Foreword

This second edition has been extensively rewritten and updated. The world of 'Anthroposophy' − as the Rudolf Steiner movement is called − has moved on since the first edition in 1984.

My aim for this second edition has been to notice the major developments in Anthroposophy in the past two decades without altering the purpose of the original book. It was, and is, intended to describe the thought world of Anthroposophy and its social practices, and to relate these to their historical and contemporary contexts, especially gnosis in the West or, as it has been called more recently, 'the Western esoteric tradition'. In order to signpost the significance of the rich and fascinating historical heritage, the book has been re-titled for the second edition to emphasise gnosis. The first edition was called *Sun at Midnight: The Rudolf Steiner Movement and the Western Esoteric Tradition*'. 'Sun at Midnight' is inspired by Lucius Apuleius' description of his transformation experience in the mysteries: he describes (see the epigraph to this book) how at midnight he saw the sun shining as if it were noon.

I first encountered Anthroposophy through looking for an unresearched topic in spiritual religion for a PhD. From the hindsight made possible by twenty further years, my application then of the unrelenting perspectives of the sociology of religion and knowledge seems to have had something of a defensive quality about it. I was not convinced by Anthroposophy then, and I have not been since. Yet on revisiting the subject recently for this second edition I have, among other reactions, found much in it to admire. My (impossible) intention has been neither to collude nor unfairly to accuse where there is controversy, for example, over the state funding of Anthroposophical (or 'Waldorf') education. I

am acutely aware that there is an inevitable trade-off between bringing in external perspectives credibly, and unwittingly misrepresenting the subject through the lack of an insider's total immersion. What follows is an external interpretation of a cosmology and way of life or, as it is sometimes called, a construct of the second degree. I am not aware of any other comprehensive account of Anthroposophy by an outsider aiming to look empathetically in.

There have been changes in the order of the first six chapters. A major alteration has been to reposition the account of how eighteen Anthroposophists found Anthroposophy. In the first edition this was chapter one, but it is included here as an appendix. The information now belongs to the past and in any event was not from a representative sample, so I have decided it should no longer be introductory. However, I include it, with a much-needed edit, because I believe it contains valuable information.

Many Anthroposophists have helped me in both editions. I am very appreciative of their spirit in doing so, the spirit that holds that inquiry about truth matters. Because I have promised anonymity – they have usually sought it – I am not in a position to identify them. Thus I am not able to thank by name most of the major contributors.

The doctoral research which, years ago, preceded this book benefited considerably from the advice of David Martin, to whom I owe much. I am also grateful for the support of the late Bryan Wilson. The research was funded by the SSRC as it was then called, now the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council). Non-Anthroposophists who helped the first edition in different ways included Eileen Barker, Rita Bultemann, John Costello, David Docherty, David Levy, Gillian Mullins, Desa Ozim, Fiona Rowell, Nick Rowell, Andrew Skarbek, Edna Swayne, AdamWarcup and John Woodcock. There have been many non-Anthroposophical influencers since, far too many to single out.

This second edition would never have been produced were it not for a non-Anthroposophical backer, who suggested it out of the blue, invested in it financially, and thereupon was generous with time and energy. Again, by his own request I am not in a position to name him. The wisdom of my wife, the artist Ivon Oates, has both sustained and challenged me throughout. I owe much to Rondel Linder for her very thorough and unstinting work preparing the second edition. Adrian Brink and Ian Bignall of Lutterworth Press have given the book careful and expert attention, and I am grateful for this. Of course, what follows here is my responsibility.

Geoffrey Ahern

Prologue

Kathleen had questioned me closely, asking what I would like to do if life became calmer and more settled. I answered her that I would probably spend a month at Dornach, near Basel, at the Swiss Steiner Centre, the Goetheanum.[1]

– Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*

The spirit of the movement founded by the 'spiritual scientist' Rudolf Steiner is a modern expression of the so-called Western 'esoteric tradition' (sometimes the word 'occultism' is also used). This − in a broad sense − neo-gnosticism is a hidden thread within some of the most archetypal works of Shakespeare, Goethe and W.B. Yeats. It has profoundly influenced German and English-speaking imaginations, and also it seems to have been part of the matrix from which modern science emerged.

Relating Western gnosticism to the development of world religions, secularity and modernity is the concern of the last of the four parts of this book. The penultimate part is a brief outline of major historical and metaphysical features of the neo-gnostic or 'esoteric' tradition as it has been reconstituted in the West.

The first two parts attempt to portray what is almost certainly the most differentiated contemporary instance of Western neo-gnosticism, the Rudolf Steiner movement or, as it is known, 'Anthroposophy'. Any account of this is inevitably subjective and impressionistic. This book approaches the subject from an outside and also an English-speaking perspective. The topic is introduced in part one through the extraordinary life of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the history of the movement from its origins in Germany through Nazi times and beyond, and a description of its organisation, membership and belonging in the internet age. Part two summarises the movement's spiritual 'science', including the many practical outlets, and its anthropology and cosmology. Then, in the further two parts of the book, the relationships between gnosticism and Anthroposophy are examined and placed in their Western cultural context past and present.

The Goetheanum, the centre of this modern mystery movement, is only a few kilometres outside Basle. Designed by Rudolf Steiner, it appears to many like a rock that is living inside. On approaching the huge concrete structure, facets, curves and angles emerge which not only convey a German organic feel but infuse extra dimensions into it. Surrounding buildings and houses are similar or have similar features. The Goetheanum and its complex are on an escarpment backed by a hill, a strangely transmuted contrast to the mundane Swiss suburbia nearby.

The reality within this sacred space is very different from the 'normality' outside. Large doors with bronze handles lead into long, hushed galleries. When I was there, plants − roots as well as tops − were exhibited on many of the walls. The atmosphere within is of German-speaking spirituality. The construction is named after the many-sided genius Goethe; indeed it is said to be the only place in the world where *Faust Part Two* is regularly enacted. It is the physical centre for the members of the movement, whose direct subscription has grown very considerably, to around 50,000. Far more people still are affected by the movement's activities. These days members are located all over the globe.

Visitors cross the huge concourses within to meditate on a large carving of three sinewy, striving forms, two 'opponents' without whom we cannot grow and 'the representative of humanity', who has the upper hand. One opponent, Lucifer, represents passion and fantasy (contrasted with imaginative truth); the other, given the Zoroastrian name of Ahriman, is perceived as a grimmer reality still, the force of hardening, especially when it takes the form of dried-up intellectualism. The sculpture, partly chiselled by Steiner himself, expresses the need to hold a balance between the two extremes. Allowing them to reveal their inadequacy is redemptive. An analogy is made Anthroposophically to the second part of *Faust.* Mephistopheles here is seen as consciously trying to upset evolution and as thereby serving it. From a non-Anthroposophical position there seems to be an implicit dualism between Ahriman's hardening and the spiritual position of the representative of humanity. Anthroposophists, however, state there is no dualism in their position against hardening because matter has a role in evolution, and because materialism properly seen is a spiritual reality.

Through improving their karmas in spiritual struggle, those committed believe they will be in a purer inner state when, as they suppose, they are reborn. Within the broader structure of the Anthroposophical Society, its School of Spiritual Science has the

mission of developing the inner core. Members are immersed in the meaning of Steiner's complex revelation, given in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It tells of the origins of the cosmos, its future respiritualization and man's identity with it. He called this 'Anthroposophy'* or 'awareness of one's humanity'. Thus those committed to this vision of life are known as 'Anthroposophists'.

Outsiders who visit the Goetheanum may well be impressed by the strange environment. Approaching Anthroposophy from 'normality' as the result of a chance contact, nothing at first made sense to me. I was never converted[2] while carrying out my research. Had this been otherwise, the chance contact would have come to be my 'karma' and meanings which are Anthroposophical would have become the meanings of all life everywhere. Many outsiders, confronted with radically different thought systems, will reinforce their own 'normality' through outright rejection. A more interesting possibility is to explore in order to gain some kind of understanding.

On one of the pink walls there has been painted a light blue, almost turquoise, serpent, about three feet in diameter, which coils round in a complete circle, so that the thin tail-end is inside, but not touched by, the mouth. A formidable eye looks out from the head. This 'seal'− see the frontispiece of this book − can be taken as a 'cosmic script, expressing the task of man's repeated lives on earth: that the I recognises itself'.[3] The head and eye represent consciousness and awareness. In being turned back around the tail they signify transcendence through knowledge of one's spiritual origins. The distinctiveness of the Anthroposophical serpent, compared with serpents in other spiritual interpretations,[4] gives clues about the distinctiveness of Anthroposophy: the serpents' details – head, eye, teeth or gums, whether the tail is within or across the mouth, or touching or not – all differ. The watchful head surrounding and

* *Anthropos* (man) and *sophia* (wisdom) are essential elements of Syrian-Egyptian gnosis (see chapter 7). The terms were synthesized by Thomas Vaughan in his *Anthroposophia Theomagica (1650).* The Swiss Ignaz Troxler (1780-1866), a disciple of Schelling, propounded an anthropology he called anthroposophy which had many resemblances to Steiner's Anthroposophy (see H. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, US, Basic Books, 1970, pp. 206-07). Steiner stated he derived the name from a work by Robert Zimmerman, who was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Vienna; he attended lectures by Zimmerman while a student at Vienna's Technical University. (Paul Allen, ed., *Rudolf Steiner. An Autobiography* (New York, Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1977), Note 361-A, p. 491.)

almost fused with the tail depicts in Anthroposophy the destiny of the conscious mind, which is to transcend self-centred individualism and materialism. Meanwhile the hardness of matter will transmute into the spiritual essences which are its rightful nature.

What does all this 'Anthroposophy' mean? Our story begins with the life and times of Rudolf Steiner.