

INTRODUCTION

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Only those who absolutely will not look at what is happening in the world as a result of these last catastrophic years can close their eyes to the fact that we are starting out on the road to ruin, and that only something new can lead us away from this path. Whatever one may look for within this destructive process itself, it can never become anything else but a force of destruction. Now only what will really draw on sources that have not belonged to the Earth's development up till now can bring about a force for reconstruction.

(From Lecture Three)

1917, 1918, 1919, 1920 ... These were extraordinary years for Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy, and the world: dark, painful, tragic, socially chaotic times, filled with constant sudden reversals. Opportunities opened and closed with rapidity. Occasional lightning flashes of the spirit illuminated the gloom, but the situation never looked good. Nevertheless, despite the odds, a new age seemed possible. The Great War, which ended officially on November 11, 1918, had left Germany exhausted. The Versailles Peace Conference followed, opening on January 12, 1918. It had promised fairness and justice. But by the time it concluded its work on January 20, 1920, it had betrayed its noble intentions and stripped Germany of every shred of self-respect, leaving the country at the mercy of the most adversarial forces. Still, for a brief period, which continued as long as idealism could hold out, everything seemed possible. The stakes were the very highest, as the subsequent course of history demonstrates. To achieve anything one would have to work fast, intuitively, out of full cognizance of the spiritual realities of the moment. This Rudolf Steiner did with his whole being. Reading his lectures from this period, we find them marked by a particular sense of *urgency*.

Every one of Steiner's lectures occurs in particular context; and it is always difficult to know where to draw the boundaries in his life and work so as to place any given set of lectures into the context that best illuminates the spiritual atmosphere in and out of which he is talking. In the case of the five lectures printed here—which on the surface appear “occasional” and “interstitial”—we must go back to 1917.

At that moment, when the end of the War was only a matter of time, Steiner was among the most prescient. In anticipation of the inevitable peace—as the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 waited in the wings in Russia—he met in Berlin with a German diplomat, Otto von Lerchenfeld, to prepare a counter strategy. Two *Memoranda* resulted, outlining a radically new vision of socio-political, economic, and cultural life for post-War Germany. Steiner called his new approach “threefold”—he would speak of the need to “threefold” society or the “threefolding” of society.

Twenty-seven years of research (from 1882 to 1917) had just provided convincing evidence that the human being was composed of three systems—a bodily or metabolic system, a soul or respiratory/circulatory system, and a nerve-sense (spirit) system—with three functions (willing, feeling, and thinking). He announced these findings most succinctly in the sixth appendix to *Riddles of the Soul* (CW 21), published in November 1917. Now, drawing on other spiritual research, he proposed that human society was also threefold, and composed of three different orders of activity that we may call the economic, legal-rights, and spiritual-cultural spheres. Reinterpreting the motto of the French Revolution—*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, Steiner proposed that each sphere of activity should operate according to different principles: “fraternity” (or association) in the economic sphere, “equality” in the legal-rights sphere, and “freedom” in the spiritual-cultural sphere.

Although the *Memoranda* were read widely and in the highest circles, nothing came of them. Once the War was over, and the ensuing chaos set in, it was clear to Steiner that what they contained must be taken up in a practical way. This meant that Anthroposophy would have to transform itself to engage its mission in a new way. World evolution now called for initiation knowledge—spiritual science—to

engage society directly. The esoteric would have to become exoteric. Consequently, Anthroposophy, as the years unfolded, would be increasingly in the glare of public scrutiny, continuously open to criticism, and even attack.

The years following the end of the War thus gave rise to a series of social and spiritual initiatives, whose success would depend not only on Steiner's ability to convince the public but also on his ability to convince Anthroposophists as a body to unite in the pursuit of these goals. To reach the general public, the spiritual-scientific epistemology and insights had to be translated into accessible, jargon-free, ordinary language that educated people could understand. For many of the older members the shift proved divisive. They had difficulty recognizing the new language of Anthroposophy. At the same time, the situation demanded that everyone concerned develop the presence of mind to act with dedication and responsibility. It was a struggle on two fronts, internal and external. It was not clear which was the easier task. Both proved equally difficult.

1919, then, saw the beginning of the work to make "The Movement for the Threefolding of the Social Organism" into a popular, political movement. November 1918 had seen the German Revolution. Socialist (Social Democrat) in orientation, almost bloodless in its unfolding (only fifteen people died), it would pave the way for the future Weimar Republic. Communists, socialists, conservatives, and nationalists continued to foment for their causes. Legitimate political groups, as well as gangs of thugs, roamed the streets in search of supporters. It was a desperate time. Anything could still happen—and did, as history, unfortunately, was to show. Steiner and his co-workers made heroic efforts (including almost daily meetings with workers, managers, owners, as well as finance ministers and other powerful people) to bring the threefold idea into the public forum. They had some initial success, but, in the long run, the odds were against them. There was too much confusion, and too many competing philosophies and ideologies.

Out of the Threefold Movement, however, on the initiative of Emil Molt, owner of the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory in Stuttgart, the first Waldorf School was created for the factory workers' children.

The idea was born in November of the previous year; ten months later, on September 7, 1919, the doors were opened. Before they did so, in the two weeks preceding, Steiner gave his first specifically “Waldorf” lectures—the foundational cycle *The Foundations of Human Experience* (or “The Study of Man”) (CW 293)—based on the now established reality of the threefoldness of the developing human being. The threefold seed had thus germinated the foundation of cultural renewal through education. At the same time, other initiatives, exemplary of the threefold idea were also planned.

1919 witnessed another, most profound moment. At the end of November in Dornach, Steiner gave the seminal lectures (published in *The Archangel Michael: His Mission and Ours*) on “The Mission of Michael and the new Michael Revelation” (CW 194). Therewith, Anthroposophy explicitly became a “School of Michael.”

The doctrine of the archangelic regents of human evolution in periods of 354 years had been part of esoteric lore at least since Trithemius’s *Treatise on the Seven Secondary Causes, or Spirits Who Move the Spheres According to God* (1515). According to this tradition, the Archangel Michael assumed the guidance of humanity in 1879. Steiner had long alluded to the enormous significance of this fact, which was coupled in his mind with the end of the Kali Yuga or “Age of Iron” in 1900; and although, in a certain sense, he had always placed his work at the service of Michael, he had to wait for the right moment to proclaim the full import of the “Michaelic Age.” This moment started in 1917 and with the end of the War achieved an earnest and near-overwhelming urgency. For he understood that it was only in service to Michael—only in becoming truly students and companions of Michael, and thoroughly permeating oneself with the “Michaelic” consciousness that leads to Christ—that a truly new culture was possible. Only Michael could ensure the proper “enchrising” of consciousness that the times demanded. As Steiner said in his second lecture (November 22):

Michael is the spirit of strength. With his entrance into human evolution, he must make it possible for us to get beyond the point of having, on the one hand, an abstract spirituality and on the

other a material world that can be hammered on and dissected without our having conception that it, too, is a manifestation of the spirit. Michael must penetrate us as the strength, the force who can see through matter to the spirit everywhere present in it.... We must see to it that human beings take up the spiritual, not just into their head, but into their whole being. We must permeate ourselves wholly with the spiritual. Only the Christ can help us do that. But Michael must help in interpreting the Christ to us. Then we will be able to add to the words of the Evangelist the following: *“And the time must come when the flesh will again become the Word and learn to dwell in the kingdom of the Word.”*

Such then is the general context of the lectures given over New Year 1919-1920 and published here.

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The specific context is an extended visit to Stuttgart. Steiner had been visiting throughout the year in preparation for the creation of the Waldorf School, lecturing on social and pedagogic questions (CW 192). This time he arrived on December 18. The next day, he gave a public lecture on “Spiritual Science: Freedom of Thought and Social Forces.” His theme was the connection between thinking and willing—headwork and handwork—as the foundation for freedom and spiritual research. The next two days, he visited classes in the new Free Waldorf School, which was just ending its first semester, and, on the following day, spoke at the School’s Christmas festival. That same evening (December 21), he gave the first of the lectures to members collected here (the others falling on December 25, 28, and 31 to end January 1, 1920.) In between, he met with teachers and—astonishingly—gave *two* lecture courses! It had previously been arranged that, over the Christmas break (December 23 to January 3), he would give a science course for science teachers and other invited people. The first of three science courses, it had been announced as *The Light Course* (CW 320). (*The Warmth Course* [CW 321] and *The Astronomy Course* [CW 322] would follow.) Steiner would improvise

this course. But at the same time, at the last moment, some teachers had asked him to give another course—on language. And so he gave *The Genius of Language* (CW 299). As if this were not enough, as all this lecturing and counseling activity was going on, meetings were held on the founding of a business, *Der Kommende Tag* (“The Coming Day”), which would exemplify threefold principles. On December 27 and 30, two more public lectures (both (CW 333) were given: “The Cosmic Balance of Soul and Spirit Life Today” and “Spiritual Knowledge as the Foundation for Action—Ethics in Knowing—Human Hope from Spiritual Power.” Finally, on New Years Eve, after his lecture, Steiner was sitting with Emil Molt. Molt asked whether he would accept the Chairmanship of the new company. As Steiner said, “Yes,” the bells began to peal, announcing the New Year. That, too, would be a busy one.

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Truly, Rudolf Steiner’s effort on our behalf—“to impress something new into the development of humanity”—was almost superhuman. As stated, *Cosmic New Year* was one of three courses that he gave at the same time. No wonder that, at the close of the final lecture, he had to conclude with the following most moving personal remarks:

My dear friends, during this present short visit every day is so filled up from morning to evening because there is so much to inaugurate, to accomplish, to arrange, that it is not possible this time for one to consider all the requests that have come to me. I can only say on the one hand: since not everything can happen that should happen, therefore I will return again in the not-too-distant future, and then personal requests can be taken care of. But I also ask that you take this into your consideration as well. Not everything can be done in a few days, in a few days in which greater arrangements also have to be made, in which I am also worried about our Waldorf School, which should now have a deep impact in a new way on the development of humanity. It

is therefore also not possible to consider all the private requests, since, as you can see, I am having a difficulty in speaking. It is not a cold—it is the same as you feel when you have been chopping wood all day long, it is nothing more than an over-tiredness of the vocal cords that can then more easily catch cold. But today it is necessary above all else to look at what is necessary for the service of humankind as a whole. And forgive me therefore that this time individual requests cannot be honored.

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Cosmic New Year, then, consists of five lectures, given to members of the Anthroposophical Society in Stuttgart, and reflecting the various concerns and themes of the hour. They convey the urgency Rudolf Steiner felt both about the issues and the need to understand them. Not only were the issues of supreme moment in themselves, it was also vitally important that the “ordinary” membership both support them and take them up in their own lives. With the proliferation of social, educational, artistic, and other initiatives, he knew that it was imperative that members come together in their support. Otherwise, division, fragmentation, and spiritual bankruptcy would follow. At the same time, since they are members—and because he is squeezing these lectures in between others and a continuous stream of meetings, they have an intimate, open tone: Steiner is speaking person-to-person and face-to-face. Such indeed was always his relation to the membership. It was an ongoing, deep relationship. Therefore Steiner is always aware in speaking of the last encounter or conversation. He picks up, as it were, where he left off, thus affirming a consciousness of unity.

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The tone, nevertheless, is one of urgency. The times are dire. Initiation knowledge—the fruit of spiritual-scientific research—can no longer afford to remain the private precinct of esotericists. The chaos into which the War’s ending had thrown Europe—revealing

the bankruptcy of the old values and modes of thinking that had led to the conflict in the first place—provided a unique opportunity for a new spiritually inspired way of being to reconstruct society on quite different grounds. It was a gift that should be returned. Anthroposophists, who had grown used to the comfort of their spiritual “club,” must therefore begin to understand that they had a larger mission: to bring a truly Michaelic consciousness into the public arena.

Thus, he begins by reaffirming that the time demands that initiation knowledge flow into cultural development. But why is this so difficult? It is difficult, he says, because people fear spiritual knowledge. They are afraid of it. They are terrified of it because inwardly—even if unconsciously—they know that spiritual reality underlies all their thinking. Yet if they were to admit it, all their avowed assumptions about the world would collapse. Everything they thought was reality would become an image, a trace. If they were brave enough, they would realize that another path, another way of knowing, was necessary. And it is only this other way of knowing—out of the supersensible—that can “enlighten us about everything that surrounds us today in such a chaotic and devastating way.”

And so the first lecture turns to its main theme: the three life streams that make up human cultural life—spiritual life, economic life, and legal life or the life of rights. Steiner begins with spiritual life, which, he says, comes to us from Greece, whither it arrived from the East, from the centers of “The Mysteries of Light,” or the Spirit. From these ancient Indian mystery centers radiated an initiation knowledge that permeated the whole of life. After millennia, this knowledge finally reached Greece, but when it did, it was but a mere shadow of what it had been before. The original clairvoyance of the founding period had faded. Intellect more and more took its place until, today, it rules as abstract intellectuality, pervading the streams of legal and economic life with which it is wound or tangled up like a “ball of yarn.” “Legal” life, as Steiner tells it, for its part, arose in ancient Egypt, in the “Human Mysteries.” Passing through Rome, it took on an unimaginative legalistic quality, which in turn affected religious life also: it too became legalistic, unimaginative, and intellectual. Social life,

meanwhile, originated “more in the North,” taking on its hardened, intellectual form in “Anglo-American social organization,” whose philosophical consequences we find in philosophers like Newton, Hume, Darwin, Mill, and Spencer. Today, these three threads are completely entangled one with another and permeated with dead materialistic intellectualism. Spiritual science can and must show the way out.

Such, in brief, is the essential content of the first lecture. Several “asides,” however, dropped in the course of the main argument and not followed up, are worth noting, for they will reverberate through what is to come. Christ, for instance, is mentioned, clearly as part of any solution, but not expanded on. But a seed is planted. Related to this, Steiner briefly invokes Theosophy more harshly than usual, as an attempt at re-spiritualization that was part of the problem rather than any solution: colonizing Indian wisdom it created a hybrid spirituality with an Anglo-American (materialist) coloring. Also interesting from a human and historical perspective is Steiner’s response to the criticism and attacks on Anthroposophy and his person as a consequence of taking spiritual science into the public arena. He does not take it personally, yet clearly feels that every attack should be forcefully answered. He does not take the high road of being above the fray, but engages the opposition with passion.

The second, Christmas (December 25), lecture makes clear—if one doubted—the relevance of this now apparently distant period to our own. How, Steiner asks, can we celebrate such festivals, and not forget “all the pain and suffering of this time” and “all the manifestations of the decline which is taking hold of humanity in our present culture”? Surely, this question has only increased in urgency since Steiner first asked it.

How do we turn to the Christ in the right way today? Steiner answers this question, after detailing many symptoms of the false view of Christianity prevalent everywhere, by turning to the other great theme of the moment: the Archangel Michael. Michael is now—since 1879—not only the Regent of humanity and, specifically, the guide and teacher of spiritual science in our time, he is also now “the countenance of Christ Jesus,” as he had previously, before

Golgotha, been the countenance of Yahweh. Too many people still relate to him atavistically in the old way: they still place the nation, the folk, above the individual. (Here the allusion is to Woodrow Wilson, and the debacle of the Versailles Peace Treaty, which took its stand on “independence for even the smallest nations” so, in this context is quintessentially Luciferic, or atavistic.) Seeking Christ, whose face is Michael, is something else: it is the universal human, which is approached through the conscious inward striving for the truth, as is made possible through spiritual science. Michael seeks to aid us in this, but he is not alone in inclining toward us. We must also navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of Lucifer and Ahriman, the one tempting us toward a kind of pre-Golgotha relation to Christ as some kind of transcendent deity, the other tempting us to a Gospel fundamentalism that denies a living soul relation to Christ (and Michael). Christ must live between Lucifer and Ahriman, between these temptations, as a paradoxical “middle way” between transcendence and materialism.

The remaining lectures then take up and, always with a sense of urgency, develop these themes: the need for initiation knowledge; the three streams of cultural life; Lucifer and Ahriman and how to work with them; the Michael-Christ revelation; and, above all, the need to constantly strive for the truth.

Truth, indeed, as Steiner uses it is a key, unifying idea. For truth, finally, is what takes hold of us, claims us, penetrates us, and grows in us, transforming us. It is the very opposite of either an intellectualistic, disembodied (Luciferic) or a materialist (Ahrimanic) approach. It does not have to do with certainty, but with living, transformative, and revelatory experience. It is truth in this sense that must be stood up for—no matter whom it offends.

Truths of this kind, he tells us in his New Year’s Eve lecture, should become the content of the “I,” now empty and devoid of ancient clairvoyance, and “more or less only a point.” This point must become a circle as the “truths” of spiritual science enter into us and lay their claim upon us. Most importantly, such living truths are of the future. They come from the Christ and out of them the future will grow. It is this that makes New Year a cosmic or world New Year.

For such living truths, reconnecting humanity with the suprasensory world and the divine, available since 1879, are the gifts of Michael. But we must receive them in a living way and create through living and communicating them a new kind of community—to which, of course, there will be great opposition from those still petrified in the past.

All in all, this is an extraordinarily rich, dense little sequence of lectures, amounting essentially to “a call to awaken.” In this spirit, he concludes his New Year’s Day lecture:

I would very much wish that a New Year’s resolution that each person can only make for themselves will be there among us: namely, that through the hearts and minds of our friends eyes are opened for the vision of what is desperately needed, opened for what can only come from the spirit alone in order to help humanity. Today we cannot bring about healing with the existing outer arrangements; we must impress something new into the development of humanity.

So it was in 1920; so it is still today.