

Manuscript title: From Anthroposophy to non-confessional preparation for spirituality?
Could common schools learn from spiritual education in Steiner schools?

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Abstract

It has been suggested common schools might have something to learn from spiritual education in Steiner schools. This arguably assumes practice in Steiner schools to be compatible with the aims of spiritual education in common schools. I question this by considering whether the former is confessional, as the latter should not be. I begin by highlighting how my concern about the potentially confessional nature of Steiner spiritual education arose. I argue for a nuanced understanding of confessional education, which distinguishes between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ confessional education, as well as between confessional education as intentional and as defined by outcome. I then argue that spiritual education in common schools should prepare pupils for spirituality, without being confessional. I consider whether Steiner schools are confessional by drawing upon findings from research conducted at six Steiner schools. I conclude that spiritual education in Steiner schools is weakly confessional in an intentional sense. I further conclude that practices which might contribute to preparation for spirituality and which can be implemented in a non-confessional manner, are worthy of consideration for transfer to common schools. Common schools committed to preparation for spirituality as an educational aim could learn from spiritual education in Steiner schools.

Keywords

Steiner schools, spiritual education, confessional education, religious education

Introduction

It has been suggested common schools¹ might have something to learn from spiritual education in Steiner schools (Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005). This suggestion arguably assumes spiritual education in Steiner schools is compatible with the aims of spiritual education in common schools. I question this assumption by considering whether spiritual education in Steiner schools is confessional - a relevant consideration given that education in common schools should not be. (Asserting this position is, of course, not the same as asserting there is no confessional practice in common schools.) If spiritual education practices in Steiner schools are *necessarily* confessional, that is to say if they could only be practised in a confessional way, common schools can rule out learning from them in so far as such learning is understood in terms of transferring practice. To be sure, this does not rule out learning from Steiner schools *per se*. Learning from distinct contexts is not confined to transferring practice. Burbules notes:

‘...theorists of education have a special duty ... to keep multiple and even radically unconventional models of teaching clearly in front of the educational audience ... to keep our thinking fresh and dynamic about what constitutes good teaching.’
(Burbules 2004, 7)

For those concerned with spiritual education in common schools there is value in learning about spiritual education in Steiner schools, even if it were incompatible with common school aims.

My concern that Steiner spiritual education might be confessional arose when I learnt about the Anthroposophical basis of Steiner education and in my review of the literature. My concern grew as I embarked upon my textual analysis of Steiner’s work, and as I conducted initial visits to Steiner schools.

I begin with a brief account of Steiner schools and of what caused my concern about the potentially confessional nature of spiritual education in these schools. I then attempt to establish a case for a nuanced understanding of confessional education, which distinguishes between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ confessional education, as well as between intentional confessional education and that understood according to outcome. The consideration of

¹ ‘Common school’ refers to a school for everybody. Of particular relevance to my argument is the ideal that the common school welcomes all pupils and treats them equitably regardless of religious identity, or lack thereof.

whether spiritual education practices in Steiner schools are compatible with the aims of spiritual education in common schools necessitates a clear account of the latter. In presenting such an account, I argue that spiritual education in common schools should prepare pupils for (as opposed to initiate them into) spirituality.

I consider whether Steiner spiritual education is confessional by drawing upon research conducted at six Steiner schools in England. I conclude that spiritual education in Steiner schools is weakly confessional in an intentional sense - although teachers do not promote a particular doctrine to pupils, many encourage pupils to adopt religious or quasi-religious beliefs in preference to atheism. Still, a number of practices considered could be implemented in a manner that might contribute to non-confessional preparation for spirituality.

What are Steiner schools?

The type of school with which I am concerned is variously known as ‘Steiner’, ‘Waldorf’, or ‘Steiner Waldorf’. Rudolf ‘Steiner’ (1861-1925) was the founder of Steiner Education. ‘Waldorf’ refers to the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory, the first school of this kind having been opened in association with the factory.

The basis of Steiner’s educational philosophy is in Anthroposophy, a worldview which can be interpreted as combining tenets from the mainstream traditions of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as from the occult tradition of clairvoyance. This is an oversimplification, but a detailed account of Anthroposophy is unnecessary here. Readers wishing to pursue such an account might begin with Steiner’s *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man* (2011[1922]). For now, it suffices to say that Anthroposophy incorporates a particular understanding of the nature of humankind and, relatedly, of ‘what constitutes learning, achievement and educational development’ (Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005, 4). These understandings inform Steiner’s educational philosophy. Being sympathetic to this philosophy and concerned with providing an education for the children of his workers at the Waldorf Astoria factory in Germany, Emil Molt opened the Waldorf School, with Steiner as pedagogical director. The school opened in 1919.

The first Steiner school in England opened in 1925. Nielsen describes Steiner Education as the ‘fastest growing independent school system in the world today’ (2004, 19). According to

the website of the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk), there are over 1,200 Steiner schools in a total of 60 countries, including 35 in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The majority of schools are privately funded, though in some countries they are funded by the state (Woods, O'Neill and Woods 1997). According to the Department for Education website (www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development), there are four state-funded Steiner schools in England.

What is confessional education, and why be concerned about spiritual education in Steiner schools?

Perhaps the obvious question to ask when considering if spiritual education in Steiner schools is confessional is: 'is this spiritual education intended to nurture Anthroposophical belief in pupils?'. This question is underpinned by an understanding of confessional education as delivered with the intention of imparting a particular doctrine. As Woods, Ashley and Woods found, in their survey of Steiner schools in England, where the nature of spiritual education in Steiner schools is concerned this understanding of confessional education would not serve consideration well:

'The research data ... tend to confirm that Steiner schools are not faith schools in the sense of seeking to nurture pupils into becoming adherents of Anthroposophy... Steiner schools are not, therefore, comparable with faith schools in the maintained sector. However, nor are they exactly the same as maintained non-faith (i.e. non-church) schools. The research findings from this study confirm that Steiner schools tend to have a character that draws from a particular relationship with and understanding of the religious tradition of humankind.'

(Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005, 97)

I propose a more nuanced understanding, which distinguishes between strong and weak confessional education. On this understanding, *strong* confessional education is delivered in order to nurture belief in a specific doctrine, whereas *weak* confessional education is intended to nurture non-specific religious or quasi-religious belief in preference to atheism. A further distinction, between confessional education understood according to intention and that understood according to outcome, is helpful. My primary understanding of confessional education is that it is intentional and, unless otherwise indicated, where I refer to confessional

education I refer to it in this sense. In such cases teachers intend either to impart a particular doctrine (strong confessional education), or to nurture religious/quasi-religious belief in 'something' (weak confessional education). Where indicated, I refer to confessional education according to outcome. In these cases, although there is no deliberate intention on behalf of teachers to nurture belief, pupils experience practice as confessional.

The extent to which spiritual education is confessional will, in part, be evidenced in participants' understandings, experiences and practices. 'Successful' strong confessional education would be evidenced in pupils' adoption of Anthroposophical beliefs. In the case of this kind of evidence, it should be noted, the term 'Anthroposophy' is seldom used with pupils. Teachers more commonly refer to Christianity and other doctrines associated with Anthroposophy, such as reincarnation or the existence of angels. Pupils' adoption of beliefs such as these would evidence strong confessional education in the same way as their conscious adoption of Anthroposophy would.

At the same time as suggesting the need for a nuanced understanding of confessional education, Woods, Ashley and Woods' (2005) raise the question of whether such education is practised in Steiner schools. The conclusion that the schools 'tend to have a character that draws from a particular relationship with and understanding of the religious tradition of humankind' (Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005, 97), is partially based upon findings relating to religious education, or 'Religion', lessons. Teachers emphasised that:

'...the primary aim of these lessons is to develop in pupils a feeling for the religious dimension of life, for the working of the divine in nature and for good and evil and right and wrong. The focus is on developing an experiential relationship and awakening feelings to the spiritual, and encouraging openness to a spiritual interpretation of the world...'
(Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005, 59)

The researchers describe the reference to the 'soul development of children' on a school website as exemplifying the approach taken in Religion (Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005, 59). My concern about confessional education, initially sparked by accounts such as this, heightened on my first visits to schools, when I found that schools do not usually allow visitors into Religion lessons. On the one hand, the explanation that Religion is considered a private space between teacher and pupils seemed reasonable. On the other, such exclusion exists alongside claims from groups such as People for Legal and Nonsectarian Schools that

we should be concerned about Steiner education, which they describe as ‘an activity of Anthroposophy, a cult-like religious sect following the occult teachings of Rudolf Steiner’ (<http://www.waldorfcritics.org/concerns.html>). Elsewhere in the empirical literature, concerns are raised about the Anthroposophical basis of the curriculum (Jelinek and Sun 2003). Early in my examination of spiritual education in Steiner schools, it became clear the potentially confessional nature of this education should not be ignored.

A few words on rejecting confessional education for the common school - a rejection so oft asserted in the literature (for example, Astley 2003 and Carr 2003), I *could* attend to it at length. It is enough to remember the common school is a school for everybody that should, therefore, take a non-partisan stance on matters of religion and spirituality. To be sure, given that ‘no religious proposition is known to be true’ (Hand 2003a, 98), teaching for belief in a religious proposition (including an atheist or agnostic proposition) is counter to the ideal of the common school. Having asserted what spiritual education in common schools should not attempt, here follows an account of a spiritual education appropriate for such schools.

Spiritual education for the common school

Hand identifies a possible meaning of ‘spiritual education’ as ‘education in a spiritual activity’:

‘The activities we most naturally think of as spiritual ... are those devotional and meditative activities by which human beings seek fellowship, communion or personal relationship with the divine. We think of the various ways in which the believer reaches out to her god, or brings herself into his presence, or focuses her attention upon him. We think, that is to say, of those activities which constitute the arena of spirituality. The possible sense of ‘spiritual education’ that strikes us with most force in this category is education in the activities of prayer, worship and religious contemplation.’
(Hand 2003b, 398)

For Haldane, at least within the context of Christianity, this is an obvious meaning of ‘spiritual’ and thus ‘the spiritual life is that given to the search after an inner awareness of God, a condition pursued through prayer and meditation (2003, 12). Hand (2003b) explains, what makes activities such as prayer and meditation spiritual is that they are believed to be a way of connecting with the divine, or transcendent. Although Hand does not define the transcendent or divine in explicit terms, he uses the terms synonymously. This chimes with

Carr's use. Carr clarifies that the term 'transcendent' need not be confined to the concept of 'god' or a higher being but can encompass a wider range of concepts of an other-worldly ultimate reality: 'whereas for Christians the main object of spiritual awareness is ... God, for Buddhists the goal is ... to achieve Enlightenment' (2003, 214). Cottingham also refers to the transcendent, or 'supernatural', realms of Christian and Buddhist traditions and tells us that, regardless of the identity of the transcendent object in question, 'spirituality is ... a metaphysically freighted notion' (2003, 47). It is in this sense that I use the terms transcendent and divine within my understanding of spirituality.

Hand's 'education in a spiritual activity' constitutes a relational understanding of spirituality – it concerns relationship with the divine. This bears similarity with other relational understandings of spirituality, notably that of Hay (2007), which could be described as emphasising spiritual *experience* over spiritual activity. This points to the belief that people can connect with the transcendent in a wider range of ways than engagement in spiritual activity. Indeed some believers would describe their experiences of connectivity as being unexpected rather than as resulting from intentional engagement in, say, prayer or meditation. It fits with believers' reported experiences to expand Hand's category of 'education in a spiritual activity' to incorporate any kind of experience or activity which is believed to bring people into relationship with the transcendent.

Through spiritual education defined as 'education in a spiritual activity' pupils can 'learn what [spiritual] activities are all about, how they are conducted and why they are important to religious believers' (Hand 2003b, 399). Learning *about* spiritual activities concerns relevant subject content and methods in religious education lessons, thus this aim of spiritual education is catered for in the common school curriculum.

Hand also asserts that pupils can 'come to an empathetic understanding of religious feelings that give rise to spontaneous worship, and of the quieter sense of holiness to which ritual worship gives rise' (2003b, 399). This points to the second aim of spiritual education I want to propose, namely, *preparing pupils for spirituality*. Preparation for spirituality *could* be conducted as initiation into spirituality. In common schools this will not do. Where common schools are concerned, this aim must be construed as preparing pupils for *as distinct from initiating them into* spirituality.

My argument that pupils should be prepared for spirituality draws upon Hand's (2004) 'possibility-of-truth' case for religious education. Hand argues that 'pupils should be given

opportunities to consider religious propositions, and be equipped to make informed, rational judgments on their truth or falsity, on the grounds that some of those propositions *may in fact be true*' (2004, 161). I argue that pupils should be given opportunities to learn about spiritual activities and experiences, and be equipped to engage in them should they wish to do so, on the grounds that some of those activities and experiences *may in fact be ways of connecting with the divine, or transcendent*.

Given the importance of the distinction between preparation for and initiation into spirituality, the question arises as to how common schools can equip pupils for engagement in spiritual activities without expecting them to engage in said activities. The answer can be found by drawing upon Scheindlin's distinction between spirituality and inner life:

'I do not mean to equate the inner life with spirituality, but only to say that a rich inner life is a prerequisite for spirituality. Spirituality entails reaching from inside to something transcendent. The inner life, therefore, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for spirituality.'
(Scheindlin 1999, 193)

Scheindlin's understanding of spirituality is relational and coheres with the definition of spiritual education developed from Hand (2003b). Just as spiritual education is a subspecies of relational education, we might describe spiritual activity as a subspecies of inner activity – spiritual activities being those that we engage in in order to make a connection from within ourselves to the transcendent beyond. In contrast, non-religious meditation, for example, constitutes a non-spiritual inner activity.

It is by enabling pupils to develop 'rich inner lives' that common schools can prepare them for spirituality. James' observation that there 'seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw' lends support to the advocacy of this suggestion:

'...the moment we are willing to treat the term 'religious sentiment' as a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation, we see that it probably contains nothing whatever of a psychologically specific nature. There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only ... ordinary fear ... in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; ... and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons.'
(James 1982 [1902], 27-8)

Common schools can avoid confessional education at the same time as cultivating states which prepare pupils for spirituality by enabling pupils to experience those states in relation to (imaginary or real) non-religious objects. It is with the understanding of spiritual education outlined in this section that I set out to consider whether common schools can learn from Steiner schools. The emphasis placed upon the ‘pedagogy of imagination’ (Nielsen 2004) in Steiner schools indicates that common schools may well have something to learn from them in relation to inner life development.

Methodology

Two concerns underpinned my research. I was concerned that, despite their increasing popularity, we know little about Steiner schools. And I was concerned about potential deficiencies in spiritual education in common schools. In the literature, I found reason to think there might be good practice in Steiner schools in the area of spiritual education (for example, Nielsen 2004), and that common schools might be able to learn from this practice (Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005). As articulated above, I also found reason to think practice in Steiner schools might constitute confessional education, hence the focus of the current discussion. In order to increase knowledge about Steiner schools and consider the extent to which the kind of spiritual education practised in Steiner schools might be well-suited to common schools, I sought to answer:

1. How is spiritual education understood and practised in Steiner schools?
2. Are spiritual education practices in Steiner schools compatible with the aims of spiritual education in common schools?

I adopted an ethnographic approach which centred on my attempted immersion in one Steiner school (School A), supported by qualitative data collection in five other Steiner schools (Schools B – F). Understandings of ethnography differ, therefore, it is worthwhile explaining how I understand ethnography and why I adopted this approach. Following Tucker, I have ‘a liberal interpretation of the definition of ethnography’ (2007, 119), described by Hammersley

and Atkinson as participating 'in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are a focus of the research' (1995, 1). For Walter, the ethnographer 'looks for patterns of daily living (culture), what people do, say and use, in order to find out what a stranger would have to know in order to be able to take part in the group or society in a meaningful way' (2007, 93). As such, an ethnographic account should describe what one would need to know, and what it might be like, to participate in the setting in question. Why was this level of participation necessary for, and why were these kinds of questions relevant to, my study?

Consider the lesson where spiritual education is most likely to feature, the Religion lesson. It would not have been enough, nor would it have been possible, to simply visit schools to observe these lessons. Steiner schools are welcoming and open to visitors but, as mentioned earlier, Religion is often the exception. Religion is considered a private space between the Religion teacher and her pupils, so visitors rarely gain access.

If I was going to gain more than minimal access to Religion lessons, I was going to need to build trusting relationships with the teachers involved. I was going to need to spend time with them and this was one of the first indicators of the suitability of ethnography. But even if access to Religion lessons was unproblematic, merely visiting a school or schools to observe lessons would have been insufficient for answering my research questions.

My first question asks how spiritual education is understood and practised in Steiner schools. On entering the field I knew very little about this, apart from: the assertion in the literature that Steiner considers spiritual education to permeate the whole educational experience (for example, Nielsen 2004); that teachers think it is important; that it is believed to relate to inner life development; and that Ofsted are reportedly impressed by spiritual education in Steiner schools (Woods, Ashley and Woods 2005). In advance of entering the field, I was beginning to develop an understanding of Steiner's account of spiritual education through my textual analysis of his work. I did not yet know how influential this would be on current understandings and practices. My minimal knowledge steered me towards ethnography for two reasons. This approach provided me with the greatest opportunity to learn about the whole educational experience. And, there was little to base specific questions or observation foci on. As Whyte found, an advantage of ethnography is that salient questions can arise during the study:

‘As I sat and listened I learned the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis... When I had established my position on the street corner the data came to me without very active efforts on my part.’
(Whyte 1943, 303)

Even if Whyte had known what questions to ask in advance of entering the field, it is unlikely he would have found the answers through making appointments to interview those participating in ‘street corner society’:

‘Life in Cornerville did not proceed on the basis of formal appointments. To meet people, to get to know them, to fit into their activities, required spending time with them – a lot of time day after day.’
(Whyte 1996, 22)

The position Whyte achieved was vital in terms of learning about his participants. I had to proceed likewise if I was to learn much beyond what I had gleaned from the literature about understandings and practices in Steiner schools.

For one school year I volunteered as a classroom assistant for two days a week at School A. I supported the full range of classes, from Class One (ages six to seven) to Class Eight (ages 13 to 14), spending the majority of my time supporting the older group of pupils. I attended a range of lessons, including Religion, as well as whole school events and teachers’ meetings. I interviewed teachers, pupils and former pupils at School A. I conducted between one and seven visits at each of Schools B – F, amounting to 18 visits in total. Most visits were a little under a school day in length. At these schools I interviewed teachers and pupils, observed a range of lessons and events with a variety of year groups, attended parents’ talks and tours, accompanied staff on break duty, participated in staff training sessions, attended staff meetings, and ‘hung around’ in staffrooms and receptions.

The empirical aspects of my study were approved by the Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee. I mention a few of the ethical issues here, and hope I briefly demonstrate that we can prepare for many but not all of the ethical issues we face in the field. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. I guaranteed anonymity in so far as was possible but it was important to acknowledge I did not have full control over this. For example, in a school with a largely female staff, I was able to give all participants women’s names in my efforts to

preserve the anonymity of male staff. However, I had to acknowledge that some participants might be recognisable by fellow participants in so far as they might be known for a particular view or turn-of-phrase cited in my study. I omitted the latter, where I was aware of it.

An unexpected ethical issue arose once I began to conduct interviews with pupils. Some teachers asked me what the pupils had said in their interviews. The interviews were confidential and so discussing them was not an option. At the same time, I did not want to hinder the rapport I was developing with staff by refusing to tell them about pupils' responses. Initially, I kept my responses to such enquiries as vague as possible but, as the questions continued, it soon became clear this was not sustainable. So, I explained that I had promised pupils confidentiality and therefore did not 'really feel that I should talk about it'. I said that I hoped they understood and the teachers seemed satisfied with this. It may, of course, have had a positive impact upon what these teachers were willing to share with me – I had provided confirmation of the confidential nature of the interviews.

Following the completion of my data analysis, I sent each of the participant schools a summary of my findings, as promised.

Findings and discussion

The relationship between spiritual education and Anthroposophy

The teachers I spoke to understand Steiner Education as being based upon Anthroposophy, and many describe themselves as 'working out of Anthroposophy'. To 'work out' of Anthroposophy is to understand the nature of human beings according to Anthroposophy. That is, for example, to understand each human as an essentially eternal spiritual being with a particular destiny. These are controversial beliefs in that they are not known to be true. To teach them as true would be to engage in strong confessional education. The consensus among teachers I spoke to is that they do not engage in such education:

'There's no doctrinal element, there's no catechism... [T]he pedagogical aim is to nurture the students in reverence ... to appeal to that in human beings which is capable of religiosity, of religious feeling, in their various ways.'
(Wayne², Religion Teacher, School E)

² [Participants are given pseudonyms.](#)

‘Everyone is connected in their own way. I’m not hung up on them being able to express it in a particular way.’
(Brenda, Teacher, School A)

Wayne identifies what the majority of the teachers present as the primary aim of spiritual education – to nurture religious feeling. As with other teachers, he rejects the teaching of doctrine. Rather, he focuses on there being a variety of ways in which students can be enabled to experience religious feeling, thus emphasising the primacy of feeling over belief. Similarly, Brenda emphasises connection over the expression of particular beliefs. It seems clear teachers do not engage in strong confessional education. However, nurturing religious feeling is suggestive of weak confessional education – of pupils being nurtured to feel religiosity ‘in their own way’ rather than in ‘a particular way’.

Some teachers express what they consider to be the non-confessional nature of spiritual education as integral to a spiritual education based on Anthroposophy:

‘I asked if many pupils went on to become Anthroposophists. Grace [Religion Teacher] replied: “No and we would not want that. We have only done our job if they go on to make a free decision about religion”.’
(Fieldnotes, School D)

‘Jeremy: When they finish Steiner Education, they will be able to choose what religious path they follow.
Me: Does it matter what religion that is?
Jeremy: It matters a lot.
Me: I mean are the school concerned what religion they choose?
Jeremy: It’s none of our business. Anyway the choice has been made before they come to us. Everybody has a path, the uncertain thing is how much of it will be achieved in one lifetime. The task of Steiner Education is to prepare them for that path.’
(Jeremy, Religion Teacher, School B)

For Grace, it is not simply that there is no attempt to turn pupils into Anthroposophists but that to do so would be judged a failure according to Anthroposophy. Jeremy agrees and adds the frame of destiny to the free decision pupils are to make. For spiritual education to be strongly confessional it would, arguably, have to contradict the tenet of Anthroposophy that each individual has their own destiny. This is supported in that during my time in the field I never experienced anyone trying to promote Anthroposophy to me. However, I did observe that at least some teachers identify and hold beliefs which would usually be identified as

controversial as non-controversially true. An example of such a belief is hinted at by Brenda in her comment above, where she seems to express the belief that ‘all roads lead to God’, that different religions have different ways of expressing the same truth. This points to the possibility of teachers eschewing intentional confessional education at the same time as nurturing belief, that is, as unwittingly engaging in confessional education. Still, in regard to the explicit promotion of Anthroposophy, the message from teachers is consistent and clear:

‘There is no attempt to turn [pupils] into Anthroposophists.’
(Wayne, Religion Teacher, School E Fieldnotes)

Despite this consensus, some teachers also express awareness that some Anthroposophists do want to promote Anthroposophy. Such individuals are seen as people to avoid, suggesting this is not a quality that would be welcomed in colleagues. Some teachers also expressed awareness that their beliefs could influence their teaching:

‘You don’t want to teach Anthroposophy but the fact you’ve been studying it for 20 years may have an effect on the children.’
(Natalie, Religion Teacher, School A)

That teachers are so open about there being evangelical Anthroposophists, along with their concern about how their own beliefs may impact upon their practice, coheres with what they have to say about the non-confessional nature of spiritual education, at least where intention is concerned. This account was confirmed by pupils when asked if they felt teachers would like them to adopt particular beliefs:

‘Me: Did you ever think that any of the teachers were trying to encourage you to believe any religious things in particular?
Zac: Definitely not.’
(Zac, Former Pupil, School A)

‘David: It’s not really a religious school, like Church schools. They probably don’t mind, like you could have all sorts of different religions throughout the school.
Me: Do you think that they would prefer pupils to be religious rather than non-religious?
David: I don’t think it matters.’
(David, Class Eight³ Pupil, School A)

³ This is equivalent in terms of the ages of pupils to Year Nine in a mainstream school in England.

‘Me: Do you ever feel that your teachers would like you to believe certain things?
Patricia: I’m not sure. Most probably they lead us to believe that we can believe in what we want to, but that it’s better to have a God who will guide us.
Me: Better to be a believer than a non-believer?
Patricia: Yeah.
Me: Do you know why you think that?
Patricia: It’s just the whole Steiner curriculum. They lead you to believe in something and show you there’s stuff you can believe in, that you don’t have to not believe in anything.’
(Patricia, Class Seven Pupil, School A)

Pupils do not report feeling under pressure to adopt particular beliefs when asked about this in general terms. However, there is some disagreement regarding whether or not religious belief is encouraged in preference to atheism. Though most pupils echo David’s response, Patricia is not alone in feeling that whilst pupils are not taught what to believe they are steered towards religious belief over atheism. This suggests that spiritual education in Steiner schools is confessional in the weak sense, and coheres with the view expressed by Grace who emphasises that pupils should ‘make a free decision about religion’ and also states:

‘It is important for people to have faith in something so they have something higher to call upon, especially in times of distress.’
(Grace, Religion Teacher, School D)

The clear and consistent message from teachers is that spiritual education is not intended to be confessional in terms of promoting Anthroposophical doctrine. Responses from pupils confirm this, suggesting that spiritual education is not confessional in the strong sense. At the same time it seems religious belief is encouraged, suggesting weak confessional education. I now consider whether particular practices are confessional.

Acts of confession?

Two practices common in the schools studied are understood by at least some participants to symbolise religious ideas or commitments, namely, crossing arms over chests and lighting candles. I consider whether confessional intentions underpin these practices.

In the schools visited teachers and pupils formally greet each other at the beginning of lessons and other events. Most lessons and events also begin with pupils and teachers reciting a verse⁴ together. Most of the greetings and verses I observed were conducted with teachers and pupils standing and crossing their arms over their chests, with each hand resting on the opposing shoulder. Responses from some pupils suggest they consider this practice to be strongly confessional; to be for the purpose of nurturing belief in a particular doctrine:

‘It has religious connotations so I won’t do it... [I]t’s crossing your arms like a cross, like Jesus ... I reckon it has got something to do with religion.’
(Kyle, Class Eight Pupil, School A)

It is possible Kyle misunderstands the intention underpinning the practice. However, David suggests Kyle’s interpretation has confirmation from a teacher:

‘David: [It means to] stand in reverence to God... We had a discussion about it one time in class, because Kyle didn’t want to do it because he’s an atheist and we are standing in reverence to God. And [the teacher] was like: ‘Just do it please’.
Me: Why do you think the teacher wanted to make him do it even though he doesn’t believe in God?
David: ‘Cos everyone was doing it.’
(David, Class Eight Pupil, School A)

This insistence (which I observed on a number of occasions) that pupils cross their arms over their chests can be interpreted as strongly confessional where the practice is understood in religious terms. However, despite David understanding the practice to symbolise standing in reverence to God, he seems to think that Kyle being made to do it had more to do with the communal nature of the act. In addition, though most of the teachers describe the practice as ‘standing in reverence’, the stated object of reverence varies – it could be self, others, nature or God. Often the object is not specified, which lends confirmation to the notion that what is nurtured is a particular kind of feeling. This coheres with the finding that pupils are steered towards ‘faith in something’ over atheism, which also suggests that the feelings attached to faith are considered to trump the object of faith. This raises the question of whether or not nurturing religious feeling is confessional. It might be considered strongly confessional were religious feeling nurtured in relation to a particular object. The most that might be said is that

⁴ [A discussion about the nature of verses recited features in the following section.](#)

the experience of such feeling might result in pupils seeking to replicate that feeling, and potentially doing so through adopting religious or quasi-religious beliefs, in which case nurturing religious feeling might be considered weakly confessional. A possible response to this might be that by experiencing such feeling in school, pupils become aware of this as an option for their lives. This response would cohere with the teachers' commitment to pupils making a free choice in relation to religion, and to pupils' understanding that teachers show them 'there's stuff you can believe in, that you don't have to not believe in anything' (Patricia, Class Seven Pupil, School A). This lends support to the possibility of crossing arms over chests being weakly confessional in an intentional sense. However, Kyle interprets the act as religious because of associations he makes with the symbol of the cross. At least for him, this act is strongly confessional according to outcome.

A lit candle usually accompanies verse recitation. Some of the teachers explain the practice of lighting candles thus:

'The light represents the part of us that is the 'I', that is God.'
(Lily, Teacher, School A)

'There has always been fire in worship.'
(Tara, Teacher, School A)

'It's a ritual. Rituals are important. [It's important] we *do* things because we are dealing with something invisible.'
(Natalie, Religion Teacher, School A)

For at least some teachers, the practice of lighting candles is underpinned by Anthroposophical belief. It is referred to as an act of worship and a ritual – though the latter need not be interpreted in religious terms it would be difficult not to interpret the former so. The former suggests some teachers define practices and events accompanied by a lit candle to be worship, which would make these practices confessional. However, generally, pupils do not report they are being asked to engage in religious practice at these times, nor do they identify the practice of lighting candles as worship or ritual. Moreover, there is minimal evidence that teachers share the above kinds of understandings with pupils. The sole piece of evidence occurred in an Assembly:

'Today is Candlemass which falls 40 days after Christmas. It was 40 days after Jesus was born that his parents took him to the temple priests. All over the world

in Churches, candles are blessed today. There is a saying: ‘the light of the world’, and we have candles because of the light of the flame.’
(Natalie, Religion Teacher, School A)

In this whole school address Natalie seems to identify the light of the flame as symbolic of Jesus or God, and presents this as the reason for lighting candles. The presentation of this ‘story’ in an Assembly where there is no opportunity for discussion seems strongly confessional. That the narrative is presented as factual rather than in terms of ‘Christians believe that’, supports this interpretation.

Anthroposophical doctrine in verses and stories

We have seen the consensus among teachers that they consider spiritual education to be non-confessional. Comments like the following evidence this:

‘I asked if reincarnation ever comes up in lessons and Grace said: “We do not teach it. Steiner was very clear about that”.’
(Grace, Religion Teacher, School D)

Yet ideas such as reincarnation do come up and there is a sense in which comments like ‘the children don’t learn about [Anthroposophy]’ (Kate, Teacher, School A) do not ring true. Though pupils may not be able to label aspects of Anthroposophical doctrine contained in verses and stories as such, because the word ‘Anthroposophy’ is not used with pupils, they do learn about them. They learn about them in the stories that feature heavily in Steiner schools. The weekly Religion lesson consists almost entirely of storytelling, and younger pupils hear a story daily. Many classroom walls are adorned with images from stories. Anthroposophical content in verses and stories is the most serious individual contender for confessional education.

The content of verses usually includes, or at least coheres with, Anthroposophical doctrine. If the verses are strongly confessional they are in as much as their purpose is to impart this doctrine in order that pupils are likely to accept it. It is helpful, therefore, to consider how far ideas expressed in the verses are accessible to pupils. Though it is possible to decipher meaning in the verses, Anthroposophical ideas held therein cannot generally be described as transparent. Take the verse recited at the beginning of Religion:

In those strong rays of sunlight
That make the earth abound
In that bright green of grasses
That springs from darkest ground
And where the stars inhabit
Their homes in heavenly height
And in man's eyes where shineth
The steadfast strength of sight
There do I feel the willing of God
My spirit's light
To whom in soul's foundation
My being I unite
That spirit, too, may be
This man of earth in me.

The most pupils are likely to glean from this is: the natural world is beautiful and bountiful because of the sun; humans can have a relationship with God; and humans have spirits and souls. Even this minimal access to the ideas held in verses is only likely to be acquired by older pupils sufficiently interested to make the effort to decipher them. In order to serve as effective confessional tools, most of the verses would require explanation by teachers. However, following Steiner, it seems to be the teachers' understanding that any verse which undergoes such explanation ceases to be spiritually educative. The verses are considered to be so only in so far as the focus is confined to their 'artistic presentation' (Steiner 2000[1919], 43).

If what matters is the artistic presentation of the verses, and if this means any doctrine included remains unexplained, why choose verses containing Anthroposophical doctrine? It seems reasons can be found in other spiritually educative purposes of reciting verses. First, ideas held in the verses are considered important because they work on people spiritually. That is, they work on pupils' inner spiritual beings. According to Anthroposophy, whatever understanding humans are able to access cognitively, our inner spiritual selves have direct access to spiritual truth. This suggests the content of verses is believed to have meaning for the pupils' inner beings and that therefore the artistic presentation of that which is meaningful to the inner being counts as spiritual education irrespective of whether pupils grasp the meaning intellectually. On this understanding, confessional education is unnecessary because on a spiritual level pupils already know the truths of Anthroposophy. A response to this might be that this practice constitutes an intention to transmit Anthroposophical doctrine to pupils, albeit at a non-cognitive level, and thus this practice *is* confessional. At the same time it is a

poor fit with understandings of the term confessional which concern nurturing conscious belief in doctrine (though may fit with what I describe as weak confessionalism). And, of course, the efficacy of such inner work on pupils is dependent upon how far this Anthroposophical claim is true; thus non-Anthroposophists might dismiss this practice as non-confessional and therefore harmless. Nevertheless, the intention is there.

Second, reciting verses is understood to be a means by which teachers connect with pupils. Teachers consider this connection one of the most important aspects of spiritual education. Where stories are concerned, some teachers stress how important it is that they themselves believe in and have a feeling connection to the stories, as this helps to ensure that storytelling contributes to the connection they are trying to foster with pupils. It seems reasonable to assume that the same is true for the verses, and it can be deduced that teachers believe the ideas held in the verses and have a feeling connection to them. On this understanding, it is not necessary for verses to include Anthroposophical doctrine but neither is it a surprise many do. That some of the verses come from the pen of Rudolf Steiner likely strengthens the feeling connection teachers have with them. In so far as verses which include Anthroposophical doctrine are chosen in order to foster connections between teachers and pupils, then, this practice is not intended to be confessional. For the most part, pupils seem to agree that the practice of reciting verses is not intended to nurture belief in truths expressed therein:

‘Some of the verses have references to God and spirits and stuff. But that’s just the school’s belief. That’s not necessarily wanting us to believe what they believe.’

(Nick, Class Seven Pupil, School A)

‘Our morning verse is kind of religious because it has a few mentions of God. I don’t think they intend that we believe it. The main intention is to give you a bit of Steiner Education and then you are kind of free to decide whether you want to stick with the Steiner or completely change your beliefs.’

(Philip, Class Seven Pupil, School A)

‘Religion was never imposed. I never remember it being imposed. I remember praying in the morning, there’s a poem. Fair enough, it was kind of spiritual, but I think the reason behind teachers wanting to do that was more of a setting your mind to work.’

(Zac, Former Pupil, School A)

‘Most of the verses are to do with God. In my opinion it’s a bit too, like, God, God, God. You have to believe in him kind of thing. I mean they don’t literally say: “Sit down and pray”, like some schools do where they make you pray. But you probably won’t get a verse where they don’t say God in it, or they don’t refer

to anything to do with God. Like in our school verse, it says something to do with God and I never say that bit ... [Otherwise] the words are nice.'
(Paula, Class Eight Pupil, School A)

Pupils are aware that verses have religious content and a few interpret verse recital as having confessional intent. Yet, even where reciting verses is interpreted in this way, a distinction is made between this practice and being 'made' to pray. Indeed, Paula seems content to sift out bits about God and recite the 'nice' words. Despite the frequent mention of God, the majority of pupils seem sure the practice is non-confessional. Nick distinguishes between what teachers believe and what they teach. Philip points to what we have already seen is understood by some teachers to be a key purpose of spiritual education – to enable pupils to make a free decision about religion. Though Zac refers to the practice in religious terms, he explains it in practical terms.

Apart from pupils like Philip, who see part of the purpose of the verses as 'to give you a bit of Steiner Education', it seems many pupils are of the view the verses could serve their purpose as well without reference to 'God and spirits and stuff'. However, for reasons explained above, from the teachers' perspectives this may not be the case for all of their purposes. Yet, despite their Anthroposophical content, on the whole participants are in agreement that verse recital is not confessional in the intentional sense. Nevertheless, the practice has some pupils feeling pressurised towards accepting belief in God. For these pupils at least, the practice seems to be confessional according to outcome.

To ascertain if storytelling is confessional, two questions are now asked: *to what extent do stories told hold Anthroposophical doctrine?*, and, *if this doctrine appears frequently, is the intention of telling such stories that pupils adopt Anthroposophical beliefs?* As Anthroposophy can be understood as a fusion of beliefs from Buddhism, Christianity, clairvoyance and Hinduism, the first question asks how frequently beliefs from these traditions feature in stories:

'Lots of the stories are Christian.'
(Lara, Class Eight Pupil, School A)

'We did the biography of the Dali Lama.'
(Ian, Class Eight Pupil, School A)

'The Boy who Saw True was about this kid who had a sixth sense. [In my Religion Book] I've written: "This boy can see spirits and mythological creatures and Jesus. He is a clairvoyant.""
(Laura, Former Pupil, School A)

These are not the only kinds of stories told. Fairytales, which do not fall into any of the aforementioned traditions, feature heavily for younger pupils. For the older pupils, some of the biographies (Bob Geldof, for example) and fictional stories (*The Apprenticeship of Lucas Whittaker*, for example (DeFelice 1996)) similarly do not fall into these traditions. Nevertheless, the majority of stories hold ideas which amount to or cohere with Anthroposophical doctrine.

Though the inclusion of Anthroposophical doctrine in some stories might *suggest* these stories are told with the intention of nurturing Anthroposophy, it does not *demonstrate* this is the case. I now consider why stories containing Anthroposophical doctrine are told, beginning with two of the reasons already given for the inclusion of doctrine in the verses. First, ideas held in the stories are believed to work on pupils' inner spiritual beings who are believed to have direct access to spiritual truth. Second, teachers choose stories they believe are true and have a feeling connection to. My observations and conversations with participants suggest additional reasons for selecting stories containing Anthroposophical doctrine. One of these confirms Patricia's impression:

'[The teachers] lead you to believe in something and show you there's stuff you can believe in.'
(Patricia, Class Seven Pupil, School A)

This intention to encourage belief in 'something' is evidenced in Shirley's and Kate's explanations of story selection criteria:

'The stories bring themes that make you realise there is more in this world and show you that different people have different understandings. So I think [the pupils] understand, intellectually you could say, that there's more out there. But it's more than that, even if they sort of say 'I don't believe in God' or whatever, they all have a kind of feeling that there is more out there. They don't think that we are just here by accident.'
(Shirley, Teacher, School A)

'It doesn't matter what you call it. As long as the children are encouraged to think there might be something special. Later if they don't believe it, it's their choice.'

(Kate, Teacher, School A)

Though the intention is ostensibly *not* to nurture pupils in Anthroposophy, the ‘stuff you can believe in’ pupils are shown is weighted towards Anthroposophy. This does not go unnoticed by pupils:

‘You notice it’s not a different religion. Even though the Christianity influences are not very big they are noticeable because there are no other religions that have influence. Sometimes it feels like they are trying to force you to be Christian. Like when they tell you a story about someone who was in heaven and then she came down, and you think well I don’t care, because I am not Christian so it doesn’t apply to me.’

(Lara, Class Eight Pupil, School A)

‘Harvey: We have been hearing about Christianity and would like to hear about something else, like a different religion.

Me: Have you spoken to your teacher about that?

Harvey: Yeah and she’s started doing different stories, different religions.’

(Harvey, Class Seven Pupil, School A)

Much of the data suggests the weighting towards Anthroposophy, which pupils here interpret as weighting towards Christianity, is due to the teachers’ own beliefs and the importance of choosing stories that have meaning for them. Despite the apparent pressure and frustration which Lara sometimes feels, there is little to suggest that it results from a desire to nurture Anthroposophical belief. This is supported by the willingness of Harvey’s teacher to include a wider range of religious content in Religion. This discussion on the selection of stories has shown that teachers would like pupils to know that religious belief is an option, and that they tend to steer pupils towards belief in ‘something’. It has not shown that this aspect of spiritual education is strongly confessional. Rather, with the emphasis remaining on the free choice of the pupils, it suggests weak confessional education.

Above I state there is *little* to suggest stories are selected in order to nurture Anthroposophy in pupils. Minimal evidence such as that exemplified in Natalie’s comment below should not be ignored. As this comment relates directly to a teaching of Steiner, it is helpful to present it in this context. Steiner (2000[1919]) tells teachers children can be taught about the immortality of the soul through verbally presenting them with the image of the butterfly (symbolising the soul), which initially exists in the cocoon (physical body) and then emerges

from it. I asked one of the teachers why, if immortality and reincarnation exist, they are not taught to the children as existing:

‘You would not talk to the children about reincarnation. [Through story] you would show them a picture of it. You could show them a picture of a butterfly and they would understand; children understand a lot more about reincarnation than we do. You can bring it to them again later. It was in that biography we did, Benjamin Franklin. He wrote his own epitaph for his gravestone and if you read it, you will see he knew about reincarnation... Some of [the class] would have seen it, others wouldn’t ... You can give them small openings and they will notice them or not.’

(Natalie, Religion Teacher, School A)

This is as close as storytelling seems to get to being confessional yet still pupils are not explicitly told about reincarnation. As seen before, with younger pupils it is assumed confessional education is unnecessary. Older pupils, who are believed to live in a different consciousness to when they were younger, are left to notice the truth in the story or not. What Natalie does not mention here is that by the time pupils are hearing biographies they are considered developmentally ready to discuss stories, raising the question of whether such discussion might be confessional.

For the most part, the types of discussion had in Religion seem antidotal to confessionalism. Pupils are encouraged to question:

‘Becky [Religion Teacher] addressed the pupils: “I want to ask you about your unplanned Religion lesson in Main Lesson today, because I hear that your lesson turned into a Religion lesson. I want to hear how this happened?”. Becky was smiling, looking pleased this had happened. Andrew said: “Questions were asked”. Becky: “What questions?”. Andrew: “If Christ was Jewish and he was the Son of God then is God Jewish?”. Saul: “How did anyone know about heaven because you cannot get there until you die and then you cannot tell anyone?” ... Becky did not offer answers to any of the questions. She said: “You have religious questions. You obviously have lots of questions and some of them cannot be answered. We can look at more stories to try to answer them and you might get answers, and you will get more questions”.

(Religion Lesson, Class Three/Four, School A)

‘We read *Alive*, which asks can you eat someone if you are in a position like that. It’s wrong to kill but if someone’s dead and you’re starving what can you do? The stories taught us to think a lot. I remember heated debates. I remember being asked to question religion, question morality.’

(Zac, Former Pupil, School A)

The older pupils become, the more the focus turns to discussion. They are encouraged to question and are seldom offered answers. This approach is something older and former pupils seem to appreciate:

‘It’s very simplistic just to say God exists or doesn’t exist. Whereas to say well he might or might not, and to have the capability to philosophise is something that not everyone has maybe ... I think my ability to do that and question is a lot to do with Steiner [Education].’

(Laura, Former Pupil, School A)

‘I remember the teachers being open-minded to any belief. If I were to go to them and say: “I’m a Hindu now”, they would be like: “Great, that’s really good”. And then ask me to look more into it. If we were interested in one of form of religion they would encourage us to look into it ... [T]hey’d be: “It’s your choice whether you follow a religion but look into it, question it”. There’s that kind of thread throughout the school.’

(Zac, Former Pupil, School A)

‘It’s a Christian school but they don’t expect everyone to believe in God. One person in our class is an atheist and that’s fine. The teachers ask him questions to get him to think about it. But they do the same if someone says they believe in God. You can’t just say: “I believe in God”. You have to think about it.’

(Michael, Class 13 Pupil, School D)

Stories are not told with strongly confessional intent, in so far as Anthroposophy is concerned, and pupils are encouraged and given space to question ideas arising from stories and elsewhere. However, stories are told with the intention of encouraging belief in ‘something’ religious or quasi-religious, and their content is often Anthroposophical. Therefore, similarly to verses, storytelling is not strongly confessional in the sense that a particular doctrine is taught as true, but is weakly confessional in so far as pupils are nurtured towards religious or quasi-religious belief which at least coheres with Anthroposophy.

Conclusion

None of the spiritually educative practices in Steiner schools are *necessarily* strongly confessional on their own. However, due to the way the teachers’ Anthroposophical beliefs influence what is taught and to the intention behind individual activities of showing the pupils that ‘there’s stuff [they] can believe in’ (Patricia, Class Seven Pupil, School A), each practice tends towards encouraging religious or quasi-religious belief over atheism, and is thus weakly

confessional. Due to the prevalence of such activities it is important to consider whether their cumulative effect amounts to a powerful influence towards Anthroposophy. In considering this it must be taken into account that: teachers encourage pupils to question their religious beliefs (or lack thereof), whatever they are; teachers consistently assert that spiritual education is not confessional; and that pupils for the most part see religious beliefs espoused in school as something their teachers hold to be true rather than as ones they are expected to adopt. Pupils are not taught about Anthroposophy directly (apart from those few schools which feature it briefly in Philosophy lessons for older pupils), and they would find it difficult to decipher a coherent belief system to adopt from the range of ideas and practices incorporated in spiritual education. Rather than the cumulative effect of spiritually educative activities exerting a powerful influence towards Anthroposophy, spiritual education in the schools studied is not balanced in its presentation of religious belief versus agnosticism or atheism, with the scales being tipped in favour of religious or quasi-religious belief. Therefore, teachers in the schools studied are absolved of strong confessional education but spiritual education is weakly confessional in the intentional sense. As for the question of transferring practice from Steiner to common school, it could be argued that this rules out the wholesale transfer of practice from Steiner to common school. However, I suggest we need not be concerned. As Waite and Rees (2014) found in their consideration of what mainstream early years and primary contexts might have to learn from imaginative play in Steiner kindergartens, the process of transfer would include a reshaping of practice by common school practitioners for common school contexts. Thus even weakly confessional practice would unlikely result. To be sure, I suggest a practice would have to meet two conditions to be viable for transfer. It would have to be non-confessional (for example, verses would need to be free of doctrine), and there would need to be good reason for thinking it would serve the aims of spiritual education. In the end, it is up to those with responsibility for spiritual education in common schools. For my part, I hope to have demonstrated that there are spiritual education practices in Steiner schools worthy of serious consideration by those in common schools serious about preparing pupils for spirituality. In answer to the titular question, common schools could learn from spiritual education in Steiner schools.

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