

INTRODUCTION

The Ecology of Environmentalism

Today's environmental movement is a vast ecosystem that includes farmers and teachers, monkey-wrenching activists and pragmatic politicians, pagans and Protestants, toddlers playing on the beach and elders planning a green burial. All are united by an awareness that their individual destinies are caught up with the health of natural systems at the local, global, and cosmic levels. Human beings have always evolved in symbiosis with wheat and cattle and intestinal bacteria; environmentalists are human beings who are becoming conscious of our interdependence. This consciousness is changing what we eat, how we treat plants and animals, where we live, and how we travel. Environmental consciousness is also changing our culture: the stories we tell, the ways we teach and learn, our outer rituals and innermost beliefs.¹

One context in which ecological evolution is taking place is within the spiritual communities and practical initiatives inspired by Rudolf Steiner, an early twentieth-century Austrian teacher, whose interests ranged from education to agriculture to "how to know higher worlds." Students of Steiner's spiritual science, also known as anthroposophy (from the Greek words for "human" and "wisdom"), are active in every corner of the environmental movement, from organic farming to environmental education to holistic scientific research. At Temple Wilton

Community Farm in New Hampshire, farmers Lincoln Geiger, Trauger Groh, Anthony Graham, and Andrew Kennedy use Steiner's "biodynamic" methods to nurture the health of their soil, plants, and animals. They draw on Steiner's social teachings to cultivate a community of neighbors who support the farm economically and share in its bounty. The system of "community supported agriculture" that they and other biodynamic farmers introduced in 1986 has spread to more than six thousand farms in the United States and thousands more worldwide.² One hundred miles north, the residents of Heartbeet Life-sharing, half of whom have developmental disabilities, use similar methods to nurture their farm and community. By partnering with cheesemakers, restaurateurs, and seed savers, they have sparked a good food revolution in rural Hardwick, Vermont.³

Across the Atlantic in Ireland and Norway, intentional communities that, like Heartbeet, are part of the Steiner-inspired Camphill movement, have led their nations' turn to sustainable technologies such as biomass and biogas energy production, natural wastewater treatment, and green building. The Water Research Institute in Maine, the Nature Institute in rural New York, the Mandaamin Institute in Wisconsin, and their many counterparts in Europe, continue the holistic scientific research begun by Steiner's students a century ago. Financing for such initiatives, and for many environmental enterprises not directly inspired by Steiner, flows from anthroposophical banks such as GLS in Germany and Triodos in the Netherlands, multibillion dollar institutions that pioneered the concept of "green banking." Persons who wish to learn more about these initiatives turn to such anthroposophical publications as *Lilipob* in the United States and *New View* in Great Britain. And those who wish to launch an environmental career can do so at Rudolf Steiner College in California, Threefold Educational Center in New York, Emerson College in England, an apprenticeship program on a biodynamic farm, or the Anthroposophical Society's spiritual center in Switzerland, known as the Goetheanum. This book will tell the stories of these and many other people and organizations.

This book will also explore the hidden symbioses between the anthroposophical movement and apparently unrelated expressions of environmental commitment. The organic gardens established by the San Francisco Zen Center inspired a host of restaurants devoted to local, vegetarian food, and nudged American diets toward a healthier balance. They are rightly seen as an expression of Buddhist ecology, yet the charismatic gardener who designed them called himself a “child of Rudolf Steiner.”⁴ Another model of Buddhist environmentalism is Bhutan’s “Gross National Happiness” project, one of whose architects, Ha Vinh Tho, encountered Steiner’s ideas at a Camphill community. Several environmental initiatives, such as Stonyfield Yogurt and *Orion* magazine, that began within the anthroposophical movement have claimed new identities and new niches within the ecology of environmentalism. Even Rachel Carson, widely recognized as the activist responsible for the expansion of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s, drew much of the source material for *Silent Spring* from a lawsuit filed by biodynamic farmers Marjorie Spock and Polly Richards.⁵

As these examples suggest, anthroposophy’s most visible contribution to environmentalism has been biodynamic agriculture, a spiritual and alchemical form of farming that prepared the way for the organic movement of the twentieth century. In arguing that anthroposophy is integral to the story of environmentalism, I am also arguing for the centrality of agriculture, and challenging the assumption that concern for wild nature is what defines environmentalism. To be sure, wilderness preservation has a rich history, as do movements combating industrial pollution and human overpopulation. But when we place exclusive emphasis on the ways humans have sinned against the environment, and on concomitant attempts to defend nature from people, we reinforce the notion that humans are intrinsically alienated from nature. Organic agriculture, by contrast, lifts up the possibility that humans can be fully at home in nature, contributing actively to ecosystems in which myriad organisms thrive together.

In recent decades, scholars, activists, and religious communities have embraced organic agriculture as part of a multifaceted environmental strategy that also includes wilderness restoration, work against environmental racism, and efforts to heal the planet's carbon-induced fever.⁶ Theologian Norman Wirzba and biblical scholar Ellen F. Davis have shown that the biblical and liturgical traditions of Judaism and Christianity presuppose an "agrarian" worldview whose wisdom remains relevant today.⁷ Around the world, sustainable farming practices are proliferating at Gandhian ashrams in India, Buddhist monasteries in Thailand, indigenous villages in Peru, and Israeli kibbutzim.⁸ Here in the United States, Native American reservations have renewed traditional cultivation practices, Buddhist and Roman Catholic monastic communities have revived the tradition of growing their own food, and Jewish and Christian congregations have planted gardens and hosted community supported farms. In seeking to connect ancient wisdom to contemporary concerns, some of these people have bypassed the first half of the twentieth century, tracing the roots of organics no further back than the spiritual poetry of Wendell Berry in the 1970s. In this study, I hope to introduce spiritual food activists to the deeper historical and spiritual sources of their commitments.

At the same time, I do not want to suggest that anthroposophy's contribution to environmentalism is limited to agriculture. Biodynamics is the center of the story, but its periphery is as wide as anthroposophy itself. Even manifestations of anthroposophy that seem unrelated to the environment have ecological significance. The best known of Steiner's initiatives is the international network of Waldorf Schools, which spread to four continents in the half century after Steiner's death, and today number a thousand schools and two thousand kindergartens.⁹ Seasonal celebrations and farm immersions are integral to the Waldorf curriculum, and many Waldorf graduates pursue environmental careers. The Camphill network of intentional communities, which includes Heartbeet and one hundred other villages and schools, seeks primarily to honor the human dignity of persons with and without developmental disabilities. It has created exemplary "ecovillages" char-

acterized by clean energy, natural wastewater treatment, organically inspired architecture, and biodynamic farming. More broadly, anthroposophy's celebration of the "wisdom of humanity" allows it to balance artistic and cultural commitments with reverence for nature. Long before environmentalists renewed devotion to Mother Earth, Steiner taught that our planet is a single organism with a spiritual personality, and his followers honor both "Anthropos" and "Gaia" in their meditations and actions.

This balancing act may be anthroposophy's greatest gift to the environmental movement. Anthroposophy is a holistic worldview that seeks to achieve harmony through creative work with the polarities of human and nature, matter and spirit, macrocosm and microcosm. It draws on alchemy, which built its understanding of the physical world on the polarities of hot and cold, wet and dry, that which dissolves and that which coagulates.¹⁰ An admirer of the alchemists, Steiner offered a balanced, threefold view of the human being, in which "soul" connects and mediates between "spirit" and "body." He also urged his students to find a middle path between the demons Ahriman, who seeks to bind us to the material world, and Lucifer, who tempts us to ungrounded spiritual flight.

Environmentalism, similarly, is a movement that seeks to restore harmony between humanity and nature by helping humans model our behavior on the rhythms of natural systems. Anna Bramwell, whose comprehensive history of *Ecology in the Twentieth Century* shapes my analysis, argues that this movement coalesced around 1920, through the confluence of "an anti-mechanistic, holistic approach to biology" and the view that certain resources are inherently limited and must be conserved. She further argues that ecology retained a German cultural cast, even as it took hold in Britain and the United States, and that it was "a new political category in its own right," aligning only temporarily and awkwardly with liberal, conservative, socialist, and fascist traditions. Anthroposophy shared these traits, and thus it is unsurprising that it has been a vital part of the story from the beginning.¹¹

Anthroposophy consistently confounds observers who seek to impose dichotomous categories onto environmentalism. Those who see environmentalism as one strand of the postsixties Left must contend with the fact that important leaders of the Nazi Party had great enthusiasm for Steiner's approach to agriculture, though rarely for Steiner himself. Conversely, those who see Nazi environmentalism as evidence of an antihumanist "ecofascism" must recognize that Steiner's spiritual science of humanity also led to advocacy on behalf of persons with disabilities, skepticism about eugenics and the need for population control, and the intriguing teaching that the shedding of Christ's blood on Golgotha dissolved national and ethnic distinctions while revitalizing the soil. Observers who try to place anthroposophy on one or the other side of various polarities—West versus East, modern science versus antimodern magic, the political left versus right—invariably leave out something important. Anthroposophy also confounds Bron Taylor's otherwise helpful distinction between "dark green" and "light green" forms of spirituality, with the former ascribing inherent value (or divinity) to nature and the latter advocating for environmental practices as a means to human betterment.¹² Steiner taught such an intimate link between humanity and the cosmos that his students typically engage in "dark green" behaviors (for example, honoring the inherent dignity of cows by refusing to remove their horns) for seemingly "light green" reasons.

Anthroposophy's creative work with polarities invites all environmentalists to broaden our vision and escape ideological monocultures. As I discovered over the course of dozens of interviews, students of Steiner have a remarkable capability to broaden the definition of "ecology" to include education, health, the creative use of money, and ritual celebrations. They are breaking down the imaginary distinctions that cause people to imagine they must choose between jobs and the environment, between sustainability and social justice, or between endangered species and the human family.

In sum, I hope to show one cannot fully understand the environmental movement today without taking into account anthroposophy's

multifaceted contributions. Yet I am not claiming a privileged place for anthroposophy within environmentalism. I personally am a Unitarian Universalist, and I could perhaps make a parallel case for Unitarian Universalist environmentalism, incorporating the nature philosophies of Emerson and Thoreau, the wilderness preservation initiatives of nineteenth-century ministers Edward Everett Hale and Thomas Starr King, the jurisprudence of William O. Douglas, and the denomination's recent decision to divest from fossil fuels. The story I will tell in these pages is just one of many that constitute the epic of environmentalism.

I write from a personal commitment to environmentalism, understood as a social movement that seeks to respect natural systems, and to ecology, understood as a way of knowing that stresses interconnection. At the same time, my stance is neutral with regard to the spiritual practices and worldview that are unique to anthroposophy. My personal experience does not equip me to render a judgment for or against the uniqueness of Rudolf Steiner's spiritual insights, or for or against the "truth" of his picture of the world. My judgment that environmentalism has been enriched by anthroposophy is pragmatic, focused on the effects of anthroposophically inspired initiatives. My approach is thus a blend of what anthropologists would call the "emic" and "etic" perspectives in scholarship: I have an emic, or insider's, approach to environmentalism and an etic, or outsider's, approach to anthroposophy. Both approaches have value, and other important dimensions of the phenomena I discuss here might be revealed by scholars working from other vantage points.

My research methods are a hybrid of textual, historical, and ethnographic approaches. I first encountered anthroposophy in the summer of 1995, when I purchased a weekly share in the Angelic Organics community supported farm. Four years later, as a fledgling professor in central Minnesota, I began spending a portion of each summer at Camphill Village Minnesota to conduct the research that led to my earlier book *Touching the World: Christian Communities Transforming Society*.¹³ Since that time I have visited anthroposophical initiatives in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, and

Switzerland, and have conducted formal interviews with hundreds of individuals associated with these initiatives. I have read widely but not exhaustively in the works of Steiner and his students. My picture of anthroposophy is broad but has been shaped by my personal location: I know the Camphill and biodynamic movements much better than Waldorf schooling or anthroposophical medicine; I understand anthroposophy in the Anglo-American world better than in German-speaking territories or the Global South; and I know more about spirituality and social movements than about agriculture or biology. Readers who finish this book with a desire to learn more would do well to seek out texts that highlight other contexts for anthroposophical striving.

An adequate epic of environmentalism must be thoroughly ecological, treating each story in relation to everything else. To say that anthroposophy has a unique place in the history of environmentalism is not to deny that other spiritual traditions have made essential contributions. Just as earthworms and cows and nitrogen-fixing bacteria and humans are all integral to the story of a farm, the story of environmentalism cannot be fully understood without anthroposophy. What's more, the stories of biodynamic farmers, community supported agriculture customers, and Waldorf school students are all integral to the story of anthroposophy, and are all worthy of careful study alongside the germinating ideas of Rudolf Steiner. In the pages that follow, I will begin with Steiner and move quickly to the ways anthroposophy has evolved in symbiosis with an energetic and global environmental movement. In reconstructing the story, I draw on my training in history and the academic study of religion, but also attend to the ways anthroposophy's holistic methods of inquiry can aid in the telling of its story. The result, I hope, will make its own contribution to the continual evolution of environmentalism.