

Time: Rudolf Steiner's Contribution to a Modern Mythology

by

Jacob Qualburg

Translated by Anniken Mitchell

A central theme in Rudolf Steiner's activity as a spiritual scientist is the description of the force and the being that carries the name of Michael. As with many other connections, Steiner connects this to the existing cultural traditions, in this case the Christian one: "The force which is the source to the thoughts of things was in olden times called Michael. This name we will keep." With this as a starting point, Steiner adds aspects and pictures which can be seen as a contribution to a new mythology, a thought content to be worked with for the present time and for people into the future. In this article I will try to give a synopsis of some of this content, based mostly on Steiner's so-called "Michael Letters" published in 1924 and 1925.

The name Michael, who is like God, already exists in the Old Testament, first and foremost in the prophet Daniel, to whom this angel or a mighty heavenly being reveals deep secrets. In the New Testament Michael is mentioned in the Deeds of the Apostles as he whom Moses spoke to on Sinai, and also as the highest inspiration and protector for the people of Israel. He is also mentioned in the letters of Judah, but the most famous place is in the revelations of John, where Michael wins the heavenly battle with the dragon.

The pictures of the archangel Michael, his characteristics and his activity, received central place in the Christian consciousness. Churches were built in which he was especially revered throughout Europe and also in Denmark and Norway. The legends about him were told all the way up to the time when people's attention was more turned and bound by outer nature. After this shift in human consciousness, the stories and legends live on in a tradition that has never died out, even though the immediate insights are no longer present. The Michael that we know through legends stands forth as Lucifer's conqueror in the grand cosmic battle. In countless pictures Michael stands forth as the superior of the

dragon. He is most often depicted with a sword because he continues to battle the evil in the world while at the same time instilling courage and strength in the human being. But we also see him with the scales as the just judge, a task that he also holds in the last sequence of the dream song of Olav Asteson. It is this judging Saint Michael who leads all human souls towards Christ. Even though Michael stands forth as a leader in the service of the highest beings, he shows a particular care for human beings. In the *Legenda Orea* by Jacorbusta Borajene, Michael is described as the angelic being who stands closest to the human being with help and guidance. This takes place in multiple concrete legendary happenings, perhaps the most well-known being the revelation at Monta Gargano in the year 390. Jacobes also emphasizes the importance of the deep insight that Michael expresses towards the human being as an important guideline for the awareness of good and evil in the world.

When Steiner brings the description of Michael as a result of his spiritual research in the twentieth century, it is not a question of repetition of earlier insights or an interpretation of earlier stories. What he gives us is concrete information about spiritual realities as they are revealed to the spiritual scientists today. We meet in these descriptions a spiritual being who not only has followed with the times, but who has actively given impulses to the development. We will perhaps recognize the old Michael. At the same time we will also meet new and important challenges which are connected with the future development of the human being.

If we want to gain a deeper understanding of the riddles of history, it is important to acknowledge two principles: first, that both the human being (and other beings visible or invisible) go through development and transformation over time. Secondly, this development does not happen in a linear fashion, but more or less through specific leaps. The impulses are given with a momentous character, and later they have the possibility to consolidate over time. The historical turning points therefore turn into important keys if we interpret them right. Already in his first Michael letter, Steiner turns his attention towards such turning points. One is the transformation that takes place in the thought-life of the human beings during the ninth century. Before this time people still had a sense that thoughts were given them as a gift from higher worlds or from spiritual words. Later, the feeling arose that they themselves created the thoughts in their own inner life. The other turning point is the transition in the last third of the nineteenth century. Before this Michael could be looked upon as the objective ruler of the cosmos. After this turning point the human being has a possibility to meet him in his or her own individual soul-life in our own hearts.

These two turning points are deeply connected with the theme indicated in the introduction, and which later became a main theme in Steiner's sharings: Michael's connection with the element of thinking. From ancient times Michael is closely connected with the world-thought, and this relationship goes through a transformation over long expanses of time and in grand steps. The quality and the specific characteristics of these developmental steps are mirrored in what happens on the earth in the different cultural forms which humanity lives through in the course of history.

It can be described that Michael's task in the earliest epochs was to take care of the cosmic intelligence. The concept "cosmic intelligence" is everything but easily accessible in our understanding. Steiner also used words like "intellect," "intelligence," and so on, in connection with the hierarchy beings' deeds who are an active force in the ordering of ideas as they stream through the cosmos into physical reality. At the same time, this phenomenon is related to the intelligence which is developed within each human being. In its origin this cosmic intelligence is looked upon as one aspect of the creator force which is the foundation for our cosmos. In this regard cosmic intelligence also has a relationship to Logos, the creative word. And in what we call natural laws we have an abstract result or a shadow picture of the divine intelligence. Thinkers from earlier times without a doubt had a deeper sense when they referred to the "music of the spheres." Despite the difficulties, we are using this expression in subsequent descriptions in the hopes that we can develop a wider understanding for the concept.

The relationship between Michael's cosmic activity and the development of humankind can be described also from a human or an earthly perspective. The human being's experience transforms from an immediate relationship with the ordering principle of the world to a state of consciousness which we could call mythological, wherein the gods lead the human being. Then comes the split between the human being and his surroundings, and as the split widens the human being, in an inner devotion, experiences the connection between his own inner life and an ensouled nature in what we call an alchemical awareness. At the transition to the old Greek culture this connection is also lost, but still thoughts are experienced as living and filled with being-ness in an artistic, philosophical awareness. At the beginning of our modern times at the fifteenth century, thoughts and the experience of thinking became totally separated from a spiritual origin, and we developed the natural scientific state of awareness where thoughts can be grasped through physical organs. Steiner also describes Michael's own experience of this same developmental process. "His task is to safeguard the cosmic intelligence, and he wishes that the development will take place in this

arena.” He has made sure that the intelligence is fitted to a form that can fit the human being so that it can still have a connection with the cosmos. But this original living contact gradually goes over into a state where Michael is left to express his activities in the form of revelations, especially through the world of the stars. And he acknowledges that the cosmic intelligence is torn away from its origin among the gods and brought down to the earthly humanity. In the end the intelligence has sunk all the way down to the pure earthly, material world, where it is now in its present form available for the use of the human being.

But when the cosmic intelligence sinks down to the earthly plane, it is also accessible by those spiritual beings who from earlier times were Michael’s enemies. The so-called Ahrimanic beings try to conquer and control the world-thought process for their own purposes, and at the same time they wish to bind humanity in their own sphere. These are the real dragon forces which exist in the world today, and which from their own characteristic will hinder the human beings to develop a state of consciousness which will be needed in order to gain new insights into the spiritual worlds. To this Michael sees for himself no danger – he himself has overcome the dragon once and for all – but his cosmic task, combined with his deep interest for humanity, leads him to be drawn closer to the earth. He follows the road of the cosmic intelligence to be close at hand for what needs to be attended. He has been on his way since the eighth century and arrived in the nineteenth century to a place where his task now rests. This journey is also between those two great turning points to which we referred earlier. Within this space of time there are also the impulses for two important developments for humanity. In order to gain a closer understanding of what this journey of development means, we can look towards states of consciousness mentioned earlier.

The earliest stage contained a total insight into the spiritual, material connections of the world, but was at the same time overwhelming and binding for the human being. The human being was totally under the guidance of the will of the gods. Our modern state of consciousness is cleansed of compulsive spiritual insight, and at the same time the human being has gained a sense of freedom in the realm of thoughts, which brings something totally new. Pure individual freedom has its price. It can really only be gained in isolation, in loneliness. The foundation for this capacity was established through what the mythology refers to as “The Fall” and culminates in the loss of the last vestiges of old wisdom. The individual human, each to his own inclination, feels either a sense of loss, or praises the impressive results of natural science. Neither of these points of view in the long run is fruitful. The true progress which has taken place is marked by the capacity for pure and impartial thinking which the human

being has gained. This capacity is used for research on the physical plane, but also for research of spiritual realities, and free thought will become the human being's most important tool on the road towards new insights. This development has taken place in the human being partially at a conscious level and partially unconsciously. This can happen because we still, to a certain extent, are protected by angelic beings. But at this last turning point the freedom has to become real and fully realized so that each human being can make his or her own choice. Therefore we must become conscious of our own situation.

We are standing at a crossroads, equipped with wakeful thinking, consciousness which we can use as we see fit ourselves, and the choice is between two attitudes or paths: either activities that serve and support a developmental path (which will no doubt require sacrifice and selflessness) or activities which aim to increase our own field of power and our own self-interests. In this situation Michael cannot force or influence the human being. Human intelligence has become the domain of the human being. But Michael has a legitimate tool: he can step forth as an ideal. This he does by unfolding his own thought-permeated being as close to the human world as possible, and, for those human beings who are capable of gazing into this nearness, Michael's image stands ready to guide those who ask for his help. Michael does not step forth in a visible form in the physical world, but he stands in freedom, accessible to those human beings who, through an ethical self-awareness, seek him.

In his Michael letter dated November 23, 1924, Steiner gives two concentrated and concrete pictures. First: "Michael strides through the cosmos permeated by a deep seriousness. He steps through the stream of time in the capacity of carrying the light from the cosmos and creatively he shapes the warmth from the cosmos as a revelation of his being. He appears as a being who has likeness with the world, and he acknowledges himself only by acknowledging the world, and from all the corners of the cosmos he brings strength to the earth." The dragon is described: "Ahriman has on his path through time a desire after conquering space. He has darkness surrounding him, even though he sends out his own light. The more he succeeds, the more frost is surrounding him. He moves as if like a world who has contracted itself into one being, namely his own, where he desires only himself through negation of the world. He strides forth as if he brought with him all the dark forces from the dark caves of the earth."

These two pictures show the most extreme consequences – on the one hand, the selfless serving attitude and a sense of love towards the world, and on the other side a self-promoting, narcissistic love and hunger for power.

Ahriman's temptation is the supreme logic, the superior and uncompromising thought forces that are offered as something objective, but

which in reality only lead ultimately to a new sense of necessity. Michael's offer is a thought activity which is connecting with the world and which leads to growth in one's own inner being through taking the world up within oneself through love. The human being has this choice, to avoid egoism. Hence, wakefulness, self-knowledge, and the ethical development are so crucial.

Overcoming the naturally based self in order to find one's true self is also the problematic question for Peer Gynt in Henrik Ibsen's play of the same name. From the old button man, he hears the old mystery phrase, "To be oneself is also to die as oneself." This is Michael's challenge. He has never laid claim to cosmic intelligence but has only protected it, and connected himself with the spiritual and god-like forces in the universe. Therefore, he himself is always a truthful expression of the world. Human beings become more deeply human the more they are an expression of the world. Human beings find themselves not when they seek for themselves, but when through conscious, disciplined will, they seek the world and connect themselves with it through love.

At this developmental nodal point, our thinking capacity is also going through an important transformation. From the point of view of Michael it is so that he permeates the intellectual activity and therefore make it possible for thinking to be an expression of the heart, for the soul as well as for the head, for the spirit. This is connected with what Michael carries within him – something of the original creator warmth forces which are the foundation for the world and the creation of the human being. His relationship to thinking is not cold and soulless, but has in it something warm and essential and heart-felt. The thinking of the heart, the warming of the intelligence, stands side by side with freedom and the awakening of consciousness, which is central to Steiner's sharings about Michael. In the first letter he says: "Michael frees the thoughts from the region of the head and opens for the thoughts the path to the heart. The time of Michael has burst forth. Hearts are starting to have thoughts. Enthusiasm is not any longer just streaming out from a mythical darkness but from thought-carried soul clarity. To understand this is to take up Michael in one's inner life." Steiner refers to the Michael being as potentially being present in the human heart if we ourselves seek him. And the human being does this when he concerns himself with the kinds of thoughts that we have talked about here. The essential signature of heart-centered thinking is warmth and genuineness and a capacity for empathy. This transformed intelligence has as its function to be directed towards the world, and its organ for understanding is therefore empathy, the capacity to experience the essential nature of everything that surrounds us and meets us. One of the most shining examples this empathy is the question Parzival asks, with the support of the Grail, during his visit at Monselevat. In

him who asks, there is a deep foundation both of insight into connections, and of a heart-felt capacity to live into, and identify with, the suffering King of the Grail. A third dimension is Parzival's acknowledgement of the help of spiritual forces—his referral to the Grail as something supersensible—and the fact that this can also work into decisive action. This is also in Michael's being, that his goal is not to represent himself.

The human being's capacity to connect with the impulses of Michael is a step on the road towards an even greater meeting. For Michael is also referred to as the face of Christ. Michael's activity was once concentrated on the preparation for the birth of Christ on the earth. Today his innermost concern is to prepare for the birth of the Christ within each individual human being. This requires that human beings develop a new understanding of both the mystery of Christmas and the mystery of Golgotha. This is Michael's most important concern in our time, and Michael is the one who steps into the lead position over the other archangels during this period of time.

From the last third of the nineteenth century and for over three hundred years forward humanity has lived in a Michaelic time wherein these themes are central in the evolution of humanity. Steiner points to the fact that anthroposophy wishes to serve Michael in this decisive process of transformation. The supersensible described above can, be rightly called a new mythology for they are thought-filled pictures intended as a supportive foundation for people who during this problematic time seek spiritual insights and understanding. This new mythology is not the only possible road. In this time of individualism we also encounter Søren Kierkegaard's statement, that from the subjective perspective it is truth that counts. What Steiner does is to contribute from his perspective so that anybody who feels touched by his words can, in freedom, choose to connect with this spiritual content in his thinking, in his heart forces, and in his will forces.