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**Zander, Helmut: Die Anthroposophie.** Rudolf Steiners Ideen zwischen Esoterik, Weleda, Demeter und Waldorfpädagogik. – Paderborn: Schöningh 2019. 287 S., kt € 39,90 ISBN: 978-3-506-79225-9

Whether or not they recognize the term “anthroposophy,” German readers will be familiar with the esoteric movement founded by Rudolf Steiner in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Known above all through its practical projects in education, nutrition, agriculture, health care, the arts, and other fields, anthroposophy today touches on many aspects of daily life. What began as a relatively small offshoot of the modern German occult revival a century ago has grown into a far-flung movement encompassing Waldorf schools, Demeter foods, Weleda products, biodynamic farms and vineyards, anthroposophical clinics, hospitals, colleges, and more. Though not always acknowledged in public, all of these initiatives are grounded firmly in the esoteric worldview promulgated by Steiner (1861–1925) and form part of the fabric of alternative spirituality that has become a common element of the religious landscape in recent decades. Making sense of these diverse components and their esoteric underpinnings is no simple task.

Helmut Zander’s new book offers an illuminating and informed guide to contemporary anthroposophy in its various manifestations. Building on his previous historical studies of Steiner’s movement, Z. has turned his attention to the panoply of anthroposophical activities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The volume focuses primarily on Germany and Switzerland, the heart of the worldwide movement. Z.’s method here differs from his pioneering earlier work; the book is less a scholarly analysis and more an informal overview of the major currents within the notoriously fractious anthroposophist milieu, structured around brief entries devoted to particular topics, from political to economic to cultural to religious dimensions of anthroposophy. In light of Steiner’s extraordinarily broad range of teachings and their even broader subsequent development among his followers, this full-spectrum approach is well suited to its subject. Though the coverage is selective and at times uneven, the book provides a wealth of information in condensed form.

One of Z.’s principal themes is that anthroposophy is anything but a monolithic movement in the present global context. He traces a growing divide between established anthroposophist organizations, with their generally orthodox orientation, and the newer crop of anthroposophically inspired initiatives that take a more eclectic approach to Steiner’s ideological inheritance. While the Anthroposophical Society remains a “precarious institution” (12) facing substantial declines in membership and serious financial difficulties, anthroposophist banks continue to thrive, anthroposophical medicine enjoys a solid alternative reputation, and Waldorf schools proliferate in new locations around the world. The range of political positions within the spectrum of contemporary

anthroposophy is similarly diverse. Yet all of these perspectives derive from Steiner's teachings about the divine forces that determine the cosmos, the supernatural factors governing phenomena like "karma", "reincarnation", and "clairvoyance", and the "higher worlds" that shape human destiny.

Esoteric precepts like these have taken on a different set of cultural connotations since Steiner's era, and his latter-day followers sometimes downplay the occult elements in their worldview in order to appeal to a broader audience. Z. shows that such efforts have been only partly successful, frequently relying on distorted claims about Steiner's background and the import of his "spiritual science," as the founder of anthroposophy preferred to call his ideas. Steiner drew heavily on the traditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century theosophy and devoted the first decade of his career as an esoteric teacher to the Theosophical Society. Claiming the theosophical mantle of a comprehensive cosmology that would incorporate the ancient hidden truth of all religions, he simultaneously insisted that this syncretic spiritual outlook was thoroughly modern and scientific. As Z. notes, Steiner wanted anthroposophy to be more than a religion (271). His followers today often have trouble coming to terms with this conflicted legacy and disentangling its disparate threads.

Such challenges form the core of Z.'s portrait. He offers extended reflections on the tension between secrecy and publicity that typically accompanies Steiner's esoteric principles, as well as the concomitant dynamic of attraction and disappointment among individuals drawn to anthroposophy. The book is especially insightful on the authoritarian and hierarchical elements within internal anthroposophical culture and its chronic difficulties with open debate and democratic procedures. Z. returns to that problematic repeatedly (23–24, 37–38, 180–81, 252–54), examining a variety of instructive examples. Discussing the growing popularity of Waldorf schooling in China, for instance, Z. notes the possibility that this success may have to do with similarities to standard Chinese educational practices, above all an authoritarian and teacher-centered pedagogy, reflecting longstanding features of the Waldorf model (54). Z. is careful to balance critical observations with positive ones, continually pointing to the readiness among some anthroposophists to adapt their conventions to modern multicultural societies.

It is the critical points in the book, however, that turn out to be the most telling. Z. recounts the lengthy series of lawsuits that anthroposophists have filed over the years against journalists, scholars, and others in an effort to stifle critical reporting on Steiner's movement (173–74); the same unfortunate practice continues today in France and elsewhere. He also takes an unflinching look at "the increasing acceptance of far right positions within the anthroposophical milieu" (206). In particular, Z. details the succession of public scandals in the past decade and a half at German and Austrian Waldorf schools where teachers, parents, and staff were actively involved in far right groups; the most recent incidents occurred in 2018 at Waldorf schools in Vienna and Berlin (203–05). For anybody following the contemporary anthroposophist scene, these alarming developments have been unmistakable, and it is crucial to view them in historical context. Z.'s treatment makes a major contribution to that effort.

Despite anthroposophy's seeming obscurity and unworldliness, it can have definite practical consequences for adherents. The chap. on measles indicates how relevant this factor is to current concerns (151–54). Z. offers an evenhanded appraisal of the striking frequency of measles outbreaks at Waldorf schools and other anthroposophical institutes, a trend routinely reported in German media that has recently garnered attention in the international press, from the *Guardian* to the *New York Times*. Noting the "widespread skepticism toward vaccination" among Steiner's followers (159), Z.

outlines how such beliefs can present a significant public health risk. Far from being mere curiosities, esoteric doctrines impact people's lives in concrete ways, for good and for ill.

The shortcomings of this very welcome volume stem primarily from its lexicon format. Splitting the material up into dozens of brief entries makes it hard for Z. to develop his complex analyses beyond a rudimentary form. In the closing pages he points to the "marked unfamiliarity" that many of Steiner's followers display toward basic standards of scholarship (275). That dynamic has repeatedly bedeviled attempts at dialogue between practitioners of anthroposophy and scholars who study anthroposophy. What makes this study valuable is Z.'s determination to keep open the possibility for this sort of dialogue even when it seems most remote. A snapshot of anthroposophy in its current state of transition, the book affords an exceptionally perceptive viewpoint on one of the most fertile forms of alternative spirituality in the modern era.

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