

Examining posture toward the contemplative: Jill Roe, contemporary spirituality and the case of Steiner education

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper responds to calls within the history of Australian education and Australian politics to examine posture or positioning toward the contemplative or spiritual in historical work. The purpose of this paper is to respond to these calls through a focus on the work of Jill Roe on alternative spiritualities, most notably Theosophy, in a way that demonstrates shifts in receptivity toward alternative spiritualities within work produced between 1986 and 2004.

Design/methodology/approach – Microhistory, in combination with a Foucauldian genealogical history of the present approach, is used to carry out and contextualise a close reading of three historical works by Jill Roe on alternative spiritualities. Subtle shifts in positioning toward the subject are highlighted to point to larger shifts in receptivity toward the contemplative and alternative spiritualities.

Findings – Close reading of three of Jill Roe's publications on alternative spiritualities in Australia and New Zealand are found to reveal shifts from a more cautious positioning toward the subject matter in earlier works to more open positionings in later works. These findings are rendered legible, it is argued, in the context of the contemporary acceptance of mindfulness, meditation and the emergence of a new cultural category of contemporary spirituality.

Originality/value – This paper responds to calls for the re-evaluation of the posture taken in the field of education history toward notions of meditation, mindfulness and alternative spiritualities. It has shown one way to respond to such calls which takes into account present framings of these subjects and applies a close, microhistory, reading of text. Creative examinations that draw together threads of connection are modelled through examining Jill Roe's work, particularly on Theosophy, to underscore continuities between Theosophy and Steiner education in Australia and New Zealand.

Keywords Jill Roe, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Alternative spirituality, Steiner education, Waldorf education, Contemplative, Mindfulness, Microhistory

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The emergence of the field of contemplative studies, along with related understandings of spiritual and contemplative practice, has brought with it historiographical possibilities. This paper responds to calls for the examination of the posture toward the contemplative and spiritual within the history of Australian education and politics and considers the changing conditions of possibility for engagement with, and understanding of, educational approaches that take seriously the spiritual dimensions of life. The paper presents a close textual reading of works by historian Jill Roe on alternative spiritualities that were published in 1986, 1998 and 2004, respectively. A microhistory approach in combination with a Foucauldian genealogical history of the present is employed to highlight shifts that, it is argued, reflect a broader change in receptivity toward contemplative and alternative spirituality. This broader shift, I suggest, aligns with the emergence of a new cultural category of contemporary spirituality which



renders more legible threads of connection between Theosophy and alternative spirituality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and contemporary educational practices. For the purposes of this paper, this is discussed in relation to Steiner education in particular. To begin, however, some historiographical background is presented.

2. Historiographical background

Education scholar Remy Low recently called on the field of the history of education to examine its posture toward mindfulness and meditative-based pedagogies as a subject of historical and academic enquiry. As part of a roundtable discussion titled *Reparative Histories of Education: Material, Spiritual and Ethical Dimensions*, Low referenced his subject of enquiry being at times derided as “woo-woo”. Having myself completed a PhD examining the history of Steiner education, an approach to education demarcated by taking the spiritual dimension of human life seriously, it was a provocation and challenge that resonated and sparked a number of thoughts. Some of these related to my own similar experiences [1]. Others related to similar experiences cited by notable scholars and how a range of developments have begun to frame this subject matter in a different light in recent years. In terms of experiences of other scholars, those of Wouter Hanegraaff came firstly to mind. A founding scholar in the field of Western Esotericism studies, Hanegraaff was surprised to find that his interest in this topic made his teachers uncomfortable. His experience was that they “responded by tossing the embarrassing topic on to another colleague as if it were a hot potato” and that “nobody seemed willing to touch it” (2012, p. 2). Taking this as a sign that he must be on to something his subsequent scholarship helped establish Western Esotericism Studies as a field of study [2]. In his detailed work *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012) Hanegraaff traces how such topics came to be associated with an embarrassing lack of rationality under enlightenment ideals and were “tacitly divested of their traditional status as players in the field of history”. Once so divested, he notes, ridicule became one of the most effective “shorthand” boundary maintenance mechanisms in relation to “authorised” knowledges (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 163–164).

Of related scholarship, I was put in mind of Frank Bongiorno’s highlighting of the response of many Australian historians to the topic of unorthodox religion (2006, 2001). Australian historians writing on the formation of political modernity in Australia in particular, have tended to respond to interest expressed by historical actors in unorthodox religions such as Theosophy, Christian Science, New Thought, or Spiritualism, with distinct, even palpable, discomfort. Such interests have been seen to cut across the grain of narratives equating modernity and progress with scientific advancement and the banishment of mystical thinking and superstition. As a result, he points out, historians writing in the second half of the 20th century in particular tended to cast these interests as either awkward eccentricities or unfortunate lapses. Rather than peripheral, he notes however, such interests often formed primary understandings and motivation for the political activism these actors were undertaking. Early socialists and feminists in particular were often motivated by a strong sense of the “spiritual”, he argues, and “the spiritual affected not just the activism of this or that individual but the whole texture of “first-wave feminism” (2006, p. 201). That this reality has not been evident in most of the historical writing that has focused on this period, it seems reasonable to assume, is likely to have contributed to the posture taken towards this part of this history.

Turning then to Remy Low’s own work, Low is at the forefront in Australia in engaging with the notion of mindfulness in ways that have been attendant to the complexities of historical context. In his article *Mindfulness for teachers; notes toward a discursive cartography* (2019), Low examines mindfulness as a “discursive formation”, in a Foucauldian sense, and offers three orientations – traditional, psychological, and engaged. In his article *Follow the breath: mindfulness as travelling pedagogy* (2022) Low adapts Edward Said’s notion of “travelling theory” to outline an approach he terms “travelling pedagogy” which is used to sensitise “the

researcher to how the interplay of temporal, spatial, and biographical factors shape reiterations of” pedagogy, in this case mindfulness as it has been taught by three of its prominent proponents: Thich Nhat Hanh, Jon Kabat-Zinn and bell hooks (p. 154). In this work, Low suggests mindfulness is more than “an idea” and should actually be regarded in itself as a “pedagogy”; one that therefore entails the teaching of it, and as such, necessarily “undergirded by some theory” (2022, p. 156). Low has also written on contemporary spirituality and teachers taking “spiritual turns” (2024), albeit with less emphasis on historical perspectives.

In turning then to the question of writing histories of knowledge traditions featuring engagement with spiritual or meditative-based practices, touching on a few developments that might shape a contemporary perspective may be useful. Firstly, the notion of contemporary spiritualities; scholars have increasingly been outlining theorising and integrating what might be termed postmodern or post-secular forms of spirituality (Tacey, 2004; Benedikter, 2006; Gidley, 2007; Rawson, 2021). Huss (2014) has gone so far as to argue, for example, that contemporary spirituality constitutes a new cultural category. “Spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) has become a dominant identification, he suggests, destabilising cultural categories previously assumed to be universally distinct: Religious and Secular. Construction of the terms “religion” and “secular”, he argues, “was dependent on various processes including the Protestant Reformation, the discovery of the new world, European colonialism, and the rise of capitalism” (2014, p. 54). Implicit in religion as a category was a dualistic world view – God is out there, we are here – while implicit in the secular was a banishment of the sacred: there is only the material world. The new spirituality, by contrast, is underpinned by a monistic view that sees the world itself as infused with spirit. This contemporary conception reflects a focus on inner activities, bodily experiences, health, relationality and connectedness with nature. In this view the world is seen as alive, and the notion of “becoming” is centred, hence the notion of “practices” that cultivate and maintain health, relatedness and continued becoming, such as Yoga or Mindfulness. As Low has noted, this focus on practice accords also with Foucault’s (2005) definition of spirituality as involving a subject’s search, experience and practice through which transformation of the self occurs – a definition that “centres on what is done and the effects of such doings rather than on beliefs and attitudes” (Low, 2024, p. 541).

In the meantime, mindfulness itself has become ubiquitous. Meditation and Yoga have become mainstream, along with any number of similar or related practices. Accompanying all this has been by a diminishment of clear delineations between spirituality and health, reflected in the notion of “wellbeing” (Ryff, 2021) for example. In terms of contemplative science, the journal *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* recently published a commentary titled *Contemplative Science Comes of Age: Looking Backward and Forward 20 Years after Baer (2003)* (Goldberg and Davidson, 2024). Illustrating how far the field has come, interest has shifted from Mindfulness Based Intervention (MBI) to Loving-kindness and Compassion Based Meditation (LKCBM). Centres for contemplative studies or related domains of inquiry such as consciousness or mind-body studies, have likewise become commonplace. The Contemplative Studies Centre at the University of Melbourne was established in 2021 for example, as was the Monash Centre for Consciousness and Contemplative Studies (M3CS) at Monash University in Victoria. Work produced from the former already includes studies such as Chris McCaw’s *Contemplative Practices and Teacher Professional Becoming* (2023). At the same time, education policies and frameworks have begun including spirituality explicitly. In 2009 spirituality was added to the Australian Early Years Learning Framework for example, with a definition that notes the importance of acknowledging “a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, or peacefulness, and an exploration of being and knowing” (p. 68).

Scholars such as Benedikter (2006) have expounded on what they term postmodern spiritualities, while pioneer curriculum theorist W.F. Pinar has proclaimed that

what identity politics has broken apart – shared experience, the common good – meditative inquiry mends. What post-structuralism split – discourse from embodied lived experience – meditative inquiry stitches together (Pinar, 2022, in Kumar, 2022, p. xii).

So where does this leave us with our posture toward the study of meditative-based approaches within Australian history of education?

Turning to my own PhD study examining Steiner education in Australia between approximately 1970 and 2010, for most if not all the 40 Steiner teachers I interviewed, it was the inner-life component of their educational work they saw as demarcating their practice from other approaches (Bak, 2021). This finding fits with the observation of scholars such as Robert McDermott for example, that until recently Steiner education has held “a lonely position on childhood spirituality [because the] concept of a young person’s inner or spiritual life was dismissed or doubted in most mainstream educational circles.” There has been a growing recognition, he notes however, “that children across cultures and religions demonstrate a rich inner life that appears to be core to wellbeing” (McDermott and Beaven, 2021, p. xii). While there is overlap, the distinction does not extend here to instruction in religious denominational schools, as will be touched on in more detail in the final section of this paper.

In the period covered by my PhD study, the teachers I interviewed failed to see this interest shared by either other alternatives or by conventional education, even where these were notably experimental and innovative such as in 1970s’ Victoria (McLeod, 2014). Participants interviewed, perhaps understandably, generally found the spiritual and inner life aspect of their professional practice the most challenging to convey to “outsiders”. Two comments from participants stand out. When asked where they saw Steiner education fitting, one participant replied simply: “it didn’t”. Asked why not, the reply was along the lines of: “because people don’t recognise what an inner life is”. The second comment that stood out related to the experience of establishing a Steiner school in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne in the early 1970s where the participant quipped: if you mentioned the word “yoga” to someone in Victoria in the 1970s “they were liable to faint!” (Bak, 2021).

Taking the above into consideration, what might a contribution towards a re-consideration of posture related to spiritual and meditative-based approaches in Australian education history look like? I propose here to look at the work of historian Jill Roe on alternative spiritualities in Australia and New Zealand. Jill Roe’s work is chosen because she has written extensively on Theosophy, and related alternative spiritualities. My intention in this paper is to undertake a close textual analysis, or close textual reading, of some of her works from the perspective of “positioning” towards her subject matter. I suggest a more cautious distancing is evident in her earlier writing, and that this cautious stance is replaced by a more open, less apologetic positioning in later work. I draw on microhistory, which allows focus not only on seemingly small objects but also on close readings of text in the attempt to understand wider contexts. I deploy this methodology (in conjunction with a Foucauldian genealogical “history of the present” approach; Roth, 1981) in order to consider what might have constituted her anticipated audience at the time of writing, as well as how this might be read from the perspective of the present. Before discussing this approach further, some detail about the subject matter is presented.

While Theosophy itself was not the largest of the alternative spiritual movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries [3], it was not without influence. Credited with pioneering Eastern thought in the West, it has been situated variously as a religion, a philosophy and an esoteric movement. Relevant for the purposes here is the extent to which it subscribed to a monistic view, holding that while there is a distinction between the phenomenal world and a higher spiritual reality, ultimately such separation is subsumed by a unity that comprises an ultimate unity (Melton, 2024). In regards to education, Theosophy is probably best known for its involvement with the New Education Fellowship (Brehony, 2004; Howlett, 2017), first held in Calais, France, in 1921 to promote progressive education, and the associated journal, *New Era*, founded in 1919. Roe’s history touches on education only briefly, noting the four or five theosophical schools that existed in Australia “were really exotics, with shallow roots” that although they did not become permanent “occupy a substantial place in the rather flimsy history of alternative education (as perhaps do Steiner schools after World War II)” (Roe, 1986, p. 243) [4]. Austrian philosopher, social theorist and esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925)

was leader of the German section of the Theosophical Society from 1902 before setting up the breakaway Anthroposophical Society in 1912 (Steiner, 1977). While there is overlap between Anthroposophy and Theosophy, a key distinction lies in a focus on the wisdom or knowledge (sophia) of the self (“anthro”), as opposed to of God (“theo”). Both situated in the esoteric knowledge tradition, Anthroposophy sits more overtly in the Western esoteric tradition, and more oriented toward practical application (e.g., biodynamic farming, anthroposophical medicine, and Waldorf education – also known as Steiner education). Described as a spiritual anthropology (Rawson, 2024), Anthroposophy is the body of knowledge, and practice, articulated by Rudolf Steiner that underpins Steiner education. Because of this, a focus on inner activity, interiority, on the part of the teachers has always been a central focus, as noted earlier (Rawson, 2021). Since Roe wrote about Theosophy and there is a clear link between Theosophy and Anthroposophy and because Anthroposophy forms the underlying basis for Steiner education, my interest in this paper lies also in pointing out links and continuities in this domain that have historically been obscured. And through this to complement accounts emphasising Eastern knowledge traditions by illuminating a Western spiritual pedagogical tradition that has had a more enduring presence in the Australian education landscape than has, perhaps, been previously recognised.

3. Methodology: combining microhistory and history of the present

Microhistory takes an interest in small things. The notion of the ocean in the drop, or synecdoche, enables an approach where seemingly unimportant phenomena can enable answers to larger historical questions (Kisantal, 2015). The idea is not just to show how small things fit into a wider picture, but also to see how close readings across the grain can be suggestive of wider, unanticipated implications. A strange detail, in other words, may be shown to represent a wider totality at play (Peltonen, 2014, p. 106). Deploying an evidentiary method, or a process of clue finding, microhistorians, Magnússon and Szijártó (2013, p. 4) maintain, “hold a microscope and not a telescope in their hands”. Altering the scale of observation, it is hoped, can allow what has been previously understood and accepted to assume new meanings. Despite variations to the approach, people in the past are generally held to be conscious actors. In other words, “for microhistorians people who lived in the past are not merely puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors” (Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013, p. 5). Determinative explanations are avoided and the notion that events occurring at the micro level are merely miniature copies of great historical processes eschewed.

Microhistorical studies have included an array of objects for study, including people, such as in *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Davis, 1983) for example, or events or objects such as a ship in Cothran and Shubert’s (2023) *Edwin Fox: How an Ordinary Sailing Ship Connected the World in the Age of Globalization, 1850–1914*. The approach also extends to close readings of text. As Kisantal (2015) has put it

when a historian studies the textual traces of the past, he or she has to regard these texts not as mirror images of reality itself, but as complex entities whose formal and rhetorical attributes, circumstances of creation, cultural positions, and interactions are as important as any concrete statement they may make.

It is this latter application of microhistory that will be drawn on here to explore the positioning toward her subject of alternative spirituality in Jill Roe’s texts. As noted earlier, because the interest here is not just on examining the textual environment of the time, but how this looks from the present, I also adopt a Foucauldian “history of the present” lens. As noted by Garland (2014), common to Foucault’s work is a concern with critically engaging with the present. His genealogical approach aims to “reveal something important – but hidden – in our contemporary experience” (Garland, 2014, p. 373). Embracing the fact that a history is written in the present, Foucault’s genealogical approach “aims to trace the forces that gave

birth to our present-day practices and to identify the historical conditions upon which they still depend.” Genealogies tend to begin with “a certain puzzlement or discomfiture about practices or institutions that others take for granted” (Garland, 2014, p. 379). As Roth has observed, much of Foucault’s work stems from the sense that a transition is in progress, from one structure of experience to another (Roth, 1981, p. 45) and in examining the conditions of possibility of the constitution of the past, and in this transition, also the present. As such it is interested in how logics are formed and constituted, and how these might shine a light on a present that is itself in a state of flux. In the case of this paper, this approach is deployed to bring into focus more clearly the conditions of possibility, then and now, for rendering legible educational approaches that take seriously the spiritual dimension of life.

4. Jill Roe and her histories of alternative spirituality

Jill Roe was Professor of Modern History at Macquarie University. She was the first female chair of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* editorial board 1996–2006, and president of the Australian Historical Association 1998–2002. She also held the Chair of Australian Studies, Harvard University, 1994–1995. She is perhaps most well known for her comprehensive biography of Stella Miles Franklin, published in 2008, but also for her work on alternative spiritualities. In 1986 Roe published *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879–1939*. This was followed in 1998 by a book chapter titled *Dayspring: Australia and New Zealand as a setting for the “New Age” from the 1890s to Nimbin*, partly based on research undertaken while at Harvard. In 2004 she published an article titled *A Shadowy Figure? Bessie Rischbeith, Theosophic Feminist*. *Beyond Belief* focuses on the heyday of the Theosophical movement in Australia from 1879 up to the Second World War. The *Dayspring* article, a book chapter, examines a range of alternative spiritualities across four identified periods: Theosophy, Christian Science, New Thought and Rosicrucianism, among others between 1890s and the Great War, Anthroposophy and Baha’i across the interwar period, E-meters and UFOs across the 1950s and 1960s and the communitarian movements, with a focus on the Nimbin community in rural New South Wales in the 1970s. The third text was published in 2004 and examines the notable feminist Bessie Rischbeith (1874–1967) with a lens on both her feminism and her lifelong engagement with theosophy.

My study explores some small moments in these texts only, and does not claim to draw definitive findings. Following the evidentiary method associated with microhistory, my intent is to look for suggestive instances that point to the “textual environment” of the time of writing, and, through a genealogical application, consider these also from the perspective of the present. The key construction in mind is the perceived audience. Who is the readership, and what reassurance might they need, given the subject matter? Given this interest, excerpts have been guided by a focus on framing, explanatory or summative statements and more attention has been given to introductory and concluding sections.

4.1 Text 1 (1986): *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879–1939*

The opening of Jill Roe’s 1986 book includes the following observations or assertions:

(1) “a Theosophical presence in Australia has not previously been noticed” (p. xiii), (2) “as a mode of religious thought theosophy has a long history” (p. xii), (3) “the historical significance of such a movement is not readily discerned” (p. xiii), (4) “we live in a determinedly secular age”, (p. xii), and (5) she also offers the following: “the Macquarie Dictionary offers a nicely distanced definition [of theosophy]. It refers to “forms of philosophical or religious thought in which claim is made to a special insight into the divine nature or to a special divine revelation” (p. xii).

There is something to unpack in each of the above, but I’d like to start with considering them together. In terms of positioning toward the object of study, there appears to be an element of reassurance at play. There is a hint of the need for containment, for example, in her

characterisation of a dictionary definition being “nicely distanced”. Definitions can be assumed to be either accurate or inaccurate (or adequate or inadequate in some way) but why would distancing be necessary? Similarly, though it may not have been “noticed” by historians, the writer appears aware that a residual association may be present in the minds of the readership, that may taint the, in some way, troublesome knowledge being discussed. The observation that “we live in a determinedly secular age”, taken in context, appears to be suggestive of a strict form of secularism, that was potentially mobilised against spiritual and religious understandings, rather than simply protecting individual freedom of conscience [5]. The formulation is partly explanatory – as one of the reasons why theosophy has been “forgotten” or “not noticed” by the readership. But there is a way here also in which Theosophy is placed firmly in the past, despite the openness of “has a long history”. The reader is forgiven for having forgotten, and for perhaps requiring some effort of imagination to reconstruct this only opaquely legible phenomenon. It is not only in the past, in other words, but firmly of it. And so, perhaps, also suitably contained?

That a theosophical presence had “not been noticed” in Australia carries a truth, and very likely rang true for many of Roe’s readers. It nevertheless slews the accepted position towards one of not knowing and is in keeping with Roe’s assessment in the book that generally speaking after the Second World War alternative spiritualities ceased to hold interest for people. Glennis Mowday, in her history of the first Steiner School in Australia, Glenaeon Steiner School founded in Sydney in 1956, has been among those who have pushed back against this assessment. Mowday claims this is “misleading” as the number of Anthroposophists remained steady throughout the post war period and the 1950s, “despite Anthroposophy being an unpopular ‘German’ philosophy”. Mowday suggests “Anthroposophists were temporarily less visible, [but] their idealism was once more publicly visible in the late 1950s” (2004, p. 29). Roe points to the continuing influence of Theosophy and Anthroposophy also later in the book when stating that “eminent art historian Bernard Smith, pondering the origins of modernism in Australia, proposed that ‘a thorough account of the history of spiritualism, theosophy, and anthroposophy in Australia as abroad is much more relevant to an understanding of modernism than say Einstein’s theories’” (Roe, 1986, p. 316). It seems in the field of education, and the world of Australian art, notice had been taken, as it had by at least some in the academic world. It is clearly true that visibility lessened for these knowledge traditions and that Australian society became more “determinedly secular” in the second half of the 20th century. Yet it is also true that “posture” towards a subject matter is conveyed through subtleties of textual framing and reinforced through discourse, to use a broad formalised sense of that word.

In the closing of Roe’s history of theosophy in Australia, she writes:

[h]istory tends to back winners ... Those same conflicts of class, colour and creed for which theosophy sought a moral remedy destroyed liberal imperialism, which was increasingly unable to guarantee the world’s peace and progress. Theosophists hoped that it could, and that the baton would pass to them. In the process they contributed much to national culture and sounded a warning against the triumph of materialism. Whether they were winners or losers is largely beside the point. The counter-culture has a longer history than we think (p. 379).

On the one hand, by evoking the notion of winners, Roe places Theosophy in the loser column, framing it as both in and of the past. On the other, Roe leaves the door open to the possibility that strands of influence continued, particularly as evident in the counter-culture movements of the 1970s. The latter reminds me of the observation of one of the participants in my PhD study that in New South Wales in the 1970s the counter-culture and hippy movement took place “alongside” the work of those pursuing humanistic, environmentally focussed ideals of Steiner education in New South Wales in the 1970s. A similar sentiment was expressed by Steiner educators involved with establishing Steiner Schools in Victoria in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who had visited Europe, including Stuttgart where two large Steiner schools had been operating for half a century. For these educators the humanistic approach to education they

were engaged in, underpinned pedagogically by inner life practices as rigorous as those that underpin jazz music improvisation for example [6], was not experimental or innovative in the manner that animated the broader educational and social (counter) culture of reform at the time.

4.2 Text 2 (1998): *Dayspring: Australia and New Zealand as a setting for the “new age” from the 1890s to Nimbin*

Much of the material for this article was sourced from the Christian Science Church archives in Boston, which Roe accessed during her time at Harvard (Kingston, 2017). One thing evident is the presence of more openly affirming formulations of linking and introductory phrases when discussing theosophy and other alternative spiritualities. See for example the contrasting usages below.

It is interesting that theosophists, who were not by and large the marrying kind, did not shrink from “blood intermixture”, as there were numerous marriages between the English and Indians in the twenties . . . (1986, p. 283)

Another powerful point in favour of theosophy in Australasia was its anti-sexism. This really told in what were men’s countries. Some early theosophical women went off to India to serve in theosophical schools (where the reverse of missionary activity was supposed to occur) (1998, p. 174).

“Powerful point in favour” contrasts with the more guardedly neutral framings in the earlier text. Although it is used here partly to explain the appeal of the movement for historical actors at the time, it also fits into a narrative that is approvingly disposed towards the merits of this as seen from the present (i.e. 1998). The *Dayspring* article also presents a positive framing for the fact that theosophy “offered colonists a positive way of thinking about Aboriginal spirituality and Maori belief . . . At least it was a step away from what most anthropologists were thinking” (p. 174). Roe adds that by implication it is only partly true that “white man got no dreaming”.

Dayspring also emphasises continuity a bit more, noting that the Theosophical Society was among those organisations mobilised to publicise the Nimbin community venture (1998, p. 185). Nimbin was the small dairy town in the northeast corner of New South Wales upon which over 10,000 students descended in 1973 to celebrate the coming in of the Age of Aquarius, becoming the site of a subsequent intentional community that remains probably the “most famous new age locale in the South West Pacific” (p. 184).

Where in 1986 Roe had suggested that history was written by winners, the concluding section of the 1998 article reflects a more positive assessment:

On balance it seems reasonable to conclude that the various manifestation [sic] of the “New Age” in the region have been beneficial, not only recently in the back to the land movements like Nimbin but over time, in what have helped keep alternative values alive in what have been rather repressive and inward-looking societies, especially with respect to race and gender. . . . For all its woozy and worse features over time, the esoteric tradition has often been a source of vitality and innovation; and it would surely be a pity if the dayspring dream was ever extinguished in Australia and New Zealand (p. 185).

It seems clear that the above framing conveys a less guarded enthusiasm for the positive aspects of the knowledge tradition she was writing about. Whether this was because her own position or assessment had shifted is less a focus here however, than the shift in the level of reassurance in regards her subject matter she felt was necessitated, in terms of her anticipated audience.

4.3 Text 3 (2004): *A Shadowy figure? Bessie Rischbeith, Theosophic Feminist*

In this text Roe addresses what she terms the “paradox of Rischbeith’s high public profile and her largely uncharted inner life” (Roe, 2004, p. 79). The term “shadowy” added in the title turns out to refer to the lack of available historical detail rather than to any suggestion of secrecy or

problematic association with the theosophic aspect of her life (p. 79) and a generally more unapologetic, matter of fact tone and framing is evident throughout the article. At the start Roe quotes Joy Dixon as having put her finger on “the essential point”:

A feminist spirituality was a crucial component of much feminist politics, and . . . one of the sites at which feminist politics – for better or for worse – was constituted and transformed (p. 80).

In her conclusion Roe suggests, in relation to the international aspects of both her feminism and theosophy, that Rischbeith was not a shadowy figure after all. Roe stresses that “the fact that her position was soon to be overtaken and superseded by other forms of internationalism underlines the importance of past historical and cultural contexts, as difficult as these are now to reconstitute” (p. 91). She finishes by linking efforts of radicals over longer stretches of time:

. . . Hope of a new order of things has been a recurrent aspiration; and time and time again radicals have had to resort to ‘unauthorised knowledges’. The time has surely come to take such religious ideas seriously (p. 92).

While at the time of writing the time had not yet arrived, perhaps it has today?

5. Contemporary spirituality, contemplative studies and education

As noted earlier, an increasing number of scholars have been arguing that the emergence of contemporary spirituality has destabilised and eroded the “gripping cultural power” of the binary categories “religious” and “secular” (Huss, 2014, pp. 55–56). The new spirituality reflects an emphasis on practices such as meditation, healing and embodied experience. In suggesting the term Postmodern Spirituality, Benedikter (2006) has argued for example that in the late writing of deconstructionists such as Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze there is a sense of a new emergent self within the productive void, a re-spiritualizing in the midst of nothingness. Postformalism likewise sees a possibility beyond formalism, the highest form of cognitive development as outlined by Piaget. The idea of post-formalism is characterised by intuitive, integral thinking, with an emphasis on imagination and aesthetic and artistic approaches (Rawson, 2021; Dahlin, 2013; Gidley, 2007). Scholars such as Heelas (2008) have distinguished between “spiritualities of life”, denoting inner life spiritualities, and “spiritualities associated with the God of transcendent theism” which are “spiritualities for life” and made the argument that a shift is underway from one type of spirituality to the other (Heelas, 2008, pp. 27-28; Huss, 2014). Scholars such as Rawson have argued that “Spirituality used to be seen in the academic world as ‘intellectually invalid, scientifically unverifiable and ultimately meaningless [but] the advent of a post-modern world, with its rejection of such pseudo-rationalistic dogma, has brought with it a revival of spirituality’” (Rawson, 2021, p. 55).

Within Higher Education, a notable contributor to the field can be found in physicist Arthur Zajonc. Professor of Physics at Amherst College from 1991 to 2015, Zajonc was a founding member of the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society, of which he was director 2004–2015 and president of the Mind and Life Institute (2012–2015), which was set up in 1991 to establish the field of contemplative studies. Zajonc has characterised the uptake of contemplative practices in universities as a quiet revolution (2013) in which “students at colleges and universities around the world” have been increasingly

settling their bodies, stilling their minds, calming their emotions, and schooling their attentions by means of contemplative practices. Insight and compassion practices complement those designed to strengthen attention and emotional balance so that complexity can be sustained until the epiphany we experience as direct and deep apprehension occurs. (2014, p. 205)

Zajonc distinguishes between stillness practices, activist practices, generative practices, ritual cyclical practices, movement practices, creation process practices, and relational practices, and suggests that “[much] of contemplative pedagogy is concerned precisely with giving

practical instruction for improving the faculty of attention” (2013, p. 85). In terms of the continuities this article seeks to highlight, Arthur Zajonc is an Anthroposophist who learned of the work of Rudolf Steiner from his professor Ernst Katz at the University of Michigan, and who was General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America between 1994 and 2002, helped establish and run a Steiner school and a biodynamic farm, as well as publishing on Anthroposophy from contemporary perspectives, much of which informed the work outlined above.

Within education more broadly, the emergence of a new category of spirituality outside of the domain of religion is also increasingly acknowledged in education frameworks globally (Rouse, 2024; Stoltz and Wiehl, 2021). Australian teacher and academic Elizabeth Rouse is perhaps emblematic in accounting for her shift to engaging more formally with contemporary spirituality as part of her teaching. In examining her own journey toward a spiritual pedagogy, Rouse notes that while she always felt she attended to the “being” of a student, when she started as an Early Years Educator in Melbourne in the 1990s there was no language for this aspect of education outside of one with religious connotations. At this time “spirituality” was “largely aligned to religiosity” she recalls, and the meaning of words such as “spiritual” or “spirituality” were often viewed as synonymous with “religion” (2024, p. 50).

As noted earlier, in my PhD research examining the history of Steiner education in Australia, the inner-life dimension of their professional practice was what the majority of the teachers I interviewed appeared to find both core to their professional endeavour, and a defining demarcation of their practice from other pedagogical and curricular approaches – both mainstream and alternative. For over a century, teachers in Steiner schools globally have generally started the school day with a verse to connect themselves in the present with focused attention for the day’s work ahead. Usually enacted in a circle, this is a collective “professional” practice. For over a century it has also been standard for Steiner educators each evening to bring into their conscious minds each of the children in their class. For most teachers, this is understood not as symbolic, but as a practical component of an applied pedagogy of care. What the teachers I interviewed from my PhD generally found was that Steiner’s Anthroposophy, understood critically and in context, offered a spiritual phenomenology, and an anthropology of the self that had practical application. As Rawson has argued:

Steiner’s epistemology and phenomenological anthropology came to full expression in the founding of the Waldorf School and he incorporated this perspective into most aspects of the pedagogy. Thus, the approach to spirituality that Waldorf education takes, is based in many ways on a very concrete understanding of spirit. However, the fact that this understanding of the interactions between soul and spirit is so detailed, is also what makes it problematic for people, who recognize the spiritual dimension, but in a vague, less defined way. Reading Steiner’s detailed descriptions of spiritual worlds can be overwhelming and for that reason, perhaps also suspect. (2021, p. 64)

I come back to “woo-woo”, because I have to, and Low’s challenge in relation to examination of posture in the field towards meditation-based pedagogies and educational approaches as a subject of historical investigation. Does it remain “suspect”, or an “unauthorised” form of knowledge, in a globalised world where meditation and mindfulness practice have become ubiquitous and unremarkable?

6. Conclusion

We no longer live, it appears, in a “determinedly secular age”. This paper has attempted to respond to Remy Low’s challenge for the field of Australian education history to examine its posture toward meditative and spiritually based pedagogies and approaches. In doing so it has picked up Frank Bongiorno’s observation that “unauthorised knowledges” in the form of unorthodox religion, or what Jill Roe terms alternative spirituality, represent a “neglected underside of Australian political culture”, and that the scholarly neglect of their influence has

led political historians, until recently, to overestimate the utilitarianism and understate the spiritual, religious and even utopian impulses behind key political movements and actors (Bongiorno, 2006, p. 180). I have extended this observation to education history here through a focus on Steiner education as a connected instantiation. There is a direct historical line between the Theosophical and Anthroposophical movements, of which Steiner education has been characterised as perhaps the most fruitful expression (Rawson, 2021). I have suggested that the emergence of contemplative studies, along with a new category of contemporary spirituality, has provided new grounds for the historical consideration of traditions assumed past. I have also attempted to demonstrate a methodological response through a microhistory reading of the work of Jill Roe on theosophy and alternative spiritualities in Australia and New Zealand, in combination with a Foucauldian history of the present approach.

Through examinations of texts published in 1986, 1998 and 2004, respectively, I have attempted to show movement from a cautious, reassuring, stance toward subject matter framed as in some way troublesome to a more open, affirming and unapologetic stance. I have then attempted to interrogate, however briefly, what this stance looks like from the perspective of the present. In the process I have taken the opportunity to point to threads of continuity that have, perhaps understandably, for all the reasons noted, been at times portrayed as either forgotten or obscure. As a scholar of Steiner education my primary interest has here been Anthroposophy, rather than Theosophy, in terms of instantiations of historical continuities. Given Anthroposophy's breadth of application as inner life practice and form of applied knowledge, similar studies could be taken on influences it may have had on the fields of art, agriculture, medicine, economics, among a host of others, to illustrate continuities and affinities with contemporary developments in those fields.

To date, work on mindfulness and meditation-based approaches to education in Australia has tended to emphasise the Eastern basis of the knowledge traditions upon which these practices stem. Through a focus on Theosophy, Anthroposophy and Steiner education, this paper has sought to complement these accounts by pointing to the longstanding presence and influence of Western meditative-based knowledge traditions in Australia. In terms of Australian education history more generally, the hope is that I have both contributed a response to a call for an examination of our posture towards meditative-based pedagogies within the field, and in doing so enacted and explored one of many possible methodological responses. Hopefully this helps to keep pushing the conversation forward.

Notes

1. While I don't discuss these here, some are captured in my paper (Bak, 2015).
2. Among many contributions on this front, Hanegraaff helped found the European Society of the Study of Western Esotericism in 2002.
3. Spiritualism, Christian Science and the Bahá'í faith had larger memberships and were generally more organised (Melton, 2024).
4. Among the former were St Margaret's in Devonport, 1918–1928, Morven Garden School, Gore Hill, Sydney 1918–1923, The Garden School, Balmoral, 1924–1946, The Kings Arthur Home School, Neutral Bay, Sydney, 1922–1923 (Roe, 1986, pp. 240–241).
5. For more on stances inherent in secular regimes, see Maclure and Taylor (2011).
6. The notion that the in-the-moment creativity that Steiner teachers strive for is founded on a similar type of study as required for musical improvisation was touched on in my PhD study (Bak, 2021). As Wynton Marsalis has pointed out “jazz is not just ‘well man, this is what I feel like playing’. It's a very structured thing that comes down from a tradition and requires a lot of thought and study” (Berliner, 2009, p. 63). See also the work of Ed Sarath (e.g. Sarath, 2016).

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