Anthroposophy is the foremost esoteric movement in German-speaking Europe today, with a significant presence in the Anglophone world, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and elsewhere as well. Founded a century ago by Austrian-born thinker Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), anthroposophy has achieved an impressive public profile through its various practical endeavors, from Waldorf schools to biodynamic agriculture to anthroposophical medicine, as well as Demeter and Weleda products. The Anthroposophical Society initially appeared in 1912/1913 as a split-off from the Theosophical Society, and has since developed a considerable influence within alternative spiritual circles, the New Age milieu, ecological currents, and a variety of social reform movements. In light of this broad cultural impact, anthroposophy would seem to provide an ideal case study in the societal emergence and integration of Western esotericism. Yet the history of anthroposophical ideas and institutions has received relatively little scholarly attention.

German historian Helmut Zander’s monumental study of anthroposophy’s early development presents an imposingly thorough examination of the subject and its context, and in the process establishes new standards for comprehensive historical engagement with esotericism. In two volumes spanning 1900 pages, Zander provides an invaluable compendium of information on Steiner and his movement, as well as a series of provocative analyses of anthroposophist beliefs and practices. One of the book’s chief strengths lies in its readiness to follow anthroposophical sources as far as they reliably lead, while simultaneously integrating these internal accounts into a broader historical framework based on existing research in the wide variety of fields with which anthroposophy intersects. In not a few instances, this yields a critical re-assessment of established anthroposophist narratives and offers compelling alternative interpretations of central themes in the evolution of the movement.

Beginning with a detailed reconstruction of Steiner’s intellectual itinerary
from the 1880s onward, the book traces his development from modest origins on the Austrian periphery through his studies in the natural sciences in Vienna and his incipient literary and philosophical interests. Zander provides an insightful portrait of the cultivated and ambitious young Steiner, giving particular attention to his involvement with German cultural nationalism against the backdrop of the aging Habsburg empire. Through the mediation of sympathetic teachers, Steiner came to early prominence as an editor of Goethe's scientific works and tried for a time to parlay this into a scholarly career. With painstaking precision, Zander examines the remarkable ideological transformations Steiner underwent in the course of the 1890s, from German Idealism to Nietzsche and Stirner to Haeckel and Monism by the turn of the century. It was not until 1901 that Steiner came to embrace Theosophy, a doctrine he had harshly dismissed just a few years before.

In 1902 Steiner became General Secretary of the German Section of the Theosophical Society and soon oversaw one of the livelier branches of continental Theosophy, eventually becoming a potential rival to Annie Besant for leadership of the worldwide movement. Unlike the India-based Theosophists around Besant, Steiner emphasized the priority of Western spiritual traditions, particularly Christian ones. At the same time, he drew heavily on the work of Blavatsky and other principal Theosophical thinkers, while adding elements from his own idiosyncratic reception of Rosicrucianism and further strands of European esotericism. Steiner was an enormously productive author and speaker. In books such as *Theosophy, Cosmic Memory, How to Know Higher Worlds* and *Outline of Occult Science* he expounded his syncretic vision of spiritual evolution, supplying additional detail in the nearly six thousand lectures he gave between 1902 and 1925, most of which were transcribed and subsequently published by his followers.

Zander’s astute analysis of Steiner’s Theosophical career and his increasingly strained relation with Besant explores the interplay between substantive doctrinal disagreements and organizational politics. While the vicissitudes of esoteric schisms are sometimes viewed as simply a matter of ideological incompatibility or principled differences over the details of revelation and worldview, the book suggests that much of this history was rooted equally in intra-Theosophical institutional maneuvering, with different factions vying for predominance. In an increasingly acrimonious series of mutual recriminations, Steiner broke with the Theosophical Society a decade after joining it, taking most of the German-speaking membership with him. He soon moved anthroposophy’s headquarters to Switzerland, building a central structure called the ‘Goetheanum’ in the village of Dornach, near Basel.