

## Baptism Makes Birth Whole; Involution and Evolution in Human Biography

Birth and baptism can be approached from many points of view. The line of thought I develop here moves within Rudolf Steiner's evolutionary understanding of the sacraments. Steiner explains that evolution has been interpreted in a one-sided way: as an 'unfolding' (*Entwicklung*) of a potential that is already there. Living beings unfold rhythmically; in their development we recognize a sequence of stages. A plant emerges from its seed, it successively develops leaves, flowers, right up to its organs of fruit. A newborn, too, is like a sprouting seed planted in the earth. It has more to develop than a plant but here, too, we notice successive stages. A growing child reaches sexual maturity at the age of 14; during adolescence its psychological life gradually becomes independent; and a distinct individuality is born at the age of 21. Like plants, infants are born carrying a potential inside of them that develops like a gift of nature. All nature is born by the evolution-stream; we could also say: by the *birth stream*.

But if we stay at this level, we only reach a materialistic worldview. What causes the evolution of matter remains incomprehensible. In reality, within every unfolding there also flows a counter-stream of withdrawal – of infolding (*Einwicklung*). "This is the stream of involution, through which the ideals, the forces, the beings and the souls who originate in the invisible world (...) ceaselessly enter into visible reality."<sup>1</sup> In reality, then, evolution has two aspects: involution as well as evolution. At every point and juncture of earthly biography a counter-stream continuously intervenes in the birth-stream. Or to put it succinctly: where involutory forces can be active, space is made for the working of the spirit.

Working from this two-fold concept of evolution, a new picture of human biography emerges. At birth, the ascending forces, the evolutionary forces are just beginning to pick up. A newborn is still largely in a state of involution (infoldedness), it really does resemble a plant that is beginning to come out of its seed. Up to the middle of life the evolutionary forces dominate; thereafter the involutory forces begin to dominate. This begins a new phase of life when the spiritual must be taken up more and more. In Steiner's terminology, this inflow of the spirit can be characterized as an integration of *dying* (withdrawal) *processes* in the human constitution. This is the inverse event to the evolutionary process of birth. It is, however, not a negative process: what is soul-spiritual in us begins to more actively 'digest', internalize its exchanges with the outer world. This is what *thinking* is: a spiritual activity that can manifest through a repressal of our bodily organization, causing disintegration processes in our organism. All spiritual activity arises at the cost of a depletion of evolutionary forces; the inflowing of involutory forces can be characterized as a *dying-stream*.

When a human being dies, going fully into involution, they can be likened to a seed that falls from a withered plant: a germ for the future. Between death and new birth, development stages are passed through that are soul-spiritual in nature. Then, between conception and new birth, we have that which is soul-spiritual in the human being moving into matter again. A new integration of spirit into matter takes place – seeding it with the potential for the future – and the human being passes over into evolution once more. A new cycle begins.

It is within this view of development that Steiner places his new understanding of the sacraments. He articulates that through the sacraments, the evolution-stages in human life can be made whole, by matching each of them with their corresponding counter-stream forces. This effectively means that through baptism, an integration of dying processes takes place in the newborn's just developing constitution, as the inverse of the birth process! In one passage<sup>2</sup> Steiner elaborates: baptism is a

---

1 Edouard Schuré: The Personality of Rudolf Steiner and His Development, Rudolf Steiner Archive, (2022, 9 Nov.), [https://rsarchive.org/Books/GA010/English/HR1960/GA010a\\_biog.html](https://rsarchive.org/Books/GA010/English/HR1960/GA010a_biog.html).

2 Rudolf Steiner, Vorträge und Kurse über christlich-religiöses Wirken, II. Spirituelles Erkennen - Religiöses

*whole-making* of the dying process that already *sets in at birth* through an infusion of what emanates from the Christ-impulse. He goes on to state that this safeguards the newborn's ability "to live as a complete physical-bodily-spiritual-soul being"<sup>3</sup> as it steps into earthly existence.

He does not elaborate further, but my interpretation is this. In terms of evolution, humanity is actually moving in a descending line. Humankind is increasingly caught up in dying processes; the human spirit is in danger of becoming more and more locked into matter. This is why Christ intervened: by incarnating – by becoming human – He unfolded His being in an earthly biography, passing through the sequence of human life stages (in a concentrated form). As God-become-human, He developed the necessary forces on a human scale to keep rightly evolving through these stages, managing to keep His entire physical-bodily-spiritual-soul being thriving through the cycle. These Christ-forces – it seems to me – are the counter-stream administered through the sacraments, the potent forces which make whole the life phases that human beings cannot (fully) bring to fruition themselves.

Stijn van Tongerloo

#### Sources

AnthroWiki: Evolution, (2022, 19 Okt.), <https://anthrowiki.at/Evolution>.

AnthroWiki: Involution (2022, 19 Okt.), <https://anthrowiki.at/Involution>.

Edouard Schuré: The Personality of Rudolf Steiner and His Development, (2022, 9 Nov.),

[https://rsarchive.org/Books/GA010/English/HR1960/GA010a\\_biog.html](https://rsarchive.org/Books/GA010/English/HR1960/GA010a_biog.html).

Evelyn Francis Capel, Tom Ravetz: Seven Sacraments in The Christian Community, Floris books 1999.

Michael Debus: The Sacraments of The Christian Community, *Perspectives* March-May 2009.

Rudolf Steiner: Geisteswissenschaftliche Menschenkunde (GA 107), Rudolf Steiner Verlag 1959.

Rudolf Steiner: Vorträge und Kurse über christlich-religiöses Wirken, I. Anthroposophische Grundlagen für ein erneuertes christlich-religiöses Wirken (GA 342), Rudolf Steiner Verlag 1993.

Rudolf Steiner: Vorträge und Kurse über christlich-religiöses Wirken, II. Spirituelles Erkennen – Religiöses Empfinden – Kultisches Handeln (GA 343), Rudolf Steiner Verlag 1993.