

Geoffrey Jones

Anthroposophical Capitalism: Esoteric Beliefs and the Creation of Modern Business Enterprises
Harvard Business School

This paper explores why esoteric religious and philosophical beliefs have sometimes provided the foundation for successful modern business enterprises. Wouter Hanegraaf has defined esoteric beliefs as being composed of “precisely everything that has been consigned to the dustbin of history by Enlightenment ideologues and their intellectual heirs and considered incompatible with normative concepts of religion, rationality and science.” This certainly fits the views of the followers of the philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who in 1913 founded Anthroposophy, a “science of the spirit.” Considered outlandish at the time (and ever since), Steiner combined his world view with the pursuit of practical applications. During the early 1920s he founded firms, sat on Boards, and proposed a new business culture. He created Waldorf schools, a new method of education, and laid down the principles of biodynamic agriculture. Although he died in 1925, the movement continued, and from the 1970s there was an acceleration of new businesses founded by followers of Steiner, including in natural medicine, natural beauty, social banking, and organic food, wine and tea. Some of these businesses became substantial, and influential – included winning many prizes for making high quality wines. The paper ends with the cases of two such firms: Ambootia Tea in Darjeeling, India, and biodynamic food retailer Aarstiderne in Denmark. The paper offers both conventional and unconventional explanations for the growth and success of anthroposophical capitalists.