

How Anthroposophical Groups Prepare for the Sixth Epoch – Community Above Us: Christ in Us

by Rudolf Steiner

Editor's note: In the last issue we began a new feature on “basic questions of anthroposophy.” We have had a number of help suggestions for future articles. One which we will follow up on perhaps in the next issue is the references in anthroposophy to “Christ” and “Christian”—which would appear to most people today to refer to some aspect of the institutional Christian religion(s). Not so! Suggestions in advance for clarifying this are most welcome!

This time we are sharing an excerpt from a lecture given by Rudolf Steiner to inaugurate the Düsseldorf Branch in Germany on June 15, 1915.¹ Why does the Anthroposophical Society have branches and groups of a long-term character, rather than focusing on the widest distribution of anthroposophical insights in public meetings? It is because, Steiner advises, we are practising a social way of being with each other which is not supported by today's individualist and materialist culture... This subject relates to the intended conversations at the annual meeting and conference this year (see p.3), and to the remarkable work of the Fellowship Community (see p.36). Your thoughts are welcome, to editor@anthroposophy.org or “Editor, 1923 Geddes Ave., Ann Arbor, MI 48104.”

[Working Together in Groups & Branches]²

We have gathered here today mainly to inaugurate the Branch founded by our friend, Prof. Craemer, a Branch wishing to dedicate its energies to the spiritual life of the present and future in the way that has been cultivated within our movement. On such an occasion it is always good to recall why it is that we come together in separate groups, and to ask: Why do we join together in working groups, and why do we cultivate within such groups the spiritual insights and practices to which we intend to dedicate ourselves?

If we want to answer these questions

rightly, we have to realize that we make a certain further distinction, even if only in thought, between the work we perform in a group like this and our other work in the world. Those who are unwilling to become more intimately acquainted with certain truths regarding the spiritual progress of humanity might ask: Couldn't you pursue anthroposophy without forming separate, closed groups, simply by finding lecturers within these groups and providing opportunities for people who may not know each other to come together? Couldn't you just invite the public, so as to impart to their souls the spiritual insights and practices of which you anthroposophists speak? Of course we could proceed in this way. But as long as it is at all possible to establish communities of people who know one another, who gather in these working groups with the highest degree of friendship and brotherly love,³ we want to continue doing so, in full consciousness of the attitude of soul that is integral to anthroposophy. [299/300]

⁴ It is not insignificant that among us there are people who want to cultivate the more intimate side of spiritual knowledge and make a solemn vow to work together in brotherly love and harmony. It's not just that our relationships and collaborations are affected by our ability to speak quite differently among ourselves, knowing that we are speaking to other souls who have consciously affiliated with us and bound themselves to us—not only is this so, but there's something else besides. Indeed, by forming separate branches we are intimately connected with the whole conception which we hold of our movement if we are to understand its inmost nature.

Our spiritual movement must imbue us with full awareness that it is significant not only for the existence that can be comprehended by the senses and for the existence that can be comprehended by the outwardly-oriented human understanding,

¹ A substantial revision by Frederick Amrine of the anonymous translation issued by the Anthroposophic Press in 1957.

² Rubrics in square brackets interpolated by F.A.

³ *freundschaftlichst und brüderlichst*

⁴ These bracketed numbers indicate the page breaks in the German original, GA/CW 159.

but also that through this movement our souls are seeking a real and genuine link with the spiritual worlds. Again and again, in full consciousness, we should say to ourselves: Through the cultivation of anthroposophy we translate our souls as it were into spheres which are peopled not only by earthly beings but also by the Beings of the Higher Hierarchies, the Beings of the invisible worlds. We must realize that our work is of significance for these invisible worlds, that we are actually within these worlds. In the spiritual world, the work performed by those who know one another within such groups is very different from the kind of work that is carried on outside such a group and dissipated within the wider world. The work carried out in brotherly harmony within our groups has significance for the spiritual world very different from that of other work we might undertake. [300/301] To understand this fully we must remind ourselves of important truths we have studied from many aspects during recent years.

Let us recall that Earth evolution in the Post-Atlantean age was sustained initially by the cultural community that we call the Ancient Indian Epoch. This was followed by the Ancient Persian Epoch—the designation is not entirely appropriate, but we need not go into that now. Then came the Egypto-Chaldean-Babylonian Epoch, then the Greco-Latin, then our Fifth Post-Atlantean Epoch. Each of these epochs has, on the one hand, the task of cultivating a particular form of culture and of spiritual life that it is meant to contribute primarily to the externally visible world. But each epoch must at the same time prepare, bear with in its womb as it were, what is to come in the ensuing period of culture.

Within the womb of the Ancient Indian Epoch, that of Ancient Persia was prepared; within the Ancient Persian Culture that of the Egypto-Chaldean Epoch was prepared in turn, and so on. Our Fifth Post-Atlantean Epoch must prepare the coming Sixth Epoch of culture. Our task in anthroposophy is not only to gain spiritual riches for our own souls—those things are granted us for the eternal life of our souls—but it is also our task to prepare what will constitute the content, the specific external work of the Sixth Cultural Epoch. Thus it

has been in each of the Post-Atlantean Epochs. The sites at which the salient form of external life belonging to the next epoch of culture was always prepared were those of the Mysteries. In these associations people gathered to engage in practices other than those cultivated in the outer world. [301/302]

The Ancient Indian Epoch was primarily concerned with the cultivation of the human etheric body, the Ancient Persian Epoch with the cultivation of the astral body, the Egypto-Chaldean with that of the sentient soul, the Greco-Latin with that of the intellectual or mind soul. Throughout its duration, our own epoch will develop and unfold what is called the consciousness or spiritual soul. But that which will give to external culture in the Sixth Epoch its content and character is something that must be prepared in advance. Oh, this Sixth Epoch! It will display many features, it will reveal many characteristics that are very different indeed from those of our age. Three characteristic traits can be emphasized above all, and we must realize that they should be carried in our hearts for the Sixth Epoch of culture, that it is our task to prepare them for this Sixth Epoch.

[Three New Characteristics]

Contemporary human society still lacks the quality which, in the sixth Epoch, will be a characteristic of those who are held to have reached the goal of that epoch, who haven't fallen short of it. Of course it's a quality that will not be found in the Sixth Epoch among those who have still remained at the stage of savages or barbarians. One of the most significant characteristics of Earth-dwellers who have attained the peak of culture in the Sixth Epoch will be a certain moral quality. Little of this quality is noticeable yet within modern humanity. Those living today must be very delicately organized for their souls to feel pain when they see others in the world whose circumstances are less happy than their own. It is true that more delicately organized personalities feel pain at the suffering that has been poured out over many people in the world—but this can be said only of the people whose constitutions are particularly sensitive. Those who stand at the peak of culture in the Sixth Epoch will not only feel pain such as is caused today by

the sight of poverty, suffering, and misery in the world, but such persons will experience the suffering of others as their own suffering. [302/303] If they see someone who is hungry they will feel hunger right down into their own physical bodies so acutely that the hunger of the others will be unbearable to them. The moral characteristic indicated here is that, unlike conditions in the Fifth Epoch, in the Sixth Epoch the well-being of the individual will depend entirely upon the well-being of the whole. Just as nowadays the well-being of a single human limb depends upon the health of the whole body, and when the whole body is not healthy the single limb does not feel up to doing its work, so in the Sixth Epoch a common consciousness will lay hold of the most highly evolved individuals and, to a far higher degree than a limb feels the health of the whole body, the individual will feel the suffering, the need, the poverty, or the wealth of the whole. This pre-eminently moral trait is the first of those that will characterize human civilization in the Sixth Epoch.

A second fundamental characteristic will be that everything we call articles of belief will depend to a far, far higher degree than is the case today upon the single individualities. Anthroposophy expresses this by saying that in every sphere of religion in the Sixth Epoch, complete freedom of thought and a yearning for freedom of thought will become so strong that religious convictions will rest wholly within the power of each individuality. Collective beliefs that exist in so many forms today among the various communities will no longer influence those who constitute the civilized portion of humanity in the Sixth Epoch of culture. Everyone will feel that complete freedom of thought in the domain of religion is a fundamental human right. [303/304]

The third characteristic of the Sixth Epoch will be that only those who know the spirit will be considered to have real knowledge, only those who know that the spiritual pervades the world and that human souls must unite with the spiritual. What is called science today with its materialistic cast will no longer be considered science at all in the Sixth Post-Atlantean Epoch. It will be seen as antiquated superstition, able

to pass muster only among those who have remained behind at the stage of the now-superseded Fifth Post-Atlantean Epoch. Today we regard it as superstition when, let us say, an aboriginal holds the view that no limb ought to be separated from his body at death, because this would make it impossible for him to enter the spiritual world as a whole man. Such beliefs still connect the idea of immortality with pure materialism, with the belief that an impress of the entire bodily form must pass into the spiritual world. This way of thinking remains materialistic while believing in immortality. Having learned through anthroposophy that the spiritual must be distinguished from the body and that only the spiritual passes into the supersensible world, we regard such materialistic beliefs in immortality as superstitions. Similarly, in the Sixth Epoch all materialistic beliefs, even within science, will be regarded as antiquated superstition. And as a matter of course humanity will accept as science only such forms of knowledge as are based upon the spiritual, upon pneumatology.⁵

[The Purpose of Anthroposophy]

The whole purpose of anthroposophy is to prepare in this sense for the Sixth Epoch of culture. We try to cultivate anthroposophy in order to overcome materialism, to prepare the kind of science that must exist in that epoch. We found communities within which there must be no dogmatic beliefs or any tendency to accept teaching simply because it emanates from one person or another. [304/305] We found communities within which everything, without exception, must be built upon the souls' free assent to the teachings. That is how we are preparing what anthroposophy calls freedom of thought. And by coming together as intentional communities for the purpose of cultivating anthroposophy in brotherly love, we are preparing the culture, the civilization of the Sixth Post-Atlantean Epoch.

But we must look even more deeply into the course of human evolution if we are to understand fully the real tasks of our fraternal groups and branches. During the

First Post-Atlantean Epoch, in communities which in those days were connected with the Mysteries, our ancestors also cultivated what subsequently prevailed in the Second Epoch. Such communities during the First, Ancient Indian Epoch were connected with the cultivation of the astral body, which was to become the main task of the Second Epoch. It would lead much too far afield today if we tried to describe what, in contrast to the external culture of the First, was developed in these ancient Indian communities in order to prepare for the Second, Ancient Persian Epoch. But this may be said: when those who lived during the Ancient Indian Epoch came together in order to prepare what was necessary for the Second Epoch, they felt: We have not yet attained, nor do we have within us, what we'll have when our souls are incarnated in the next Epoch. It still hovers above us. And in truth it was so. In the First Epoch of culture, that which was to descend from the heavens to the Earth in the Second Epoch still hovered over the souls of our ancestors. The work achieved on Earth by intimate communities of people connected with the Mysteries was of such a nature that forces flowed upwards to the Spirits of the Higher Hierarchies, enabling them to nourish and cultivate what was to stream down into the souls of human beings as substance and content of the astral body in the Second, Ancient Persian Epoch. The forces that descended into the souls incarnated in the bodies of Ancient Persian civilizations at a later stage of maturity were like little children in the First Epoch. [305/306] Forces streaming upwards from the work of human beings below in preparation for the next epoch were received and nurtured by the spiritual world above. These forces were then used to cultivate the new forces that were to flow down again later. And so it must be in every later epoch of culture.

[The Spirit Self in Its Infancy]

In our epoch we must become aware that the faculty our ordinary civilization and culture calls forth within us must be the consciousness soul. It must be what has taken hold of humanity beginning with the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries in the form of science and materialistic consciousness of the external world. This will become more and more widespread, until by the end of the Fifth Epoch it will have become fully evolved.

But it is the spirit self that must be grasped by the Sixth Epoch. It will have to be called forth within human souls, just as now the consciousness soul is being developed. The nature of spirit self is that it must presuppose the existence in human souls of the three characteristics I've described. In the idiom of anthroposophy: social life in which brotherliness prevails, freedom of thought, and pneumatology. These three characteristics are essential in the community of human beings within which the spirit self is to develop as the consciousness soul develops in the souls of the Fifth Epoch. Thus we can imagine that by uniting in fraternal working groups, something hovers invisibly over our work, something that is like the child of the forces of the spirit self—the spirit self that is nurtured by the Beings of the Higher Hierarchies in order that it may stream down into our souls when they are again on Earth in the Sixth Epoch of civilization. In our groups we perform work that streams upwards towards those forces that are being prepared for the spirit self...

⁵ From the Greek *pneuma*, meaning "spirit." Hence "pneumatology" (which exists as a technical term within theology) means "the study of the spirit."



"Philadelphia," by Larry Young