Anthroposophy, the religious current initiated by the Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), presents many different aspects.¹ There is an immense corpus of writings, by Steiner as well as his followers, outlining a vast and detailed esoteric conception of the world and of humanity. There are numerous practical applications, including Waldorf pedagogy, eurythmy (a distinctly Anthroposophical performing art), and biodynamic farming. There is an Anthroposophical-Christian institution, The Christian Community. There is also a substantial Anthroposophical visual and material culture, manifested in architecture, in mystery plays, even in commercial products such as Weleda cosmetics and natural medicines. Since the present chapter is a contribution to a volume on the influence of the Theosophical current on the modern religious landscape, we will not attempt to present a broad panorama of Steiner’s legacy. Our perspective is largely limited to those aspects of Anthroposophy – and in particular, Steiner’s esoteric concepts regarding cosmogony, anthropogony, and the occult physiology of the human being – that are historically connected to the Theosophical Society (henceforth, as elsewhere in this volume, abbreviated TS), an organization that Steiner joined in 1902 and left again toward the end of 1912.

The first part of this chapter is structured to reflect three chronologically overlapping stages in the development of Steiner’s ideas. As a very

¹ From a scholar’s point of view, Anthroposophy presents characteristics typically associated with religion, and in particular concepts of suprahuman agents (such as angels), a charismatic founder with postulated insight into the suprahuman realm (Steiner himself), rituals (for instance, eurythmy), and canonical texts (Steiner’s writings). From an insider’s perspective, however, “anthroposophy is not a religion, nor is it meant to be a substitute for religion. While its insights may support, illuminate or complement religious practice, it provides no belief system” (from the Waldorf school website www.waldorfanswers.com/NotReligion1.htm, accessed 9 October 2011). The contrast between a scholarly and an insiders’ perspective on what constitutes religion is highlighted by the clinching warrant for this assertion. Although the website argues that Anthroposophy is not a religion by stating that there are no spiritual teachers and no beliefs, it does so by adding a reference to a text by Steiner, who thus functions as an unquestioned authority figure.
brief and incomplete background to the Theosophical and post-Theosophical parts of the Anthroposophical saga, we begin with a sketch of Steiner’s – quite un-Theosophical – intellectual interests before the turn of the century. We then discuss the period from Steiner’s affiliation with the TS until his disaffiliation ten years later, in 1912. Third, there is a period that begins during his membership in the TS, when Steiner commences to distance himself from certain Theosophical doctrines but is deeply influenced by others, and continues well after his disassociation in 1912 as Steiner with increasing insistence rejects any direct ideological links to the Theosophical world view.

The second part of the chapter is concerned with some of the elements of Steiner’s writings that most clearly display an affinity with Theosophical concepts. We concentrate here on four topics. First, we discuss Steiner’s panorama of cosmic evolution, in which various vast epochs succeed each other, and in which mythological continents such as Lemuria and Atlantis play an important part. Second, we examine his anthropology, i.e. his view of humans as constituted by several Wesensglieder or occult “bodies.” A related topic, the role of karma and reincarnation in human life, is our third subject. Our fourth section contains a brief look at his radical reinterpretation of the Christ of traditional Christian churches. Finally, we discuss the broader issues concerning religious innovation that are illustrated by the case of Anthroposophy.

Steiner and the TS – A Chronological Sketch

Steiner before Theosophy

Born on February 25, 1861 as the son of a railway official in the Croatian town of Kraljevec (then part of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy), Steiner was soon to pursue ambitious plans. Biographies recount how he already in early childhood felt fascinated by the technical environment which he encountered at his father’s workplace. This fascination may have played a major role in Steiner’s career choice when he decided to study at the University of Technology in Vienna in 1879 after having

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2 Most biographies of Rudolf Steiner are written by sympathetic insiders to his movement and are thus to varying degrees hagiographical. Among the best are Wehr 1987 and Lindenberg 1997. A recent scholarly account, Zander 2011, was published too late to be consulted for the present chapter.

3 Johann Steiner (1829–1910) was initially a telegrapher and later a station master at the Austrian Südbahn.