

Is Waldorf Education Christian?

By William Ward

Waldorf schools seek to cultivate positive human values of compassion, reverence for life, respect, cooperation, love of nature, interest in the world, and social conscience, as well as to develop cognitive, artistic and practical skills. The soul life of the child is affirmed and nourished as the ground for healthy, active thinking. Because of this, Waldorf schools sometimes are mistakenly perceived as religious, or, in particular, as Christian schools. Nevertheless, parents of various religious views and ethical philosophies—Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, Protestants, Sufis, Muslims, eclectic seekers, and agnostics—choose Waldorf Education for their children. They do so knowing that Waldorf schools are based on a spiritual view of the human being and of the world. However, no religion, including Christianity, is promulgated in a Waldorf school.

The inspiration for Waldorf Education arises from a worldview or philosophy called Anthroposophy. This broad body of research, knowledge, and experience holds a spiritual view of human nature and development. It sees the human being as more than a culturally conditioned, genetically determined, biological organism. Instead, Anthroposophy maintains that each individual human being has a spiritual core, or “I,” and that this I is in a continuous process of becoming, of evolving in freedom through spiritual activity toward ever greater self-knowledge. With the gradual awakening of the I, a corresponding awareness of the spiritual wisdom within the created universe arises in the soul. The anthroposophical worldview understands the historical evolution of consciousness in many cultures as the background for each individual’s path of self-discovery.

The fundamental tone of this worldview—which is not a religion—is in harmony with many world religions and philosophies. It stands in opposition, however, to the powerful, contemporary cultural currents based on materialism. In our culture a form of psychological conditioning occurs on an unprecedented scale through the cumulative impact of the 20,000 commercials that the average American child sees each year. Unchallenged assumptions about human nature convey reductionist views of the human being. These strongly influence how children form their fundamental “image of Self,” their view of the essential nature of the human being. This is distinct from the individualized self-image each child also forms.

Various one-sided theories of human development are projected through the popular media—the idea, for example, that the human being is merely an advanced ape or a biological organism that has arisen accidentally from the primordial ooze and whose ideals are epiphenomena of secretions of the brain. Other common images are of the human being as historically/culturally conditioned and behaviorally programmed; fundamentally egoistic and controlled by unconscious drives; genetically determined; a consumer to be manipulated; a unit of economic production in global competition; and a mechanism whose heart is merely a pump, whose brain is a computer. The human being is a couch potato, an action hero, a Barbie doll.

Faced with this persistent tide of subconscious indoctrination, concerned parents look for an education that offers a more uplifting view of human potential. And in the curriculum, methods, and festivals of the Waldorf schools such an alternative image of the human being is offered.

Many parents are content to see their children thrive in a Waldorf school, sensing that dedicated teachers deeply care about their children and work with effective educational insights and methods. A few parents wonder further about Anthroposophy, the philosophy that inspires the education. Some inquire out of genuine interest, others to make sure that their children are not exposed to something sectarian, parochial, or dogmatic. Parents can rest assured that Anthroposophy is not taught, inculcated, or subliminally communicated in the school. That would be counter to the purpose of Waldorf Education as “education toward freedom.” The Waldorf method is so successful in helping young people think for themselves that they develop strong independent judgment that is a defense against hidden agendas of all kinds.

The respect for individual freedom, fundamental to the anthroposophical roots of Waldorf Education, affirms that the search for wisdom, spirit, and religious connection with the divine, however variously these may be named, is a matter of individual conscience and effort. The cultivation of religious values is a choice that belongs to the family. We parents and educators may well ponder together how to fulfill our responsibility to cultivate values that open the possibility in our children to freely seek their own spiritual path when they become self-directed adults. But it is not the role of the school or its teachers to proffer a religion to the children and their parents.

In the free search for those spiritual and cultural values that give one meaning and purpose in life, many, if not most, teachers in Waldorf schools discover in Anthroposophy a remarkably insightful conception of human development and spiritual wisdom, one that is as practical as it is profound. It is important, though, that Anthroposophy does not remain ideas in books on a shelf, but becomes a work to be undertaken. For the Waldorf teacher, insight into the depth of human potential, reverence for the growing child, respect for the freedom of the individuality, enthusiasm for the curriculum, and renewing meditative work enrich the daily practice of teaching from the wellsprings of Anthroposophy. This source of inspiration is as essential to Waldorf Education as sunlight, water, air, and earth to a growing plant. If it is absent, the teacher, supported only by his or her own experience and insight, will find the challenging task of Waldorf Education overwhelming or impossible.

It is counter to the function of Waldorf schools to promote Anthroposophy to parents or students involved with the school. Some parents may wish to learn about it, though, and do so out of individual initiative. They soon discover that Anthroposophy at its root is deeply Christian in outlook. To the student of Anthroposophy, Christ’s deeds, example, and teachings offer spiritual resources and guidance toward the fulfillment of our human nature. This Christian orientation, however, is not narrow or sectarian. It perceives, despite the many religious conflicts history records, an overarching harmony among the world’s inspired religions, with each serving the spiritual guidance of humanity.

The name Christ and the word Christianity can have strong connotations, positive and negative. In the context of Anthroposophy, however, the Christ impulse is a universally available matrix of human aspirations, transformative ideals, and deeds. It does not involve theological speculation, sectarian dogma, blind faith, institutionalized ritual, or a missionary agenda. In this view—as surely as the Sun shines on each of us regardless of our religious affiliation, non-affiliation, or ethical philosophy—fundamental, human-spiritual realities, such as love, compassion, reverence for the divine, peace, healing, and freedom are essential goals of our true humanity. Such universal aspirations comprise the spirit of humanity and find expression in the multiplicity of languages, cultures, and religions. It is a tragic anomaly that atrocities, motivated by intolerance and self-righteousness, are committed in the name of religion.

While a Waldorf teacher, as a student of Anthroposophy, may find strength and insight in a worldview that sees profound significance in Christ, to particular parents the name Christ may carry negative connotations that arise from the tragedies of history. These may include religious wars of aggression such as the Crusades, persecution of other religious groups as is seen in anti-Semitism, fundamentalist dogmatism, contemporary sectarian warfare as in the former Yugoslavia, violence in the name of brotherly love, or even just a ruler-wielding nun.

In such a situation parents and teachers should communicate openly and frankly. Parents have legitimate concerns: “How does your personal spiritual search as a teacher affect what you teach my children? You profess freedom as a value, but you may hold your values and views superior to what we hold most dear. Perhaps you intentionally or unintentionally promote your view at the expense of ours.”

The question-Is Waldorf Education Christian?-may surface at key moments in the festival life of the school. While traditions vary from school to school, an Advent Garden is commonly held; Saint Nicholas may visit; there may be a Saint Martin’s festival; Michaelmas (the festival for Saint Michael) will likely be celebrated; and, along with animal fables, stories of saints will be told in second grade. At many schools there is a performance of a Christmas nativity play. With these events marking the course of the year, the obvious answer to the question seems to be: Yes, Waldorf Education is Christian.

Well, it is not so simple. We Waldorf teachers also teach the Eightfold Path of the Buddha; the Old Testament and Judaism; Islam; the teachings of Confucius; the teachings of Zarathustra; and Egyptian, Greek, and Norse mythology. Although limited by our own personal backgrounds, we enter into diverse world cultures with as much reverence and depth as possible. While there are important differences between the world religions, a remarkable common ground-what has been referred to above as the spirit of humanity-is evident. As a school movement, we celebrate festivals of many religious traditions.

A more relevant and revealing approach is to ask: What image of the human being do the Waldorf schools seek to bring to the children as a model and inspiration? Here the answer is unequivocal. It is an image of the human being as loving, compassionate, reverent, respectful, engaged, tolerant, peaceful, joyful, patient, good, upright, wise, balanced, in harmony with the cosmos, nature, and humanity. No religion or code of ethics can arrogate these fundamental and universal values as its unique possession.

For an education that is of the heart and the will as well as the head, there is the practical question of how to help children develop these qualities. Much of what goes on in a Waldorf school that is perceived as religious and Christian-the festivals, the stories and legends of the saints, the Old Testament stories, and so on-has this intention.

In the school where I teach, there is an annual production of “The Shepherds’ Play,” a medieval nativity play put on by the teachers. This play is a tradition deeply woven into the fabric of many Waldorf schools. The story revolves around the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and the birth of the child attended by an angel. Uncaring innkeepers reject the family; another finds them simple shelter. Three shepherds-common folk, called by the angel-reverently offer simple gifts to the Holy Child.

The play is about Christmas. But more broadly it is about the renewal of light in the depth of winter, the light of the world, and the spiritual light within. In the context of the universal spirit of humanity, the play presents the cosmic truth that the newborn child, each newborn child, is a Holy Child and comes into the world trailing clouds of glory. In each human birth occurs the rebirth of spirit in the

world, and each calls for reverence and love.

For grade school children “The Shepherds’ Play” is primarily pictorial, speaking more through tableau, gesture, and archetypal character than through the rhymed, and somewhat archaic, dialogue. But the play gives them an experience of the renewal of the light, of the miracle of the spirit coming into the world, and also of their identity with that spirit. The play also offers an atmosphere comprised of reverence, humility, peace, and love, as well as of the boisterous good spirits of the shepherds, an atmosphere that for a brief moment shines as a candle in the hectic, commercial miasma of the holiday season.

This play need not be seen as an expression of a narrow, exclusive sectarianism. When I speak to the children, preparing them to see the play, I give them the following context: This is how Christians of long ago and also of today retell the birth of the Holy Child. For those of us of the Jewish faith, the Messiah spoken of by the prophets will be born in the future, and a time of peace will at last come to Earth. For Muslims, Jesus is a prophet who taught and followed God’s will. He was in the line of prophets that led to Mohammed, who has taught us to obey Allah in the holy Koran. Buddhists understand that, as the Buddha taught infinite compassion for all beings, Christ preached love and forgiveness toward all. And for Sufis who hold that “where the heart opens to love, God speaks,” Christ’s message of love may be heard. Every child, every human being, bears the gift of light and love within. We celebrate this miracle at this the darkest time of year.

The play offers these same gifts to parents and other adult friends of the school, who are also invited. It also offers something beyond this. There is a “living in the spirit,” evident in the newborn child—an openness to creation, a joy in the light, a love of life and of the world. This ideal state of being is affirmed in each of the world’s religions as the highest goal of human striving. It is expressed in various ways: as liberating submission to the will of Allah in Islam, attainment of the pure Buddha mind, the ecstatic love of the Sufi, atonement and songs of praise to Yaweh, as Christ consciousness, and so on. In each religion is an inspired expression of the human spirit seeking the divine.

What is true of the nativity play is also true of Saint Michael’s battle with the dragon. Saint Michael, an archangel recognized by traditional Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, overcomes the dragon symbolizing evil in the world and the evil within—the lower nature of the human being. The archetypal image of subduing the dragon is a powerful imagination, more true and valuable than the empty pictures that children find in Saturday morning cartoon shows, comics, and video games. The aim of the festivals is to provide imaginations of archetypal truths about human nature, life, and experience, not to promote Christian dogma or to convert anyone.

Waldorf Education consciously nourishes the inner life of children in order to start them on a lifelong process of self-discovery. It places before them eminent persons—some of them great religious figures, some of them not—but all of them persons who overcame weakness, transformed themselves, expanded the horizons of the human heart, and inspired social change. It does this in the hope that a seed image of human aspiration will grow within each awakening I as the light within, as conscience, as the spirit of truth. Whatever may be achieved in this regard is within the context of an excellent academic education that equips young people for contemporary life with clarity of thought, wisdom of the heart, and practical skill for work.

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