few, if any, intact traditional cultures exist in the world today. All have been eroded and undercut; only hybrids, remnants and pieces

of genuine traditional culture remain. If the traditional wisdom is to be recovered, it can only be through the inner transformation of the modern mindset that is asserting itself worldwide, often now with growing destructive consequences. Showing that such a transformation of modern rationality is a real possibility is one of Rudolf Steiner's main contributions to the human future.

Without such an inner transformation of modern consciousness it would seem that we face only two other possibilities. Either we can harden in modern consciousness and complete the course of destruction on which we are now set (If there is any "promise" here, it is a thoroughly dire one.), or we can seek to escape the problems of our individuated rational consciousness by trying to return pure and simple to earlier stages of participatory cosmic consciousness. Since individuality and technological rationalism are now global, this possibility is both unlikely and undesirable. Yet without an inner transformation of the destructive aspects of modern consciousness, the temptation will remain great to attempt to undo individuality by merging it with the group. The result, however, will probably be the loss of both individual rationality and the traditional wisdom. In attempting to return pure and simple to earlier modes of consciousness, we would most likely find, not the wisdom of the ages, but the madness of a broken self or the obscenity of a tribal-bound worldwide Bosnia.

Second, does Rudolf Steiner's account of the evolution of consciousness favor Christianity over Judaism, and by implication other world religions? Again, I will maintain that this, too, is a misinterpretation, one that derives mainly from a misunderstanding of Rudolf Steiner's description of the Christ. It is the case that the Christ is central to all of Rudolf Steiner's work. But the picture and understanding of the Christ that he presents is that of a being who is universal, who is now present to all human beings everywhere, often under different names, and who works to ground the dignity, worth and reality of every individual human being in the God-head. In this respect Rudolf Steiner was especially critical of the traditional Christian churches for their repeated failure to recognize and honor the universal significance of the Christ.

It would be humorous, were it not so serious, to read that a teacher in a Waldorf school should say that "Jews cannot be Waldorf teachers." Were such an ill-informed, unreflective opinion actually to be the case, it would decimate the teaching ranks of most Waldorf schools in this country, and if extended to the Anthroposophical Society would deplete it of some of its most outstanding leaders since Rudolf Steiner began his work. Rudolf Steiner's own rejection of anti-Semitism was made in the strongest way. We have already noted the Nazi attack on anthroposophy because of "the friend of Jews, Rudolf Steiner." As early as the 1890s, Steiner actively attacked anti-Semitism, taking a public position against the anti-Semitism behind the Dreyfus Affair. And already in 1901, Rudolf Steiner established a close friendship with a Jewish author (Ludwig Jacobowski) and worked closely with him in support of his association against anti-Semitism (Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus).⁶ Throughout his life Steiner combated all expressions of anti-Semitism, calling it "a culture sickness," "an evil." His own position was unambiguous, and from his time to the present, Jewish members of the Anthroposophical Society have figured among its most outstanding and distinguished leaders.

It is impossible here to explore the myriad ways in which Rudolf Steiner explicates the cosmic, universal nature of the Christ. Suffice it only to emphasize that Steiner's view of the Christ affirms the worth of all peoples, as well as the truth of the world religions. In fact, Rudolf Steiner says that it is probably impossible for most modern people to understand the Christ today precisely because this understanding must proceed from the transformation of our innermost being and consciousness, which is the task that lies before us. "To expect modern humanity to understand the Christ impulse," he says, "is really asking too much." But this does not mean that the universal, life-creating Christ impulse is not at work in the world as the archetype of humanity, working for inner human unity in the midst of outer diversity. "In the future," he writes, "it will not matter much whether what Christ is will still be called by that name," but it will matter a great deal whether we find and work with the Christ impulse as the living archetype of

universal humanity. From this perspective persons of all religions can find the Christ impulse, and, perhaps, even from the perspective of their own traditions also bring new understanding to the working of that impulse.

In 1995 the Anthroposophical Society in Dornach hosted a conference on Anthroposophy and the World Religions. Among the main presenters, with many others, were a Buddhist priest who is also an anthroposophist, a Jewish university professor from Israel who is an anthroposophist, and a Muslim anthroposophist and founder of an anthroposophical community which in the Egyptian desert maintains Waldorf education and Bio-dynamic farming. Many other representatives of world religions were also present. The aim of the conference was to seek the inner unity of the world religions without loss of their individual richness and diversity that Rudolf Steiner held was one of the main tasks of anthroposophy.

Finally, is it the case that Rudolf Steiner's view of the evolution of consciousness favors Europe and North America over Asia and Africa, and by extension most Southern Hemisphere cultures? Again I will argue that this too is a basic misinterpretation, but one that has often been made by people in the West, including some anthroposophists.

The opening for misinterpretation lies in the fact that the discovery of the autonomous, self-determining individual, and the awareness of the fundamental human rights of all persons that has grown out of this awareness, first appeared in its fullest expression in a certain region of the world (which is not to say that there are not anticipations and analogs elsewhere). We designate this region somewhat misleadingly as the West, for it is certainly not limited to Europe, and as Rudolf Steiner has repeatedly pointed out, nearly everything the West experiences in this regard has its roots in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is in the West that the full discovery of human individual rights and its articulation and expression in documents, institutions and social experiments has taken place. This has led many Europeans, especially in the overseas extensions of Europe, to claim special credit for this discovery.

But to claim special privilege for the West is a mistake of the first order (not to mention that it is also in the West that some of the most horrendous denials of human rights have also taken place). Once the awareness appears that the human individual is of infinite worth and dignity, this fact then immediately also exists, by definition, for all human kind. That the West has repeatedly, whether through cupidity, arrogance or ignorance, attempted to use this discovery of human rights to its own advantage by claiming moral and material superiority over other peoples, is one of the unsavory aspects of recent history. The attempt to take advantage of a universal reality for special interest and privilege is a built-in contradiction, denying the very universality of the principle being affirmed, and is, therefore, self-canceling.

The only way that the West could have properly taken any special credit at all would have been for it to have responded to the universal value of all human beings by setting an exemplary model in treating all human beings accordingly. But this has all too rarely happened. And so the task of representing human rights and the worth of the individual has fallen today more and more to a growing number of remarkable nonwestern individuals. In our time the real heroes and heroines of this work are often not the westerners but those magnificent Africans, Asians and Latin Americans, who, at great risk to their own and their families' lives, have taken up the western discovery and spoken out for human rights and individual dignity.

Consider just a partial listing of the main champions of human rights in our time: Mahatma K. Ghandi (South Africa and India), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Chico Mendes (Brazil), Rigoberta Menchu (Guatemala), Stephen Biko (South Africa), Nabila Brier (Lebanon), Wangari Mthai (Kenya), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma), Abdulla al Na'im (Sudan), Nawal el Sadwi (Egypt), Donatila (Bolivia), Maria Elena Moyano (Peru), T. Sugimura (Japan), Wei Jingsheng (China), Chen Ziming (China), Harry Wu (China), Adolfo Lopez Equivel (Argentina), Victor Jara (Chile). And the list goes on.

It would be both sentimental and condescending to criticize the discovery of human rights, equality and the dignity and worth of the individual as western and Eurocentric. Tell one of the persons above, or some unknown peasant in the so-called Third World, who has spent months of isolation and torture in some autocratic prison that he or she (and it is often a woman), that he or she should not be interested in his or her rights as an individual because these are Eurocentric, western cultural values.

Rudolf Steiner's presentation of the evolution of consciousness emphasizes the necessity and the real possibility of affirming our human differences and of finding a human unity through and beyond these differences. If we ignore this account of the evolution of consciousness, we abandon one of the most important resources at our disposal for understanding and undertaking what is required for a truly human future.

We cannot end these remarks, however, without noting the fact that, while race itself becomes less and less important, racism still remains and must be dealt with. Racism has meant the creation of divisions of suffering, denigration and deprivation that oppose the reality of the universal human being. The Pulitzer prizewinning African American journalist, Clarence Page, has written, "The ancestral desire of my ethnic people to be 'just American' resonates in me. But I cannot forget how persistently the rudeness of race continues to intrude between me and that dream. I can defy it, but I cannot deny it." But Page goes further. He quotes James Baldwin's statement that "Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self, in which case it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change ones robes." Then Page continues on his own. He writes that we all must examine the garments of race and identify, "to loosen their camouflage and constraints on the naked self, on its strengths and vulnerabilities, so that we might trust more confidently our naked selves. Only then, beyond the confining fashions of race and nationalism can we express the full rainbow of our true humanity."⁷

"The naked self" and "the full rainbow of our true humanity" - these are the twin poles, as I understand it, of the sweep and substance of Rudolf Steiner's account of the evolution of consciousness. The inhuman divisions of racism oppose the realization of the truly human potential contained in this evolution, its real "promise." It is against these that we must continue to work with all our being. Ray McDermott has challenged Waldorf education in North America to this task, a task which involves constant, unrelenting self-examination. My confidence is that we will not waver in it, and that we can carry it out supported by the deepest insights into the universal human being indicated by Rudolf Steiner himself.

Notes

¹ Rudolf Steiner, *The Universal Human* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1990), pp. 12-13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ See *Mitteilungen aus der anthroposophischen Arbeit in Deutschland, Geistige Individualität und Ganungswesen*, Sonderbeft, Sommer 1995.

⁴ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New Haven: Harcourt, Brace & World, n.d.).

⁵ Among some of the recent works on the evolution of consciousness, from various points of view, are, Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*; Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953); Erich Neumann, *Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1970), Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (London: G. Bles, 1949); John Cobb, *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967); Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985); Stephen Prikett, *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁶ *Mitteilungen*, pp. 7-10.

⁷ Clarence Page, *Showing My Color* (N.Y.: Harper-Collins, 1996) p. 27.