

Overcoming Racism through Anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner and Questions of Race

Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, was a vocal participant in the early twentieth century debate about what it means to be a human being. This was during a period when colonialism, nationalism and imperialism were very much in evidence. The military and economic domination exercised by western nations over the non-western world was based on the socio-Darwinistic idea that the world belongs to the fittest “race.” For instance, in the 19th century, the British Empire justified its colonial activities through a belief in the supposed superiority of the Anglo-Saxon “race.” Likewise, the United States spoke of its “manifest destiny” when interfering in the affairs of other peoples in the Western Hemisphere. Other European nations joined in the battle for global dominance because they, too, believed themselves to have been called by either nature or God to be superior. Similar or analogous historical views of superiority were also to be found in other parts of the world.

In contrast to this, Steiner invoked a strong and even radical individualism from the time of his earliest philosophical works. “For him the core of the human being was the spiritual individuality. This in turn came from the belief that all peoples were brothers and sisters, ‘for the primeval source [of this individuality] is sociability and solidarity.’”¹

In recent years, occasional charges of racism have been leveled against Rudolf Steiner and against institutions arising from his work, such as the Waldorf schools. Those laying the charges have increasingly shown themselves more interested in defaming the work of Rudolf Steiner than in finding what lay behind the apparently offending passages. It is therefore important for serious readers to recognize that critics have taken quotations out of context and/or from unedited, transcribed (not tape-recorded) notes of Steiner’s lectures. Clearly, such techniques can easily lead to errors or serious misunderstandings based on patently dishonest manipulation or distortions of Steiner’s thoughts. The most compelling proof comes from Steiner himself.

On first glance, some of the isolated remarks appear to indicate racially discriminatory views, yet a careful reading of Steiner’s philosophy show that nothing could be further from his fundamental beliefs. Before such a judgment can be reached, these remarks have to be seen in the light of both Steiner’s overall philosophy of anthroposophy as well as the historical context in which they arose.

One quotation of this nature is the statement: “Negroes must be regarded as human beings.”² At first this seems to be a patronizing statement. However, put in context, it becomes

¹ “If the basic source of compatibility did not lie within human nature, we could not implant it by any outward laws! Only because individuals *are* of one spirit can they live out their lives side by side. A free person lives in trust that the other free person belongs to the same spiritual world and that they will concur with each other in their intentions.” Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*, Hudson, N.Y., 1986, p.155

² “If your principles are taken from life, you know that life is various, and that the same thing can be done in the most varied ways. You see, for instance, that negroes must be regarded as human beings, and in them the human

clear that Steiner was voicing opposition to the racist view which was current in white society at that time and which, in its most extreme form, cast all people of color as something less than human. A thorough study of his work, recently published³, demonstrates that he vigorously opposed any form of racism or anti-Semitism throughout his life.

“... the anthroposophical movement [. . .], must cast aside the division into races. It must seek to unite people of all races and nations, and to bridge the divisions and differences between various groups of people. The old point of view of race has a physical character, but what will prevail in the future will have a more spiritual character.”

-R. Steiner, *The Universal Human*⁴

The Human Being is Spirit

The advocacy of an individualism based on freedom and responsibility formed the basis of Steiner's contribution to the debate on race in his day. In the book *The Philosophy of Freedom (Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path)*⁵, which he wrote in 1894, Steiner stated that we can never grasp the true nature of the human being by using concepts that generalize. The unique individuality of each human being needs to be recognized. He expressed a strong wish that we overcome all barriers of race, ethnicity or gender. He consequently supported the emancipation of women in the strongest terms, a major political and cultural issue during his lifetime.

*“The human individual is the source of all morality and the center of earthly life. States and societies exist because they turn out to be the necessary consequence of individual life.”*⁶

For Steiner then, only the free and unique human individual, regardless of race or ethnic origin, could take responsibility for his or her own moral course of action. As spirit, the human being must be free and autonomous. Healthy individuals can more easily develop fully within social forms that support this. Early in the 20th century and prior to founding the Anthroposophical Society, Steiner served as President of the German branch of the Theosophical Society. Its primary principle was “...to form the core of a brotherly society that would encompass the whole of humanity regardless of race, religion, social class, nationality or sex.” Steiner declared this to be the “only binding principle” of that society.⁷

form appears quite differently. In the same way when the art of education is held as a living art, all pedantry and also every kind of formalism must be avoided.“ R. Steiner. *Spiritual Ground of Education*. Spiritual Science Library, Blauvelt, NY 1989. pg. 64.

³ H.J. Bader and L. Ravagli:*Rassenideale sind der Niedergang der Menschheit - Anthroposophie und der Rassismusvorwurf (Racial Ideals Lead Humanity into Decadence - Anthroposophy and the Allegation of Racism)*, Stuttgart, 2002. English publication in preparation.

⁴ R. Steiner, *The Universal Human*, Hudson, NY: . Anthroposophic Press, 1990. pp.12-13.

⁵ Op Cit. R. Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path (A Philosophy of Freedom)*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1986, pg.155.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 155

⁷ R.Steiner, *Theosophie und Sozialismus* (German, not translated) October 1903, GA 34, pg. 433

In 1917 Steiner came forward with a design for a radically democratic social order in society. Called the “Threefold Social Order,” it recognized both the autonomy of the human spirit and the equality of all human beings before the law. The essential element of culture was seen to be the self-determination of the individual, not the self-determination of nations based on racial or ethnic grounds. This, too, was contrary to what others were advocating at the time.⁸

His opposition to the idea of a state based on race drew the hatred of those who stood for nationalism. In Germany, these nationalists dubbed him “a traitor of the nation and a destroyer of the state” and, in 1922 in Munich, they even made an attempt to physically attack him. Adolf Hitler and like-minded theorists all declared their opposition to him and his philosophy. The reason given by the Nazis for closing down the Steiner Waldorf schools and the Anthroposophical Society in Germany (and in other occupied countries) in the 1930’s was that they were extremely hostile to “German values.” They were considered to be anti-war, internationalists in their outlook, and in contradiction to the racial concepts of National Socialism.⁹

Steiner’s Opposition to Racism

Some of the criticisms leveled against Steiner have to do with his usage of the theosophical concept of “root races.” After a brief period of usage, Steiner distanced himself from this terminology as a misnomer for a concept that actually refers to periods of ancient cultural evolution, having nothing to do with race at all in the modern sense.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Steiner refers to the five principal human racial types that were accepted as common knowledge well into the 20th century.¹¹ For his part, Steiner attempted to understand this human diversity from a spiritual perspective.¹² Most of what Steiner addressed in this regard had to do with what he saw as the spiritual realities behind the

⁸ Consider one of Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” at the end of WWI, suggesting the self-determination of virtually any ethnic group which felt itself entitled to a separate country. [ed.].

⁹ The Nazi Central Security Office (“Reichssicherheitshauptamt”) remarked in 1941: “Anthroposophy stands in contradiction to the national socialist teachings of race. According to the national socialist concept, the racial laws of heredity apply not only to the body, but to the whole human being, including spirit and soul. Anthroposophy, like the Christian Church, in effect acknowledges the concept of heredity only with regard to the body ...” cited in *Anthroposophie in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus (1933-1945)*[*Anthroposophy during the Time of the Nazi’s (1933-1945)*]. Uwe Werner, Munich 1999 [not translated]

¹⁰ “It is quite understandable that each movement has what you might call childhood diseases and that at the beginning of the Theosophical movement one spoke about seven time periods on earth, which were called main races [or root races], [...] so one could speak of seven races, each with seven sub-races. But one must overcome childhood diseases and get clear about the fact that the concept of race ceases to retain any meaning in our time.” Steiner, R, *The Ego*. Anthroposophic Press, NY, NY, undated. pg. 19

¹¹ See, for instance, R. Steiner, *The Mission of Folk Souls (in connection with Germanic-Scandinavian Mythology)*. Spiritual Research Editions, Blauvelt, NY 1989. The common usage of the early 20th century can be found in *A Civic Biology*, an American textbook from 1914. There, author George William Hunter writes about the “Ethiopian or Negro” racial type, the “Malay or brown race,” the “American Indian” or red race, the “Mongolian or yellow race,” and the “Caucasian” or white race, adding: “... at the present time there exists upon the earth five races or varieties of man, each very different from the other in instinct, social customs, and to an extent, in structure.”

¹² Unfortunately, in some English-language translations of his work, the five principal races were incorrectly translated as “root races,” greatly confusing his meaning. This is the case in one of the current translations of *The Mission of Folk Souls* as translated by A.H. Parker.

physical characteristics. An example of this is found in his treatment of Native Americans.

On the one hand, Steiner showed high regard for the deep spirituality of Native American culture, recognizing its ancient roots and wisdom. On the other hand, he was aware that a significant percentage of the pre-Columbian Native American population died of disease imported from Europe.¹³ This led Steiner to speak of “forces which hastened their extinction”¹⁴ and to compare the physical constitution of Native Americans with the vulnerability of old age. In no way does this vulnerability justify for Steiner the treatment of these native peoples. He saw the massacres visited on them as the worst expressions of the barbarism and decadence of western European civilization.

He was deeply opposed to any philosophy or practice that promoted racial or ethnic superiority. For instance, his critique of “Caucasian” ethnic culture included an attack on the egotism of white Europeans by sharply criticizing the very progress of which they were so proud. He pointed to the drawbacks of European civilization: the barbaric nature of colonialism, the loss of European cultural values, the view of people in general as “the masses,” and the mechanization of life.

Recognizing the modern dilemma of developing an individual ego without falling into a destructive egotism, he insisted that Europeans had no right to colonize peoples such as American Indians, Asians and Africans. Rudolf Steiner was especially appalled by the materialism which infected European culture with views that threatened to remove the spiritual element from every part of life. He saw this threat as an impending tragedy which would cause the peoples of Europe to fail to achieve their cultural tasks in the world.

Long before World War I, he pointed out that by repressing its own spirituality through superficial materialistic thought, Europe was laying foundations not only for colonial excesses overseas but also for an overall European catastrophe. For him, World War I was an expression of the same barbarism that European nations were perpetrating through their colonialism and imperialism.

At the same time, he also spoke against signs of degeneration in all cultures and peoples. Quoting these isolated critical comments about non-white cultures or peoples out of context can erroneously create the picture that Steiner was racist. Quite the reverse is true. A more accurate picture is gained when remarks which criticize white, European culture are also included, as they should be. His concern was the weakening of human spiritual development in whichever culture he found it.

Steiner did not deny differences among the diverse natural dispositions of peoples around the globe. Modern readers may find some of his characterizations of these differences to be offensive. Yet our 21st century sensibilities cannot fairly be overlaid on Rudolf Steiner or other crusaders for freedom and equality of earlier times. One can fairly

¹³ One author suggests a loss of 95% of the population of Native Americans due to diseases from Europe. See J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel, A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*, New York 1997, p. 378

¹⁴ R. Steiner, *The Mission of Folk Souls (in connection with Germanic-Scandinavian Mythology)*. [op. cit.] See especially the third, fourth and sixth lectures on 10, 11 and 12 June, 1910.

argue that given Steiner's philosophy and awareness of his times, he would have been aware of and written about these subjects in a different way today. Nonetheless, his bedrock thesis for his entire life's work would still be clear: freedom and equality for each individual human being. In his own time, Rudolf Steiner never tired of stressing that "human beings around the globe are, in fact, all dependent on one another. They need to help one another. This is the case even on the level of natural dispositions."¹⁵

Above all, he saw the spiritual side of the human being as the essence of the individual. He viewed bodily traits such as skin, hair or eye color as only one-sided developments of the physical body. Therefore, a body simply "clothes" each individual; by no means does it determine the human being. According to anthroposophy, a primary meaning of human evolution lies in the liberation of the individual from the bonds of blood, race and heredity.¹⁶

Social Regeneration

Steiner envisioned a world culture that was based on freedom of the individual spirit and solidarity with all humankind.

On every continent and in more than 60 countries, steps are being taken out of the spirit of anthroposophy to address the racism carried by each of us as modern human beings. All over the world, people from many ethnic groups are striving to realize the ideas originated by Rudolf Steiner, ideas that are helping to shape the future. These ideas encompass the realms of medicine, agriculture, social activism, education,¹⁷ and indeed, almost every field of human endeavor.

One finds anthroposophic endeavors in every social and economic milieu, including inner-city communities in the U.S., townships in South Africa, and *favelas* (slums) in Sao Paolo, Brazil. In addition, the Detroit Waldorf School in the United States and Gaia Waldorf school in South Africa, for example, offer outstanding examples of racial diversity and harmony. Such initiatives throughout the world are the clearest signs of the spirit of anthroposophy at work.

While Steiner and those who are students of anthroposophy reject racism, serious attempts are being made to find any expressions in anthroposophical literature and thinking which inadvertently could support even a subtle form of it. As part of this search, translations, turns-of-phrase, inapt metaphors, etc. are being re-examined and recast so that nothing that even hints of racism or racial prejudice can be inferred. In South Africa, workshops under anthroposophical auspices are held for whites and blacks alike to help them to overcome the tendency towards racism that each modern human being carries within. This kind of work is simply part of the task of consciously striving human beings everywhere.

¹⁵ Op. Cit. R. Steiner, *Spiritual Ground of Education*.

¹⁶ Steiner, *Rosicrucian Esotericism*. Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1978; pp. 109-113

¹⁷ See *Waldorf Education Worldwide; The Development of Waldorf Education including Anthroposophical Curative Education and Social Therapy*. Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners (Friends of Waldorf Education), Berlin, 2001.

World events of the last eighty years have rightfully made us sensitive to the scourge wrought by racism upon our society. It is with this in mind, therefore, that all anthroposophical institutions, including Waldorf schools, are working to help overcome it and the egotism on which it is based. This means that each person must look into her/himself to find those places in which the individual is demeaned by her/his failure to see beyond the physical in order to find the spiritual reality. It also means educating children in such a way that they can help to heal society of its ills.

Anthroposophists and the Waldorf School movement continue to serve the spiritual ideal of uniting people of all races and nations, working in ways that respect and bridge cultural differences, honoring the uniqueness of each individual. This is the true essence of Rudolf Steiner's work.

For more information on the work of Rudolf Steiner: www.spiritworking.org,

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