

## The Steiner cult: an exchange

I would like to correct some misstatements that appeared in your recent article about Steiner education (*Australian Rationalist* January 2008). First, Steiner's stages of child development have been shown to correspond closely to Piaget's (Ginsburg, 'Jean Piaget and Rudolf Steiner', 1982). Secondly, the author claims there is a paucity of studies that support the efficacy of Waldorf education. Many studies by independent academics demonstrate that Steiner school pupils score better on tests of intellectual development, results on college entrance examinations, creativity, social commitment and moral development, and last but not least, enthusiasm for learning — this last echoed by numerous reports from college professors and admissions personnel. At least 12 of these studies, as well as articles by mainstream journalists (who actually visited the schools to make their reports) and comments by prominent educators, are referenced in the Wikipedia article on Waldorf education ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldorf\\_education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldorf_education)). Those who question the objectivity of an editable encyclopaedia should examine the original studies and articles and draw their own conclusions.

Steiner education has been frequently cited for the support it gives each individual child to unfold his or her destiny. A study of an American Steiner school operating in the public sector (published in *Urban Review* v. 28/2) states: 'In anthroposophy, each child is understood to have a special destiny, and it is the school's business to make the most of it.' The connection with German fascism was exceptionally wrong-footed; Hitler and other prominent Nazis virulently attacked anthroposophy, Steiner and the Steiner schools for their emphasis on the individuality, placing this over and above any societal grouping. Correspondingly, in Waldorf education, the study of history, while developmentally oriented, does not culminate in the study of 'Aryan' or Germanic civilisation, as your article's author implied; during the study of mythology in the early primary years, the Norse myths are preceded by the Old Testament and followed by the Indian, Persian, Egyptian and Greek myths. When the study of history proper begins in year 6 it follows a conventional chronology; at no time does 'Aryan' or

'Germanic' civilisation play any special role in this.

Finally, though Steiner education certainly begins from a respect for every individual's spiritual nature, Steiner's pedagogy and ideas are not intended to convey any particular religion. Steiner certainly aimed to imbue education with wonder and to cultivate in children a sense of respect for the world, for one's fellow human beings and for their cultures. This includes encouraging teachers to work out of devotion to the children — as the article quotation clearly indicates. Those who do not believe in any spiritual component to the human being or the world may well not find Steiner education a good fit. But there is no denominational orientation here.

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## Ian Robinson replies:

Harlan Gilbert seeks 'to correct some misstatements' that appeared in my recent article about Steiner education (January, 2008)

First he claims that 'Steiner's stages of child development have been shown to correspond closely to Piaget's'. He supports this with a reference to an article by Prof Iona Ginsburg. This article is by a Steiner school parent whose academic field is psychiatric dermatology. The article is not an academic investigation but an informal comparison of the theories of Piaget and Steiner and rather than showing that Steiner's stages of child development correspond closely to those of Piaget, it focus on the differences between them, and, given the writer's bias, argues that Steiner's views are superior to Piaget's.

The writer accepts that

the world views and working methodology of Steiner and Piaget are poles apart. ... Piaget, the 'genetic epistemologist', focuses virtually exclusively on the structural changes during cognitive development; Steiner on the totality of development.

So any vestigial similarities between their respective 'developmental stages' are no more than coincidence and do not constitute a vindication of Steiner's theories in terms of Piaget's, as Gilbert claims.

Second, Gilbert questions my claim that 'there is a paucity of studies that support the efficacy of Waldorf education'

and quotes the 12 studies cited in the Wikipedia article on *Waldorf Education* as evidence. Aware of the sometimes unreliable nature of Wikipedia, he invites the reader to 'examine the original studies and articles and draw their own conclusions'. I have done just this and discovered that four of the cited articles are by print and TV journalists writing for publications ranging from *The Atlantic Monthly* to *Der Spiegel*; two are unpublished PhD theses of who knows what validity; one is an article in a business leadership publication and one is a university-based report that used interviews and surveys of Steiner schools as its main source of information, together with a literature review and, apart from asking Steiner schools to comment on their performance, did no original research. The three studies cited that might have some academic standing are, as I said in my article, not on academic performance, but on drawing ability, creative thinking and moral competency, respectively. Finally, an article on Rudolf Steiner in the UNESCO publication *Prospects* is cited, which on examination hardly concludes with a ringing endorsement:

In the last resort, the practice of this system of education with its broad spectrum of artistic and handicraft learning potentials, a caring attitude to children and the many opportunities for conscious participation in community tasks is far too important to be left to the unquestioning adepts of Rudolf Steiner.

The conclusion I draw, therefore, is that my claim that Steiner education lacks rigorous academic support must stand.

It is true that most modern-day Anthroposophists shy away from the racist and fascist underpinnings in Steiner's thought, but sometimes they bubble to the surface, and there is anecdotal evidence of dark-skinned children being made to feel very uncomfortable in Steiner schools. The closed nature of the schools makes hard evidence difficult to come by, however. As the detailed article I cited concludes, Steiner followers have never satisfactorily resolved this issue.

Finally, Gilbert claims 'Steiner's pedagogy and ideas are not intended to convey any particular religion'. But they clearly are — the religion of Anthroposophy. Steiner certainly thought so, as the writings I quoted made plain. Of course it is not packaged as religion,

but as I pointed out, it has all the hallmarks of religion. And the whole system is informed by and predicated on Steiner's religious (anthroposophical) theories.

Perhaps Harlan Gilbert has not yet been inducted into the inner sanctum of First Class and does not fully understand yet the implications of the system with which he is involved.

## Hirsi Ali's courage

As a description of a personal journey from Islam to enlightenment and reason, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* is perhaps the most remarkable story that has been written. David Schafer and Michelle Koth (*Australian Rationalist* April 2008) seem to recognise the enormity of her achievement but then they rather inexplicably condemn her for it. They rightly identify her critics as being at best cultural relativists who ignore human rights, but then engage in the same ill-founded criticism.

It is true that some of her more recent statements during interviews can be seen as being somewhat extravagant. Given that Hirsi Ali has permanent bodyguards and is in constant danger of being murdered, merely because of what she has said, one would think she could therefore be granted some licence to speak

forcefully. But no, instead she is held, by her humanist critics, of being ignorant of Islam, with potentially catastrophic consequences!

Schafer and Koth exhibit characteristics that are unfortunately quite common in academia particularly in the U.S. — the curious phenomenon of the anti-atheist humanist. It is stated plainly that Hirsi Ali's 'complete rejection of Islam and embrace of atheism' is seen as the heart of the problem. Far better, they say, that she should have stayed within Islam to allow its 'beneficent features' to grow.

Despite being students of Islam, Schafer and Koth believe in promoting 'moderate Islam'. However, as many commentators, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have pointed out, moderating Islam is a basic impossibility. What is written in the Koran cannot be rejected. Islam means submission to what is written there. The first line of the Koran says: 'This book is not to be doubted'. Muslims do not have the option of submitting moderately, doubting moderately or believing moderately.

Granted, degrees of adherence to the doctrines do vary. In non-Muslim countries the strictures can to some extent be ignored. In Muslim countries, Islamist excesses can be kept in check by repressive means or by a rigorously secular constitution as in Turkey. But

Muslims cannot easily criticise the Koran and remain Muslim. All liberal Muslims can do is scour the Koran for quotes that might support their cause, a futile practice because each can be countered by numerous alternative quotations. Rationalism requires rejection of Islam, as Hirsi Ali has done.

After enduring indoctrination and coercive socialisation, it is extremely difficult for most believers to come to the realisation that there is no rational basis for the truth claims of any religion. Having recognised religion as a delusion, what is Hirsi Ali supposed to do? Lie, and pretend to believe? Help to perpetuate the delusion rather than help others to overcome it? Deny the reason and rationality that she fought so hard to achieve?

Hirsi Ali has displayed enormous courage and leadership. Ex-Muslims in Britain and other countries have set up websites, to name themselves as such, to give courage to others so that more can 'come out' as ex-Muslims. Secular values and the following of the path of reason and rationality is the solution, not a 'reformed' delusion, as Schafer and Koth would have us believe.

**John Perkins**

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## Rationalist AGM

The annual general meeting of the Rationalist Society of Australia will be held at 6.30 pm on Monday 30 June 2008, at Level Four, 99 William Street, Melbourne. This will be followed by light refreshments, including wine and snacks.