The Spirit of the Race and the Soul of the Nation: Anthroposophy and the Rise of Fascism in Italy

In the early decades of the twentieth century anthroposophy was a primarily German phenomenon, a movement concentrated in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, the lands where Steiner spent his life. By the time of Steiner’s death in 1925 anthroposophy had established footholds in other European countries, particularly the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and England. Its only substantial presence in southern Europe was in Italy, which was home to a numerically small but intellectually vibrant and culturally influential anthroposophist movement beginning around 1910. Like its German counterpart, Italian anthroposophy comprised a wide range of political perspectives and a variety of stances on race and ethnicity, all correlated to a spiritual foundation. The emergence of Fascism after World War One gave rise to divergent anthroposophical responses; while several leading anthroposophists embraced Mussolini’s movement, others kept their distance, and the Fascist regime treated Steiner’s followers inconsistently.1 This complicated situation set the stage for a series of remarkable anthroposophist engagements with Fascist racial policy in the 1930s and 1940s.

The origins of Italian anthroposophy can be traced to Steiner’s dispute with the India-based leadership of the Theosophical Society. Steiner had cultivated an Italian audience for several years as Secretary of the German Section of the Theosophical Society. He visited Venice, Genoa and Rome in 1907 and Naples in 1908, returning in spring 1909 at the invitation of an Italian princess for a series of theosophical lectures in Rome, Milan, Palermo and Trieste. He gave another lecture series in Italy in 1910. Steiner’s future wife Marie was active in

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Italian theosophical circles since the turn of the century. From 1910 onward several prominent Italian theosophists sided with Steiner in the escalating controversy within the international Theosophical Society. Steiner emphasized the superiority of European spiritual traditions over Eastern ones, against the “Indian” and “English” variant of theosophy represented by Annie Besant. This position held strong appeal among Italian esotericists.

In the midst of the ongoing discord, Italian theosophists harshly criticized the “Indian mysticism” of Besant and championed the “Christian esotericism” of Steiner. Steiner’s Italian followers portrayed the intra-theosophical conflict as a struggle between “oriental” and “occidental” forms of spirituality. From the point of view of Italian anthroposophists, “the Western peoples have progressed further than the peoples of the Orient and must therefore pursue a more elevated spiritual path.” Similar sentiments played a role in Germany as well. In 1911 longtime theosophist Günther Wagner, who sided with Steiner in the split, wrote to another leading German theosophist explaining the significance of racial-spiritual differences between Europeans and Asians. Wagner noted that according to Steiner and his followers, “Since we are the most advanced race, we have the most advanced religion.”

Such statements were consistent with Steiner’s own teachings: “But this Oriental form of truth is worthless for us Western peoples. It could only obstruct us and hold us back from our goal. Here in the West are the peoples who shall constitute the core of the future races.” This accounted for the divergence in

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3 Carlo Paes, “Cronaca di Teosofia” Rassegna Contemporanea April 1912, 146–49, quote on 147.