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# **The Show Must Go On: Corporate Narratives in the Anthroposophical Society**

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## **Abstract**

When new religions reach a mature and settled phase, they resemble in many respects secular organizations and are therefore amenable to being studied with methods inspired by organization studies. One group of such methods deals with corporate narratives and corporate communication. This article takes a structuralist approach and applies a version of the actant model originally developed by the Lithuanian literary theorist Algirdas Greimas to a specific case involving a set of texts, namely the so-called Christmas appeals in which a spokesperson for the leadership of the General Anthroposophical Society at the Goetheanum initiates a fundraising campaign. Since money is a limited resource, these texts reveal which objects the organization's leaders present as being important and why. The analysis reveals an organization that largely resembles a secular corporation but with the crucial difference that there are ultimate aims that transcend such arguably mundane concerns as maintaining a balanced budget.

## **Keywords**

Organization theory and religion; corporate narratives; New Religious Movements; Anthroposophy; Goetheanum

## **From Emergent to Settled Religions<sup>1</sup>**

An academic discipline acquires a particular discourse and a habitus by posing certain specific questions in regard to its empirical materials while giving others that also could have been asked less attention. The emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of a number of highly visible new religious movements prompted the formation of a field of academic research devoted to these organizations. The field was defined by the questions that individuals involved in it considered to be the most

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical framework underlying this article has been developed by Karen Swartz. The application of this framework to the empirical materials selected as a case study and the task of writing the text of this article is the result of the joint efforts of both authors.

pressing ones. These movements seemed to challenge the values of mainstream society and hence gave rise to concerned reactions from outsiders. Much of the scholarly effort was therefore oriented towards addressing these concerns and was primarily sociologically informed.<sup>2</sup> The typologies and the models of recruitment, membership, and tension with surrounding society that emerged from this study were more immediately applicable to understanding how emergent religions function rather than the operations of a post-charismatic organization that has grown in size, has a global presence, consists of many different branches and sub-organizations, and attracts people with vastly differing levels of commitment. Such large-scale, older new religions have gone through what Bromley (2012: 26) calls a process of “maturation and settling” that “presents scholars with promising issues for further development of the area of research.”

### **New Religions as Corporations**

The broadest explanation for the changes exhibited by religions as they go from the emergent stage to the mature and settled one is that religions form part of the general cultural context and have to adapt to it. This context can at present be characterized in terms of having a capitalist economy and being informed by neoliberalism and thus implies, regardless of whether the organization in question is a religious or secular one, a need to generate revenue and manage a cash flow by offering an appealing product and to organize day-to-day activities within the framework of an often quite complex administrative system. In other words, in contrast to the classic emergent charisma-centered communal organizational structure or the school-like form typically described in the literature on NRMs, settled religions come to resemble substantial corporations. Hence, they are amenable to being studied by means of some of the various methods belonging to the diverse, and in the case of the study of religions underexplored, field of organization studies.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Corporate Narratives*

Organization studies is a vast field of research with several subfields, including the study of corporate culture, of how organizations are structured, and of the relationships existing between organizations and their environment. Corporations, whether secular or religious, present themselves

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<sup>2</sup> The history alluded to here is described in detail in Ashcraft (1999).

<sup>3</sup> The qualifier “some of the methods” is due in particular to the fact that much of what is encompassed by the term organization theory is devoted not only to understanding complex organizations but also to providing practical advice on how to improve the functioning of corporations. In the study of religions, this practice-oriented aspect is of little immediate relevance. For work that studies religion from such an organization studies perspective, see Tracey, Phillips & Lounsbury 2014 (contributions by specialists on organization theory who wish to expand the field to include religious organizations). The administration of settled NRMs adopt a corporate structure in a way that resembles the bureaucracy of large religious institutions as discussed in a literature that goes back to a seminal article by Thomas O’Dea (1961). A useful literature review of the interconnections between organization theory can be found in Hinings & Raynard 2014. Contextualizing religious social formations as corporate-like organizations that operate within a neo-liberal, capitalist economy connects with such topics as the study of religious markets (see Moberg 2017: 39-71 and Moberg 2020 for an overview and a discussion of the relevant literature), the branding of religious goods and services (Einstein 2008; Stolz & Usunier 2014), religion in the neoliberal economic and political context (Gauthier & Martikainen 2016; Brekke 2017), and religion in consumer society (Gauthier & Martikainen 2013; Gauthier, Martikainen & Woodhead 2013). For a more general introduction to the relevance of economics to religion, see Seele & Zapf 2016.

to their stakeholders<sup>4</sup> and to the outside world, and are in turn discussed by various parties, in narrative form. The term narrative has been defined in different and sometimes conflicting ways (cf. Bryant & Cox 2012: 376-8). We have here adopted a modified version of a characterization of narrative as involving a chronology, a plot, retrospective interpretation, the audience as co-authors, and an element of identity construction (Søderberg 2006). Our modification of this definition concerns the suggestion that narratives are necessarily retrospective. Inspired by David Boje's concept of 'antenarrative' (Boje 2001), we expand the concept of narrative to include interpretations of the present as well as of potential futures.

Corporate narratives come in many forms and can, as a heuristic, be subdivided into the following four types:<sup>5</sup>

1. Narratives directed at outsiders, i.e., customers. These narratives are typically found in promotional materials, e.g., websites and commercials, and deal with the products the organization wishes to market and the values it tries to project.
2. Narratives crafted by spokespersons for the organization directed at stakeholders (including employees), in which attempts are made to present a particular picture of the corporation's identity and its values. Large companies typically distribute magazines to its stakeholders wherein such narratives appear.
3. Narratives that stakeholders tell about the corporation and its managers. These are often counternarratives, i.e., they can question or even undermine the message presented by the corporation's spokespersons.
4. Narratives that various outsiders, such as the media and customers, tell about the company and its products, e.g., stories that circulate about the advantages or disadvantages inherent in choosing one brand of computer, car, or soft drink over another.

In light of the minimal definition of a narrative we offer above, examples of any of these categories can range from elaborate and embellished to brief and basic. For instance, a commercial spot of thirty seconds showing the sun beating down upon thirsty young people, the sudden appearance of bottles of a particular brand of soft drink, and the subsequent jubilations of the crowd organizes these three events temporally, adds an implicit causal connection, and is part of an elaborate campaign of identity construction for that particular brand of beverage.

### *A Narrative Model*

How can corporate narratives be analyzed? We can illustrate one possible way by means of using a short example that gradually will be unpacked below. A few years ago, we, each at first unbeknownst to the other, set out on a quest in our respective corners of our shared professional sphere to find a way to understand narratives told by religious organizations in the form of corporate communication. The emergence of numerous other projects meant that progress was often

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<sup>4</sup> Here, we follow the definition of stakeholder offered by Cornelissen (2014: 284): "Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives".

<sup>5</sup> This is a somewhat reworked version of the fourfold typology in Smedegaard (2011: 30).

hampered, but one of us fortuitously discovered and eventually modified an approach inspired by the structuralist model developed in 1966 by the Lithuanian literary theorist Algirdas Greimas which we, after having decided to join forces, describe in the following and demonstrate by means of presenting a case study.

Readers familiar with Greimas' work will recognize that the preceding paragraph comprises a (truly minimalistic) narrative in Greimas' sense and that it in fact comprises every one of the six basic roles he claimed were the structural building blocks of any narrative. Based on the work of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, Greimas' model focuses on the fundamental roles played by various elements (ranging from people to abstractions) in a narrative. The model has been reworked and modified both by Greimas himself and by others<sup>6</sup>, and in this article we make use of a bare-bones version that can be summarized as follows. A narrative is structured around six fundamental roles or *actants*. The *sender* is at the ultimate origin of a particular course of action but may remain behind the scenes in the world of the narrative. Instead, it is the *subject* who carries out the various actions required to obtain an *object*. These actions benefit a *receiver*, who either may be identical with the subject or instead be somebody, or something, else. The quest for the object is furthered by *helpers* and is hindered by *opponents*.<sup>7</sup> In the minimalist narrative above, we framed ourselves as subjects who have striven to attain as an object the elusive narrative model. The sender is academia or perhaps academic culture. Our quest had both a helper (Greimas and his 1966 work) and opponents (our many projects and limited time). A given role can be filled by several different actors. One receiver in our streamlined narrative is the reader of this article, who is presented with the Greimas-inspired model. Implicitly, we, and in some small way even the academic community as a whole, figure as receivers, but the specifics of how this will play out naturally remain to be seen.

The world of religion abounds with stories that lend themselves to such an analysis. For instance, in a well-known narrative that is central to Islam, the deity (sender) sent out numerous prophets (subject) to provide guidance (object) to humanity (receiver). The last of these prophets was aided by his many disciples (helpers) and faced enemies in the form of the polytheists of Mecca and various groups of infidels (opponents). Corporate stories are also amenable to such treatment. The shareholders of Widgets, Inc. (sender) have entrusted the board of directors (subject) with the task of increasing profits (object), which in this narrative is beneficial to both shareholders and the public at large (receivers). They are helped by their astute managers and hard-working employees (helpers), who together have ensured that Widgets, Inc. has a larger share of the widget market than is had by its competitors (opponents).

By identifying the most basic building blocks of corporate narratives, it becomes clear how spokespersons for a corporation can attempt to project the impression, whether it comes from a need to make sense of things or from a more strategic position, that the decisions made, the course of events that have occurred, and the direction in which they feel that the organization should or must head are sensible or even necessary. When actants have been located in the text, a set of questions

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<sup>6</sup> Greimas' model has previously been used to study corporate narratives in (secular) business contexts, see e.g., Söderberg (2003) and Robichaud (2003).

<sup>7</sup> We are using a pared-down version of the actant model. For instance, Greimas saw these six actants as connected in pairs in ways that we have not pursued in this article as we did not find this aspect useful for our purposes.

opens up for investigation. Thus, once one has identified an object that the corporation finds worth striving for, one can begin to ask questions such as: Why is this particular object deemed important? Who gets to decide what object is given this status? What background knowledge does the narrator assume that the addressee has in terms of being able to understand the value of the object? What terminology is used to describe this prized object? Does the object remain identical in a set of narratives presented over a stretch of time or are there shifts? It is such questions that we will ask regarding the materials we present below.

### **The Anthroposophical Society as a Case**

The Anthroposophical Society, now known as the General Anthroposophical Society<sup>8</sup>, was initially founded in the last days of 1912 by the Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) after he broke his ties with the Theosophical Society.<sup>9</sup> In his many books and published lectures, Steiner presented the details of an elaborate cosmology, in which numerous spiritual beings influence or direct events in the world. He also helped launch or shape numerous practical applications that build on this cosmology, such as Waldorf pedagogy, biodynamic agriculture, and Anthroposophic medicine. Anthroposophy has over the century that has passed since Steiner's death grown into a worldwide movement with (in 2017) some 44,000 members in fifty countries (Zander 2019: 16). The international headquarters of the General Anthroposophical Society, a large building known as the Goetheanum located near the Swiss city of Basel, is home to many operations. Here, one finds performance venues, a bookstore, a library, exhibition halls, office spaces, conference rooms, a restaurant, and accommodations for overnight guests. The Goetheanum also houses the School of Spiritual Science, a body that insiders to the movement define as "an institution intended to be an esoteric school for spiritual scientific research and study"<sup>10</sup>, and that an outside observer might characterize as a central locus of doctrinal production.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, this is a movement that has passed well beyond its charismatic stage, when Steiner could address an entire country's membership base in one lecture hall, and it was thus theoretically possible for attendees to meet the organization's charismatic leader in person. The operation of this movement today resembles that of other corporations, whether secular or religious. A distinctive organizational culture has developed, and corporate stories are crafted that we can analyze by means of the method described above.

For the purposes of this analysis, a suitable category of sources needed to be identified. It would preferably reflect a development occurring over longer periods of time, so that continuity and

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<sup>8</sup> The terms Anthroposophical Society and General Anthroposophical Society are often used interchangeably, both by scholars writing about the organization and by members of the organization itself. Our own use of the terms is equally fluid.

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough survey of Steiner's involvement with the Theosophical Society, his work during this period, and his break with it, see Zander 2007: 545-780.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from

<https://www.rudolfsteiner.org/school#:~:text=%20School%20for%20Spiritual%20Science%20%201%20General,science%20%E2%80%93%20biology%2C%20physics%2C%20chemistry%20%E2%80%93...%20More%20> (accessed on 20 November 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Given Steiner's insistence that the activities of this organization is a form of science, one could also view the various sections in which it is divided as being departments, the School of Spiritual Science as a kind of university and the Goetheanum as a campus. This, too, it should be stressed, is an outsider's view, since Anthroposophists can explicitly reject this characterization; see Schmidt 2010: 99.

change would become apparent. It should demonstrate the crafting of corporate narratives in action, i.e., they should treat such core concerns as promoting products, generating cash flow, and projecting the values of the organization. The corporate narratives that this article focuses upon have these characteristics. They are the recurring pleas for money that are sent out to members every year around Christmas in the members' publication *Anthroposophy Worldwide*.<sup>12</sup> These short texts, usually around a page in length, have been a recurring feature for many years, and the analysis in this article is based on texts of this kind from the period 1999-2019. Each was penned by a key figure in the administration of the Anthroposophical Society, most often the person then serving as treasurer. Since the organization needs to convince the people that it addresses of the importance of their financial contributions, these stories focus on what its spokespersons present as being the central values of the organization. Since an organization operates with limited resources, funds will be allocated to furthering whatever projects are presented as being essential to the organization.<sup>13</sup>

The yearly Christmas pleas for money can come across as relatively straightforward and sometimes even artless pieces of prose due to the conventions of the genre in question. However, studying these recurrent narratives over time allows one to transcend the somewhat static picture that a structural analysis can have (and that Greimas' actantial model has also been accused of<sup>14</sup>). The analysis that follows will show how patterns emerge over the roughly two decades that concern us here. Towards the end of this article, we very briefly touch upon the issue of counternarratives to the official picture presented in the Christmas appeals.

### Three Types of Narratives

A particular piece of corporate communication does not need to restrict itself to one single narrative. In fact, the material that we have analyzed is typically constructed around two nested main narratives and one or more subsidiary narratives. Since Christmas appeals are, as the title suggests, appeals for money, one of the main narratives has to do with the fundraising campaign itself. Foregrounded and elaborated upon in some of the texts, more subdued in others, its basic storyline is, quite simply, that the reader needs to make a donation to the organization. The other main narrative explains what the goals of the fundraising campaign are and why it is of vital importance. As we will see, these goals are ultimately often very lofty and concern the spiritual wellbeing of humanity. In order to fulfil this ultimate objective, any number of more mundane financial goals need to be met, but since the lofty concerns are usually stated to be the ultimate purpose of the campaign, we choose to call this second main narrative the soteriological narrative. The subsidiary narratives are inserted at various points in the text to, e.g., explain the historical background for why a particular artistic production supported by the staff at the Goetheanum has

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<sup>12</sup> *Anthroposophy Worldwide: What is Happening in the Anthroposophical Society* is the official news organ of the Anthroposophical Society and is made available monthly to members in English, French, German, and Spanish. "Member News" <https://goetheanum.co/en/society>. Our quotes come from the English-language version. Some of the texts contain grammatical errors. We reproduce such passages verbatim without adding the customary [sic] since this editorial intervention, especially when it occurs frequently, interrupts the flow of reading.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that there are numerous other streams of income that we do not consider here since we are specifically analyzing corporate narratives that attempt to persuade potential donors to contribute.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Long 2001: 20.

the importance that it does. Although the Christmas appeals are typically quite short, the fundraising, soteriological, and subsidiary narratives can be intertwined and nested in various ways.

### ***The Fundraising Narrative***

In many of the appeals, this narrative is kept to a bare minimum. The basic structure is that the treasurer of the organization sends the reader out on a mission to support the Goetheanum financially. The receiver of these donations is the organization, including all those who partake of its services, e.g., lectures, courses, advice from council members regarding institutional growth for initiatives,<sup>15</sup> and financial support for initiatives in developing countries where Anthroposophy is taking root. The simple dichotomy of helpers versus opponents comes down to being an opposition between those who give and an often-implied group of people who do not, whether it be members, institutions, or national branches of the Anthroposophical Society.

The 2010 appeal has the following somewhat more elaborate variant: The author of the text and “the good spirit of the Goetheanum” are sending out the reader to enable the Goetheanum to be a representative center where a free spiritual life is possible. The Goetheanum, the Anthroposophical movement, and the world will benefit, but only if people pay, because there are major obstacles in the form of a dire financial situation (due to exchange rates and a “structural deficit”) and difficult times in the world in general.

The size of the deficit that the fundraising campaign is supposed to fill is apparent in the version published in 2012: Here, the treasurer entreats the reader to help make up a remainder of 2 million CHF, equivalent to almost the same amount in Euro. The receivers are the Goetheanum staff (so they can carry out their tasks), the Anthroposophical movement (i.e., to be understood as everybody who works in one way or another with Anthroposophy), the physical premises, and, by extension, the world. As in the 2010 narrative, the helpers are donors and the opponents are those who do not donate enough. Of course, contributing a sum of money to help close a gap of that magnitude would make little sense unless the tasks of the organization are presented as being very worthwhile. That is the purpose of the soteriological narrative.

### ***The Soteriological Narrative***

The basic summary of this narrative can be formulated as follows: The Goetheanum (subject) has a task given to it. The task is sometimes as grandiose as saving the world and sometimes as mundane as replacing the doors on the old and decaying Goetheanum building (objects).<sup>16</sup> Those who benefit range from nameless visitors who come to admire the Goetheanum to all of humankind (receivers). Helpers are generally those who donate and is sometimes an increasing public interest in Anthroposophy (framed as part of what could loosely be called the zeitgeist). Numerous opponents stand in the way of the tasks: those who do not pay; a range of unpredictable societal factors, e.g.,

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<sup>15</sup>An initiative is an Anthroposophical insider term for various practical applications of Anthroposophy, i.e., individual Waldorf schools, biodynamic farms, medical clinics, etc., that in some ways function as franchises.

<sup>16</sup> The construction of the Goetheanum in its present form was an undertaking that was begun in 1925 and took over 70 years to carry out ([https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/vk/9999\\_infos/BesuchInfo\\_EN.pdf](https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/vk/9999_infos/BesuchInfo_EN.pdf), p. 9). The age of the building and its central role for the Anthroposophical movement have entailed that the Goetheanum requires extensive and expensive periodic renovations.



fluctuating currency exchange rates; unnamed critics of Anthroposophy; increasing costs that are unfortunately incurred due to what could be seen as the success of the organization (expansion and internationalization); and not least the Goetheanum building itself as an aging physical structure that requires constant and costly maintenance and thus drains the coffers.

### *The Sender*

Who or what has entrusted the Goetheanum with carrying out the tasks for which such large sums of money are needed? As might be intuited from the passive voice used in the summary above, the texts are often vague regarding that point and the formulation “has a task given to it” sums up the account that is presented. When a sender is mentioned, it is usually Rudolf Steiner in his capacity as founder of the organization. From a formal point of view, this is quite literally the case. Although Steiner left the Theosophical Society at the cusp of 1912/1913 and thus was the driving force behind the emergence of the Anthroposophical Society as a separate movement, it was with the so-called Christmas Conference of 1923 that the organization was recreated and restructured as one governed by a set of bylaws and directed by Steiner as a kind of CEO. From the leadership structure to the physical appearance of the Goetheanum itself, Steiner is still today, long after his death in 1925, perceived as the force behind the organization. It is therefore hardly surprising that Steiner fills the role of sender in appeals from 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2014, 2016, and 2018.

Anthroposophical cosmology posits that there is a spiritual world, and Steiner’s voluminous corpus of texts portray in great detail the various forces or beings of this spiritual dimension as agents behind the scenes that influence the course of events in the material dimension. Although Steiner does not come across as an emissary of the spiritual world, the fact that he was, from an Anthroposophical perspective, able to clearly perceive the workings of the spiritual world is explicable in terms of the right spiritual conditions being in place. The soteriological narratives, however, barely hint at the existence of this cosmology. Only in two of the Christmas appeals (2003, 2007) do we meet one of the key characters in Anthroposophical cosmology, the figure of Michael.<sup>17</sup> The author of these appeals assumes that the reader is familiar with the idea that this is a spiritual being who, in the Anthroposophical view of history, is the regent of our time and succeeded another spiritual entity, Gabriel, around the end of the 1870s.<sup>18</sup> Besides these references, the spiritual world only makes indirect and sporadic appearances in these narratives. This is a point to which we will return.

### *Subjects*

Whoever or whatever is ultimately the power behind the quest, the subject that carries it out is almost invariably “the Goetheanum” in some unspecified way. The term is used in a manner parallel to the metonymy that makes “the White House” stand for the U.S. president, or the federal government, or parts of that government. The organizational structure of the Anthroposophical Society is quite complex, but, in the narratives, the matter of who does what is rarely explicit. The

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout this analysis, years in parenthesis refer to Christmas appeals published that year. The full reference can be found in the list at the end of this article.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., <https://wn.rsarchive.org/GA/GA0237/19240803p01.html> (accessed on 20 November 2020).

Goetheanum, the School of Spiritual Science, and the General Anthroposophical Society sometimes seem to be used as synonyms, and the implication is that the leaders are a collective “we” who are entrusted with a variety of tasks, a term that appears frequently in the texts analyzed, that need to be done.

### *Objects*

As one might expect from a narrative embedded in a plea for donations, the object to be attained receives sustained attention. Over the twenty years from which we have analyzed Christmas appeal narratives, the need for funding comes across as chronic and massive, and the objects of the quest for donations can seem like an endless list. The donations are simply a necessity, since even taken together the membership fees and the money paid by customers (i.e., people who partake of the services on offer at the Goetheanum) are insufficient to cover costs.

As one begins to impose some kind of heuristic order on them, the objects appear to fall into categories that resemble those of any corporation intent on marketing its goods and services. Funds need to be allocated to long-term goals, producing the products the corporation markets, staff, buildings, and so forth. Compared to a company with tangible products and operationalized long-term aims (e.g., to increase the sales of their range of cars or reach new markets with their soft drinks), the ultimate goals described in the Christmas appeals come across as vaguely described and impossible to gauge the success or failure of. They range from performing “tasks” and carrying out “specific projects,” “essential tasks,” and “urgent matters,” (2008) to seeing what the world needs and filling those needs (2000), being a meeting place and mediator (2001), fulfilling ambitions of a “cultural, research and civilization nature” (2006), fostering individual transformation and engagement in “three realms – individual, community and world” (2002), and perhaps somewhat obscurely, “giving voice to what is universally human and what connects us to the spiritual in the universe” (2004).

A connection between the ultimate aims and more tangible goals is made in the 2004 appeal, where helping to heal the world is unpacked as supporting the School of Spiritual Science, financing various artistic endeavors, and supporting outreach activities that can benefit Anthroposophical initiatives in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. It is the intangible nature of ultimate aims described in such abstract terms and the fact that the more concrete aims of the organization seem to be steps towards these ultimate goals that prompts us to characterize this narrative as soteriological.

Steiner’s descriptions of a spiritual world are, from an Anthroposophical perspective, a spiritual science. The product that donations will support can therefore be described in terms of research (1999, 2002, 2006). More concretely, however, the main products on offer at the Goetheanum are conferences and artistic productions (2011). It should be noted that the building is nonetheless not to be construed as a secular theater or concert stage. The productions mentioned in these narratives are the same, year after year. A slightly more elaborate list is found in the 2003 appeal, which names Steiner’s own four mystery dramas,<sup>19</sup> Goethe’s plays *Faust* I and II, and Beethoven’s

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<sup>19</sup> The mystery dramas are a set of four plays created by Steiner that describe the fate of several characters over a series of incarnations.

seventh symphony interpreted in eurythmy (narratively framed as part of a process for “regeneration and service”) as the key productions. More commonly, the list is reduced to multi-hour productions of the mystery dramas and of *Faust*. The reasons for and effects of devoting a large and costly operation to especially the second of these two key goals will be explored below.

Clearly, the research and the artistic productions need infrastructure in order to materialize, both in terms of an organizational structure and in terms of a building where these activities can be carried out. Although the ultimate aim is to accomplish tasks in the service of humanity and the world, what fills the role of object in many of these narratives is precisely these infrastructural elements. Objects that one might also find in the narratives of secular corporations are the need to “coordinate management of our events [conferences] and the services to our guests in a more professional and welcoming manner” (2006) and various forms of outreach, e.g., an international travel fund and funds to facilitate translation for international guests, having more conferences, and institutional changes in the interests of further developing various projects (2000). As a focal point of an international network of enterprises, such organizational goals can be to connect with and know about initiatives around the world, described as a goal given to the Goetheanum by Steiner (2002), and to collaborate with initiatives worldwide (2004). Organizational renewal is another recurrent object and can be explained in terms of helping to develop new sections at the School of Spiritual Science (2016) and finding new (Anthroposophical) terms to use based on emergent situations having to do with the changing times and globalization as well as “new ways of being” that are in step with what customers want today (2009).

At the most concrete end of the spectrum lie practical tasks. Since the history of the movement and its link to Steiner are important to the self-understanding of the organization, quite a few narratives have as their objects such tasks as preserving the material legacy of Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Society’s formative years by, e.g., protecting artwork (2012), restoring the model of the first Goetheanum (2006), and completing the publication of Steiner’s numerous volumes of writings and transcribed speeches (2016). Even more practical are the objects of cleaning the site and tending the gardens (2002) and, more generally, taking care of the physical building (1999, 2004, 2012), where onerous tasks such as renovating the stage and the roof are the objects of urgent pleas.

### *Receivers*

The receivers who benefit from the many tasks carried out are often merely implied. When mentioned, they can be people internal to the organization or, much more commonly, the Anthroposophical Society itself, which, thanks to the anticipated donations, will be able to carry out its tasks (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012). Researchers (1999), staff (2012), and former staff now in retirement (2001) are among the few categories mentioned more specifically. The activities that the organization carries out also benefit various people who come into immediate contact with the Goetheanum. These include those who visit for conferences, performances, or other reasons (1999, 2001), and various vaguely described guests (2006), visitors (2015), and members and visitors who benefit from a well-functioning Goetheanum (2016).

It becomes apparent from an analysis of the full set of Christmas appeals, however, that the receiver to ultimately benefit from the activities is conceived of much more broadly. These go from abstractions such as the individual and the community (2002), via the arts, nature, and social life (2018), to the two most commonly invoked receivers, namely humankind (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2018) and the entire world (2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2012). Donations to the Goetheanum thus contribute towards fulfilling a global soteriological aim, the nature of which is rarely spelled out.

### *Helpers*

Framed as a quest to perform tasks that ultimately benefit the entire world, the question of who is on the right side and wants to support the cause is easy to answer. Generous donors and people willing to pay to attend conferences and artistic performances are singled out in one narrative after the other as the helpers. Members (and sometimes “friends”) and institutions that make donations are very frequently mentioned (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). Some references to these donors add a brief mention of why they have this positive quality: they feel connected to the Goetheanum and the General Anthroposophical Society (2003), they care (2004), and are generous and have good will (2005, 2008). Customers such as conference participants and theater patrons (1999), not least those attending the production of *Faust* (2015), and in general, people who finance their own participation in various events (2000) also help.

Since the appeals are addressed to readers, it is perhaps not surprising that staff are rarely mentioned for their positive role as helpers in bringing about the goals of the organization. Among the very rare references to them is a mention of employees willing to take pay cuts (2015) and treasurers from several national societies who pledged to make an effort to raise membership rates by 10% (2017). Just as rare are references to forces outside the organization that might make a difference. The two mentions concern a greater societal acceptance of Anthroposophy (2007) and a more interested general public (2011).

### *Opponents*

Who could possibly be opposed to helping the world by contributing to the budget of the Goetheanum? If donors and patrons are helpers, one imagines that those who do not contribute financially are opponents. This is, however, something that remains implicit and is seldom alluded to. An acknowledgment in the 2014 appeal that the organization received the required financial support from many, many members and some branches and country societies comes very close to pointing a finger at a number of local branches as being opponents. Even more implicit is the possibility that a less than perfect management might play the role of opponent in these narratives. A statement in 2009 that “we are attempting to resolve a structural deficit which has grown over the last decades” is most naturally interpreted as an admission that the leadership of the Goetheanum has for many years spent more money than the organization has earned, but the phrase itself frames an abstract noun, i.e., a structural deficit, as the subject. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the explicitly named opponents in these narratives are shadowy outsiders or structural factors.

Organizational change can be identified as an opponent. Just as in secular corporations, success can come with its set of pitfalls: costs are accrued when one expands to new markets since there are expenses involved in restructuring and hiring new employees (2000, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2016). For an organization with paying members, internationalization brings with it the added challenge of reaching countries where the standard of living makes it difficult or even impossible for people to finance their own participation in events (2000, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2009).

The opponents that are most commonly mentioned come from outside the organization and are in most cases nearly unstoppable forces over which it has no control. They range from vaguely described divisive tendencies active in the world today (2001, 2007, 2008), changing times that require adaptation (2003, 2016) and a world that is becoming increasingly complicated (2003), to calamities such as war and natural disasters (2005) and less dramatic, but for the finances of the organization deeply challenging, factors such as unfavorable exchange rates (2011, 2015). Outsiders who fail to appreciate the fruits of Anthroposophical work (2009) or even engage in critical attacks (2007) are also mentioned. Again, the opponents are left faceless and vague: the nature of the 2007 critical attack, for instance, is not made explicit, although we suspect that it may refer to the publication that year of Helmut Zander's two-volume history of the Anthroposophical movement that by at least some individuals within the Anthroposophical Society was seen as a hostile account of the movement.

An equally unstoppable force, finally, is the sheer effect of time and decay and the concomitant need to year after year solicit funds for a physical building requiring a seemingly endless series of renovations and for artifacts that must be preserved if they are to survive for much longer (2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2016).

### **Narratives of perpetual crisis**

Over the range of twenty years of Christmas appeals, a pattern emerges. The Goetheanum corporation is presented as chronically underfunded and at least financially in chronic crisis mode. Two reasons for this state emerge from the texts. Firstly, the Goetheanum building requires very substantial sums of money to be kept in operation. To give an idea of the sums involved, we quote from the November 27, 2014, edition of *Anthroposophy Worldwide*<sup>20</sup>:

The damaged roof and crumbling concrete façade are being repaired and – importantly – the 85 year old stage, which was no longer safe and technically outdated, has been renovated. Overall costs amounted to 13.5 million Swiss Francs (11 million Euro), a sum which was raised inside the Anthroposophical Society, without any external funds.

Secondly, the artistic productions that (together with the conferences) are one of the main products of the corporation are extremely costly to organize and have appealed to a far too small customer base to even begin to break even. Faced with the massive structural deficit caused by a production of *Faust* that sold too few tickets to recoup the cost, the response of the management has been to plan yet another cycle of *Faust* performances.

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<sup>20</sup> "Advent: 2014 Christmas Appeal" [https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw\\_e/AWE2014\\_12.pdf](https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw_e/AWE2014_12.pdf), p. 3.

It is at this point that it is instructive to compare a religious organization with secular corporations. Corporations flourish or fail not least depending on their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. If a firm understands its competitors and its customers, is able to adapt to new technologies, adjust its organizational structure and organizational culture to the demands placed on it, and so forth, it can continue to perform well. The management of a sufficiently flexible secular corporation could, for instance, decide that it was unwise to have its headquarters in the most expensive country in the world and move elsewhere. Faced with flagging customer support for its products year after year, it could investigate customer preferences and redesign its product range in order to appeal to more people. For an organization like the Anthroposophical Society, it is simply not an option to outsource its operations to, say, Berlin or Prague (where, according to the site numbeo.com, consumer prices are 44% and 58% lower than in Basel, respectively), nor can it just decide to use its stage and performers to set up crowd-pleasing productions that might see a full house every evening.

In general, there are many factors that impede the successful adaptation of a corporation: from fear of the unknown and the loss of corporate identity to more mundane factors such as a reticence to invest the resources necessary for successful change. Seen in this context, the leadership of the Goetheanum comes across in the texts we have analyzed as the managerial structure of a corporation that actively resists change and adaptation because its very identity lies in its links to the past.

As even a cursory look at the historical record amply demonstrates, religions are malleable, and there is no essential reason why a religious organization could not introduce drastic innovations if that is what is needed to survive. Conversely, corporations of a secular nature can also find themselves in an identity crisis and experience difficulties in moving forward. What sets religious organizations apart is the ability of its spokespersons to draw on references to apparently sacrosanct values in their attempts to explain to stakeholders why traditions need to be followed and change resisted. These references can reflect what the people who are in charge of corporate communication feel to be the core values of the organization, what they believe will be well received by the stakeholders, or both. As the analysis above has shown, the appeals that the Goetheanum sends out to members are phrased in an overwhelmingly secular language, but when these texts invoke ideological reasons for resisting adaptation, it becomes apparent that there are ultimate values that can only with difficulty, if at all, be set aside without losing one's identity.

The organization is in so many ways connected to the figure of its founder that his intentions (whether real or imputed) need to be respected at nearly any cost. From the details of the building that houses the headquarters of the movement to the ultimate soteriological goals that he inspired, Steiner comes across as the long-departed but still active CEO of the corporation and hence as a man who looms too large for truly radical innovative measures to be taken.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the connection between even the lowly functions of building maintenance and the more spiritual nature

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<sup>21</sup> Not even this aspect of Anthroposophical corporate communication should be taken as an essential difference between the ways in which secular and religious organizations present themselves and make sense of their decisions. One might be reminded of the question that for many years functioned as a mantra in Disney decision making after the death of its famous founder, "What would Walt do?" (cf. Kramer 2013: 87).

of its ultimate objects is apparent in the textual details. It is rhetorically framed by calling the upkeep of the building a safeguarding and renewal of the “physical substance” of the second Goetheanum (2014). Its spiritual nature, its ability to act as a meeting place and mediator for Anthroposophists around the world and as a link to a historical past in the person of its founder Rudolf Steiner, who is even interred on the premises, reveal that the Goetheanum is far from being a mundane architectural structure but constitutes an axis mundi.

The narrative that surrounds the *Faust* production, in particular, shows that this is, from the perspective of the authors of the appeals, not just a cycle of theatrical performances but something much more profound. The 2016 narrative presented the financially bleak result of having produced such a *Faust* cycle, although the rhetoric of the text, stressing the enthusiasm of the audience, the apparently short time needed to prepare the performance, and the mere five million Swiss Francs allotted to it, attempts to make the result look far more positive than it actually was:

[in] January 2015 work began on a completely new production of Goethe’s *Faust* Parts 1 and 2. The play premiered only 18 months later as a synthesis of drama, eurythmy and music with entirely new costumes and a new stage design. Would it be possible to master this “Herculean task” with a tight budget of five million Swiss Francs and to ring in an era of great festivals at the Goetheanum? Every beginning is difficult – unfortunately. While the audiences of the six 2016 performance cycles rewarded the performers and directors with standing ovations, only around 4000 people came to see them. This means that the Goetheanum needs to somehow cover a shortfall of 800,000 Swiss Francs. If you have not seen the play yet, don’t miss out on the performances in July 2017!

Thus, despite the losses incurred by the disappointing ticket sales in 2016, performances were to continue in 2017. Not only that: the 2019 Christmas appeal announced that yet another *Faust* cycle was in the making. This text also makes explicit that there are ideological reasons that explain why the organization goes on delivering a product that so few people are interested in:

With *Faust* as an artistic stage experience we would like to help as many people as possible to achieve an inner awakening, in the sense of Goethe’s words to Eckermann on 25 January 1827, “More I did not intend. Let the crowd of spectators take pleasure in the spectacle; the higher import will not escape the initiated.” Come to the premiere or attend one of these weekends and participate in this nine-hour gesamtkunstwerk, or make others, particularly younger people, around you aware of it, so that they can have such a – potentially biographically important – experience in the Goetheanum’s Main Auditorium.

In other words, Goethe has in some (albeit anachronistic) way given the Goetheanum the mission of putting on this play in order to produce an inner awakening in those who see it. Those who benefit from the experience are audience members (and perhaps – although this is our conjecture – those who come into contact with them). Rudolf Steiner implicitly fills the role of helper, because he is the one who was able to reveal to people what the play actually means. Since the play is rooted in the historical bedrock of the movement and has a spiritual goal, it is by this very nature different from, say, a performance of a “secular” play or a musical would be.

In other words, it appears that it is the play itself and its ability to transform the audience, no matter how small, that lie at the center of narratives where this production is mentioned. Something similar

goes for the other products and services on offer. One may suspect that the very vague nature of the receiver in these narratives reflects the fact that the products are not aimed at a specific target audience that the organization has identified with any precision. As seen above, the proximate receiver may be merely implied, and ultimately the receiver is humanity in general or the entire world. How this path from a specific event held near the Swiss city of Basel to the rest of humankind is perceived is not spelled out, but the following could be a plausible train of reasoning. If a teacher from a Waldorf school somewhere in the world goes to a conference at the Goetheanum for teachers, they personally benefit as they develop professionally. Their school, in turn, benefits: they bring back ideas and share them with their colleagues, which then can lead to changes in the school, which then can benefit the students, which then can benefit their local community in a steadily expanding ring of influence until the entire world has been helped.

A state of permanent (financial) crisis seems to lie inherent in the organization, and in one sense the writers of the narratives are acutely conscious of this fact: it is, after all, part of the fundraising campaign narrative genre to explain that funds are very much needed. The perceived reason why there has to be a funding campaign every single year, often for very large sums of money, becomes apparent when one pieces together the mentions of who and what plays the role of opponent in these narratives. The thought that the products do not match the interests of a potential audience is only marginally touched upon in the twenty years of materials that we have analyzed. As we saw above, the 2009 appeal mentions as an object finding new ways of being (i.e., which activities to arrange) that are in step with what customers want today. Much more commonly, the problems that make the situation of the Goetheanum so difficult to solve are placed outside the immediate remit of the management. If only members and branches of the Anthroposophical Society would pay their dues, if everybody pitched in to donate money, if the attitudes prevalent in society at large were better, if more people would just buy tickets to *Faust*, and the ravages of time did not affect one part after another of a venerable building, then all would be well.

## **Counternarratives**

One of the advantages of studying corporate narratives is that one comes to realize that a corporation is not a monolith. Different factions within the company, various stakeholders, and outsiders who comment on the corporation and its products and activities will produce their own narratives. This article has been overwhelmingly concerned with how one tightly delimited set of narratives produced by the leadership of the Goetheanum allows it to communicate its goals, identify challenges, and frame who the helpers and opponents are. It is only to be expected, however, that a financial debacle such as a *Faust* production budgeted at five million Swiss Francs that sold 4,000 tickets would give rise to critical counternarratives. We will very briefly touch upon one such counternarrative as a tantalizing suggestion for further research and analysis of a particular aspect of corporate narratives.

A motion submitted to the General Meeting of the Anthroposophical Society called for a thorough investigation into the production of what the authors called a “Faust cycle [that] will go down in the history of the Goetheanum Stage with three superlative attributions at least: as the shortest, the



worst and the most expensive.”<sup>22</sup> The text goes on to blame the producers of Faust for not respecting the intentions of Rudolf Steiner, which in itself is, of course, significant. If the product is realigned with the values of the founding figure, problems with production costs and a lack of interest from the intended audience, it is suggested, will be solved. A defense of the production supports our argument here that it is the transformative power of the play that matters more than such matters as audience size and budget deficits<sup>23</sup>:

The representative for Georgia [at a Youth Conference on Faust held in July 2016], Nodar Belkania, reported this week that thirteen young people, former Waldorf pupils from Tbilisi, who had attended the Faust Conference, had returned home full of enthusiasm and immediately undertook to study the play further. They have by now performed individual scenes and also started studying Rudolf Steiner’s Philosophy of Freedom.

The discussions led to the decision that the 2020 production would be a fresh start and not build on the 2016/2017 cycle. The responsible group within the Goetheanum leadership is quoted as saying that “it is not productive to stand in the past and at the same time want something new.”<sup>24</sup> It deserves stressing that the “something new” is not a new product but yet another cycle of the same plays performed in a different manner.

## **Conclusion**

The study of new religious movements was founded as a discipline at a time when a cohort of small, emergent movements led by charismatic leaders emerged. The literature on these movements was overwhelmingly sociological and largely focused on the issues that seemed most pressing at the time, not least their perceived deviance and volatility. Once new religions reach a more mature and settled phase, they have acquired other characteristics and, in many respects, resemble secular organizations. We here propose to study such settled religions with a variety of methods inspired by organization studies.

One group of such methods deals with corporate narratives, as defined at the beginning of this article. We have taken a structuralist approach and have adapted a model originally developed by the Lithuanian literary theorist Algirdas Greimas. This article applied the model to a tightly delimited set of texts, namely the so-called Christmas appeals in which a spokesperson for the Goetheanum, typically the treasurer, initiates a fundraising campaign. Since money is a limited resource, these texts should reveal what objects the organizational leaders deem important and why.

When analyzed in terms of the various narratives that can be nested and interwoven in these texts, and the actants that form their structural pillars, patterns begin to emerge. An often merely implied sender has entrusted the Goetheanum with a mission that combines very this-worldly goals (such as building maintenance) with ultimate goals that are quite vaguely described but that ultimately benefit all of humanity.

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw\\_e/AWE2017\\_03.pdf](https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw_e/AWE2017_03.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw\\_e/AWE2017\\_05.pdf](https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw_e/AWE2017_05.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw\\_e/AWE2018\\_06.pdf](https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw_e/AWE2018_06.pdf)

Taken together, the twenty texts from the period 1999 to 2019 form a portrait of an organization in perpetual financial crisis. The narratives on the one hand acknowledge that there are problems that make it imperative for donors and other stakeholders to step in and fill the gaps in the budget and on the other reveal that the organization is linked to its past and to an ideological agenda that makes it resistant to change and therefore finds it difficult to overcome its organizational challenges.

Considering the fact that the organization has as its objective to preserve and disseminate the spiritual legacy of its founder Rudolf Steiner, a man who formulated an elaborate body of teachings that has the hallmarks of a set of religious doctrines and practices, the narratives are phrased in an overwhelmingly secular language. When the texts begin to explain why it is so important to produce one *Faust* cycle after the other, despite huge losses, or why it can accept a structural deficit for several decades, a difference between a secular and a religious corporation becomes apparent. Even the counternarrative that we briefly touched upon restricts itself to criticizing the way in which the play was produced and does not question the ultimate need to set up yet another season of *Faust* performances. The ultimate aim of the Anthroposophical Society appears in the texts we have analyzed to comprise spiritual values that transcend such mundane concerns as a balanced budget.

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