

**Dr. Dan McKanan**, Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist Association Senior Lecturer in Divinity, Harvard Divinity School, USA

My presentation will explore the ways that esoteric or magical spiritual traditions can contribute to economic justice, ecological sustainability, and the common good. Focusing especially on the community-building, biodynamic agriculture, and social investing initiatives of the Anthroposophical movement, as well as on similar initiatives rooted in New Thought, New Age, and Neopagan spiritualities, I argue that magic can be a vital part of the repertoire of social change activists.

Magic, as I understand it, is the attempt to achieve worldly ends by gaining subjective insight into the deep structures of the cosmos. Magical traditions have often been opposed by monotheistic religions (which emphasize the passive acceptance of grace) and by modern science (which seeks objective, rather than subjective insights). Yet people seeking to change society have repeatedly turned to such magical practices as alchemy, astrology, and homeopathy as sources of strength or as models for their activism. Indeed, in a broad sense the practice of consciousness-raising can be seen as a form of magic, which is why newly class-conscious workers of the nineteenth century sometimes found inspiration in the Rosicrucian ideal, and feminists of the 1970s often turned to the magic of the Goddess. Magic is both a source of power for persons excluded from institutional power, and a method for building a new world without losing one's self in the process.

As a sympathetic outsider to magical traditions, it is not my intent to promote magic at the expense of either science or conventional religion. I hope, instead, to initiate a dialogue in which magic will be more fully recognized as a partner with Gandhian nonviolence, engaged Buddhism, Catholic social teaching, religious humanism, and other spiritualities in the shared human pursuit of the common good.

In the West, as indeed in other cultures, there is a long tradition of magical practices being used to promote the common good. One good example, and inspiration for many subsequent traditions, is Rosicrucianism. It seems likely that the earliest Rosicrucian texts, which told of a secret society of individuals pledged to anonymous acts of healing, were fictions that preceded the creation of an actual Rosicrucian society. But once the idea of a Rosicrucian society was out there, dozens of groups—from the Freemasons to some of the earliest labor unions—sought to model themselves on the ideal. Typically, these groups sought to empower their members with elaborate symbols and rituals, and they sought to improve society through apolitical, under-the-radar acts of benevolence. They also laid the groundwork for subsequent socialist movements: eighteenth century German pietists, for example, were deeply influenced by Rosicrucianism and created several communal or semi-communal societies in North America.

Esoteric magic took a more decisive turn toward socialism with the work of Charles Fourier, one of the “utopian socialists” later repudiated by Karl Marx. Fourierists, along with the followers of Robert Owen, were the first to use the term “socialist” to describe their ideal society. Because Fourier called himself a “social scientist” and because his communities were not linked for formal religious practice, Fourierism has generally been remembered as a “nonsectarian” form of communalism. But it is better understood as a

form of magic. Fourier believed that he had cracked the “divine code” underlying the cosmos, and his elaborate blueprints for intentional community were based on numerological patterns and a thoroughgoing system of correspondences between heaven and earth. The people who flocked to Fourierist communities in the nineteenth-century were devotees of any number of additional magical practices, such as phrenology, homeopathy, automatic writing, and spiritualist communication with the dead.

The magical milieu of the 1840s paved the way for Theosophy, which inspired a new round of intentional communities but also fed into the development of the Socialist Party, at least in the United States. (One important precursor movement, Bellamyite Nationalism, was first organized by Theosophists.) Theosophy was a profoundly schismatic movement, but its spiritual descendents—which include Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy; the disciples of Alice Bailey, Edgar Cayce, and Nicholas Roerich; Neopaganism; and the New Age movement—are at the forefront of many of today’s movements for economic cooperation and ecological sustainability. Among the movements with significant sources in post-theosophical spirituality are biodynamics, ecovillages, permaculture, community supported agriculture, local currencies, “transition towns,” social enterprise, and community banking.

My own awareness of these connections began when I encountered anthroposophy, an offshoot of theosophy organized by Rudolf Steiner, an early twentieth-century Austrian who emphasized Christian esoteric traditions rather than the eastern spiritualities favored by other theosophists. Steiner claimed to have clairvoyant access to supermundane spiritual realities, including the “akashic record” bearing the entire history of consciousness. On the basis of his gifts, Steiner offered guidance to specific professional groups who hoped to renew the practice of education, medicine, agriculture, dance, architecture, and several other fields of endeavor. Out of this grew several distinct anthroposophical “initiatives,” among them the Waldorf network of schools, the biodynamic system of agriculture (which predated modern organics, and combines a refusal of chemical fertilizers with astrological and homeopathic practices), and the Camphill movement, a network of intentional communities where people with and without disabilities share daily life and work, often in agricultural villages.

(I should stress that Steiner referred to his system as a “spiritual science” rather than as “magic,” and that some—not all—anthroposophists have objected to my use of “magic” on the grounds that magic involves the unconscious use of spiritual forces while anthroposophy demands full consciousness. I do not believe that “magic” has this connotation: both medieval alchemists and contemporary neopagans use “magic” to describe conscious processes comparable to those found in anthroposophy. It may well be, however, that another, less confusing term might be substituted for “magic” in this essay.)

I first became aware of anthroposophy in 1995, when I purchased a weekly share of vegetables from a biodynamic farm near Chicago. Much later, I learned that biodynamic farmers were the first to employ the now widespread practice of selling farm shares as a strategy for reducing the risks inherent in farming and building stronger ties between farmers and consumers. In the meantime, a personal and academic interest in

intentional communities led me to Camphill Village Minnesota, which is located about fifty miles from the college where I began my teaching career. At Camphill, I met a community of about seventy people, half of them with developmental disabilities, who were living just as many environmentalists aspire to live. They raised most of their food on site, using a mix of organic and biodynamic methods; they created a variety of beautiful crafts; they found meaning and pleasure in one another more than in consumer goods or electronically mediated forms of entertainment. These Camphillers were more casual than some in the relation to anthroposophy, but they certainly engaged in many practices dictated by Steiner's spiritual science, such as the reciting of mantra-like verses from Steiner's "Calendar of the Soul" each morning and the use of homeopathic preparations in gardening.

Camphill puzzled me, because at that time many of my environmental sensibilities reflected the commitments of my old teacher, theologian Sallie McFague. For McFague, the dualistic distinction between body and spirit is the root cause of the environmental crisis, and the antidote is a commitment to living fully in *this* world. McFague also assumes that religious environmentalists should simply accept the findings of modern science. At Camphill I met many who believed that this world could be understood only in relation to other, higher worlds. These people took "spirit" very literally—they believed it followed its own rules, distinct from the rules governing matter. It is true that they weren't dualists: Steiner taught a threefold theory of human nature as body, soul, and spirit, in which the individual soul is a sort of meeting place between spirit and body. But they definitely believed in a sort of hierarchy, in which spirit comes into matter from above. At Camphill I also met many people who were skeptical about modern science: Steiner had his own evolutionary theory which was in some ways the opposite of Darwin's. He believed that human evolution had taken place on several different planets, and that our evolution on earth involved a gradual "hardening" into material form. In Steiner's evolution, humans are older than animals; the fossil record creates the opposite impression simply because the animals hardened into material form earlier. So, in short, here were people doing very good environmental work, but on the basis of ideas that I had been led to believe were anti-ecological.

I have not yet fully worked out this conundrum, but my awareness of it has led me to many other connections between esoteric magic and both environmentalism and economic sharing. Indeed, I think it is reasonable to conclude that neither the socialist movement of the nineteenth century nor the ecological movement of the twentieth would have come into existence with magical spiritualities. This is not to say that there was a single, magical starting point for socialism and ecology: both movements grew out of a confluence of sources. But so many of those sources were magical that socialism and ecology without magic would have looked very different.

One might explain this in a variety of ways, of course. For anthroposophists and their spiritual kin, the priority of Fourierism to Marxism and of biodynamics to organics is evidence that human evolution is being guided by hidden, spiritual beings. A more cynical observer might note that Fourier and Steiner were wildly imaginative thinkers; they produced so many unusual ideas that at least a few of them had to prove useful. An intermediate explanation might follow the lines of classical idealist philosophy: if the

world is constructed, in whole or in part, by our thinking, then traditions that generate a rich array of new ideas help create a world in which those ideas will be useful.

Which theory one prefers may determine whether one thinks it is important to *preserve* magical elements within movements with magical roots. For example, Rudolf Steiner began his lectures on biodynamics by noting that conventional agriculture took too narrow a view of the factors that contribute to soil fertility. His call for a more holistic approach doubtless paved the way for contemporary ecological thinking—yet the holism Steiner advocated included, and indeed highlighted, astrological factors. One might well ask whether it is advisable, or indeed possible, for ecologists to preserve a holistic ethos without astrological and other magical elements.

I don't yet have a clear answer to that, so in my presentation I will meditate on a few of the elements, like holism, that are prominent within magical traditions but potentially relevant even to those who don't accept magical premises. Among these are:

- The idea that small factors can make a big difference. This is the basic idea of homeopathy—which dilutes its remedies so that there may not be a single atom left in the prescribed dose—but also of ecology. The implication is that subtle changes, rather than one-size-fits-all fixes, may be the way to nudge ecosystems back into balance.
- The emphasis on empowerment. Many social change strategies focus on getting people, especially privileged people, to do the right thing. Often these strategies founder because even objectively privileged people may *feel* powerless. Magical rituals and initiations offer people the sense of power they need to begin living in new ways. That is desperately needed if humanity is to adjust to a post-carbon future.
- A celebration of the imagination. When Jack sold his cow for magical beans, he also received *a story*, and magical practitioners often seek to change the world by telling new stories. *The Wizard of Oz*, written by a theosophist outraged by the power of the big banks, was such a story, as is neopagan Starhawk's utopian novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.
- A look backward as well as forward. "Progressive" traditions typically assume that the good society lies primarily in the future. Magical traditions don't necessarily reject this idea, but they continually retrieve discarded cultural elements, sometimes applying these to entirely new problems.
- Faith that humans are *at home* in nature. Magical traditions often posit the existence of supersensory, spiritual realities, but they also stress the ways in which spirit is present *in* nature. Anthroposophy, for example, stresses the role of the human being as the bridge between spirit and matter. The anthropocentrism of this position might be offputting to deep ecologists, but in practice it serves as an antidote to the assumption (shared by many environmentalists *and* anti-environmentalists) that humans are at war with nature. As one biodynamic farmer put it, the ecological goal should not be "zero impact" of humans on the environment, but a "maximum impact"

that goes both ways, so that humans genuinely feel that our well-being is tied up with that of the whole ecosystem.