

## Steiner's Relationship with the Cistercians

Steiner said that among the Cistercians were “the last relics of a striving to awaken Platonism—the Platonic world-concept—in unison with Christianity....”<sup>1</sup> What had lived in the School of Chartres survived, although somehow corrupted, among the Cistercians. Thomas Aquinas had spent the days of his final illness at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, and died there. That thread was picked up early in Steiner's life path. Steiner probably had one of his first contacts with the Cistercians through Robert Anderski, a liberal and tolerant priest of the neighboring village of Saint Valentin, who, however, “never spoke of things that usually interest a priest.”<sup>2</sup>

While living in Neudörfel, the young Steiner enjoyed going to the monastery of the Most Holy Redeemer, meeting the monks on walks and hoping that they would talk to him, but they never did. “I was in my ninth year when I became convinced that there were very important matters connected with the tasks of these monks, and that I had to learn what they were. Again, I had innumerable questions, which remained unanswered. Indeed, questions about all kinds of matters made me a very lonely boy.”<sup>3</sup> One cannot help but ponder how the life of Aquinas may have been reverberating in the young soul. Thomas was five years old when he had first asked the question about the nature of God to his uncle Sinibald.

During Steiner's schooling in Neudörfel, we know from the *Autobiography*, there was a close connection between the school and the church. The assistant master, Franz Maraz, also played the church organ and took care of the church vestments, ornaments, and sacred objects. Steiner mentioned that “we school boys served at the altar and sang in the choir at masses, requiems, and funerals.”<sup>4</sup> This he did until age ten. The ritual and the music left an imprint on his soul; not so the Bible reading and catechism. The service was for him an experience of deep significance. Moreover, he had great reverence for the priest, about whom he said, “The image of this man is deeply engraved in my mind... Of the people I got to know up to my tenth or eleventh year, he was by far the most significant.” This is restated a little later in the *Autobiography*: “Until my tenth year I intensively took part in the serving in the church, and this often enabled me to be in company of the priest, whom I revered so deeply.”<sup>5</sup>

We may sense the reverberations of the Thomas Aquinas incarnation in all of Steiner's proximity to the order. This thread continued during Steiner's adolescence. We find a last reference to Steiner's preoccupation with what lived on from the Aquinas soul, when, referring to his thinking and [how he was] wanting to develop it, he said,

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3, July 13, 1924 lecture.

<sup>2</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, note on p. 314.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Chapter 3. Another remnant of the child Steiner/Aquinas's devotional attitude appeared in his statement that he liked to climb a mountain near to home in Neudörfel, to visit a chapel that contained the image of Saint Rosalie. “This chapel was at the end of a walk I often took with my family; later on I loved to go there by myself.” (*Autobiography*, Chapter 3)

<sup>4</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

I wanted to establish a harmony within myself, between such [unbiased] thinking and religious instruction. This was also vitally important for me at that time. We had excellent textbooks in this particular field. With tremendous devotion, I absorbed from them Dogmatism and Symbolism, the description of the ritual, and church history. I lived in these teachings with great intensity.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, this phase did not carry further; yet Steiner wanted to draw the reader's attention to it over and over again.

Most of what we will relate now is found in the earlier mentioned Lectures 4 and 5 of *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4. Where not otherwise noted, I will be referring to those two lectures and highlight in italics relevant sections.

In relation to the Cistercians, Steiner said, "*from my earliest youth, until a certain period of my life, something of the Cistercian Order again and again* approached me. Having gone through the elementary school, *I narrowly escaped*—for reasons which I explained in my autobiography, *The Story of my Life*—becoming a pupil in a gymnasium or grammar school conducted by the Cistercian Order. *Everything seemed to be leading in this direction*; but my parents, as I have explained, [in the autobiography] eventually decided to send me to the modern school instead." Here Steiner was obviously stating his own preferences over and against those of his parents. In the autobiography he wrote, "My father intended to prepare me in a suitable way for a position with the railroad. This influenced his decision about whether to send me to the Gymnasium or the Realschule. He finally decided I should be a railroad engineer. Thus he chose the Realschule."<sup>7</sup> Steiner concluded that the choice was not too upsetting to him, as he was still quite young. "At that age, my future position was a matter of indifference to me, as was the matter of whether I should go to the middle school, the Realschule, or the Gymnasium." In Lecture 4 he added a telling remark: "...this [change] was also for very good karmic reasons." But the longing still remained; in later times Steiner started buying Greek and Latin textbooks and pursued his own classical education, while also tutoring students from the Gymnasium.

There are similar statements in *Karmic Relationships*, Volumes 3 and 6. In Volume 3, Steiner said that "before the Weimar period, I could never escape from the presence, in one way or another, of the Cistercian Order; and yet again I was always somehow kept at a distance from it." And further, "It was a *strange play of forces* that *drew me to them and at the same time held me at a distance*."<sup>8</sup>

The Cistercian influence continued, in spite of Steiner's having gone to modern school. "But the modern school that I attended was only five steps away from the Cistercian grammar school. Thus we made the acquaintance of all those *excellent Cistercian teachers* whose work was indeed of a high quality at the time." Where this relationship went is commented upon later, when Steiner said "*I was deeply attracted to all these priests*, many of whom were extremely learned men. I read a great deal that they wrote and was profoundly stirred by it. *I loved these priests*..."<sup>9</sup> From these premises, he concludes, "*In short, the Cistercian Order was near me*. And without a doubt (though

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<sup>6</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 7.

<sup>7</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 6.

<sup>8</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3 July 13, 1924 lecture.

<sup>9</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6, June 18, 1924 lecture.

these of course are hypotheses such as one uses only for purposes of illustration), if I had gone to the Cistercian *school I should, as a matter of course, have become a Cistercian.*”

That the statement above is not a mere figure of speech is confirmed further by the fact that Steiner wanted to emphasize that the relationship with the Cistercians continued later. After he went to Vienna, he said, “I came into the circle around Maria Eugenia delle Grazie, where many professors of the theological faculty in Vienna used to gather.” The circle of delle Grazie met in the home of professor Laurenz Müllner, a liberal-thinking philosopher. The “spiritual center” of the group was formed by the theologian Karl Werner, who had written a famous work on Thomas Aquinas, and whom Steiner never met.<sup>10</sup> Werner also had interest in cosmology; that is, in the relationship between the spheres of the planets and the hierarchies. In some way, Werner laid the ground for the recognition of Aquinas’s soul in Steiner’s life. About this circle of people we hear: “*I learned to know some of them intimately. All those professors were members of the Cistercian Order. Thus once again I came together with the Cistercians, and through the currents which flow through the Cistercian Order today, I have been able to follow many things back into the past.*” [That is, streams of the Michael School as described in *Karmic Relationships*, Vol. 3.]. Notice that Steiner leads us back to where he started by stressing that his interest lay in *the currents which flow through the order*, not the order itself; in other words, the people whom he met through the order in that time and place in history.

How deep that link was is explained immediately afterward as an example, presumably one of many. Steiner refers to a professor of theology that came to him after he gave a lecture. Steiner commented on what the professor said: “He uttered words in which was contained his memory of *having been together with me in a former life on earth.*” The links that Steiner had with these individuals are deep. This is why the whole of the matter of the Cistercians is closed in this way. “Here you see, I have told you something of *the karmic foundations which have made it possible for me to speak at all in this form about these particular streams.* For one cannot study these things by mere study. One’s study of them must consist in life itself.” Steiner was referring to the two streams of the Michael School, of which he was speaking in the previous Lecture 3, and in the beginning of Lecture 4; not to mention the whole cycle of *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3. In that cycle, a clue is offered about the fate of the people of the School of Chartres, which concerns us here. After explaining the autobiographical events of his relationship to the Cistercians, Steiner added: “And to me those things were most important which revealed to me: it is indeed impossible for any of those who were the disciples of Chartres to incarnate at present, and yet it seems as though some of the individualities connected with that School became incorporated, if I may call it so, for brief periods, in some of the human beings who wore the Cistercian garment.”<sup>11</sup> Betty Glück had been a noticeable exception, but a person who felt out of step with her age. To offer an example of Platonic inspiration, Steiner referred to a conversation he had about the Christ-Being. Here Steiner said, “For the conversation was carried on, not from the present-day dogmatic standpoint

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<sup>10</sup> Delle Grazie was a key figure of a pessimistic group, formed mainly of Catholic theologians, predominantly Cistercian professors. They met in the home of professor Laurenz Müllner, a liberal-thinking philosopher.

<sup>11</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3, July 13, 1924 lecture.

of Theology, but from the standpoint of Neo-Scholasticism.” Thus, the *currents which flow through the order* are both the Aristotelian and the Platonist. The Aristotelian currents are made clear through the last example, and through the research of Karl Werner into Thomas Aquinas’s life. But in the Cistercian stream were also held the last traces of Platonism in the nineteenth century; so much so, that some Platonic souls could occasionally speak through members of the order.

Let us pause to draw attention to the ultimate consequences of what Steiner was calling attention to. He was telling us that here are people with whom he had intimate connections from previous lives; hence, people whose opinions he reads with “keen devotion.” From all of this it becomes clear that the statement “I should, as a matter of course, have become a Cistercian,” is not a concession to sentimentalism (to which Steiner was not prone). The statement is, in fact, repeated in *Karmic Relationships* Volume 6, “*I should have become a priest in the Cistercian Order*. Of that there is no doubt whatever. ...*I loved these priests* and the only reason why I passed the Cistercian Order by was because I did not attend the Gymnasium.”<sup>12</sup> Remember, in passing, that what Steiner said of his later acquaintances and friendships had already been true earlier for the Cistercian Franz Maraz. Steiner was telling us that his inclinations would have drawn him to join with these people, not because they were Cistercians, but because they were “carrying forward old threads of spiritual life which are indeed of the greatest value for Anthroposophy itself.” In fact, in regard to the Cistercian Order he said that the “stream of development has become decadent.” No, all of this was, or rather would have been, Steiner’s karma, had it not been for a larger world karma that was made possible through the intervention of his parents, particularly his father. In the end, “it was all for very good karmic reasons.” How important he judged it to be for the members to understand what karma was at play, is also restated in *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6. “In the future, the Anthroposophical Society must learn to understand, with full consciousness, something of its karma.”<sup>13</sup>

It was in the circle of the Cistercians that Steiner also learned something important about the fate of the Platonic stream. This transpires most clearly from Steiner’s research into the karmic biography of Elizabeth Glück.<sup>14</sup> That leaving this circle

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<sup>12</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 6, June 18, 1924 lecture.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Most of what we will elucidate here about Elizabeth Glück/ Betty Paoli comes from the lecture of September 14, 1924 in *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 4. In the previous lecture Steiner had just talked about his relationship to members of the Cistercian Order, and that he would have possibly joined the order. In relation to Elizabeth Glück, he prefaces her life by saying that there have been very few incarnations of spirits from the School of Chartres. “I was given one chance of looking back at the School of Chartres through a stimulus in the present,” Steiner said in relation to what later was found to be referring to Betty Paoli. He referred to what comes half a page later as “one of those monks, especially devoted to the teachings and works of Chartres, ...after all reincarnated in our time.” This was an “authoress who was not only my acquaintance, but my friend.” He added that he could speak of her only after the Christmas Conference. From this, we can imagine that he did so because something important lies behind her life story.

The Austrian Elizabeth (Betty) Paoli was born at Vienna in 1814. Her father, a physician, died when she was very young, and the family was left in very poor circumstances. Betty Paoli was compelled to earn her living from early on. For some time she supported herself as a teacher in Russia and Poland. Later, returning to Vienna, she became companion to Princess Marianne Schwarzenberg, a position she held until

of people was a difficult decision is indicated in Steiner's words: "I was now divided between this house [delle Grazie's], which I so much liked to visit, and my teacher and fatherly friend Karl Julius Schröer, who, after the first visit, never again appeared at delle Grazie's."<sup>15</sup> It is not without interest to note that Steiner devoted all of Chapters 18 and 19 of his autobiography to the circle around delle Grazie, after doing the same for Schröer in all of Chapter 14 and much of 15. In between those, Chapters 15 and 17 speak of Goethe.

Having made these earlier statements about Steiner's originally intended karma, we must repeat that it was with no regret on Steiner's part that his life turned in new directions. On the contrary, Steiner asserts: "I regard it as a very significant and fortunate dispensation of my karma that, while I had been deeply interested in the spiritual world in my early years (in fact, I lived my early life on the spiritual plane), I had not been forced by external circumstances into the classical education of the Gymnasium. All that one acquires through a humanistic education I acquired later on my own initiative... I am glad I was not sent to the Gymnasium in Wiener-Neustadt. I was sent to the Realschule and thus came in touch with teaching that prepared the ground for a modern way of thinking; teaching that enabled me to become closely associated with a scientific outlook."<sup>16</sup>

That Steiner went to quite some length to underscore that his inclination and his karmic connections led him one way, but that ultimately, world karma led him another way, must all be for a good reason. And why is this a point of such importance that it was stressed repeatedly? It seems we are here at the intersection of two movements of karma; the first is what Steiner formed of a personal karma, if such it could be called in his case. We may call it, rather, his "normal" karma or the regular karma of evolution. The second, the karma that he accepted wholeheartedly, seems to underscore the necessity of world

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the death of the Princess in 1848. The following three years Paoli spent traveling, visiting Paris and Berlin, and in 1852 she settled again in Vienna.

Betty Paoli's poems were widely read toward the end of the nineteenth century. Steiner called attention with keen empathy to the fact that the authoress used to repeat that she wanted to die. Steiner adds that this "did not spring from a sentimental or hypochondriac, nay, not even from a melancholic mood of soul." And further, "it was not a question of temperament or melancholy or sentimentality," but that "her whole soul life had ... been dominated by a kind of weariness as the karmic outcome of the mood of soul of yonder monk of Chartres." He connected the depth of the imprint of this previous life to the fact that Betty had maintained a likeness in her facial appearance to her incarnation in the Middle Ages.

Steiner went on to tell how the life of Chartres was dominated by a certain twilight mood of the spiritual life. The people of Chartres knew that after their passing, a time would come when ideals would no longer be understood. When she incarnated in modern times, Betty Paoli's soul felt that she had nothing to do with them. Her writings have the same quality; they hardly belong to their time. The mood of the life of Chartres still penetrated in these lines. Steiner concluded: "If her whole life of soul had not been dominated by a kind of weariness as the karmic outcome of the mood of soul of yonder monk of Chartres, I could scarcely imagine a personality more fitted to behold the spiritual life of the present day in connection with the traditional life of the Middle Ages."

Having said all of the above, Steiner pointed once more to the previous picture, in which he had described his experiences with the Cistercian Order, just to stress the link of continuity with what came before in the lecture cycle. This seems to indicate that here was another soul who was part of that circle, maybe through those who moved around the poetess Maria Eugenia delle Grazie. Could it be that here is another soul who would have gravitated around Steiner's circle, had world karma not taken her in another direction?

<sup>15</sup> Steiner, *From Symptom to Reality in Modern History*, November 1, 1918 lecture.

<sup>16</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 19.

karma at play. Given that Schröer had given up his world task, it was to be expected that Steiner would “pick it up,” for more than one reason. The task of Schröer was far too important for world evolution for an initiate to simply pass it by; moreover, understanding of karma and reincarnation would have been impossible without the foundation of spiritual science.