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'tainted spiritual legacy of dogmatic zealots' (- what else?)

November 30, 2010 · by [alicia hamberg](#) · in [waldorf criticism](#), [waldorf education](#), [waldorf movement](#)

Update on September 22, 2011. I would very much like to warn people to get involved with the pair behind the Steinermentary project. I don't have the time to write more about it right now (see discussion threads), but I wish that nobody takes the post below as a sign of support for them or as a recommendation for people to get involved with them.

*

[There's a new website around. 'Steinermentary'.](#)*

We were interested in Steiner Education, interested enough to enrol our children in a Steiner School. Our experience was far from what is advertised. [. . .] Due to our questioning, we have met many other people who have found that the humane ideas of Rudolf Steiner are sometimes being controlled by people who simply do not have the best interests of children at heart but are pursuing their own power agendas through Steiner's ideas.

My hunch is that they may be wrong about this. I'm not so sure these 'bad' Steiner people's actions are aberrations from a real, true Steiner pedagogy. Maybe it's the 'bad' people who have 'got' what waldorf education is all about? At least that's what I suspect. Why else do all waldorf schools fail in a similar manner? Why are the problems of waldorf schools virtually the same all over the world? Is there a waldorf pedagogical essence which cannot find its expression in actual waldorf schools because a few evil dogmatists are running the show in a conspiracy to prevent any and all changes? If so, what is this essence? Except a product of many parents' and teachers' fantasy?

On another section of the website, I [read](#):

Reminiscent of the ring in Lord of the Rings, of the Flies in Lord of the flies, some people's obsession with Karma and some rather dodgy notions of it, has run riot.

In education, are there non-dodgy notions of karma? But really and truly: reincarnation and karma, the temperament doctrine, and the archangels and elemental beings are all integral parts of waldorf pedagogy. These beliefs, in my opinion, are bound to run riots with some — if not many — people's minds. More importantly, they have no place in education until anthroposophists and waldorf proponents have shown that they are valid concepts to use in the educational context — and that they can be applied without causing harm. So far waldorf education has failed spectacularly in this sense.

As the website correctly points out, the same 'phenomenon appears time and time again in the stories of those for whom Steiner education was not "a good fit".' Perhaps that's because the foundation itself is dodgy. Perhaps it just cannot work. At least not as long as human beings are fallible (and I believe they will continue to be so for quite some time yet).

Useless it is to point out to people that Rudolf Steiner didn't invent Karma, in fact, as an understanding of life billions of people have believed in it for centuries. And guess what, it actually isn't a weapon to use to explain why you had to damage children, or why they need to be bullied. That's just an excuse for not running a school properly.

Though that is not dissimilar from how Steiner himself used the karma concept. According to Steiner, the person being abused needs it for karmic reasons, and, again for karmic reasons, will seek out the circumstances — that is, incarnate to such circumstances — which make this karmic necessity come true. This is not exactly the same as using it as an excuse to do harm, but it's close enough; and, being clairvoyant, why didn't Steiner predict the consequences and the potential misapplications — and why didn't he do something *radical* to prevent them? And isn't harm being done in waldorf schools everywhere for the very reason that Steiner and other prominent anthroposophists condoned such a line of reasoning in the first place? It may be that Steiner didn't invent karma — as it happens, he didn't — but this doesn't mean he didn't accept the concept, including its bad and its good implications. He elaborated on it, tirelessly. From the viewpoint of success in education, it would perhaps have been preferable, had he rejected the notion in its entirety. But, then, education in a conventional sense wasn't his paramount concern.

It is time for the Steiner Movement to take stock. Instead of appointing leaders who follow the typically fundamentalist attitude of closing up, reigning in, going to ground, no matter what the facts are, in a pseudo-intellectual but really visceral reaction to any form of challenge, Steiner school communities should practise the habit of weeding out forms of corruption.

I hate to say it, but it isn't going to happen. *That* is how the waldorf movement works, for better or worse. It is its tradition. It is how they kept themselves apart from the world. It is their reason for being. I suspect that this statement above is put forth not because one would expect a reaction from the movement but because no reaction — or the usual hostile reaction — is an answer as good as any. The answer is that the movement isn't going anywhere. It isn't cleaning up its act.

I cannot but agree with this, though:

On the occasion of the 150th birthday of Rudolf Steiner, let him stand four square, and have a look at where his life's work, his establishment, his very temperament, has left the children.

On a [third section](#) of the website, there's a list of a number of important points. However, this list shows quite clearly why waldorf schools are in trouble. There should be properly trained teachers, yes. But waldorf teachers aren't properly trained, not if they are waldorf trained. And

those extremely cultish elements in the movement who insist on a total lack of transparency and accountability, are giving many of those benign ideas a really bad press because of the way that they get lumped in with bad behaviour from Anthroposophists.

You wonder why people who support only the 'benign ideas' don't do something about it. Is it because even those individuals who have managed to separate the evil ideas from the benign ones — keeping the latter and discarding the former — are members of a spiritual movement which operates like a closed cult? No matter how much anthroposophists tout the ideal of thinking for oneself and the freedom to choose, that's not how it works in reality. In reality, you acquiesce — or you leave, often disillusioned.

It is not acceptable, or adult, to view valid criticism as an attack

It isn't. But how come the anthroposophical movement has always viewed valid criticism as attacks? Since Steiner's days. Besides, nobody who hasn't been down the right path, should be taken seriously. Steiner himself wanted his works to include [this text](#) in the prefaces of his books:

No person is qualified to form a judgment on the contents of this work, who has not acquired — through the School of Spiritual Science itself or in an equivalent manner recognized by the School of Spiritual Science — the requisite preliminary knowledge. Other opinions will be disregarded: the authors decline to take them as a basis for discussion.

The result is that anthroposophists always have an excuse for disregarding valid arguments from outsiders. And they do so, more often than not.

[Back](#) to the website.

People who run schools shouldn't really be dogmatic or pseudo spiritual.

What is pseudo-spiritual? Is pseudo-spirituality somehow less useful in education than 'real' spirituality? Who decides which spirituality is 'pseudo' and which is not? Are we sure waldorf — the true essence of waldorf — represents 'good' spirituality? And how do you keep spirituality untainted by dogmatism? Who rings the alarm bells when the spiritual project takes a nastier turn? It is, after all, not a fact-based operation. You cannot use reason to correct bad spirituality, since its foundation isn't rationality in the first place.

Many of the ideas of Rudolf Steiner have relevance for children today, in a world where arts have been so cut in many schools that children's own creativity isn't being encouraged at all.

Again, a misunderstanding. I'd say, of what waldorf education is. It's not about creativity. Creativity is just a PR catch-word. Though, of course, parents reasonably expect to get what's advertised. Creativity is restricted to copying anthroposophically approved art. I don't know of any waldorf schools doing it differently.

The problems at hand in waldorf schools are perhaps due to 'a tainted spiritual legacy of dogmatic zealots who can't let go of control', but if so, they may be intrinsic to waldorf. What is waldorf education, if not the product of a tainted spiritual legacy kept alive by (more or less) dogmatic zealots?

* As was pointed out in the comment thread, the people behind this website are the same people who are behind some other website(s) criticizing Titirangi Steiner school in New Zealand.



Tags: [steiner education](#), [waldorf criticism](#), [waldorf education](#), [waldorf movement](#)

19 Comments



1. *ThetisMercurio* · [December 1, 2010 - 12:31 am](#) ·

This is a brilliant analysis, zoocy.

There isn't going to be an archangel in shining armour riding to rescue Steiner from the Steineristas.

To paraphrase a wise friend: if you want to understand anthroposophy, read about the history of anthroposophy. If you want the real Steiner, don't ask an anthroposophist.



2. *zoocy* · [December 1, 2010 - 12:35 am](#) ·

'There isn't going to be an archangel in shining armour riding to rescue Steiner from the Steineristas.'

If there were one, he would have arrived already. If you have supernatural abilities, why wait 80 years? Seems daft. We need Steiner to reincarnate to change waldorf education. He's the only one who will be listened to. And I think that some anthroposophists are only willing to listen to him if he behave exactly as last time. They've spent so much time reinforcing old beliefs that they're not willing to give them up — not even after intervention by a reincarnated Steiner.



3. *ThetisMercurio* · [December 1, 2010 - 12:41 am](#) ·

They'd be disappointed if he wore jeans & marketed a Goethe iphone ap.



4. *zoocy* · [December 1, 2010 - 12:51 am](#) ·

Preaching the gospel of reason and scientific evidence. (Leaving out 'spiritual'.)

They wouldn't recognize him.

It's what I think will happen.



5. *Hollywood Tomfortas* · [December 1, 2010 - 1:44 am](#) ·

Zoocy,

I just nominated you for an Old Crony Award because of this posting.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/waldorf-critics/message/16109>



6. *Diana* · [December 1, 2010 - 3:19 am](#) ·

Agree completely with your take on this.

Perhaps these people haven't read enough actual Steiner to know what Steiner himself taught? I find this is often the case with people who harbor fond notions that Steiner's ideas were "humane." They often know only the Steiner they've been spoon-fed by their local Waldorf

teachers, who print a few cherry-picked Steiner favorites about love and light and creativity and imagination in the school brochures and won't discuss the "dodgy" parts when questioned.

Overall, I applaud these folks' efforts but suspect they are doomed to failure. It's been tried many times – "Steiner without the dogma," "Waldorf schools without the zealous anthroposophists," "let's keep the good parts of Waldorf and throw out the crazy" etc. These folks are usually stunned when they experience how hard the zealots will fight back.



7. [ThetisMercurio](#) · [December 1, 2010 - 8:55 am](#) ·

From the section 'Luciferocity':

'If these kind of justifications or excuses came from Rudolf Steiner himself, then the whole thing must be flawed.'

Em, yes. That would be it.

This is the couple who were at the Titirangi school in New Zealand, of course. Perhaps they should ask for an audience with Sergei at the Goetheanum.



8. [zooey](#) · [December 1, 2010 - 1:24 pm](#) ·

A very quick correction from me:

I wrote 'Though that is dissimilar from...' when I meant to write 'Though that is not dissimilar from...' (which clever readers may have figured out!)



9. [Diana](#) · [December 1, 2010 - 2:09 pm](#) ·

“a tainted spiritual legacy of dogmatic zealots who can't let go of control', but if so, they may be intrinsic to waldorf. What is waldorf education, if not the product of a tainted spiritual legacy kept alive by (more or less) dogmatic zealots?"

Exactly. It's a spiritual legacy of a type that *attracts* said dogmatists. If you create a spiritual legacy that consists of 600 volumes of dogma and 7000 lectures on your dogma, who do you think is going to join? Dogmatists. And do you think the dogmatists are going to react well when, periodically, some more liberally minded folks attempt "reform," or suggest "letting go" of the dogma?



10. [zooey](#) · [December 1, 2010 - 2:29 pm](#) ·

'Perhaps these people haven't read enough actual Steiner to know what Steiner himself taught?'

I do wonder!

'These folks are usually stunned when they experience how hard the zealots will fight back.'

I suspect there could be a crude wake-up in store eventually.

Most importantly, the waldorf movement has never showed itself willing to take seriously the views of those who are not even part of their system anymore. These people are outsiders, they're people who didn't toe the line, they've left! Thus, entirely irrelevant.

'This is the couple who were at the Titirangi school in New Zealand, of course.'

I suspected so, but didn't write it because I wasn't a 100% sure, only 99%. I think their ideas are great, but at the same time I can't stop feeling that they're still partly inhabitants of waldorf-fantasy-land. Thinking there is such a thing as the perfect waldorf. An illusion they share with fully convinced waldorf proponents, of course.

'It's a spiritual legacy of a type that *attracts* said dogmatists.'

Yes. And there is, by its very nature, very little room for anything else.

(Speaking of dogma: <http://cuteoverload.com/2010/11/27/yin-yang-dogma/>)



11. *ThetisMercurio* · [December 1, 2010 - 4:31 pm](#) ·

What is so wrong with state education? Much of it is good, especially at primary level. Especially in the UK. So what is so appalling that anyone should have to run from it into the arms of a dead theosophist who in reality knew nothing about education and was also into German nationalism and 'spiritual' racial hierarchies. He was not progressive, enlightened or an even reasonably decent after-dinner speaker.

Look – tell those anthrozealots to f* off and read this instead:

<http://www.idenetwork.org/index.htm>

<http://www.idenetwork.org/schools/democratic-schools-new-zealand.htm>

<http://www.tamarikichch.schoolzone.net.nz/index.html>

'know thyself' – as the school site says, and that doesn't mean by wittering on about how 'spiritual' you are. Or anyone else is. Or how spiritual the school guru was.

I love this: <http://www.tamarikichch.schoolzone.net.nz/WhoIsWho.html>

'We have the most wonderful bunch of people who clean (it can get VERY messy), who supervise in lunch hours, (it can be VERY messy) and who provide support with transport, and general dogsbodying. (It can be VERY messy.)'

Point is: that is progressive education. If those fleeing state ed don't like it (and a lot of people find democratic ed a bit challenging) it may mean the whole journey thing is not about the children at all. Certainly no one needs Waldorf. It's as dead as the deadeest duck on the frozen lake at the back of an abandoned lot in Narnia. It should shuffle off its mortal coil and go to join the choir invisible. It is a tree-lined cul-de-sac of hand-knitted lunacy.



12. *MarkH* · [December 1, 2010 - 4:46 pm](#) ·

Hmmm. My initial reaction is that these people can't let go of that wonderful, initial Steiner honeymoon period, before they discovered the awful truth.

Short segments here and there do ring true. From Luciferocity (what a wonderful word!) I especially like:

'Steiner Education, being the fastest growing alternative education movement, should also be becoming more understandable to people, more transparent, and, given the desire of Steiner Schools to ingest large amounts of tax-payers money, 400% more accountable.'

Maybe what's needed is a major piece of investigative journalism, in a national newspaper or TV programme. Before we get any Steiner Free Schools here in the UK...

13. *Tweets that mention 'tainted spiritual legacy of dogmatic zealots' (- what else?) « zooey -- Topsy.com* · [December 1, 2010 - 5:16 pm](#) ·

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by alicia hamberg, Mark Hayes. Mark Hayes said: An interesting angle on Steiner education: <http://bit.ly/hlu9lC> and @zzzoey's take on it: <http://bit.ly/e0W2bc> [...]



14. *zooey* · [December 2, 2010 - 8:09 pm](#) ·

'run from it into the arms of a dead theosophist'

That could be a horror movie! Psycho at the Goetheanum!

'He was not ... an even reasonably decent after-dinner speaker. '

Depends on how many drinks you've had, I reckon. With champagne he becomes bearable, my experience from the ethereal kiosk tells me.

'It is a tree-lined cul-de-sac of hand-knitted lunacy.'

Ha! No wonder the humour filter stops you Thetis, you are indeed too funny!!!

MarkH:

'My initial reaction is that these people can't let go of that wonderful, initial Steiner honeymoon period'

My suspicion too.

'Maybe what's needed is a major piece of investigative journalism, in a national newspaper or TV programme.'

That is desperately needed in every country where there are steiner/waldorf schools. The press often seems to share the honeymoon feelings of parents (before disillusionment).



15. *ThetisMercurio* · [December 2, 2010 - 10:46 pm](#) ·

the press can't get their heads round it. They can't believe it. The best story was by that journalist from a local paper in Leicestershire, who took the piss out of prospective Steiner Free Schools parents eating tofu. She just knew they were daft.

Oh, he's fine now. Death has been good for his stand-up.

No, not a horror movie: 'Finding Rudolf Steiner – The Musical'. A cross between 'Spamalot' and 'Springtime for Hitler.' You know what I'm saying.



16. *mule* · [December 2, 2010 - 10:51 pm](#) ·



17. *Hollywood Tomfortas* · [December 3, 2010 - 12:28 am](#) ·

Hey, cool beans, Mule!!! I never knew this movie existed. It came out in 2006. You put up the trailer, but I was able to watch the entire 88 minute film — well I skipped around maybe 20 minutes — at this "Culture Unplugged" site. (The only problem is the Volume. I had to max out the volume slide on the video plus my own desktop volume.)

<http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/2755/Finding-Rudolf-Steiner>

It's a well-done film technically and even somewhat artistically, but kind of boring since it's mainly a vehicle to interview 5 men (no women at all! How sexist! Especially given that the social structure of anthroposophy is really a matriarchy!) about Steiner. (Chicks really dug Rudi, you know!)

See eminent Anthro Yahoos like Uncle Walt Kugler, archivist at the Goetheanum, Phil Thatcher, head of the AS in Canada, and Full Nelson Willby, of the Wellspring bookstore in London. (But Nellie kicked the golden bucket, as it were, last year, so he be watching with you from his perch in kama loka, located just over your right shoulder in a darkened room.)

Between the interview segments are interspersed city scenes and video game pastiches, a few movie scenes like Hitchcock's "Notorious" and of course they show some performance eurythmy, and I was thinking, Zooney, you really need to watch this film because I think it will

turn your mind around about eurythmy. I feel like you might just be the most talented eurythmist in the 21st Century, if only you would awaken to your destiny about it. Or else . . . maybe not. (I've narrowed it to those two choices!)

Anyway, here's the synopsis.

Synopsis: **Finding Rudolf Steiner** is a visually entrancing journey into the occult philosophy of clairvoyant Rudolf Steiner, set against a background of modern moral and social decay. This film was selected for the 2006 Calgary International Film Festival.

The film presents fragments of interviews with leading international experts on Steiner's spiritual vision in counterpoint to archival footage and riveting visuals from the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Detroit.

Steiner died in 1925 and was one of the most profound and original thinkers of the twentieth century, known as much for his clairvoyant explorations into the true nature of man as he was for the creation of Waldorf Education and biodynamic farming.

In a world increasingly dominated by technology, materialism, and the threat of a growing international police state, the individual is faced with many challenges.

Finding Rudolf Steiner probes into the heart of a spiritually bereft world in which materialistic science and traditional religion are at odds, yet neither can come up with a solution to draw man out of his self-created chaos and push him forward.

Contrasting rare footage of Eurythmy performances (a type of modern dance created by Steiner) with beautiful sequences from the streets of Detroit and Buenos Aires, and shocking footage from violent video games, this film washes over us in waves of contradictory imagery, allowing the viewer to make his or her own decisions as to where western society is going and how we might look inside ourselves to discover our own spiritual nature and limitless creative forces for personal and social rejuvenation.



18. [zoey · December 3, 2010 - 6:44 pm](#)

Thetis — 'Oh, he's fine now. Death has been good for his stand-up.'

Oh, absolutely.

mule — scary. What's with the mix of eurythmy and city scenes? It's like they're trying to squeeze eurythmy into the modern world again.

Tom — 'and I was thinking, Zoey, you really need to watch this film because I think it will turn your mind around about eurythmy.'

It's possibly so scary I won't be able to sleep! Eurythmy spooks me out.

'I feel like you might just be the most talented eurythmist in the 21st Century, if only you would awaken to your destiny about it. Or else . . . maybe not. (I've narrowed it to those two choices!)

That's how you guarantee success as a psychic! Clever!

From the synopsis:

'Finding Rudolf Steiner probes into the heart of a spiritually bereft world in which materialistic science and traditional religion are at odds, yet neither can come up with a solution to draw man out of his self-created chaos and push him forward.'

Anthroposophy to the rescue!



19. [Hollywood Tomfortas · December 4, 2010 - 2:35 am](#)

I was inspired today to conjure up a movie title, which may lead to a whole new Steiner movie.

Looking for Mr. Goodbar — and Finding Rudolf Steiner

please leave a howl, a bark, a growl, a tail-wag or a comment! (comments are currently moderated, which means it might take a while for them to appear)

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'Perhaps humankind can't bear too much reality, but neither can it bear too much unreality, too much abuse of the truth.' (Saul Bellow)
 '448 OMAR KHAYYÁM Omar had a personality; I, for better or worse, have none. In an hour I'll have strayed from what I am at this moment; tomorrow I'll have forgotten what I am today. Those who are who they are, like Omar, live in just one world, the external one. Those who aren't

who they are, like me, live not only in the external world but also in a diversified, ever-changing inner world. Try as we might, we could never have the same philosophy as Omar's. I harbour in me, like unwanted souls, the very philosophies I criticize. Omar could reject them all, for they were all external to him, but I can't reject them, because they're me.' (F Pessoa)

'Mrs Glass looked over, abstractedly, at the blue bathmat, across the tiled floor. Zooney stood as still as possible, in order not to break her mood. "You can't live in the world with such strong likes and dislikes," Mrs Glass said to the bathmat, then turned again toward Zooney and gave him a long look, with very little, if any, morality in it. "Regardless of what you may think, young man," she said.' (JD Salinger)

'Art only begins where imitation ends.' (Oscar Wilde)

"I like zooney's blog," Steiner would say, "It's the only internet site with a foyer. Saul and I often meet there, by the ethereal kiosk. The ice-cream is splendid." (ThetisMercurio)

'What is the use of telling people repeatedly that the Society is not a sect and then behave as if it were one?' (Steiner)

'Laughter means distance. Where laughter is absent, madness begins. The moment one takes the world with complete seriousness one is potentially insane.' (Jens Bjerneboe)

'If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you.' (Oscar Wilde)

'Let's act like sphinxes, however falsely, until we reach the point of no longer knowing who we are. For we are, in fact, false sphinxes, with no idea of what we are in reality. The only way to be in agreement with life is to disagree with ourselves. Absurdity is divine.' (F Pessoa)

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the basics

the posts on this blog are written by alicia hamberg, with the guidance of mr dog, the canineosophist, and with inspiration from rudolf steiner, the anthroposophist, and the rest of our friends, people, dogs and strange beings who hang out with us in this remarkable ethereal kiosk



comments & discussion

comments in swedish, norwegian, danish, english, german are very welcome and much appreciated; and even though I do understand some french, spanish, dutch and italian, I prefer the aforementioned five languages. As a side-note: I eat food, not anthroposophists. And I'm not half as evil as you might think.

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