

Introduction

In this series of lectures, Rudolf Steiner repeatedly challenges us to awaken a new way of thinking that can truly penetrate into the social questions surrounding us. As he so often did, Steiner emphasizes how Spiritual Science can, indeed must, address the pressing issues of the day. It might seem strange to some readers that a book with the title *Ancient Myths* should be a call to a new understanding of our modern condition, yet it is through an appreciation of the significance of myths in the lives of ancient peoples that Steiner makes clear the challenges we face in our modern ways of knowing.

The ancient myths are an expression of great truths about the nature of the universe and human development. In mysterious, image-filled ways they describe a people's knowledge of their origins, and also of their particular state of consciousness. The different myths gave ancient people pictures of their development—of their gains and losses in human becoming—and helped them to understand their place within the evolving universe.

These stories challenge us to exercise a consciousness other than our modern one if we want to experience their truths. We must, for example, try to imagine what the different circles of the gods meant to a Greek, or how the slaying of Osiris spoke to

the experience of an Egyptian. This entering into another kind of consciousness—where the pictures express living realities and speak of real experiences of a macrocosmic–microcosmic relationship—is particularly difficult for modern people. Steiner articulates how the ideas, the words, and even the pictures in the ancient myths have become abstractions for us, cut off from any sense of the experiences that they actually represent. And so the real thrust of these lectures is to encourage us to develop thinking that can reunite us again to the realities beyond our narrow, abstracted understandings.

Steiner looks to the myths of neighboring cultures—of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Israelites—to illustrate how myths express the particular mode of consciousness of a people. He makes many fascinating connections and comparisons, exploring the heritage that different mythologies have contributed to our present worldviews. Students of mythology will find rich insights in these lectures.

The Egyptian Osiris–Isis story is particularly interesting to Steiner in these lectures. He sees Osiris as an expression of the Egyptian experience of the loss of direct Imagination of the suprasensory world. With the slaying of Osiris the Egyptians expressed that “the forces active in the old clairvoyance are now amid the dead...imaginative clairvoyance disappeared from Earth as a normal faculty of the human soul.” This living, direct picture-knowing was replaced by ever greater abstraction: Isis discovered Osiris’s corpse in Phoenicia, where writing originated as a transformation of the earlier picture-script.

Steiner draws attention especially to the relationship between the loss of imaginative consciousness as experienced by the Egyptians and the challenge we face today to bring new

life to our abstract ways of thinking. Here, as in other lecture cycles (particularly *Egyptian Myths and Mysteries*), he points to the connections between the Egypto–Chaldean historical epoch and our own. Certain impulses that were experienced in ancient Egypt reappear today in a new form.

In the third lecture, Steiner refers to the experience that the Egyptians had of Isis as “the epitome of all the deepest thoughts the Egyptians were able to form about the archetypal forces working in nature and in the human being.” He describes a statue of Isis in the ancient temple at Sais, beneath which was the inscription: “I am the All, I am the Past, the Present, and the Future; no mortal has lifted my veil.” He describes how for the early Egyptians this use of the word “mortal” meant that only one who had awakened to the immortal spiritual life of the soul could lift the veil of Isis.

Steiner then tells a new story, a new Osiris–Isis legend. This is a truly remarkable story, and one that I believe is of great importance for our time. Steiner tells it with great care, and with, for him, surprising tentativeness. As he says, “it is in no way born out of foolish arrogance, it is born in humility; it is also of such a nature that perhaps it can be related today in only the most imperfect way.”

This story takes place in the land of Philisterium in the age of scientific profundity. We meet the New Isis as an invisible, sleeping figure, veiled behind a statue of the Representative of Humanity and various adversarial beings. And here, too, is an inscription: “I am the Human Being, I am the Past, the Present, and the Future. Every mortal should lift my veil.”

This strange and illusive story is filled with powerful images. It pictures many elements that remind us of the realities of our

modern age: a kind of homelessness, the single mother dragging her child through life, the unknown father, the broken child, the attraction of illusion, the power of mechanical laws, cloning, computer paper, and the need for a new relationship to nature. But most of all it challenges us to wake up to experiences and ways of knowing that go beyond our everyday abstract consciousness.

Before she can wear a golden crown of genuine substance—the transformation of her ancient cow horns of clairvoyance and profundity—the New Isis must be able to recognize the true nature of her offspring, she must awaken to the true meaning of the Logos as described in St. John’s Gospel. Her challenge, and ours, is for “a conscious grasping . . . of what is meant by the Mystery of Golgotha, by the true power of the word.”

In a series of lectures given during Christmastime 1920, called *The Search for the New Isis, Divine Sophia*, Steiner brings further insights to this New Isis being. In the second lecture—which I am so glad has been printed here as an addition to the present volume—he announces that we must fulfill a New Isis myth for our age. He describes how the ancient Egyptians experienced that even after his death Osiris continued to be with them because Isis had buried him in the earth; this being of the Sun would now await them in the world after death. Steiner then suggests that since the Mystery of Golgotha, humanity has not lost the Christ Being; but what we have lost is the ability to know that this Sun being is still intimately connected with us and with the destiny of the Earth. He says, “It is not the Christ we lack . . . but the knowledge and wisdom of the Christ, the Sophia of the Christ, the Isis of the Christ.”

For many years I have pondered the challenges posed by the New Isis myth. Initially I saw it as a fundamental resource for my work on questions of feminine and masculine as qualities interacting in the individual and in society. At this level the myth can be seen as a call to awaken a new relationship to the feminine, so that we may address the imbalances of long years of masculine influence in our ways of thinking and relating to each other and to the Earth. (I am not here equating feminine with woman and masculine with man, but rather referring to soul qualities in all human beings.) The New Isis myth is a story that is continuously evolving, and so, too, I believe, is our human capacity to ever more consciously manifest and balance our masculine and feminine sides.

In recent years, feminist scholarship and the archeological discoveries of early matriarchal cultures have fostered a growing interest in ancient forms of Goddess worship. Many people are finding that the Judeo-Christian views of God no longer describe or inspire their personal search for the divine. A movement is developing to rediscover the Goddess as a feminine—some would say less stern and judgmental—face of the Godhead.

It seems to me that the New Isis myth offers something of deep importance to this search. Rather than looking back, and trying somehow to ignore or erase a male view of God that pervaded human understanding for thousands of years, it looks to a “New” Isis for an understanding of divinity. This evolving spiritual being can come to her full stature only through an understanding of the Mystery of Golgotha; she must come to know the true nature of her offspring.

What is so exciting about this myth—and all myths, if we can enter into them as expressions of different stages of human consciousness—is that the pictures are dynamic. They inspire human development. The New Isis inscription reads, “I am the Human Being...” Here is a new challenge to our human becoming, to how we understand our relationship to the divine world. From this point of view it becomes clear that this new myth is also about much more than a new consciousness of how feminine and masculine qualities interact in us. It is a challenge to human awakening, to each one of us to bear the spirit with ever greater understanding and responsibility.

Rudolf Steiner told the New Isis myth within this lecture cycle given in 1918, but it appears that very few people took any notice of it. Just as the New Isis statue in the myth was veiled behind the group statue, seen by few—and this within a building closed to none but where “far the greater number of people saw nothing at all”—so the myth, too, seems to have lived veiled within the lectures. Until recently, even among longtime students of Anthroposophy, it was rarely referred to or discussed. It seems particularly timely that SteinerBooks has now republished these lectures.

Beyond the telling of the New Isis myth the lectures have further insights; they are filled with enigmas of human existence. Perhaps one can see the myth itself as the central enigma around which Steiner offers clues and builds connections between the starry heavens and our human becoming, between historical development and human psychology. He shows how Spiritual Science gives the impulse to new questions that can take us beyond the abstractions of our modern knowledge to new experiences of a spirit-filled reality.

Throughout the lectures he looks at examples of pressing social questions of his time, for example, the chaos in Russia in 1918 and the problems of nationalism. Sadly, rising nationalism continues to be of great concern in our present age. Steiner's view of national chauvinism as a manifestation of a kind of psychosexual impulse operative in the wrong sphere is both amusing and enlightening: "Just imagine," he says, if those calling out for national interests "had to realize that what they crave is after all the mating-voice of the cock, however finely decked out in national garments." In instance after instance, he opens up perspectives on problem areas with a challenge to the human will to discover the real possibilities for development in our age, to awaken to our place within the entire cosmos.

In the later lectures of this cycle, Steiner turns to another aspect of the human enigma: the unusual sounding concept of humanity "becoming younger" through the passage of time. Initially, Steiner connects this phenomenon to the fact that, as humanity has advanced, the natural development of our soul and spirit nature in connection to our physical aging has ceased at an ever earlier age. In ancient times to grow old was also to grow wise. In our present age it is in our twenties that the physical ceases to let us be dependent on it "through our own will power we must make any further advance." In our materialistic age, when a youth culture so dominates popular images of success, Steiner's words ring with significance: "We must learn in a new way how to become old, and we can do so only through spiritual deepening." To awaken rejuvenating forces right through our lives we must continue to experience newness in our consciousness and not feel that learning belongs only to the young.

The questions, which Anthroposophy can awaken in us, foster ongoing learning.

Rudolf Steiner always returns to the need “to direct our gaze to what is invisible.” He explores the twofoldness of the human being in terms of the head with its spherical form as an externally complete image of the whole cosmos, and the body, which develops physically much more slowly, as “only a fragment,” as embodying more the suprasensory and invisible. He calls us to know our twofold nature and our task within the cosmos: “to know that from the whole universe there flow unconsciously into the head, stimulating its forces, the secrets of the stars, but that all this must be worked upon the whole life through by the rest of the organism, so that a person may conserve it on Earth, carry it through death back again into the spiritual world.” We must transform head knowledge into heart knowledge, natural science into Spiritual Science; this is the task of the future.

The importance of this task is not only for human life but for all of Earth development. Here Steiner’s statements stand in direct contrast to many modern thinkers who consider the human being an insignificant, and largely destructive, part of Earth evolution. Steiner actually begs us to develop a new heart life, for only by doing this in our lives on Earth can we give back the forces necessary for the future: “In the human race itself rests the future of the Earth’s existence.” He says that we must learn to “feel through” things; merely thinking through them is not enough.

I find this entire lecture cycle an exercise in trying, with Steiner’s guidance, to feel my way through the enigma of human existence. He poses a question and then moves around

it, offering pictures that quicken imaginations. The lectures themselves serve as a deed, an example of how to enliven concepts that, in our modern thinking, have been “passed through a sieve” and so live as abstractions. This work of reenlivening abstractions requires patience; it takes time to feel one’s way beyond a surface, materialistic knowledge.

By the end of the lectures it seems even more appropriate that the New Isis myth appears within them. The myth calls us to wake up, to lift the veil to the spirit and know our place within the past, the present, and the future. The lectures elaborate this call and clarify the challenges that face our awakening. But lest we might think that the task of understanding myths is ever complete, Steiner has warned us already on the first page that “myths are accessible from many points of view, and when something has been said about one of them, its content is far from being exhausted.”

Signe Schaefer
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