

INTRODUCTION

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CONTEXT OF THE LECTURES

THE CYCLE OF FOUR LECTURES entitled “Christ and the Human Soul” was the last that Rudolf Steiner held before the outbreak of World War I. Although there is no direct reference to the coming events, we know that he was fully aware of the political tensions in Europe. Already in the spring of 1913, he wrote in a private letter about the danger of a possible war in the near future.* In retrospect, we can therefore recognize how these lectures dealt with themes that were relevant for millions of suffering people in the period that followed. Rudolf Steiner focused on the connection that Christ makes with human suffering and guilt, with sin and the longing for redemption from sin—a connection that is by no means abstract, but rather represents a deep union with each individual human being, however burdened with guilt he or she may be. Steiner tells us the meaning of Christ’s words to the criminal on the cross: “I am with your deed” (lecture of July 15, 1914, p. 157). When we connect willingly and consciously with Christ, he will help us carry the burden of our deeds.

Before considering in more detail the themes of these four lectures, I would like to take a step back and survey the context of Rudolf Steiner’s lectures in the years before World War I. The crucial theme of the ritual laying of the foundation stone for the First Goetheanum on September 20, 1913, was the suffering and compassion of Jesus. This was followed by months of lectures on the Fifth Gospel—an account of the dramatic events during the childhood and youth of Jesus. An immense quality of compassion lived in Jesus not only during

* Rudolf Steiner, *Briefe, II: 1890–1925* [Letters, II: 1890–1925] (GA 39), p. 455.

his childhood, but, as he grew older, this quality extended to humanity as a whole, as “desperateness about the destiny of earthly humanity.” The Russian author Andrei Bely, who attended these lectures on the theme of the Fifth Gospel, was the first to recognize that this was in fact the background of the building of the First Goetheanum: compassion for the suffering of humanity and the need to bring the impulses of Christ into the world. Bely called these lectures “a spiritual sheath of the First Goetheanum.”[†] In the years 1913 and 1914, the theme of Christian suffering and compassion appears in many lectures, not only as a quality of Christ himself but also as a task for humanity in helping him fulfill his mission on Earth. Rudolf Steiner spoke of this as “the culture of selflessness”:

To know Christ means to undergo the school of selflessness. . . . Under the influence of materialism, the selflessness of humanity was lost in a way, as will be understood in future ages of humanity. However, through absorption in the Mystery of Golgotha, the penetration of the knowledge of the Mystery of Golgotha with our whole feeling and soul being, we can once again acquire a culture of selflessness. We can come to understand that what Christ did for the development of the Earth is contained in the fundamental impulse of selflessness, and that what he can become for the conscious development of the human soul is the school of selflessness![‡]

Not only in suffering and compassion but also in the realm of ideals, intentions, and strivings, our soul forces can become “true seeds of a future reality” when they are developed in connection with Christ (lecture of July 14, 1914, p. 145).

In March 1913, ties with the Theosophical Society were decisively

* From the lecture of December 8, 1913, in Munich (CW 148). Not available in English.

† This theme was worked out by Sergei Prokofieff in an article: “Das erste Goetheanum und das fünfte Evangelium” [The First Goetheanum and the Fifth Gospel] in Florian Roder and Karl Lierl, eds., *Anthroposophie wird Kunst. Der Münchner Kongress 1907 und die Gegenwart* [Anthroposophy becomes art. The Munich Congress of 1907 and the present] (Munich: Anthroposophical Society, 2008).

‡ Rudolf Steiner, the lecture of June 1, 1914, in *Approaching the Mystery of Golgotha* (CW 152), pp. 118–9.

broken; already in February 1913, the Anthroposophical Society was founded in Germany (though there had already been an unofficial founding on December 28, 1912). Anthroposophy became an independent movement with the task of bringing Western spirituality into practice as a culture of selflessness.

One can see these different developments as an organism in which each part is connected to the others: the building of the First Goetheanum; Rudolf Steiner working on the statue of the Representative of Humanity; his awareness of a worldwide tragedy that begins to unfold; his lectures on Christology, which emphasize that Christ is with us, regardless of all our failures. In all of this, we see Rudolf Steiner seeking to give humanity hope in the midst of despair. Again and again, he emphasizes in his lectures on the Fifth Gospel that it was necessary to take up these themes precisely at that time “because of an occult necessity,” as “something that needs to be brought to humanity now.”[§]

In countless other lectures on Christology, Rudolf Steiner emphasized the meaning of Christ for humanity and for the earth as a whole. But the red thread through the series of lectures collected in this volume is above all the theme of the relationship of Christ with the individual human soul.

THE LECTURES IN NORRKÖPING, SWEDEN

At the beginning of these four lectures, Rudolf Steiner makes clear that the theme “Christ and the Human Soul” was given by the friends who organized this event. The human soul is the stage upon which the future of humanity and the earth is decided.

In her autobiography, *The Green Snake*, Margarita Woloschin describes the deep impression these lectures made on her and her friend Bugajev (Andrei Bely):

The lectures which Rudolf Steiner held between July 12 and 16 had a particular impact, due perhaps to their being held directly before the catastrophe of the First World War. They brought us to

§ From the lectures of October 5 and December 18, 1913, in *The Fifth Gospel* (CW 148).

an awareness that the twin goals of human evolution are the development of free will and the comprehension of the divine. For this reason, Rudolf Steiner referred to the Fall of Man, through which the human being became able to distinguish good and evil, and the event of Golgotha as two religious “gifts.” Without these momentous events, the human soul, which had become darkened in the course of earthly evolution, would never have been able to find its essential being. I remember the stupendous impression made on me by Rudolf Steiner’s description of the mass of people at the condemnation of Jesus; how they shouted furiously, expressing thereby the disavowal of the Being through whom they could alone recover their humanity. With that, they said in effect, “We no longer want to be human.” Humanity had arrived at the point where it had lost itself.*

At a moment in history when humanity has once again come to a point where it is in danger of losing itself, Rudolf Steiner shows us how Christ is longing to connect with each individual human being, however separated he may be from his true Self. Every human soul stands “in a direct personal relationship” with Christ, whether we know it or not (lecture of July 12, 1914, p. 122). However, if we begin to ask for his help in our destinies, he will be able to work in and with us as the Lord of Karma.

Here Rudolf Steiner presents an approach that is often neglected—namely, the development of an existential relationship with Christ. Rudolf Steiner tells us that spiritually striving people can indeed become their own confessors. That does not mean, however, that they can overcome their sins and shortcomings without any help—on the contrary: they have to develop a personal relationship with Christ and receive answers from him.

Perhaps I might be permitted to share something from the biography of someone I knew personally, as a concrete example of one who turned to Christ with her questions—and received his answers. She was among the humblest people I have ever met. I am speaking about Magdalene von Gleich, the widow of Sigismund von Gleich. Both were contemporaries and personal co-workers of Rudolf Steiner.

* Margarita Woloshin, *The Green Snake: Life Memories*, trans. Peter Stebbing (Edinburgh, UK: Floris Books, 2010), p. 317.

Magdalene belonged to the pioneers of the Waldorf School in Germany and The Netherlands.

In 1971, the house for elderly people where she lived burned down as the result of an accident. Seven of her best friends died in the flames. The next morning, standing beside the remnants of the house, Magdalene von Gleich asked Christ: “Why did I not die in the fire? Why my best friends?” Immediately, the answer came from within: “Because you have not yet suffered enough.” This seems like a harsh answer. For Magdalene von Gleich, however, it was an affirmation that the spiritual world knows when the time has come for us to finish our earthly task. This world needs our destinies, our sufferings, our compassion. In the years that followed, Magdalene von Gleich was able to bring these qualities into all her relationships.

With the theme of suffering and compassion, we return to a central theme of anthroposophy during the years 1912–1914. Through suffering and pain, spiritual forces can be developed that bring regeneration to the world—especially when our capacity for *passio* is extended in a selfless way to *compassio*. This is the essence of the Christ-impulse and at the same time the task of anthroposophy, as it was expressed in the First Goetheanum and in the life and work of Rudolf Steiner.