

Concerning the General Anthroposophical Section

A Review of 'A Way of Serving'⁷

November 2013

Sad to say, from beginning to end, this booklet reads, to me, as almost anything but what it purports to be – a description of the General Anthroposophical Section. The text is built out of muddles – muddles in thinking and muddles between what one might call the signature of the Anthroposophical Society and those of Camphill and the Christian Community. This is not a negative statement, but we will not get anywhere if we deny or do not recognise that, while the Anthroposophical Society and, by extension, the Anthroposophical Movement is the home of all manner of karmic streams and in that sense is a broad church, it is broad precisely because that is its own particular signature. But this signature is only known to us when, rather than regarding our particular karma as a synonym for what he did – refounding of the Anthroposophical Society – we second it to that of the so-called Deed of Rudolf Steiner. I include myself and my own work in this critique.

In this review, I will pass from beginning to end of the text, in order to follow its line of thought, although that is a description more polite than accurate! Already there is a problem in the title, *A Way of Serving*. This may be fine as a general, even platitudinous, statement about what, surely, ought to be an ideal for every human being, but how can it be specific to the School of Spiritual Science and its Sections? That we should serve one another is a statement about life in general. The question is how we do that and in what ways this general aspect of life is especially, if at all, furthered by becoming a member of the School of Spiritual Science. Surely, the answer to this question cannot be anything that one can find *outside* the School. Unfortunately, *A Way of Serving* suggests the opposite.

Perhaps I belong to an Anthroposophical Movement of another planet, but it is difficult to credit conscious intention to much of what is here written. It begins, so to speak, as it intends to go on – by asking a question which it wrongly answers: How is one to understand and therefore translate 'Allgemeine', as in Allgemeine Anthroposophische Sektion? Towards the end of the booklet (Chapter 11) the answer is given as "generally human", which is Rudolf Steiner's choice of words. This is the term used in the Christmas Conference, for which a perfectly correct and perfectly understandable synonym is 'universal'. So how can this term, let alone Steiner himself, be considered "vague"? To translate 'Allgemeine Anthroposophische Sektion', as the authors do, as "Section for Anthroposophy (that is) common to all" is an unnecessary travesty of meaning, a mangling of language and in the end an empty phrase. It risks being the kind of translation made by those who, not understanding the original Biblical texts, downgrade them to what a modern mind can comprehend, rather than lifting that mind to a higher level of understanding. "Common to all" also has a dangerous mood of communitarianism about it, and of democratising knowledge, a kind of wiki approach in that Wikipedia assumes 'true' knowledge is bottom-up, peer-led.

The booklet goes on to state: "Thus the term 'section' seems out of place and therefore confusing. Perhaps the word 'department' would be better, although this also fails to convey the message that this is meant to be the background or underpinning of all the other departments." However unintended, what arrogance lies behind these thoughts! How can one assume that Rudolf Steiner did not think such things through? That is to say, that he could not have been aware of the challenge the 'form' of the Society/School would be to the normal consciousness of our times? Would he have used the word section if department had served better? Even in pedestrian English, if one is to seek a sub-division of a section, as is done at the Goetheanum, one uses the word department. But what would subdivision of a department be? To the arrogance of overlaying Steiner's carefully chosen terminology – he elsewhere says there is nothing arbitrary about the vocabulary of spiritual science – is added a lesser level of thinking, unnecessarily so. Simple knowledge and plain use of English will allow us to avoid the pitfalls that this booklet's authors, but also its editors, have fallen into.

By sloppy thinking they arrive at their first, for me questionable, conclusion: That the General Anthroposophical Section is the underpinning of the other sections. Notwithstanding Rudolf Steiner's own comments to that effect, if one looks at the grid drawing used by Rudolf Steiner to introduce and explain his image of the Society/School this is precisely *not* how he draws things. It is of course right that we can and should think in various ways, but *pictorially* we only have the grid to go by:

⁷ *A Way of Serving*. Penelope Baring and Ruediger Janisch. Mercury Press, NY 2013.

		III		
		II		
		I		
		GAS*		

* Referring to the General Anthroposophical Society, not the General Anthroposophical Section.

There the sections are shown vertically, alongside each other. None is beneath the others. Beneath them all is the Society. If the grid hints at anything, it is that the General Anthroposophical *Society* is the entry point! Moreover, Statute 5 says simply: 'One enters by way of the First Class of the School of Spiritual Science.' There is no mention of the sections in the statutes (called by some principles), although one understands the general idea that one joins the School in the First Class in the General Anthroposophical Section such that, if one is also active in 'professional' life⁸, one finds oneself in the relevant section.

Like a hapless slalom skier, already in the second paragraph of Chapter 1, the reader is launched from a high place on to a long slide down a very slippery slope, passing many crucial stakes along the way, but clipping rather than understanding them, ending in a heap of, thankfully soft, snow at the bottom.

The first stake clipped on the downhill slide concerns the authors' statement that "the content of the General Anthroposophical Section is at one and the same time the content of the classes of the School of Spiritual Science: the path towards self-knowledge and self-transformation; towards being 'truly human', to becoming one's own true self." Notwithstanding Steiner's own cited remark that "The General Anthroposophical Section ... will be for those who have a purely human need to find the paths of the soul to the spiritual world," that we are already in a muddle is clear by the authors' own use of the word 'classes', and their subsequent focus on the first third of the First Class, the 19 Lessons. Classes, plural, is a reference to the three classes, the content of which, by general admission throughout our movement and reinforced in various 'official' publications, is not supposed to be known to us.⁹ Not knowing this content, therefore, how can one say that it is "at one and the same time the content of the General Anthroposophical Section"?

The second stake is the tricky question of how to understand, translate and interpret institutionally the word "sachlichem Feld". Candidate words here are 'specialty' and 'professional', even though the latter risks reversedly implying that the General Anthroposophical Section is for amateurs – to get beyond which was one of the very reasons why Rudolf Steiner refounded the Society! It also leaves unanswered how, on a basis of spiritual science, one is to develop 'professionally' such fields as philosophy, Christology, epistemology and all manner of other disciplines that do not have their home in one of the, now 11, sections. I am not convinced such topics can be allocated to, for example, 'Belles Lettres', in English anyway somewhat awkwardly called by some 'Humanities'.¹⁰

Stake (one is tempted to say mistake!) 3 is the statement that, "the core of the esoteric work of professionals is the personal striving for the purely human." Again, this suggests this is not the case for amateurs or non-members of the School. Are they somehow not 'purely human'?

Stake 4 is the suggestion that the Society is where we find books and knowledge, while the School is the province of "personal self development not for one's own sake." This is bizarre, to say the least. For both we have *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* and related texts. Indeed, Steiner's entire literary opus. Neither the Society nor the School supplant this fact. That cannot, therefore, be their *raison d'être* or the mark of their distinct tasks, which were clearly given by Rudolf Steiner in Statute 9 as "respecting the furtherance of spiritual research [and the] research itself."

Stake 5. Albeit written and edited by conscious experienced anthroposophists of many years standing, p. 5 carries the incredible, even if unintended, statement that in the professional sections we conduct research, but each one of us does so "as a moral human being, a member of the General Anthroposophical Section." Is no other researcher a moral human being? More pithily: from what moral standpoint is such a statement made?

Next comes the idea that 'higher ego-centric' is a synonym for 'world centric' or working from the periphery. Fair enough on the face of it. But if we mean that the higher aspects of our being can comprehend and embrace the lower, that an astral life educated by spirit self is less self-centred, then

⁸ By 'professional' I understand one is qualified in a particular field and even recognised as at the top of one's game.

⁹ It is a pity that more people are not familiar with the work of Jorgen Smit in this regard. See 'Tasks, Seeds, Qualities...' in *The Deed of Rudolf Steiner*. Search aebookstore.com.

¹⁰ Awkward because the interface with conventional use in modern spiritual life, e.g. universities, is thereby made both unclear and uncertain, and because Humanities can also be used to translate 'Geisteswissenschaft', spiritual science.

why not say so in plain English?¹¹ And are we sure that 'periphery' is an apt term? I live in England and travel all over the world, including 'to' Dornach, but do I experience myself as peripheral and Dornach as 'the centre'? Not at all. Surely, the locus of the Invisible Goetheanum¹² is wherever its members are active? When such a member arrives at or lives in Dornach he or she is not *at* the centre other than in a spiritual sense, meaning a shared, as distinct from individual, locus.

There is one moment of clarity in the generally unclear thinking of this essay. That is where on p. 5 Rudolf Steiner is quoted as saying that "In the future it must be understood that wherever there is the intention to embark on some fresh anthroposophical activity, direct connection is made with one or other of the Sections. For, as you will easily see from the explanations I have given, this Anthroposophical Society must become a living organism in which the different spheres of responsibility are respected and given scope – for they are its very life-blood!"

If only the authors and the movement generally would not only take this to heart, but also into their conscious thoughts. Then we would know very clearly that the Society is the home or body of the School, the School the soul of the Society. Then, too, we would see ourselves as lay (which does not have to mean amateur!) people insofar as we are members of the Society, and professional when acting as members of the School – in whatever section. Then we would have a chance to give to the world, but also to our own movement the very opposite of what happens when we do not respect the work of the sections (or when the work of the sections is not worthy of respect).

The seventh stake is the statement: "The collegial work is another way of understanding the General Anthroposophical Section." This remark cannot be left as put. It is potentially insulting to those 'outside' the sections, and is even an empty remark. It means that wherever human beings work collegially there is the General Anthroposophical Section, and vice versa. If only! Often activity on the part of members of the General Anthroposophical Section or held under its auspices is not at all collegial. On the other hand, a great deal of awake management throughout the world is. Why do we suppose this is a peculiar gift of anthroposophists? When it is operative, by spiritual definition collegial work leads to shared, even received intuitions. This is almost a platitude nowadays. It can hardly be a synonym for the work of the School. Which again begs the question: What, then, *is* the mark or point of the School?

Stake number 8 is on p. 9 where we are told, "there is a section for each profession", yet clearly there is not. Nor should there be necessarily. Steiner only founded sections where there was a concrete individual able to 'lead' such a section, someone who had standing in the world of his 'profession' quite apart from his standing in the Anthroposophical Movement.

So much for Chapter 1. Chapter 2 continues the downward slide – although now I am going to let the slalom metaphor drop. We are told there are three responsibilities that belong to a member of the School – to feel the earth's suffering, to be affected by human striving and to become aware of our interconnectedness. Quite apart from expecting us to believe this is not the case for non-members, the term 'responsibility' is immediately switched to 'world', as if they are synonyms. Then we are told these three things are "the world stage on which members of the School ... are to act." But, again, what about the non-members of the School? Are ordinary mortals on some other stage?

While it rings true to say that "members of the School are to be representatives of Anthroposophia..." (though I think Steiner says 'representatives of Anthroposophy',¹³ the rest of Ch. 2 concerns three tasks which are said to be those of the School and its members: Deepening the life of soul, growing through others, and collaborating to be a vessel for the spirit. Again, why is this thought to be unique or special to the School? If anything, the question has to be what happens, through membership of the School, that makes these tasks any different within it than outside it? Much worse, how many would-be members of the School do those who think, let alone speak, in this way deny entrance to? Not only those who ask and are put off (often, it is then said, because "they were not ready"), but those who smell such nonsense from a mile off and decide not to bother. It is not representative of what they expect, which is based on what they know from when they made the decision to join the Michael School in the 13th century and to incarnate in its earthly vehicle, the School of Spiritual Science, when the time was ripe – that is to say, in *this* Michael Age.

When we bemoan the 'low' numbers of members or the widespread fact that few Waldorf teachers, for example, are members of the School or see the point of it, do we stop to wonder why that may be? Is the fault with them or with us? And is every member of the School linked concretely to the spiritual life of our times in the way teachers, farmers, economists and so on are? We are in danger here of a serious, but

¹¹ One says 'plain' English, but plain English is also poetic in that it comprehends spirituality non-conceptually in the first place.

¹² The successor of the First Goetheanum, the second building being a reminder (Denkmal).

¹³ For some, by the way, this is the *only* condition of membership of the School.

false, dichotomy, in terms of which it is simply impossible to read what the actual spiritual situation in our movement is.

Ch. 3: "It is the heart alone that sees clearly, says the fox to the Little Prince." Poetic words on the part of St. Exupery, but does Rudolf Steiner say this? In the *World History Course* given during the Christmas Conference he describes how thinking has to reach down into the heart and thus rise again into the head to appear there not as dry intellect, but enlivened thinking. Chapter 3 risks being a dangerous celebration of the heart, as if the heart was not adjacent to the lungs, not only in life but also in Rudolf Steiner's very particular analogy in the Christmas Conference. The lungs are the lobes of the brain that descended from the 'head', just as the heart ascended from the metabolism. Beware over-focussing on the heart, therefore. This can tip anthroposophy into a quasi-religious mood, which is not a mood in which spiritual science can thrive.¹⁴

Ch. 4. Is the first step for joining the School "to become aware of the will that arises in the heart"? Or is this evidence, not cause, of this step? When it is written that the members "are the bridge from the esoteric work of the School to work in the public arena of life," is this a reference to the crucial feature of the Conference, namely that henceforth esoteric life is also exoteric, and vice versa? If so, why not say so? Rudolf Steiner did. In his terms, post 1923, the public arena of life, or rather our contribution to it, *is* esotericism. No bridge is needed because a chasm no longer exists. By definition, what one does 'professionally' or as a representative of Anthroposophy is informed but not caused by one's striving on 'the path'.

Ch. 5. The idea is articulated that we have to create an archetype out of our work. Is this in fact possible? Is it not, rather, that we have to give expression to an archetype through our work? This is not to split hairs. In this domain nuances of meaning have concrete significance.

Ch. 6. Is it enough, post culmination, "to continue to study anthroposophy"? Do we change the world through the power of ideas or through making ideas into ideals and then making ideals into deeds?

Ch. 7. "We are all familiar with academic and scientific research. Some think we should leave this to a few super-intelligent individuals. Similarly, many consider spiritual research to be reserved for those few chosen who are clairvoyant." Why are we so fearful of academic research? Why do we disrespect it rather than improve it by participating in it and contributing our own scholarly efforts where we think that of others is lacking?

Ch. 9: 'Section for the Art of Education, instead of Pedagogical Section / Section for the Art of Healing, instead of Medical Section / Section for Earth Care, instead of Agricultural Section'. What is this nonsense? What is wrong with the scientific terminology used by Rudolf Steiner? Why wrap everything in art, as if scientists have no artistic dimension? Why not lift art into science? Perhaps, because one is unable to be spiritually scientific!

"With the help and encouragement of the spirit, we must free ourselves towards our own becoming. This is the path within the School of Spiritual Science." But also without it! Why make this peculiar to the School? The need for and striving after self-development is a generality of modern culture.

Ch. 10. Much classic Camphill muddling! Is it valid for Anke Weihs, Karl Koenig and Otto Scharmer to rewrite Steiner? And do their interpretations survive spiritual scientific scrutiny?

Ch. 11. Are the authors really deriving their thoughts from the Christmas Conference or from the ethos of the Christian Community and that of Camphill? Is 'action research' a term from Rudolf Steiner? Is it in fact spiritual science? Creating a dichotomy between spiritual science and natural science is surely an unwise thing to do.

Ch. 12. 'Building the hut.' The authors describe a 'threefold focus': Small cupola as the work in various fields, large cupola as the Anthroposophical Society, the audience sitting, comprising "all those interested and open to the spirit." Two foci held together by the building as a whole, representing the School.

Yet the Society is the building as a whole, not just the large hall. The School is the small cupola. And it all comes together in the vesica piscis, where the AGM takes place.

Here we see how the ethos of Camphill and that of the Christian Community 'compete' with the Deed of Rudolf Steiner. They preserve a dichotomy between inner and outer that is passé post the Christmas Conference.

¹⁴ The challenge we face is well described by Rudolf Steiner in *The Occult Movement in the 19th Century*.

Ch. 13 and 14. By maintaining a dichotomy between esoteric and exoteric one necessarily puts the esoteric above and before the exoteric. This leads to a focus on meditation and self-development, whereas both should be means, not ends. The means, moreover, to effective outer work, meaning working in the world on a spiritual scientific basis.

Overall, this book is an exercise in imprecise thinking and doubtful analogies. It creates gaps that lead to erroneous ensouling and false – better put, invalid – bridging. The cold light of the spirit would lead elsewhere. It is a well-meant and well-documented description of personal experiences, and for that reason should not be gainsaid. But to my mind it describes what *any* human being will discover if he awakes spiritually, at least in the sense of Anthroposophy,¹⁵ not to what a member of the School, a representative of Anthroposophy, awakes to.

What is described is what any healthy person will discover by taking Anthroposophy to heart. It thus in fact leaves unanswered, because unasked, the question: What, therefore, is the particular purpose or experience pertaining to membership of the Society, let alone that of the School? It reads instead as a smorgasbord of confusion, in part due to the conflation of esotericism already mentioned. It is not a waste; because it reveals much about the nature of those whose karma links them to Camphill and to the Christian Community. But the esotericism of these movements, even when they are understood as 'daughters', is not a substitute or match for the 'public' esotericism of the refounded Society.

The entire publication is shot through with the idea that members of the School are somehow apart from, even above, certainly different to, human beings generally. This is a form of tyranny, leading in the end to the idea that the School and its members have 'jurisdiction' over the Society and its members, and then by extension over the rest of humanity. I doubt Rudolf Steiner would have truck with such theocracy, however benign or unintended?

¹⁵ It is a moot point whether other esoteric streams awake to the same things.