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Bridging the Abyss: Reclaiming Spirituality in Academic Knowledge Production

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Abstract

Over recent decades, Western academia has shown a growing interest in spirituality, accompanied by methodological innovations and epistemological expansion. Nevertheless, spiritual inquiry continues to be subtly subordinated to scientific rationalism, with Western science often presiding as gatekeeper over what is considered legitimate knowledge. Drawing on Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of *abyssal thinking*, this article argues that spiritual and experiential forms of knowing remain largely relegated to the far side of an epistemic divide, valued only insofar as they can be reframed within scientific norms. Despite increasing institutional recognition of spirituality in fields such as education, psychology, and medicine, these validations frequently rely on criteria set by the dominant paradigm, thereby reinforcing the hegemony they purport to challenge. To explore the possibility of a more equitable dialogue between science and spirituality, this article looks at the life and work of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), whose spiritual science (*Geisteswissenschaft*) offers an early example of first-person inquiry grounded in rigorous cognitive training. Steiner's anthroposophy represents an integrated onto-epistemology that seeks to bridge the Cartesian divide by cultivating enhanced faculties of perception through disciplined practice. I examine how Steiner's contributions have been, in part, validated in educational and agricultural contexts, while also noting the discursive vacuum around his spiritual methodologies. Ultimately, the article calls for a reconceptualisation of research into spirituality, one in which inner experience is not merely documented by others but is recognised as a valuable site of knowledge production. It suggests that meaningful convergence between science and spirituality will require researchers who are also spiritual practitioners, and spiritual practitioners with a grounding in research practices, inhabiting both epistemic domains with rigour and integrity. Only then might we move beyond the entrenched schism between soul and science, one born of Western rationalism's claim to epistemic supremacy, and begin to imagine—and practise—a more inclusive and integrative vision of knowledge.

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Bridging the Abyss: Reclaiming Spirituality in Academic Knowledge Production

The relationship between the Western¹ academy and spirituality has undergone a quiet but significant transformation in recent decades. Although spirituality once held a central place in Classical and medieval thought up to the time of the premodern university, especially in the fields of theology and philosophical inquiry, the advent of rationalism, positivism and secularism during the Enlightenment gradually marginalised and then rejected experiential forms of knowing, including spiritually informed inquiry. Spiritual experience, especially in its first-person, embodied forms, came to be regarded as incompatible with the academy's ideals of objectivity, neutrality, and critical distance. This displacement was not merely epistemological, but had both political and religious consequences, reflecting broader dynamics of power over what could be counted as legitimate knowledge.

These dynamics were explored by Foucault (1969/2012, 1980), who confirmed that the production and regulation of truth was undertaken through historically situated regimes of power/knowledge, “a power which the West since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific discourse” (1980, p. 85). He comments on an “Insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (1980, p. 81) which was already appearing in the 1970s to counter Western scientific “hegemony,” a hegemony which demonstrate[s] a reliance on empirical, measurable and replicable models which, uncoincidentally, were situated in Western colonising civilisations.

It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time. (1980, p. 145)

Santos (2007, 2014) extends and builds on this critique, introducing the notion of “abyssal thinking” to describe the radical epistemic cleft in Western knowledge between what is seen, recognised and accepted, and what has long been rendered invisible or non-existent. Spiritual ways of knowing, especially those grounded in non-Western, Indigenous and embodied traditions, are often located on the “other side of the line,” systematically excluded from any meaningful dialogic engagement, resulting in what he calls epistemicide.

Over the last 50 years, there has been a notable increase in attention paid by Western thought to trans-abyssal knowledges. The emergence of feminist, postcolonial, Indigenous and post-qualitative research paradigms has challenged the idea that only replicable, data-driven, depersonalised knowledge is valid, indeed, arguing that it is incomplete and needs to be balanced by relational and situated ways of knowing. These epistemic shifts have seen lived experience, including spiritual experience, become acknowledged as a site of meaning-making, leading to methodological innovations and academic resistance (Roth, 2012). Researchers increasingly acknowledge that denying the spiritual dimension of life silences crucial aspects of human understanding and human experience (Milner et al., 2020).

However, there still appears to be a requirement for abyssal knowledges to require validation (or be seen to validate themselves) based on standard scientific criteria before they can be

¹ “Western” here refers primarily to intellectual and cultural traditions grounded in ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian thought, as developed through European history and later extended globally through European colonial influences. I acknowledge that there is no monolithic “West” and that Europe has always contained a wide range of worldviews.

accepted as recognised knowledge. While progress has been made, the abyss still exists and power relationships are still unequal. With goodwill on both sides, there are indications that these may be overcome. To explore this possibility, I focus on the work of Austrian spiritual scientist, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) as an early and noteworthy example of someone whose life work comprised an attempt to bridge the abyss between Western science and spiritual inquiry.

Literature Review

For millennia, Western conceptions of the human being, the world, and the cosmos in general were shaped by spiritual and metaphysical worldviews. From Plato's theory of Forms to Aristotle's rational cosmos and Aquinas's synthesis of theology and philosophy, reality was seen as purposeful and divinely ordered (Kenny, 2012; MacIntyre, 2007). The human being was understood not just as a physical entity, but as a moral and spiritual being capable of communion with the divine.

Kant and Cartesian Anxiety

While this remained largely unchallenged and unaltered in Indigenous and non-Western worldviews (Baggini, 2018), in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment, all knowledge became mediated through reason alone and other conceptions and worldviews were relegated to the status of non-reason. As Kant pictorially puts it in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1998):

This land [of pure reason], however, is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape. (pp. 351-352)

These are boundaries set 250 years ago around what could and could not be accepted as knowledge. This forced dualism between reason and un-reason, between the mind and the body, between subject and object, is commonly known as the Cartesian divide. It led in time to difficulties on the island of pure reason (Varela et al., 2016) which Bernstein has termed "Cartesian anxiety" (1983), a "deep-seated fear that if there are no certain foundations for knowledge, then everything is groundless, chaos, and madness" (p. 18), together with a desire for cognitive security, firm ground to stand on, and the assurance that everything has its place.

The Changing Relationship between the Academy and Spirituality

What we know nowadays as spirituality² was undoubtedly part of Kant's "broad and stormy

² I use Foucault's descriptions of philosophy and spirituality. First, philosophy:

[T]he philosopher ... can recognise the truth and have access to it in himself [sic] and solely through this activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject. (2005, p. 17)

and spirituality

... the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call "spirituality" then the set of these researches, practices and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's

ocean,” a ceaselessly deceptive zone for serious scholars to operate in. It was a form of “rejected knowledge” (Hanegraaff, 2005) waiting unnoticed in one of Kant’s “fog banks” to be recognised.

Over the past five decades, the academic treatment of spirituality has shifted from marginalisation and suspicion to increasing legitimacy and interdisciplinarity. During the 1970s and 1980s, dominant paradigms in psychology and the natural sciences, particularly behaviourism and positivist empiricism (Tarnas, 1991/2010), regarded spirituality as either irrelevant or pathological (Wilber, 1980). First-person spiritual experiences, including visions and mystical states, could be categorised as mental illness or irrationality (Kaselionyte & Gumley, 2019; Taylor, 1999). While figures such as James (1890; 1902) had explored esoteric experience phenomenologically long before this, his work and others similar (for example, Blavatsky, 1886; Underhill, 1915) was often situated outside mainstream scientific discourse during this period.

However, in the latter part of the 20th century, an expansion of qualitative methodologies began to challenge this epistemological exclusion. Transpersonal psychology, championed by Maslow (1965; 1971) and Grof (1985), reframed spirituality as a requirement of being fully human. Spirituality began to be studied in terms of what it could contribute to well-being, personal growth, and meaning-making (Pargament, 1997), entering the fields of psychology, nursing, and education, among others, with greater empirical legitimacy. Although organisations such as the California Institute of Asian Studies (n.d.) were founded in the 1960s,³ the first university chair in Western esotericism was founded in 1999 at the University of Amsterdam (see Hanegraaff, 2012), followed by the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom in 2005. Around the same time, anthropology and religious studies increasingly interpreted spiritual narratives (in non-Western groups) as being culturally embedded and epistemically valid rather than primitive or delusional (Csordas, 1994).

From the 2010s onwards, spirituality has become increasingly normalised within the academy, with growing research into its role in neuroscience and psycho-social health interventions (Goldberg & Davidson, 2024). Neurophenomenology, first articulated by Varela (1996), offers methodological tools for integrating first-person and third-person data regarding spirituality and spiritual experience.⁴ This has coincided with the development and increasing acceptance of decolonial and Indigenous epistemologies and methods (Smith, 2001; Wilson, 2008) which have brought cosmologies to the foreground in which spirituality is inseparable

very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth. ... Spirituality postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge (connaissance) ... [but] that, for the subject to have right of access to the truth, he must become changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. (2005, p. 15)

³ Which became the California Institute of Integral Studies in 1980.

⁴ I follow Hynes' (2012) definitions here:

- First-person: Investigating one's own subjective experience or autoethnography.
- Second-person: Investigating another person's experience through interaction or dialogue, such as interviews, participant observation, or ethnography.
- Third-person: Investigating phenomena from an external, objective viewpoint, including experiments, surveys, and physiological measurements.

from knowledge production, strongly challenging Eurocentric academic norms, including what can be included in the term “science” (Held, 2024).

This trajectory continues into the 2020s, marked by growing acceptance of and curiosity about spiritual experiences and their outcomes, further consolidating a field that was once relegated to the academic periphery.

Abyssal Knowledges

Santos’s lens of abyssal knowledges (2007) helps highlight a tension which remains within the growing acceptance of spirituality as an academic field. His abyss characterises Western epistemologies as claiming “the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false” (Santos, 2014, p. 119) and “setting the criteria to which other cultures are expected to conform” (Frazier, 2017, p. 9). The “abyssal line” sustains the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms while excluding what Santos calls the “epistemologies of the South” (Santos, 2014). It can be traced back to the work of Fanon (1952/1967), Césaire (1950/2000), Said (1978), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) and others, often in connection with Eurocentric scientific logic, which constructed the colonised as irrational and devoid of reason. While critics of Santos caution against reinforcing binary logics, his concept remains a useful and influential tool to assess and challenge monolithic ontologies.

While applauding the growing interest in and validation of spiritual and other abyssal knowledges in academic research, I question if it reflects a genuine epistemic openness or merely repackages scientific dominance, particularly when such research remains firmly on the Western side of the abyss and stays grounded in Western epistemological assumptions.

Spirituality and the Emergence of First-Person Research

There are different ways of investigating spirituality or esotericism, which highlight different aspects. One can look to its outer, physical manifestations, its recognised effects, significant personalities, its history, and so on using standard methodologies and standard tools (Hanegraaff, 2012). This, however, neglects introspective and subjective accounts of spiritual experience and does nothing to rebalance imbalances of power across the abyss, in which those with a spiritual mindset risk becoming data to be studied by those on the Western side of the abyss.

To counter this, the gradual re-legitimation of spirituality has seen growing methodological and epistemological value attached to so-called first-person research (Verela & Shear, 1999; Shear & Varela, 1999), first-person narratives that offer an insight into lived experience (Holman Jones, 2005). First-person research has become central to disciplines exploring extended or altered states of consciousness, personal transformation, and meaning-making. Autoethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry can be used to explore spiritual experience from within, rather than through detached observation (in the second- or third-person) (Anderson & Braud, 2011). The field of contemplative science, drawing on insights from mindfulness and meditative traditions, exemplifies this synthesis: subjective experience is taken seriously and correlated with neuroscientific findings (Lutz et al., 2007).

The Case of Steiner

To explore this, I draw on the work of Austrian visionary and polymath Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), whose ideas anticipate these developments and whose life and thought offer a rich, unconventional resource for examining the possibilities and tensions inherent in spiritually grounded first-person research.

Life, Work and Method

In many ways, Rudolf Steiner is a paradoxical historical figure. Born into humble circumstances and educated at local schools, he was invited to edit Goethe's scientific works at the Goethe Archive at the precocious age of twenty-eight. His early works are primarily philosophical,⁵ strongly influenced by German idealism, especially Kant, Fichte and, above all, Goethe, and focused on epistemology, the nature of human freedom, and the act of cognition. In his books *Truth and Knowledge* (1892/1981) and *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1894/1995), he aimed to ground the idea of human freedom within a rigorous theory of knowledge, positioning spiritual perception as a legitimate extension of rational inquiry rather than a departure from it. At this stage of his life, he looked as if he was aiming at having an academic career.

However, around the age of 40, his work took an unexpected turn (Skagen, 2020) and Steiner began to speak and then write about spirituality and his own significant spiritual experiences, first in the Theosophical Society from 1902 to 1913, and later in the Anthroposophical Society, which he founded in 1913. He commented that speaking directly out of spiritual experience took courage.

I had to make a certain position for myself in the world first. People may say nowadays that my writings are mad, but my earlier work is there also, and they cannot wholly ignore it. And moreover, I had to bring things to a certain clarity in myself, to a point where I could give them form, before it was possible to talk about them. That was not so easy. And then – I admit it frankly – it needs courage to speak openly about such things. I had first to acquire this courage. (Rittelmeyer, 1929/2013, p. 68)

As the literature review above indicates, it is only recently that speaking openly about spiritual experience has begun to become more acceptable academically, and even now it is not always straightforward (Boland, 2024). It must have been severe for Steiner to speak out in the academic and social context of the period. However, as Steiner says in his incomplete autobiography (1925/2005b), his work from the turn of the 20th century was the result of a constant process of askesis, or inner development, which he had undertaken since he was young.

Steiner called his worldview or philosophy, anthroposophy, which can be found expressed in his collected works (some 350 volumes consisting of around 30 stand-alone books and over 6,000 transcribed, and usually unrevised, lectures) and in the wide range of practical applications of anthroposophy which have been developed over the last 100 years or so, two of which I discuss below. The term anthroposophy becomes clearer when the German word *Geisteswissenschaft* is used—a science of the spirit.⁶ The best known and clearest description of it which Steiner gave was “a path of knowledge, to guide the Spiritual in the human being to the Spiritual in the universe” (1924/2007, p. 13).

In essence, anthroposophy is an attempt to unite the spiritual and the scientific worlds, an attempt, made over a century ago, to bridge the two sides of Santos' abyss. In *The Philosophy of*

⁵ These include *Goethean science: Introductions to Goethe's Natural-scientific Writings* (1883-1897/2018), *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of the Epistemology of His Worldview* (1886/2008), *Truth and Knowledge* (1892/1981), *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* (1894/1995), *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom* (1895/1985), and *Goethe's World View* (1897/1985).

⁶ German: *Geist*, spirit and *Wissenschaft*, science.

Freedom, Steiner talks about three different kinds of monism: scientism on one hand (believing that everything can be explained by science); spiritism⁷ (the view that only the spirit is truly real, and material existence is secondary or illusory); and a third kind of monism, which he aimed for, which unites and acknowledges physical *and* spiritual realities. He spoke numerous times about his respect for and valuing of scientific progress; “we want to stand fully within it” (Steiner, 1922/2022, p. 83), and that scientific knowledge must be the basis of any spiritual investigation, “the science of the spirit needs to have the most recent findings made in natural science as a foundation if it is not to be amateurish, vague and unclear” (Steiner, 1917-18/2005a). However, Steiner’s life’s work was to try to extend scientific inquiry through spiritual methodologies, to show that they offer perspectives that conventional scientific methods could not provide. “Anthroposophy does not want to be in opposition to the legitimate paths of scientific knowledge. It only wants to extend what science gives for the sense realm into those regions that can be described as the supersensible world” (Steiner, 1921-22, Trans. author, 18 Jan. 1922).

This extension requires a development of soul capacities through long inner training, “faculties that are still dormant today [in everyone], in the same way as the faculties revealed today were once dormant in my soul during childhood” (Steiner, 1922/2022, p. 64). These dormant capacities allow the meditant or spiritual researcher to enter extended levels of consciousness while remaining fully, or even hyper, aware, and so investigate beyond what is observable or physically perceptible.

This description makes clear the contrast between Steiner’s methodology (and that of many other spiritual researchers over the centuries) and that of the large body of standard scientific research, and helps explain why commentators on Steiner are heavily polarised between “enthusiastic support and destructive criticism” (Ullrich, 1997, p. 568). Steiner spent considerable effort over many years to explain this spiritual methodology as an extension of his earlier philosophical and epistemological work (1904/1994) and he gave multiple precise and detailed descriptions of the path of training which it demands, yet it did not meet with academic acceptance.

A consequence of this protracted lack of acceptance is what da Veiga (2014, p. 147) refers to as a “discursive vacuum” which surrounds epistemological research into, and informed by, Steiner’s ideas. This vacuum is marked by the lack of a strong body of authoritative academic voices, with both scholarly standing and a deep understanding and experience of anthroposophy as an inner path, capable of shaping debate and fostering a culture of criticality. Although da Veiga made this observation over a decade ago, it remains, in my view, largely valid.

Practical Applications

One thing which sets Steiner apart from other savants and spiritual teachers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example Blavatsky (1831–1891), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), or Krishnamurti (1895–1986), is the extent and success of the practical fields of activity which he initiated, especially in the final five years of his life. These include the Waldorf education movement, anthroposophical medicine and therapies, biodynamic agriculture, curative education, the arts, the movement for social renewal, ethical finance, and self-development, among others. He saw these as practical expressions of spiritual knowledge which could be applied in everyday contexts to the benefit of society and humanity.

⁷ Not the meaning given to spiritism by Allan Kardec (1857/2006).

Validation through Scientific Methodologies

Although Steiner expressed a strong wish that academics would engage with anthroposophical ideas and spoke regularly in academic circles (1922/2015), it is only in recent decades that a steadily developing body of research literature has formed into some aspects of anthroposophy and the practical applications of Steiner's ideas (Ullrich, 1992). I take two of the practical manifestations of Steiner's work here: education and agriculture.

Education

Steiner or Waldorf education⁸ began in 1919 for the children of factory workers in Stuttgart, Germany. Since then it has grown to a worldwide movement of well over 1000 schools and several thousand early childhood centres (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners, 2024) spread across over 70 countries with additional organisations Waldorf-inspired or not listed formally. The essential features of the education are holistic—a balanced education of head, heart and hands—nourishing the child in body, soul, and spirit. Steiner's view of the growing human being, his anthropology, as it pertains to education, is as detailed as it is complex (Steiner, 1919/2020b). In practice, the schools have a developmentally appropriate curriculum, the main subjects are taught in so-called main lesson blocks (usually for three or four weeks)—a two-hour period every morning. The arts are incorporated all through different subjects and teachers in the primary school “loop” through classes, being the main teacher of a group of children for up to eight years.

Formal academic teaching does not begin until the children's seventh year, common in many countries, but up to two years “late” in some English-speaking countries, leading to parental concern. Research undertaken in New Zealand (Suggate, 2010; Suggate et al., 2011) indicates that children starting later “catch up with” and then surpass their peers in reading ability by the age of ten. Other peer-reviewed studies of the academic attainment of Steiner graduates appears to follow a pattern: while their performance is not significantly better than and is sometimes below that of their peers, their enjoyment of learning, their positive feelings of school and their teachers, their in-school well-being, and their feeling of being “met” by their teachers is significantly greater than in other kinds of schools. Especially in science, Steiner students' interest in science topics and enthusiasm for learning is consistently higher than in control groups (Salchegger et al., 2021), possibly due to the sustained use of inquiry-based learning. Importantly, Steiner graduates also speak favourably about the learning atmosphere, being treated as individuals, and report significantly better sleep and less stress than their peers (Jiménez, 2012).

In the United States, studies in 2012 (Larrison et al.) and 2024 (Telfer-Radzat) of Waldorf charter schools (government funded) found that a slower start in math and reading resulted in poorer results in the early grades, however, this was offset by a higher level of performance by grade 8. A study by Stanford University (Friedlaender et al., 2015) of the Alice Birney Public Waldorf School in Sacramento reported similar improved academic results as well as lower transiency and suspension rates, especially among African American, Latine and socio-economically disadvantaged cohorts.

While these studies suggest that public Waldorf education can support strong academic and social outcomes across diverse populations, they exist alongside ongoing debates about Rudolf

⁸ These terms are used interchangeably. Steiner education refers to the founder, Rudolf Steiner, while Waldorf education is named after the first school, die Waldorf Schule, in Stuttgart, Germany.

Steiner's legacy, particularly in relation to racially problematic passages in his work and their potential influence within Steiner schools. A 2009 study in Germany surveyed over 9,000 students to investigate the incidence of xenophobia and right-wing attitudes in a range of different schools,⁹ including Steiner schools (Baier et al., 2009) and found Steiner students to be the most tolerant of the groups studied. The incidence of xenophobia among Hauptschule students (24.7%) was three times higher than those attending Gymnasien (8.3%), which in turn was three times higher than in Waldorf schools (2.8%). The incidence of right-wing thinking followed a similar ratio (1.2% of Steiner students), although the incidence of things such as graffitiing, drug consumption and truancy were on a par with Hauptschule students and much higher than those attending Gymnasien (European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, 2006). Since that time, intensive work has been done on many fronts to address dated, Eurocentric attitudes within the school movement (Tyson, 2023).

Ullrich (2008) voices what he sees as a paradox within Waldorf education. While he likens anthroposophy to a neo-mythology, "a doctrine of dubious scientific credibility", he acknowledges that this same neo-mythology "has been unusually effective and successful" (p. 165) in the field of education, combining validation and dismissal in the same sentence.

Agriculture

The biodynamic movement originated from a series of lectures on agriculture given by Steiner in Poland a century ago (1924/2025). Biodynamic agriculture (BD) "was the first kind of organic agriculture, [established] decades before the ecological movement began" (Galfré, 2023, p. 65). It emerged as a response to the perceived decline in soil vitality and food quality under industrial agricultural practices and seeks to integrate ecological, ethical, and spiritual principles in farming. Over the last century, the movement has grown into a global network of farmers, gardeners, and consumers in 55 countries committed to a holistic and often spiritually informed understanding of nature and food production.

Biodynamic agriculture shares many principles with organic farming: the avoidance of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, and an emphasis on soil health, crop rotation, and animal welfare. However, there are some key practices which distinguish it. These include the use of specific "preparations" made from herbs, minerals and animal materials, and a planting calendar guided by lunar and cosmic rhythms (Koepef et al., 1976).

Common critiques of biodynamics have centered on its perceived lack of scientific basis, particularly regarding its spiritual basis. The use of the preparations and the idea that cosmic forces influence plant development have, in particular, been viewed with skepticism by the mainstream scientific community (Turinek et al., 2009), although biodynamic practitioners argue that these methods produce tangible outcomes in soil fertility, plant resilience, food quality, and animal well-being.

Despite such skepticism, biodynamic agriculture has received a degree of external validation (Santoni et al., 2022), both through sustained consumer demand and scientific investigation. Several independent studies have attempted to assess the agronomic and ecological performance of biodynamic farming. A major source of evidence comes from the 45-year comparative study of organic and conventional cropping systems in Switzerland, comparing biodynamic (D), organic (O), and conventional (K) systems (Research Institute of Organic

⁹ In the German education system, a *Hauptschule* provides a more vocationally oriented curriculum, while the *Gymnasium* offers an academically rigorous path leading to university entrance qualifications (*Abitur*).

Agriculture, 2024). The DOK trial has found that biodynamic systems consistently promote higher soil biological activity, better soil structure, and increased biodiversity compared to conventional systems, even if yields are somewhat lower (Maeder et al., 2002).

Biodynamic compost preparations, in particular, have shown promise in enhancing microbial life and humus formation (Carpenter-Boggs et al., 2000), though the specific mechanisms which cause this remain scientifically unclear. Meta-analyses and reviews note that as many biodynamic outcomes overlap with those of organic practices, it is difficult to isolate the unique effects of biodynamic preparations without controlling for all other variables (Turinek et al., 2009). Wines from grapes grown biodynamically are also attracting attention and winning international prizes (Decanter, 2023; Peskett, 2021), and BD viticulture has received additional publicity thanks to Sting¹⁰ producing 150,000 bottles of BD wine annually at his vineyard in Italy (O'Hare, 2021).

In recent years, researchers in agroecology, sustainability science, and the sociology of agriculture have shown renewed interest in biodynamics, viewing it as part of a broader movement toward holistic and regenerative agriculture (Santoni et al., 2022; Turinek et al., 2009). The concept of the farm as a self-contained organism, integrating plant, animal, and human, as well as more-than-human, activity has been praised as a sustainable model for closed-loop agricultural systems. Wright (2022) identifies resonances between Indigenous approaches to agriculture and biodynamics, namely embracing both material and non-material dimensions in order to both heal and maintain balance and harmony in the world.

The biodynamic movement occupies a distinctive position within sustainable agriculture; it overlaps substantially with organic and regenerative practices, while being grounded in an integration of the spiritual with the physical supported by an esoteric philosophy. While it has been externally validated to an extent through scientific studies, certification schemes (the Demeter label) and market acceptance, a substantial part of its value may lie in its contribution to addressing urgent global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation. Biodynamic agriculture offers a regenerative model that enhances biodiversity, counters the dominant negative effects of monocultures, and fosters harmony with the natural world. Its emphasis on soil health, closed-loop nutrient cycles, and the avoidance of synthetic and persistent “forever” chemicals aligns well with efforts to reduce environmental toxicity and restore depleted ecosystems. Beyond this, biodynamics incorporates ethical approaches to animal husbandry and land stewardship, supporting food systems that are not only productive but help support a more ecologically and ethically sustainable world.

Medicine

Space does not permit an examination of peer-reviewed studies of the effectiveness of anthroposophical medical and therapeutic treatments. Much of this is gathered on the website, Anthromed Library (2025), which contains links to a range of studies, including Iscador treatments for cancer.

Apparent Research Gaps

Like other aspects of spirituality, there is a growing body of research around the work and influence of Rudolf Steiner. Some of this looks at his philosophical background and influences, how his thinking developed, using standard document analysis. A critical edition of some of

¹⁰ Sting is the stage name of Gordon Sumner, a British musician best known as the former lead singer of the rock band The Police. Since 1997, he has cultivated his own vineyard.

Steiner's early works by Christian Clement has been established, which gives insight into how his views developed over time. There are studies which look at the history of the Anthroposophical Society at different periods, the life and character of prominent individuals, what former Waldorf students think of their education, what the Waldorf teacher demographic is, and so on. Others look at the increasing spread of anthroposophy around the world and the ensuing need for it to adapt to differing cultural and societal perspectives, highlighting attitudes within Steiner's work which are not tenable today (Traub, 2020).

The growing body of peer-reviewed literature on the efficacy of Waldorf education, BD agriculture, and anthroposophical medicine and therapies (AnthroMed Library, 2025), serves to validate ideas that Steiner put forward about what would work in a concrete, practical sense. The application of suggestions by Steiner, based on his spiritual insight, appears able, at least in part, to be proven "according to the standards of contemporary academic research" (Traub, 2020, p. 14). What is spiritual is found to have concrete, material application and worth. These studies are valuable and I for one hope that they will continue to increase; they illustrate a growing interest in a remarkable individual whose influence on the present day is significant yet often overlooked (Barfield, 1995).

Extended Methodologies

These studies all rely on standard methodologies, whether qualitative or quantitative, and investigate outer manifestations, the footprints made in the world by anthroposophical knowledge, by anthroposophists and their actions, using historical sources. They represent studies from the Western side of the abyss of spiritually based knowledge on the far side. The "validation" of outcomes of Steiner's spiritual insight using Western methods is for me a case of what Santos describes as when alternative knowledges "become objects or raw material for scientific enquiry" (2014, p. 120). Western science uses its accustomed prerogative to judge what is and is not worthy of being called knowledge. As Traub reports from a seminar on Steiner studies, Steiner "want[ed anthroposophy] to be regarded by the academic sciences as a crucial contribution to academic problems and solutions" (Steiner, 1950), yet research can "only ... be relevant and have impact outside of the anthroposophical community if it adheres to the generally accepted standards of academic discourse" (Traub, 2020, p. 15). Such "scientific," or scientistic, studies constitute important work, but they remain only part of the story. It is ironic that these worthy studies do not touch on the most fundamental and perhaps ground-breaking aspect of Steiner's work and legacy, which remains neglected. This is Steiner's anthroposophy itself, "a path of knowledge, to guide the Spiritual in the human being to the Spiritual in the universe" (1924/2007, p. 13).

I turn here to the work of Thayer-Bacon who takes James's 1976 metaphor of the ontology and epistemology of the researcher forming the warp and weft of a "net" with which she or he fishes (Thayer-Bacon, 2017). I quote her at length as she puts it better than I can.

There are multiple kinds of epistemological and ontological fishing nets we can design, maybe even an infinite variety, some more effective than others, in terms of the amount of ocean life they are able to catch up, some are more beautiful, some more durable, or more particular to their sought-after catch. Whatever epistemological and ontological net we use, however fine the weaving of the warp and weft threads, there is so much more in this vast ocean of experience than our nets can ever catch. When we cast our nets, much will overflow the top of our net as well as spill through it and escape back into the infinite ocean. (p. 300)

This poetic statement is of great relevance to Steiner studies and to studies of spirituality more widely. We are familiar with the mindsets behind standard qualitative and quantitative nets. Yet what kind of onto-epistemological net is needed in order to “catch” and investigate a link to the cosmos?

Spiritual Inquiry as Research Methodology

In looking for methodologies to investigate Steiner’s anthroposophy, sensitive enough to be able to investigate a link to the cosmos, we need to travel across the abyss and explore facets of Steiner’s work that have only rarely been approached academically. Namely that “The capacities by which we can gain insight into higher worlds lie dormant within each one of us ... All we need to know is how to begin to develop these faculties for ourselves” (Steiner, 1904/1994, p. 13). Such capacities need to be developed in order to begin to practise anthroposophy as “a path of knowledge which seeks to lead what is spiritual in the human being to what is spiritual in the universe” (1924/1989, p. 14). It is worth exploring this in some depth to see if it indicates possible avenues for further exploration.

Steiner gives detailed instructions of how to start off on this path as well as descriptions of what spiritual research may find there, but it is a path that may only be trodden individually. As stated above, perhaps one of the most unexpected aspects of this path to those unfamiliar with it, is that it involves the soul, that it is a training of the soul, as “it is the soul that cognizes” (Steiner, 1904/1994, p. 10).

In the following passage from a lecture given in 1923 (1923/2020a, pp 14-15), Steiner describes such work. It illustrates both how this training involves the development of soul capacities and how far removed it is from conventional Western research methods:

I’m going to use a very mundane comparison: you can have a certain capital and keep spending it. Then you have less and less and finally nothing left at all. Then you have “zero” capital. But this may not be the end of it: you can go on to incur debts, and then you have less than nothing. We’re familiar with this idea from mathematics. The same can be true of stillness, silence. Passing from the noise and tumult of the world, we can enter complete silence, as it were, “zero.” But then we can go further still, gaining greater quiet than quietness: we can descend below this zero point to become quieter and quieter, a negative quiet, negative tranquillity that is deeper than tranquillity... We create in the soul a tranquillity that goes to the other pole, a silence that is more than the silence we possess when the ordinary mind is quiet.

And once we enter into this silence, when the soul feels that it has, if you like, distanced itself from the world, not only because the world grows still around the soul, but by virtue of the soul feeling that, though the world cannot become more tranquil than “zero,” the soul itself can delve deeper into silence than the silence of the world can be. And when this negative stillness arrives, from the other side of existence the world of spirit starts to speak to us, really. It starts to speak. ...the world of spirit begins to utter itself in a language, a speech we must first become accustomed to, which does not in any way resemble the language of words. This language shapes itself for us so that we gradually become accustomed to it, hearkening to qualities we know well from the world of the senses—to colours, tones and, in short, everything we are familiar with from sense perception. We have to resort to these sense experiences if we are to describe the distinctive impressions we can receive in this way from the world of the spirit.

This resonates strongly with a comment by Godwin (2007) on the Sufi mystic, Suhrawardī

(far removed in time and culture from Steiner):

At the centre of the Suhrawardī's theosophy is the same concept of a spiritual body that is developed by prayer and meditation... It answers to the requirements of a scientific method, namely that anyone with the right equipment will discover its objective existence. However, unlike the radio telescope or particle collider, which inform the scientist of invisible and almost unimaginable realities, the exploration of Hūrqulyā [the spiritual world] requires the special tool of a highly refined astral or spiritual body: something as rare and hard to obtain as any piece of expensive hardware. (pp. 6–7)

Likening the developed astral body of the researcher to a piece of equipment you need to possess in order to undertake research, and that you have to develop or build this equipment yourself before you can research effectively, puts an interesting slant on the commonly held view of what constitutes academic investigation, that “Information about matter and energy relies on the senses and their amplification through various technologies such as microscopes and telescopes”.¹¹ This statement is of interest in that Steiner advocated for the expansion of the senses through inner work, just as Foucault argued for.

Technologies of the self... [which] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves... in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (1988, p. 18)

In what is written about Steiner and anthroposophy—by insiders, critics, and neutral academics alike—few address academically the fact that anthroposophy is not merely a historical phenomenon or a body of ideas but a *praxis*, an *askesis*: a consciously undertaken inner path that, through disciplined practice, can develop and open additional senses and illuminate phenomena from previously unexplored angles, including the nature of the process itself. There are undoubtedly people working with meditation as a method of researching the spiritual world in order to gain a more accurate understanding of reality (on both sides of the abyss) but, by and large, they do not talk or, especially, write academically about it.

There is a growing body of research into the experience of others on this path, second-person research (University of Ljubljana, n.d.). Somewhat bafflingly, this is also referred to as first-person research, although is not autoethnographic, in which the author is inquiring into their own experiences. da Veiga (2014) calls for academics interested in anthroposophy as praxis “simply to try, however modestly, to render spiritual reality accessible, and to offer the fruits of these attempts for discussion”, in the hope of building up a “trained elite” (p. 147) who can discuss their findings and take the work further. While “this is as straightforward as it is exacting” (da Veiga, 2014, p. 147), there is a small body of such work from academics emerging (Boland, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2024). Despite such work emerging, by and large, “this [kind of collective scholarly engagement] does not seem to be happening” (Tazer-Myers, 2019, p. 332). Until this area is more fully developed, a significant and promising area of methodological extension that can explore Steiner's work (and much else besides) will remain undernourished.

Karma Research

The second field I would identify as very much neglected is that of karma research, research into experiences of past lives. A substantial proportion of the world's population lives in

¹¹ From the call for papers for this special issue.

countries in which the concept of reincarnation is unremarkable (Evans et al., 2025). Perhaps contrary to expectation, this includes Europe. Haraldsson reports that in Scandinavia, 78% of respondents from Iceland reported a belief in reincarnation (the highest) compared to “just” 38% in Denmark (2006). A belief in reincarnation is not something limited to nominally Hindu or Buddhist cultures.

Despite this widespread belief in reincarnation, many academics likely regard the scientific, first-person investigation of past experiences as flaky at best, or even outrageous or impossible. Standard methodologies are certainly not able to investigate this. Meyer (2010) describes Steiner’s essential mission, his core task, to do research into reincarnation and karma, which he pursued with increasing intensity toward the end of his life. In the final six months of his lecturing activity, even as his health declined, Steiner gave 86 lectures on karmic relationships (*Complete Works*, volumes 235–240a). These follow on from some early lectures on aspects of karma (1910/1996a, 1912/2001b) and two lecture cycles from 1916, *The karma of vocation* (12 lectures, 1916/2014) and *The karma of untruthfulness* (26 lectures, 1916/2005c).

Steiner identifies research into past lives as particularly difficult, to be entered into with deep responsibility, although “a definite conception can be acquired by means of certain inner exercises which are by no means easy; indeed they are difficult, but they can nevertheless be carried out” (1912/1996b, p. 5). Such research is, perhaps unsurprisingly, “subject to all kinds of deceptive images and illusions” (1910/1996a, p. 149), yet also, Steiner said that self-knowledge is only truly possible when one is able to view this life in the context of past experiences. There are a number of studies in which the authors lay bare details of their own karmic investigations (e.g. Ben-Aharon, 2014; Hartmann, 2020) but these prioritise personal insight over methodological accountability. It is perhaps best if the subject remains explored in private until a suitable methodology becomes more firmly established.

Nonetheless, as an increasing number of people claim to have some awareness of past-life experiences (Meidan & Mayseless, 2025), especially young children (Moraes et al., 2024)—which is in line with Steiner’s predictions of the increasing spiritual awareness of humankind generation on generation (1909/2001a) and it is something which conventional science lacks the means to explore. Is there a possibility of karma research being acknowledged as a valid area of spiritual inquiry? In the short term, I would say, assuredly not. In the medium term, I am not so certain.

Conclusion: Bridging the Abyss

Speaking generally again, there have been positive and innovative steps taken to unite scientific expertise with spiritual methodologies. A notable example occurred some years ago at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, where a group of scientists held a two-day conference with the Dalai Lama and other representatives of Tibetan Buddhism (Harrington & Zajonc, 2008). The meeting was largely organised by Arthur Zajonc, an emeritus professor of quantum physics and former General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in the United States.

The aim of the conference was to explore and understand experiences of extended states of consciousness both from the perspectives of scientists as well as of practising meditants. It provided a forum for both groups to come into dialogue, reflecting Varela’s view that “there could be no comprehensive science of the mind without understanding subjective experience, especially the subjective experience of one’s own mental processes as they are lived in the first person” (Harrington & Zajonc, 2008, p. 19). It explored whether “external” science could be

complemented by “inner” experience, an aim which strongly resonates with what Steiner wrote a century earlier, that science should be extended by spiritual investigation.

It is in work such as this conference that I find the most hopeful signs that the abyss between science and spirituality can be bridged, with the knowledge on both sides equally valued and equally respected by the other. My hope is that representatives from both sides will not simply peer across the gap and gather data that supports their own perspectives but will instead build and travel across a genuine bridge of understanding.

While I fully support standard research into the physical and historical manifestations of spirituality, the most promising direction, for me, lies in researchers exploring the development of their own consciousness through inner, meditative paths. Likewise, meditants can engage analytically with their inner experiences of heightened consciousness. Working in this way could unite the two sides of the abyss. I suggest this as a model for consciousness or spirituality studies: one in which Santos’ abyss is spanned—or even filled—by individuals who inhabit both worlds simultaneously, rather than being dominated by academics becoming “experts” in experiences they have never had.

Similar work has been accomplished in other fields. Just a few decades ago, European anthropologists typically studied ethnic groups using Western knowledge systems, one group holding the knowledge, while the other (as carriers of “less-developed,” or even “primitive,” beliefs) provided the data that was studied. This began to change when Indigenous peoples trained as academics and began researching their own communities, bringing valuable insider knowledge previously unknown to outsiders. Indigenous methodologies were developed (Huaman & Martin, 2020; Smith, 2001), honoring cultural context and weakening the West’s hegemonic grip on what constitutes valid knowledge (see Santos et al.). Non-Western ontologies and epistemologies started to gain wider recognition.

My hope is that something similar will occur in the study of spirituality, exemplified a century ago by Steiner and more recently by the MIT conference with the Dalai Lama. I hope that spiritual experience will not remain merely a subject of research, with esotericists serving only as data providers, but that it will become a legitimate site of research in its own right. That it may complement and extend material knowledge, heal the Cartesian divide, and help overcome the academic marginalisation of the soul and spirit.

Half a century ago, Maslow added a final, perhaps most elevated, human need to his hierarchy: that of transcendence— “behaving and relating ... to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos” (Maslow, 1971, p. 268). This strongly resonates with Steiner’s wish to “guide what is spiritual in the human being to what is spiritual in the cosmos,” which he goes on to describe as “a need of the heart ... an elemental need of life, just as one feels hunger and thirst” (1924/2007, p. 13).

I welcome the academy’s growing interest in manifestations of spirituality. Yet I look forward more to a time when researchers into spirituality will also be spiritual practitioners, and spiritual practitioners will engage in research, uniting inner experience and scholarly inquiry within the same individual.

Final Words

I end with a short verse written by Rudolf Steiner for his wife, Marie, in 1922 (2004, p. 102). For me, it captures the essence of a turning point we are living through both in the academy and in society, a transition from understanding the world in purely physical terms towards a

more expanded notion of the human being and their place in the universe.

Once the stars spoke to man,
It is world destiny that they are silent now.
To be aware of this silence can become pain for earthly man.
But in the deepening silence
there grows and ripens
what man speaks to the stars.
To be aware of this speaking
can become strength for Spirit-Man.

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