



BOOK REVIEW

Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism,
by Dan McKannan, University of California Press, Oakland, Calif., 2017, 290pp, price (pb) £25.00,
ISBN 976-0-520-29006-8

Reviewed by Martin Large

Dan McKannan is the Emerson Lecturer at Harvard Divinity School, and first met Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic work when signing up for a weekly share in a community-supported biodynamic farm. He then researched the Rudolf Steiner-inspired Camphill villages for a book called *Touching the World: Christian Communities Transforming Society* (Liturgical Press, 2007).

His new book, *Eco-Alchemy*, comes at a time of Extinction Rebellion (XR), a response to global heating and potential social collapse, that invites us to declare a climate emergency, and to deliberate how we can design and realise a zero-carbon way of life.

McKannan describes some origins of the environmental movement with *Silent Spring*'s Rachel Carson making friends with two Long Island New York biodynamic farmers, Polly Richards and Marjorie Spock, sister of Benjamin Spock and students of Steiner. In the late 1950s, they noticed that birds were disappearing from their farm, so they kept records, and connected this with the aerial spraying of DDT – for which they took the US government to the Supreme Court. Although they lost, this led to Rachel Carson writing *Silent Spring*, and eventually to the founding of the US Environmental Protection Agency.

As a health warning, the words 'spiritual' and 'anthroposophy' need some deconstructing, as otherwise they can be showstoppers. *Geist* can be translated as 'spirit', and *geistliche* as 'spiritual', but in English these words have largely lost their edge. However, in German *gestichliche* can mean a powerful combination of intelligence, agency and creativity. So when Rudolf Steiner defines anthroposophy as the wisdom of the human being, and as a path that connects the spiritual in man to the spiritual in the world, a lot can be lost in translation. Owen Barfield (1988), in his works on the evolution of human consciousness, explores this – for example, how divine and external capacities such as 'creator' became internalized. He recounts how Coleridge got excommunicated from the Church for daring to say humans could be creative, not just God! The Suggates in their new book *Reclaim Early Childhood* (2019) also deconstruct 'spiritual' and 'anthroposophy' for contemporary insight.

McCannan argues that for nearly a hundred years, the anthroposophical movement has helped catalyse environmental activism. Steiner's biodynamics helped bring organic farming to life, his economics to community-supported farming and to ethical, green banking such as Triodos. McCannan describes the Seed of Steiner's holistic vision, biodynamics and the origins of organic agriculture; the Branches, the

Flowers and the Fruit. However, he concludes with four significant gifts to rebalance environmentalism.

First, there is the gift of *cosmic holism*, that invites us to pay attention to ever-widening circles of interconnection between humanity and mother earth. This sense of ever-widening, interconnecting and deepening webs recognizes that ‘every culture has its own cosmological traditions, its own imaginative pictures linking the carrot or the earthworm to the music of the spheres’. Secondly, the gift of a *homeopathic model of social change* invites us to use subtle influence to heal the world, such as attention, mindfulness, the power of example, like Marjorie Spock making her research in birdlife decline available to Rachel Carson.

Thirdly, *appropriate anthropocentrism* allows us to experience ourselves as humans full at home in the world, that humans are not earth dominators, but ‘human well-being cannot be imagined apart from the health of the planet’. Nature is interconnected with human activity, and the earth is constantly adapting to human activity. The urge for conservation, sustainability and zero impact may limit healing changes such as regenerative agriculture. Finally, there is the gift of *planetary transmutation*, with humans being ‘more like a specialised organ within the earth organism rather than a caretaker who exists independently of the object of care’. In conclusion he writes:

Cosmic holism expands the environmental imagination and counters tendencies to reduce

the movement to a single issue or single activist strategy. Homeopathy reminds us that small organisms are as important as large ones in a healthy ecosystem, warding against the demand that we judge environmental practices exclusively on their capacity to scale up. Appropriate anthropocentrism protects us from the temptation to respond to ecological devastation with bitter misanthropy. And the idea of planetary transmutation prevents the ideal of conserving nature and ‘leaving no trace’ from hardening into a stubborn resistance to evolution itself. But these gifts are valuable only as counterbalances: taken in isolation, each could be as distorted as that which it counters.

A good, timely read....

References

- Barfield, O. (1988). *Saving the Appearances: Study in Idolatry*, 2nd edn. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Suggate, S. & Suggate, T. (2019). *Reclaim Early Childhood: Philosophy, Psychology and Practice of Steiner Waldorf Early Years Education*. Stroud, Glos.: Hawthorn Press.

Martin Large lectured in behavioural science, and now works as a facilitator enabling the development of Oakbrook Community Farm, Stroud, for reconnecting people with nature, food and regenerative biodynamic farming.