

[“Meeting Anthroposophia Today”](#) from the Goetheanum’s English edition of *Anthroposophy Weekly*; published November 4th, 2022.

Robert McDermott is the former President and a recently retired, long-term Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, as well as the author of the books, *The Essential Steiner* and *Steiner and Kindred Spirits*. In this interview with Ashton Arnoldy, McDermott reflects on Anthroposophy in relation to America and Steiner in the context of other great thinkers.

Ashton Arnoldy: So you’ve just retired from being a professor for the Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), where you were also once president. Would you like to share a bit more about yourself?

Robert McDermott: Sure. I’m essentially a professor. I was a professor for fifty-eight years. Two years in administration at City University of New York, and nine years at CIIS. Throughout all the time that I was a professor, I was also in administration—chairing boards and serving as president for various organizations. So I have a strong and administration gene. Ah, but also a professorial gene. So for me the two parts of my life are, in fact, very close, very complementary and hardly divisible. So when people ask, «What will you do when you retire?» And I’ll say, «Oh, I’m going to do the same,» the same as I did while I was a Professor and a President: I will try to get more knowledge, which I will then try to share in writing and lecturing and teaching, and I will continue to be active, for example, in this conversation, which is, you know, a form of teaching, but really sharing—sharing what I’m thinking, etcetera. There I am—I’m ready for your questions, at least I’m ready as I will be.

Ashton Arnoldy: Prior to discovering Steiner, you had been deeply involved with the work of the philosopher and spiritual teacher Sri Aurobindo—publishing his work in English, and making a documentary about his work. What was it about Steiner’s work that pulled you? Steiner took on more prominence in your life—is that right?

Robert McDermott: That’s exactly right, Anthroposophy became more prominent, my primary spiritual commitment. And I think that any of these biographical questions lead me to give two answers. One is practical and that I understand. The other one is karmic and spiritual and more complicated that I accept, and I can point to, but I don’t really understand it very well when it’s happening and it’s only in retrospect that I can say «that makes sense.»

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I think, though, that the aspect that brought me to having a primary relationship with Steiner was his own practical work, the work that he did in the last six or seven years [of his life]. In other words, after the First World War and Europe was in a shambles and he saw the need for a different economics and a different educational system and a

different farming system. By that time, he was lecturing to several thousand people a night in various European cities. People were coming to him and asking for advice of help or direction. And among those works I was deeply interested in education – I was a professor, after all. I had children, and my wife was a teacher. And so when I learned about Waldorf—that was very exciting, that this very high spiritual being was giving lectures on what to teach in kindergarten and what to teach in the third grade to sixth grade to ninth grade to 12th grade, I mean, several, literally several hundred lectures on the Waldorf approach to teaching and to education and the development of the child and what is helpful and what is useful and what is deleterious. So all of that attracted me because I'm a practical person. I'm not really so mystical. So yes, I liked that he had lectures on economics and social structures and communities. After all, I was influential in many communities and many of them – most of them – were not working very well.

Ashton Arnoldy: You've taught Steiner alongside other figures like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Sri Aurobindo, and Carl Jung, and you've written a whole book, called *Steiner and Kindred Spirits*, to bring him into conversation with other thinkers. Would you like to say anything about that?

Robert McDermott: Sure. I could say about 440 pages about it – that's why I wrote *Steiner and Kindred Spirits* [laughs]. I was once introduced before a lecture, and the person said, «well, all you need to know about Robert McDermott is that he is a pluralist.» So, I have many sources and I'm on many tracks, but I have a home base, Steiner and Anthroposophy, and then the Indian world as a companion and then I have lots of Christianity that is not Anthroposophical, like Teilhard and little bit of Thomas Merton. So to try to answer the question: it's to my mind tragic that these great figures did not know about Steiner. Steiner either didn't know about them or didn't pay attention to them. The one combination that should have been realized was Steiner and Jung. They were an hour apart by train. Jung's architect was an Anthroposophist. Jung's wife, Emma, went to the Goetheanum and studied fairytales with people at the Goetheanum.

Ashton Arnoldy: They knew about each other.

Robert McDermott: They knew about each other. Jung said almost exactly what Freud said about him after a while—Jung said: «Oh, Steiner and those people; he just makes it up as he goes along.» This is in a book by Gerhart Wehr. Wehr himself was an Anthroposophist and a very fine scholar of Jung. So there are these people who know both. But they [Jung and Steiner] did not connect. Now, I'm more critical of Jung because by the time Steiner died in 1925, the Jung that we're all excited about wasn't really well known. The Jung of the Red Book, those three amazing years between 1913 to 1917 when Jung went deep into his unconscious and did children's games in order to discover general archetypal structures. So there was time enough for Steiner to know how close they were. And Steiner did a lecture on Jung and Freud that wasn't great. But had he known about the Jung starting in, say, 1935, then 45' and 55', and right up until 1961, had he known about *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, or one of those major works like *The Symbols of Transformation* or one of those other fabulous books, he would

have had a different attitude. Now, why didn't Jung look into anything that Steiner was doing when sometimes they were focused on the same topic? It's tragic.

And Teilhard didn't die until 1955. He did not know about Steiner, but he spent so many years in China that he wasn't involved with the German culture. He was involved with French and Chinese, whereas Jung spent his whole life in Switzerland. Well, Steiner's headquarters was in Switzerland. It's only a tiny state. So that's the one that really bugs me, you know? And then there are other great figures. I don't know what Gebser learned from Steiner, but the resemblances are remarkable. The person who knew, who I wanted to ask about this and never did, was William Irwin Thompson, because he knew both Steiner and Gebser very thoroughly. Somebody should write something about that—how much did Gebser learn from Steiner?

Ashton Arnoldy: Yeah, that would be a great research project because he [Gebser] does cite the term «Anthroposophy», but he only cites the person who first used the term, who Steiner also references at some point, but he doesn't—Gebser, in *The Ever-Present Origin*— he doesn't actually mention Steiner at all. But you're right, I agree, there are striking resemblances. Gary Lachman actually wrote a short essay comparing them.

This brings me to my next theme: Steiner in the contemporary, bringing Anthroposophy forward. The following quotation is from your *Steiner and Kindred Spirits*:

«The hundred years since Steiner's lectures on the evolution of consciousness have shown the limitations and the tendency toward exceptionalism of a European (and American) worldview. While the level of insight and method of rendering would seem to be valuable, and perhaps unsurpassed in depth and detail, Steiner's account will have to be extended to include indigenous, Jewish, Islamic, Asian, and feminist modes of consciousness. Regrettably, and unacceptably, in Steiner's account, people of color are almost invisible. The quality of his work is profound and important but will not continue to be so unless it is extended to the past, present, and future of the entire human community. We should not consider an extension of Steiner's account of the evolution of consciousness unfaithful to his mission, but rather it's appropriate, even necessary, continuation.» Would you care to elaborate on this theme? And maybe you can also talk a little bit about what you've described as the «Spiritual Mission of America»?

Robert McDermott: Ah, yes, that quotation, which I'm conscious of, because some people have written to me saying, «Here's what I just read. I'm a little surprised that you wrote that, considering, you know, most Anthroposophists don't hold that view.» Anyway, throughout my my whole career, I've been interested in evolution of consciousness, and I'm *also* interested in America. Among my favorite authors are Emerson, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, Whitehead. So I'm very interested in this relevance of America, because I think America is an extremely powerful country. It's too powerful, actually. It's powerful and it's dangerous. It loves war. It's a very violent country. And it's a little bit, I'm tempted to say, schizophrenic. The founding, though racist and elitist, is nevertheless fabulous. It's just such an amazing

contradiction, these great ideals. In the meantime, these people were slave owners, and only men could vote. Women brought about the vote by horrible suffering, by being force-fed and tortured for months on end to get the vote in 1920. The country was over 100 years old, 150 years old. So it's a very imperfect country.

At the same time, it has lots of ideals and it's trying to do something, conscious or not, which is certainly rare on the scale that is trying to do it, which is to create a multicultural *culture*. It was founded—no other cultures of countries were *founded*. They all have lineages that go back hundreds and thousands of years. The other day at the funeral of the Queen, they're talking about «this hall that was built in 1586 and this one is 1632,» and whatever else. We have no such markers. It's still a relatively new country, and yet it's the oldest democracy. But as Benjamin Franklin said, «if you can keep it.» So, it's an experiment. And I think it's terribly important to create a new culture, a culture based on selected ideals. Some of the people who make me most unhappy are these originalists who think that everything is in the original Constitution—I don't even know that they really believe this. I mean, it seems like it's really foolish to believe it, but there are political advantages to believing that everything in the Constitution is right and nothing needs to be changed, which is, of course, hopeless, because the Civil War was fought for four years over in order to show that the Constitution was not adequate. So I'm very interested in all that and I think it's tremendously important. America, for better or worse, and it is sometimes absolutely for the worse, is very important.

So what would Steiner ideas say about that experiment? Well, I think Steiner was enlightened with respect to the definition of the human as being individual and universal and not defined by nationality or group or race. Even though race is a discredited concept, race isn't really a reality, it is a political concept with great consequences. So I think Steiner is fundamentally right that we should understand and make relationships to persons as individuals who have universal characteristics. But Steiner himself lecturing, after all, 6000 times, sometimes spoke with an evolution-of-consciousness-attitude which definitely prized or privileged European and Christian ideals and consciousness. And if you scream at him and say, «you can't do that because it's somehow unfair or insufficiently respectful of China or India» or whatever else I think Steiner would say, «This is not my fault. This is this is objective. The ideals that are advancing evolution of consciousness did come from Europe.» So I sometimes say, lecturing on or teaching on something about evolution of consciousness, «It might be true, even though it is disastrous in terms of our relationships.» You know, it's like where you have to say, «I'm really sorry that this is true.» Now, I'm not saying that everything that came out of Europe was better than anything anywhere else. But I am agreeing with Steiner that some great insight, some mode of consciousness that came from modern Europe *is* influential throughout the world, for good reason. It is the source of some really good ideas. That said, it's also true that the very people, cultures, nations, and leaders who are advocating those really good ideas—also included in those very ideas, not as some far-away shadow, but closely attached to those very ideas are violence, colonialism and racism. Those have got to be expunged from the idea of evolution of consciousness, and we also need a reduction in the privileging of national identity.

Steiner, I don't think he ever believed that he belonged to a particular nation. He was born in Austria, taught and lived in Germany, and died in Switzerland. So he was certainly a European. But that's not what he thought was important. He really viewed the individual and universal as highest and not the middle level, which is national group. In Chapter 14 in *Philosophy of Freedom* in 1893, which is was early in his career, he has a chapter on the fallacy of gender, that gender should not be a factor in people's identity or privilege or responsibility. I think that's pretty good. And in 1893, he had the same view of all national identity. He also spoke about what he considered to be the advance guard of consciousness evolution that he identified within certain ideas and thinkers in Europe, not nations, but *individuals* who he thought had great karmic tasks to advance humanity. It's quite complicated.

Ashton Arnoldy: Yeah, I think he's consistently against that kind of abstract nationalism and, instead, for what might be called a kind of cosmopolitical localism, wherein, the ideals of social threefolding, for example, would be realized through the particularity of each place and its peoples, but I also think many people today are inclined to think about history without any assumption of reincarnation, but he [Steiner] is consistently coming from that place. And so if we are inclined to only think about ourselves as living once, and not really belonging to any kind of common humanity that is spiritual in essence, that transcends just one particular life, then we may not be inclined to think about the ideals that are arising out of one particular continent, and certain cultures that have, you know, had such a big impact on the earth, as belonging to more than just *those* people, *those* people in *those* times, rather than to *all* of humanity *across* the ages. I feel like this is an important aspect [of Steiner's thought] that can be overlooked—that this evolution of consciousness is something that is ongoing and will see contributions coming from different places as it unfolds.

Robert McDermott: That's very important to him. One of his big complaints is the parochialism and exclusivity and arrogance of institutional Christianity. But when he's talking about Christianity, he's not talking about the Christianity that exists. He's talking about a universal gospel of love that would be throughout the world, and that there would be expressions of that revelation in the language and flavor of all of all the different cultures. He had the same idea of Anthroposophy. People tend to think that, well, if you're an Anthroposophist, then you're a Christian. But he was very comfortable with the idea of Buddhist Anthroposophists and Hindu and Daoist and whatever else, because for him, Anthroposophy is not an exclusive idea at all. Christianity and Anthroposophy are both intended to be universal and not *owned*, is not supposed to *exclude* any other set of ideals. But sometimes it doesn't sound that way.

Ashton Arnoldy: Well, you know that *central event* that informs the way of thinking about Christianity in Anthroposophy, this cosmic event that—because it's treated by Steiner as a historical event for the whole evolutionary cosmos, for all beings—in order to see Anthroposophy and Christianity as something universal, there has to be a kind of openness to the possibility that this event [the Mystery of Golgotha] actually happened, but this openness is hard to come by in our materialistic times.

Robert McDermott: It is, because we're all influenced, or even determined by our local perspective. He himself was as well, because he was a Central European. He never came to North America or to India or China. So all of his language was sort of European-Christian inflected.

Ashton Arnoldy: And because of the hold of materialism over our imaginations, our conditioning, that something like that could even be possible I think is hard for a lot – for probably most people – to fully accept.

This reminds me of another question that I wanted to ask you – you recently gave a lecture on John's Gospel in which you mentioned Steiner having said once that those who can read in the akashic record are capable of making mistakes. And you mentioned how this is not something some Anthroposophists are willing to acknowledge – that there is a potential for mistakes to happen. You also mentioned how complex the reading of the akashic record is. And so I'm curious: we're aware that Steiner made statements that reflect a kind of ignorance – racist statements – that are hard to reconcile with our understanding of Steiner as this spiritual teacher. How does one reconcile the fact that he said certain things that we today feel are completely untrue with what we find compelling in his overall picture of human evolution? What are your thoughts about all this?

Robert McDermott: So the question is: was Steiner sometimes wrong? Did he admit that

he was sometimes wrong? And how do we square that with people who think that, not only he wasn't wrong in any of his statements, but he couldn't be because it was a direct transmission from the Akashic record? I have several responses. One is that, as Steiner himself says, it's quite a difficult process. Just think about how—when Steiner is speaking—he is not reading a script as when we are reading words on a screen. He is reading *light*. Light is not writing words. It's hard to imagine what was going on. But he says that some people, including himself, can read ideas in light. You can read what lives in light and events in light, but there's a transition between light and words. It's quite radical. There's a lot of

opportunity for misjudgment such that sometimes, he says, «At that time, I hadn't seen such and such, and later I was clearer about it.» Now even if he were clear, it doesn't mean that he articulates what he's clear about in a way that we can understand clearly. Then there's the whole problem of German being translated to all the other languages. So this is a partially imprecise process. It's not taking stenography from what somebody said. Then in addition to that, the very concepts that Steiner had available to him were German language concepts. He knew English reasonably well and French reasonably well. But he didn't have a fluency. He certainly didn't have a fluency in any Asian language. And so there's this whole question of «What concepts did he have at his disposal to adequately explain these various developments?» For example, I'm very conscious that these great figures who I consider Steiner's kindred spirits, say Sri Aurobinod or Teilhard, did not have the concept of the *etheric*. And they might say, «Oh,

when you go into that place, there was a certain energy there.» Well, that's sort of like <etheric,> but it's not quite the same. And so they didn't have that concept of what the human body as a living body has in common with the etheric around the globe. Here's a way of understanding the world that is not available to them because they lacked the concept. Now, there aren't so many concepts that they needed that they didn't have. But I think *etheric* is one. For example, Jung had the concept *psyche*, which is approximately the same as *astral*. So there's not a loss there. But those who didn't have the concept *etheric* at all can only talk around it, but not actually, as Rick Tarnas would say, not <nailing it.>

So that's a positive part on Steiner's side. But he might not have had language concepts that he needed for certain phenomena that weren't accounted for in German language in the early 20th century. Then, finally, Steiner comes at a certain time. All of his work is between, let's say the last decade of the 19th and the first two and 1/2 decades of the 20th century. He didn't live through or after the Second World War when some many aspects of human life and human consciousness were violated and just proven to be wrong. I mean, there was a degree of inhumanity, of just unfathomable barbarity in the Holocaust that is just so dramatically different from whatever language we would need to talk about history. And he didn't experience that. Similarly, he didn't really take in the extreme multiculturalism of in the United States. There are school districts where the first language of the children in the first grade of there is represented by 100 different languages. And that is the case in maybe 100 school districts throughout the United States. Now, Steiner had no awareness of that. He had no awareness that the Jewish population in New York City is larger than the population of Israel. I mean, Astoria, a very large section of New York City, is significantly an Indian population. And there are other parts of New York City in the South Bronx that are Latino – 100,000 Spanish-speaking people in a particular area. Or like Chinatown. Same thing is true in San Francisco, but it's a much smaller scale. This is an incredible experience with all these children now, who at home, they're speaking one language, and then they go to school, they learn a new language, and their friends are all coming from families that are speaking different languages. And then they all have to become American citizens that contribute to American culture. That is a new experiment in the world.

Now, Steiner didn't know about that in a way that was at all adequate. So it's not a good idea to take what he says about a nation or a culture and apply it to the United States. He says, quite interestingly I think, that in order to know the truth of anything, you have to see all sides. He said an idea or an event is like a tree. You can't get an adequate picture of the tree except by going around the back. So you have to have at least four different angles on an idea or an event or a development. I think I could say about him what my colleague said about me: he *is* a pluralist. But he's also deeply grounded in early 20th century German language culture. So it's kind of a dialectic. He tries to get out of it, and often he does, and sometimes he doesn't. But that's our job, to improve upon what he did.

Ashton Arnoldy: And so, as someone who appreciates the work of Steiner and finds it instructive, it sounds like, from what you're describing, that it's important for us to

understand where he's strongest in his work and *also* be able to acknowledge where he may be speaking out of limitation or insufficient understanding—to acknowledge that this could even be possible for him.

Robert McDermott: Well, I think that Steiner has the disadvantage of his advantage. He is astonishing. The book that I published with all these kindred spirits, for a couple of years when I was first beginning to think about the book, I called it *Unique, Not Alone*. Now, the unique part, I think, is not a very helpful word because everybody is unique, but unique is appropriate in that he seems to be singular in the level, the depth, the extent of his useful revelations. I think I know all the competitors. I don't think there's anybody who competes successfully on the depth or the extent or the usefulness of education, gardening, medicine, economics, scripture, interpretation, history, etc. It's overwhelming. That is a disadvantage because, first off, it makes people annoyed. «This guy's got a nerve thinking that he knows all this or that he thinks that I'm going to accept that he knows all this when I know perfectly well that nobody knows all this.» So there's a kind of a built in competition with Steiner— like «Yea, show me.» There is also a disadvantage in that the people who find Steiner and come to the conclusion that he is astonishing and that he does know what we need to know to survive, that they then go a little further from saying «He knows the most» to saying that «Everything he knows is true» and that there aren't important developments that he didn't know anything about or that he misunderstood. That's essential. Or else we make him into something he's not, which is omniscient. It's destructive, actually. And it repels people. Some say «He may be great, but I don't want to be involved with the people around him. Yuck.» So that's a disadvantage. The other disadvantage is that because he said so much there's a tendency to think that it had a kind of finality, especially since there doesn't seem to be anybody coming close behind who is approximate. Jung is fabulous. So is Teilhard and so is Aurobindo. But it doesn't seem that they know more or deeper. They just also know a lot in allied areas. So the dogmatic tendency in people is reinforced by not only the extent of his knowledge, but the confidence with which he speaks.

We in the United States, but I think in Western Europe generally, have developed a necessary skill for anticipating the resistance of the audience or the reader. When teaching, we hardly ever say, «This is true, dammit,» or «What's wrong with you? Why don't you see this? Anybody who doesn't see this is really, really stupid.» It's just counterproductive. Even if we believe that we absolutely know the truth of what we're saying, we'd find ways to say, «I would like you to consider this. This seems to me to make sense. I think it's very useful in this way. I think that this explains such and such, etc.»—all those phrases that we have learned to use, I hope sincerely, but in any case even if not, they are necessary ways of discourse and to use early 20th century German-language, confident-statements is off-putting. It's not that inviting. We don't like that. We like it more conversational, more tentative, more respectful of the hearer or the reader. I mean, to a much greater extent than Steiner exhibits. So that's another problem, a limitation.

Ashton Arnoldy: Well, you know, maybe that confidence—obviously, it had some purpose—it was coming from somewhere—maybe to ensure that Anthroposophy would

stay, that it would continue to be a force. But maybe we can end with some reflections on the significance of Sophia, or the *sophianic*, in connection with what you were just describing, because I think this respectfulness that you are describing, as a professor, to the student or to the reader, respecting their own process in coming to know something, I think, is connected with the *sophianic*, the divine feminine, and Sophia—Anthroposophy, as an approach to knowledge that isn't just the dead intellect.

Robert McDermott: It seems to me revealing that the figures who I think about in *Kindred Spirits*, in addition to Steiner, Merton, Teilhard, Jung, Aurobindo, all have a concept of a divine feminine. And they don't always know exactly how to integrate it. And I think many of their readers don't know how to integrate it, but they all have it. In this case of Steiner, though the manifestation of Sophia that he is focused on is called Anthroposophia, who he says is a Sophia being, who is devoted at this at this time, particularly now – not about 50 or 100 years ago, but at this time – is devoted to limiting, at least, or maybe discrediting, and maybe even doing away with, materialism. So this Anthroposophia is a being in service to human freedom and the spiritual experience which is prevented by a thoroughly materialistic worldview, because the materialistic worldview emphasizes a kind of a mechanism that has an automatic quality to it, over against innovation, imagination, experimentation, individuality and thinking and acting in relation to one's individual, absolutely individual, karmic history. All of that is part of the agenda of this being Anthroposophia. He's willing to say, «Just call it Sophia, if you want,» but it does have different manifestations. Isis is different from the Virgin Mary, who is different again from Anthroposophia.

He thinks that this recent version, has arisen and is working, because materialism is so powerful and is controlling human behavior in so many ways at such a deep level that people have to join with this being and another being like her, the Archangel Michael, the regent of the time who is fighting the tempters. And what are they doing? They're trying to beat the tempter, who he says is named *Ahriman*, who is in charge of mindless, materialistic, automatic thinking. In other words, controlled by technology, controlled by surface at the expense of depth and the control increasingly of our relationships, which are completely external and automatic. So there's no interior, unique, imaginative individual depth. Those are all getting flattened by various kinds of technologies. So it's not just relevant, it's desperately urgent because the evolution of humanity depends on a loving relationship with everything that exists. That, of course, includes the Earth. The Earth must be loved or it will be destroyed. So it's desperately urgent.

*A concluding quote from Robert's **Steiner and Kindred Spirits**:*

“Steiner researched great spiritual beings such as Krishna, Buddha, and Tibetan masters but he had scant knowledge of the cultures of Asians, Africans, South Americans, Native Americans, or African Americans. He had extensive contacts with people from Europe, Britain, the United States, and Canada, and rightly believed that the English-speaking world played an important role in advancing the evolution of human consciousness. However, his perspective and writings are not as planetary or universal as is need at present. His view of evolution of consciousness too closely

resembles the overly confident nineteenth-century European, and particularly German-Romantic, view of history—as a straight line from the Greeks through Christendom to the modern West. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, the great insights as well as the most inspiring biographies and movements have frequently been found outside of Europe among people of color—Gandhi of India, Martin Luther King, Jr., his Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet, and both Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.”