

# Centennial Celebration in New York City

ANTHROPOSOPHY NYC, THE NEW YORK CITY BRANCH OF THE ANTHROPOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, CHOSE THE WEEK BEGINNING SATURDAY, MARCH 6TH, AND LEADING INTO THE ANNUAL STEINERBOOKS SPIRITUAL RESEARCH SEMINAR, TO CELEBRATE THE FORMATION OF THE FIRST GROUP WORKING IN THE USA WITH THE IDEAS AND GUIDANCE OF RUDOLF STEINER. A REPORT BY THE EDITOR:

The celebration began with a day-long symposium surveying the anniversary from several perspectives. Although the planning group hoped also to have an expert speaker on the threefold social organism like Gary Lamb, the five presenters brought a very diverse perspective.

## Saturday March 6, the Symposium

The day's first speaker was **Michael Gomes**, a noted historian of the Theosophical Society and editor of a number of works of H.P. Blavatsky. Helena Blavatsky had founded the Theosophical Society with Col. Henry Steel Olcott in New York City in 1875, and by the 1890s Theosophical meetings in New York numbered in the thousands and met at the old Madison Square Garden. He shared a number of historical insights, pointing for example to Richard Maurice Bucke, author of *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901) and great admirer of Walt Whitman, as an example of the spirit of the times.

Michael also described Rudolf Steiner's honored place in the Theosophical Society of 1910 as head not only of the German Section of the Theosophical Society, but of the society's Esoteric School. He also spoke warmly of Steiner's connection



with Mabel Collins (left), author *Light on the Path*, who wrote in 1912 of Steiner's teaching as

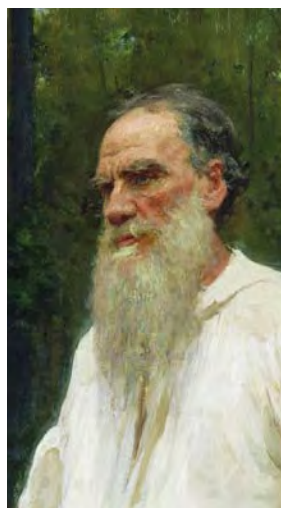
a grand ideal, a superb conception of the Christ Spirit in its relation to man.... [B]y following the leader who carries [this ideal], every detail of common life is glorified and filled with meaning and dignity.

In conclusion Michael spoke of the continuing challenge of "conscious evolution" and the lack of great moral figures today, and he expressed

gratitude for being invited to this centenary event.

## A Century of Inspiration and Challenges

The second speaker was **Ralph White**, co-founder of the New York Open Center, and organizer of significant international conferences on the Western esoteric tradition. Ralph is a long time anthroposophist working in the world and a friendly critic of the Anthroposophical Society. He too began by speaking of the world of 1910. William James, a great American psychologist, author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, died that year, as did the great Russian novelist Lev Tolstoy (right, painted by Repin). There was a worldwide movement for nonviolence, and



Ralph mentioned the peace gatherings at Mohonk Mountain House, north of New York City, as well as the visionary influence of Henry Ford. He also named many individuals born in 1910 who would become well-known cultural figures.

Ralph then sketched the progress of the 20th century spiritually, mentioning the deepening work of esoteric psychologist C.G. Jung, the novels of Hermann Hesse and D.H. Lawrence, the poetry of W.B. Yeats. The 1960s, he said, tried to pick up from the high level where things stood in 1910. There was an explosion of consciousness, famously psychedelic and "countercultural," along with the intensification of a series of libera-



tion movements: civil rights, the women's movement, and gay liberation. (Photo below: intense agitation for women's right to vote was part of the New York scene in 1910.)

The philosophy of logical positivism contin-

ued to dominate, however, with its view that "the meaning of life is a meaningless question." Nevertheless, millions continue to seek a living meditative tradition, though mostly outside the Western tradition.

Ralph shared concerns about the limitations of the anthroposophical movement in America very candidly. So far, he said, anthroposophy has been Eurocentric; it needs visibly to embrace world culture. Also, Rudolf Steiner gave so much and anthroposophy is "so comprehensive" that it is in danger of "becoming a self-contained world." Its three great strengths are first, that it is the "crème de la crème"—it has intellectual acuity and breadth of learning. Second is its practicality, the living spiritual intelligence of its initiatives in the world. And third is its wonderful link to the Western tradition, which Ralph has always championed in the programs of the New York Open Center. We can still be hopeful, for despite the inadequacy of corporate globalization, esoteric impulses have grown. People are looking for living spiritual practice. Anthroposophy should strive to offer newcomers something *experiential*.

## Serving the Child

**Joan Almon**, former general secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America, is director of the Alliance For Childhood. She began by speaking about the "resurrection rhythm" of a century: that it consists of three periods of 33 1/3 years, the lifetime of Jesus and the Christ on earth. So *this centennial is a moment of reinforcement*. She recalled her own meeting with anthro-

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posophy as a Baltimore kindergarten teacher. Having learned some techniques of Waldorf education, she applied some very simple ones in her work and experienced an immediate change: the children came to life.

When tested later also in poor inner-city schools, there was the same result. She mentioned the work



19th c. illustrations (above,below) by Wehnert to Grimm tales.

of Monica Alexandra in the public system, reporting that “the children are angry, their souls are not being fed”; people are starting to speak of “educational abuse.” In Los Angeles there is teaching from scripts from kindergarten on, with monitors enforcing it. After their experience of collectivism, visiting East European teachers are appalled by what they see happening here. By contrast, Waldorf education says simply that *a child is a child*, and that “education must stir the soul.”

Rudolf Steiner offered a double mandate: intense inward work, and intense outward work. Joan identified our chal-



lenge today as *giving children strength to meet what they have to meet*. There is a real struggle of good and evil in the world, and we must help them find their way. The old fairy tales teach about good and evil

in a way children can recognize. A century ago children could simply follow their parents’ example; today few parents know what example to set. And the rhythms of public school are very strong, and media programmers know how to hold attention by producing a vulnerable fight-or-flight feeling.

## Humor and Tragedy

**After lunch**, there was an unscheduled addition to the program. “**Herr Dreier**” (the real-life Alexander Dreier) is a well-known if incomprehensible anthroposophical lecturer. Although his insights are undoubtedly great, again and again his effect has been to reduce an anthroposophical audience to laughter and tears. He did this again on this special occasion, though regrettably his blackboard diagrams were promptly erased.

“Comic relief” was perhaps a necessary preparation for the next speaker, **Olivia Stokes Dreier**, associate director of the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding. Karuna works in those places in the world where there has been “unspeakable



From left, Anthroposophy NYC symposium speakers Michael Gomes, Joan Almon, Walter Alexander, Ralph White, and Olivia Stokes Dreier.

violence” and helps the survivors rebuild confidence in the future as a community. Olivia observed that there is a great deal of American hubris about the world situation, as if we were a gated community. There are countries that have been crushed, their populations dying in the crossfire, with little awareness or response by Americans. Yet one is struck by what emerges in those terrible situations. It is *a recognition of each other as human beings*.

Frightened people are very manipulable. Hate-filled broadcasts in Ruanda led to the genocidal violence there. Killing teams went out with machetes and worked to exhaustion killing their supposed enemies. And suddenly in a small, poor country there were 530,000 orphans. Now there had to be a new request broadcast on the radio: would every woman in Ruanda please take in a child?

Truth wants to be spoken. Weekly village hearings talk it all through. With too few jails, punishment is often simply “work in the general interest.” That is not without meaning, however. One offender said, “I did terrible things... I am so glad that my government is allowing me to be a human being again.”

Anthroposophy? It speaks for a new cosmopolitanism, a yearning for new ways of relating, in opposition to this global pandemic of dehumanization. The work of “peacebuilding” is to create a safe container for people to start talking again, rediscovering their own and each other’s humanity.

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## The Struggle for the Whole Truth in Science

The final speaker of the day was co-president of the New York Branch council **Walter Alexander**. Walter is a writer on medical subjects and science, a former public and Waldorf teacher, and an editor of *Lilipoh* magazine. His talk was an overview of the book he is preparing based on a series of interviews with significant thinkers and scientists. Against the common philosophical view, epitomized by Daniel Dennett, that “we are all zombies, no one is conscious,” Walter marshalled a wide range of experimental results and insights from the past century of science, from quantum physics to the placebo effect, which show something quite different.

“But it’s a myth that if we gave scientists the data they’d accept it.” Real professional fear stops any sort of new thinking around consciousness. Walter’s book (and further articles in *Lilipoh*) will do justice to all he shared, but we can repeat the story

he told of a medicine man whose tradition held that the universe rested on the back of a turtle. A scientist, whose “reductionist” view sees ever smaller particles going down and down, challenged him with the question, “And what is holding up the turtle?” The reply was, “It’s turtles all the way down.” Walter ended with the affirmation that reality rests not on things but on beings: “it’s beings all the way down, all the way up!”

Finally **John Beck**, a former president of the branch council, attempted in about ten minutes to express a relationship among the day’s presentations. Noting the concise phrase used in the Waldorf movement, “experts in child development,” he suggested as a possible summation that “anthroposophy affirms humanness.” Rudolf Steiner’s big project was nothing less than to sow the seeds of a new world civilization, one that could manage the evolutionary changes we are going through as beings of body, soul and spirit. Steiner gave the picture of human beings as assistants who are sent out “from the architects’ office” to the building site. If we evolve by embracing the wholeness of the cosmos, the spirit of truth, we can begin to step up as co-designers. Failing to seize this opportunity, we have only the level of animals or robots to fall back to. The panel of speakers followed with a short conversation around the day’s rich themes.



Prometheus honored at Rockefeller Center

## Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday Evening Talks

Historian and writer **Kevin Dann** continued the week of celebration with a talk, “American Anthroposophy’s Alternative Promethean Path,” which he informally retitled “America: My Will or Thy Will? My Way or the Highway?” After stirring up the group musically for a few minutes, he walked with us in imagination, downtown to the old Masonic

Publishing Company where in 1910 that first-in-America group met to hear and discuss Rudolf Steiner’s work. Ethel Parks Brownrigg, a singer and speaker, read the lecture. The group totaled six persons.

From there Dr. Dann wove a fabric of impulses in American spiritual life, linking the treasure hunting of Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism in the 1820s, with Goethe’s portrayal of Faust’s search, both men binding and being bound to a spiritual being. He noted that “Lucifer” and “Ahriman” are beings hidden in plain sight. Thoreau? A phenomenologist who wrote that

a botanist’s experience is full of coincidences. If you think much about some flower which you never saw, you are pretty sure to find it some day, actually growing near by you. In the long run we find what we expect. We shall be fortunate, then, if we expect great things.

Later figures summoned up included Wallace D. Wattles (top right of next column), part of the “New Thought” movement and

famously the author of *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910), a book still very much in print and active in the world. (A topic for anthroposophical research?) William James had described “New Thought” in 1901 as

a deliberately optimistic scheme of life, with both a speculative and a practical side. In its gradual development during the last quarter of a century, it has taken up into itself a number of contributory elements, and it must now be reckoned with as a genuine religious power.... One of the doctrinal sources of Mind-cure is the four Gospels; another is Emersonianism or New England transcendentalism; another is Berkeleyan idealism; another is spiritism, with its messages of ‘law’ and ‘progress’ and ‘development’; another the optimistic popular science evolutionism...; and, finally, Hinduism has contributed a strain.

But the most characteristic feature of the mind-cure movement is an inspiration much more direct. The leaders in this faith have had an intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust, and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry, and all nervously precautionary states of mind. Their belief has in a general way been corroborated by the practical experience of their disciples; and this experience forms today a mass imposing in amount.

Among many other observations, Kevin shared that Rudolf Steiner had identified the mythic Titans, precursors of the Olympian gods, as spiritual beings of the will, and Kevin connected this with the American phrase “titans of industry.” Prometheus who brought fire to mankind was pure will, and his brother Epimetheus was pure reason...

Wandering out into the night after the talk, one was struck again by New York’s will forces, its towering buildings and canyon-like streets filled with constant activity and animation.

Wednesday two members spoke from **the current St. Mark Group**, the same group celebrating its 100th anniversary. **Joyce Monges** spoke in part of the Monges family, centered on Henry Monges (1870-1954), first general secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America from 1924 to 1948. Henry was a forceful personality, an architect and professor of geometry. He was married three times, each wife making her own contribution. Joyce knew his wife Lisa, a eurythmist, who “touched the earth very lightly,” and she spoke with gentle warmth of several other persons involved in the earlier history of anthroposophy in America, concluding that the future of the society will continue to depend a great deal on our quality and qualities as individuals. To which the evening’s emcee Walter Alexander added the quip, “It’s always a Who, often just a few.”

**Albert Spekman**, current leader of the group, took the opportunity of our looking back a century to extend the perspective by reference to Rudolf Steiner’s *Occult Science: An Outline*, written in



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1910. This “basic book” is a view of the past and future of the cosmos, and an outline of all of anthroposophy. Albert unfolded a series of great images from this enormous evolutionary perspective.

Thursday evening’s speaker was **Robert McDermott**, a long-time leader of the movement and one of the most prominent and well-known anthroposophists in academic life, currently president emeritus and professor of philosophy and religion at the California Institute for Integral Studies. Robert had been president of the branch in the 1980s and commended everyone on how the branch’s home has been developed over the years, and how beautifully members had prepared the space for this week. (In fact, the branch had recently suffered major water damage last summer from hidden leaks, and the members had first to battling for proper reimbursement by the insurance company and then to supervise extensive repairs in the fall.)

In connection with the St. Mark Group, Robert wished first to mention Beredene Jocelyn (author of *Citizens of the Cosmos* and *Life after Death*). He then explained that he would both look back and look forward. Concerning the period around 1910 he, too, mentioned William James, the American spiritual-psychological researcher, “still the top of the line.” Robert recently completed *The New Essential Steiner*, and he spoke of Rudolf Steiner’s life for several minutes. Steiner’s upbringing was non-religious, but his path led to a meeting with the cosmic Christ and a recognition of His involvement in the evolution of humanity and the earth and the cosmos: a recognition that, as Augustine had said, “the idea of humanity lived in the mind of God.” At age 39, Steiner’s teaching became “Christ-infused.” And so, for the Theosophical Society Steiner was “the guy who got away.”

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were also active at this time, but unlike William James, whose focus was on the experience

### “WHY ISN’T RUDOLF STEINER BETTER KNOWN?”

Response by Robert McDermott to a question, at the NYC centenary celebration:

1. Because Steiner claims to know about things that most people today think cannot be known.
2. Because of anthroposophists—how many of us are truly humble and reverent?
3. The implausibility of there being so much—when today we’re all skeptics and specialists.
4. It’s hard to get started with anthroposophy, it’s full of special words with few helps for that; and you can’t easily share it with friends or family.
5. The Central European style—too much authority.
6. The work of the spiritual “enemies,” Lucifer, Ahri-man, the fascination with money, sex, power—against which human beings just aren’t working hard enough.

To which Dr. McDermott added that there is tremendous good work being done in the USA, but that more and more Steiner-inspired work is taking place outside the Anthroposophical Society.

of healthy people, their starting point was illness. Other features of the time included Gandhi’s experience in 1906 that led him to “satyagraha,” to “truth-force”; Einstein’s special theory of relativity in 1905, Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* in 1907 with its ideas about *élan vital* or life-impulse and time as subjective duration, and Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1912).

William James had attempted to hold a middle, experience-based position: a place, as he said, of “spontaneous thought, with metaphysicians and scientists both against me.” Unfortunately he had no successor. Behaviorist B.F. Skinner, author of *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, would hold the William James professorship at Harvard. A younger colleague of James’, Josiah Royce, whose concept of “The Beloved Community” was taken up

by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., decades later, is scarcely mentioned today. There are important literary figures in this time, poets—Yeats, Eliot, Rilke. And in 1924 Rudolf Steiner joins his destiny to this group, the Anthroposophical Society, who are both very impressive and also somewhat petty and argumentative.

Looking at today and the future, Robert suggested several themes for our time. GLOBALIZATION, of course. MUSIC—we have got to start philosophical-religious jam sessions, like musicians. ECOLOGICAL DISASTER—if we would see into matter, we would see *the intent of spirit*. KNOWLEDGE OF LOVE rising from the individual to the universal: the will to attend, be reverent, humble.



William James, mentioned throughout the week

Dr. McDermott’s talk was given with a great freedom of spirit, as if he has reached that age and stage of reflection where one knows, and can say as he did at the beginning, that the whole of his talk might not mean that much to any of us listening, but that he hoped everyone would find some part of it meaningful.

At the end he offered to take questions, and was immediately asked why Rudolf Steiner is not better known. It is a question friends and members of the Anthroposophical Society often ask. Out of his experience, Robert gave a list of reasons which are highlighted in the box above.

The last of several questioners asked what he saw happening with America, the USA. After thinking aloud for a moment, he replied that the US is racing at full speed in two opposite directions: into the abyss, and toward a real flowering of everything.

That observation concluded—all too incisively!—the New York branch’s centenary celebration. The SteinerBooks Seminar picked up the next evening at New York University in Greenwich Village.