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INTRODUCTION

This volume comprises lectures given by Rudolf Steiner to various audiences in Europe during 1910, 1911, and 1917. These audiences were familiar with and sympathetic to Rudolf Steiner's worldview. In particular, they understood what a person could learn from a study of his *Outline of Esoteric Science*.¹ In that volume Rudolf Steiner introduces the idea that a science of the spirit, in contrast to natural science, is a cultural activity that is not only possible but also vitally important to the future of humankind. Regarding the discoveries of spiritual science, the third statute of the Anthroposophical Society² states that:

No special degree of academic learning is required to make them one's own and to found one's life upon them, but only an open-minded human nature. Research into these results, however, as well as competent evaluation of them, depends upon spiritual-scientific training, which is to be acquired step by step. These results are in their own way as exact as the results of genuine natural science. When they attain general recognition in the same way as these, they will bring about comparable progress in all spheres of life, not only in the spiritual but also in the practical realm.³

The training of a spiritual scientist proceeds along exactly specified lines and brings about the further development of the soul-spiritual being. This process might require several incarnations. This development can be compared to the development of a human being from a fertilized egg to an adult, but in the case of the training of a spiritual scientist the development takes place in the soul and spirit of the aspiring spiritual researcher and the development is undertaken consciously.⁴

The result of this development is the capacity for precise clairvoyant observation and understanding of the spiritual world. The training makes the student into an instrument for observing the spiritual world and thereby capable of spiritual-scientific research.

When modern spiritual researchers wish to convey their discoveries they first translate them into conceptual form. The resulting communications are comprehensible to anyone capable of unprejudiced thinking. In reality, this is not possible for many people because they are so immersed in the dominant materialistic worldview of our time.

In the following analogy, Steiner describes the difficulties that arise when people with a materialistic worldview approach the findings of spiritual science: Suppose a man who could not read decided to study a book. He could make all kinds of observations about the shape and ordering of the letters on the page, but would find incredible that something else, say Shakespeare's *King Lear*, could be found there. If this man debated about the page with someone who knew how to read he might well make fun of it, stating that nothing of the kind was to be found there, but rather only black letters on a white background.

A related problem is applying a materialistic scientific approach in a domain where it is inadequate to the task. A particularly striking example of this problem is found in the area of New Testament scholarship. Through spiritual-scientific research Steiner discovered that it is in the very nature of the Mystery of Golgotha that no outer historical research will ever be able to prove that it happened, much less what it was really about. This is possible only through spiritual science. Steiner puts it this way in the last lecture:

Those who refuse to grasp the Mystery of Golgotha through a spiritual understanding of earthly evolution—without historical documents—will never understand it at all. This

is the will of the gods, so to speak. Regarding the most important event on earth, human beings must exert spiritual activity. The Mystery of Golgotha can always be refuted historically; people will understand it only when raised to a spiritual comprehension of the world. (p. 203)

Moreover, academic researches acknowledge that next to nothing is verifiable about the life of Christ. Steiner states:

It must be understood that one cannot speak of the Christ Impulse in the same way that people discuss ordinary history. Important theologians claim that it is foolish to speak of the Gospels as historically true in the ordinary sense, since everything they offer as historical proof that Christ actually lived can be written on a few sheets of paper. Well-known theologians today thus admit that it is useless to study the Gospels as historical documents; there is no way to prove that they represent historical facts. This is considered self-evident today. According to these famous theologians, a couple of sheets of paper could contain all of the historical proof—of the sort that one would write as authentic documents about other historic personages. What this really means, however, is that even what is written on those few sheets of paper is not true in the ordinary historical sense. (p. 202)

The point is that the reality of the life of Christ is largely inaccessible to a materialistic, historic approach, and consequently all attempts in this direction are futile. A notable contemporary example of this problem—research with inadequate means—is found in the so-called Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar is a group of independent scholars who meet regularly to study texts relating to the life of Jesus and decide what parts are historically verifiable. Over seventy scholars have participated in the meetings since its founding in 1985. The group resolves controversy by a voting system and, on that basis,

makes pronouncements. The Jesus Seminar has amassed over 1,500 sayings attributed to Jesus and 387 reports on him. Their review includes not just the four Gospels but also some eighteen lesser ones. They have decided that about 18 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus and 16 percent of the stories about him are historically true. This puts their percentages higher than the scholars Steiner describes above. However, they reject the historical value of many of the most spiritually significant statements of Jesus Christ. For example, the “I am” sayings in the Gospel of St. John are not deemed historical. Quoting from the brief report by Gregory Jenks, here is what the Jesus Seminar makes of Jesus:

1. Jesus appears to have been an itinerant sage who delivered his parables and aphorisms in public and private venues for both friends and opponents in return for food and drink.
2. He never claimed to be (nor allowed others to call him) the Messiah or a divine being.
3. Jesus taught a wisdom that emphasized simple trust in God’s unstinting goodness and the generosity of others. Life was to be lived and celebrated without boundaries and without thought for the future. He rejected asceticism.
4. Ritual ceremonies had no value. Purity taboos and social barriers were never allowed to come between the people who responded to God and to one another in simple trust.
5. There were no religious “brokers” in Jesus’ vision of God’s domain. No priests, no prophets, no messiahs. Not even Jesus himself was to be inserted between a person and God.
6. To experience forgiveness one simply had to offer forgiveness to others.
7. No theological beliefs served as a test for participation in God’s domain.
8. Apocalyptic speculation with future punishments for the

wicked and rewards for the virtuous played no part in Jesus' teaching.

9. Jesus was killed because he refused to compromise this radical vision of life as God's festival banquet. Those defending the status quo with its elaborate brokerage system for religious favors had to destroy him or lose their hold over others.
10. Following his death his closest friends (especially Mary Magdalene and Peter the Fisherman) found that they continued to experience him as the one who made God real to them. The resurrection stories express their conviction that Jesus had been taken beyond death into God's own life.⁵

For anyone who has an understanding of the Cosmic Christ, as can be acquired from Rudolf Steiner's published spiritual-scientific research on Christianity, these ten points paint a totally pathetic picture. There is absolutely no sense for Christ, the solar being who incarnated into Jesus at the Baptism in the Jordan. Of course this is to be expected, as the scholars, using their voting system, have no doubt eliminated every statement found in the texts that would help one acquire some inkling of this deepest mystery of earthly evolution. The contrast between this picture and the magnificent image of Jesus Christ that emerges from spiritual-scientific research makes clear what Steiner was getting at with his story of the debate between a person who could read and one who could not, regarding what was to be found on a printed page. With scholars such as those of the Jesus Seminar, people who understand spiritual science will find no possibility of meaningful dialogue, as these scholars simply are unable to grasp what spiritual science is because they work with inadequate means; for the tools of material, historical research will never reveal the truth about the life of Jesus Christ.

* * *

Having, at least briefly, introduced certain hurdles that must be overcome if one wishes to approach these lectures with understanding, I will turn to a few observations about the contents. The first eight lectures, all delivered in 1910, constitute a world-historic event of the greatest imaginable significance. Here Rudolf Steiner travels through Europe speaking for the first time on the theme of the reappearance of Christ in the etheric, as developed from his spiritual-scientific research. He tells his audiences that the second coming of Christ is an event that will begin in the period from 1930 to 1940 with a few people experiencing it, and that it will come to more and more people over the next 2,500 years. In each talk he develops a broad historic perspective and context for this message, and each new presentation contains nuances that distinguish it from the others. He stresses that Christ will never inhabit a physical body again. Christ inhabited a physical body from the time of the Baptism, when he entered the body of Jesus, until the Crucifixion on Golgotha.⁶ Never before and never again will Christ take on physical form. His second coming will be in an etheric form.

The etheric body is something visible only to clairvoyant perception. In *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, Steiner explains that living beings—plants, animals, and humans—have a subtle etheric body that makes life possible. At the time of death, the etheric body separates from the physical body, and the physical body decays following the laws of inorganic chemistry. The reason people will be able to perceive Christ in the etheric is that Christ endows them with what Steiner calls “the new natural clairvoyance.” More and more people will be endowed with this new natural clairvoyance over the next two and a half millennia. Through the fact that many people will have this enhanced consciousness, human civilization will be completely transformed.

Lecture nine in this volume, “The Etherization of the Blood,” was given in 1911 in Stuttgart, Germany. Here Steiner continues his spiritual-scientific exploration of the working of Christ in modern times. This research leads to the deepest insights into the nature of matter, showing in particular how Christ is working into the material processes of humankind and the earth with a tremendous transformative power. The lecture also gives intimate details of how Christ approaches those who are in deep need. They perceive him in his etheric body. His etheric body appears as if it were a physical body, but because it vanishes, they realize it is not physical. Christ has the power to appear simultaneously to thousands of people all around the world. His etheric body is capable of working in the physical world in the way that a physical body does. Here is how Steiner describes Christ appearing to a suffering individual or group:

Such individuals may suddenly become aware that someone has approached to help them become alert to something. Although they believe that they are seeing a physical person, the truth is that Christ has come. They will realize that this is a suprasensory being because he will immediately vanish. Many will have this experience while they are sitting silently in a room, oppressed with a heavy heart and not knowing which way to turn. The door will open, and the etheric Christ will appear and console them. Christ will become a living comforter. Though it may seem strange now, it is nevertheless true that even large numbers of people sitting together and wondering what to do will see the etheric Christ. He will be there and confer with them; he will cast his word into their gathering. (p. 122)

Over a century has passed since Rudolf Steiner spoke these prophetic words. One therefore can ask if evidence of such

Christ experiences exits today. In fact there have been many reports in our time from people who claim to have experienced Christ. Two Swedish researchers published ads in the newspapers asking for people to send written descriptions of their Christ experiences. The results were published in the book *We Experienced Christ: Spiritual Encounters with Jesus Christ*.⁷ A compilation of personal Christ experiences is also available in *I Am with You Always: True Stories of Encounters with Jesus* by G. Scott Sparrow.⁸ There are also websites devoted to posting personal experiences of meetings with Christ.⁹ A review of such material reveals that a number of the encounters occur in vivid dreams. Another group of experiences occur as part of near death experiences. A third group occurs during ordinary waking consciousness. In these latter cases Christ appears to be in an earthly body that then disappears. This last group is quite consistent with Steiner's description from "The Etherization of the Blood," quoted above. I do not suggest that all the reports stem from actual meetings with the risen Christ. Of course, account must always be taken of the possibility of illusions and hallucinations, and even fabrications. On the other hand, there is no reason to dismiss all these reports as illegitimate.

The remaining four lectures of this volume are of a quite different character as they were given in 1917, the third year of the First World War, which decimated Europe, leaving upward of 30 million people dead. While these lectures were all delivered in neutral Switzerland, the tragic condition of humanity is reflected in these lectures.

The first three of these lectures were delivered as a series in Dornach. They examine the most difficult issue of modern time: the mystery of evil. Steiner shows how organized occult groups in their pursuit of power attempt to divert humanity's attention from Christ's reappearance. Steiner states that no one can have any influence on the sovereign will of Christ, but that these opponents of Christ are trying to deflect people away

from experiencing Christ, trying, that is, to affect our ability to experience Christ.

In the last lecture, given in Bern, Steiner introduces a very important distinction: the distinction between the world of nature and the world of destiny. He explains that into the orderly, natural, law-abiding events of nature, a completely different world penetrates, altering circumstances without ever violating the natural order. Suppose, he says, that a man is going on a walk in the mountains. Suddenly, he hears a voice saying: Can't you just wait here a few minutes? You don't have to continue just now! The man heeds the unknown voice, and a boulder hurdles over the place he would have been. The man inevitably would have been killed had he not followed the voice. No laws of nature have been violated, but the world is a different place for the man and his circle of acquaintances. This, Steiner states, is an extraordinary circumstance but mundane versions can be found in the myriad events of everyday life. For instance, you are delayed leaving home by some seeming nuisance, without realizing what was prevented as a consequence. Or, you are delayed at the airport, and as a consequence meet someone who turns out to be important for your life. This realm of "chance" happenings and "avoided" happenings is a vast realm that plays into human life and around the laws of nature without ever violating them, making our biographies what they are. This is the realm of destiny over which Christ is the ruler.

When we grasp that humanity will awaken more and more to an awareness of Christ working as Lord of Karma and giving conscious, wide-awake council to people every day around the globe, then we can begin to glean the social impact that Christ's working into earthly evolution will have. Christ's words as councilor to suffering souls will also sound out to politicians, business people, and scientists whose hearts are open, guiding their activities in the way of healing and the true moral world order of evolution.