

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NEW CHURCH

As someone who came into the New Church in my early fifties nine years ago, not knowing anything about Swedenborg or its theology, I thought it might be useful to try to explain its appeal and why its continuation is vital.

To begin with, my initial encounter with the *Arcana Caelestia* was much like that of a child reading an exciting adventure story. It really was a page turner. However, judging from the less enthusiastic reaction of others, questions began to arise in my mind why it was that I took so easily to the Writings. I subsequently began to read the Bible in a similar vein, a book that I had barely glanced at since my teens, and that was also puzzling. Consequently I began reading other New Church materials, as well as Swedenborg's less well-known works which stemmed from his pre-visionary stage.

Perhaps I should explain that I was raised Roman Catholic, attended Roman Catholic schools, and like many others, fell away from it in my late teens to early twenties. This was a gradual stepping away, coinciding with the development of other interests. In fact, between my teens and early fifties, apart from being pre-occupied with earning a living, the subject of the nature of reality in all its many guises had been something I had immersed myself in, whether in science, poetry, philosophy, art or wherever ideas led. Religion did not figure prominently in that exploration, though it always lurked in the background.

It may seem strange, therefore, why the New Church had an appeal, and I say this as the person who was puzzled by the attraction. Clearly its theology was miles in front of the scapegoat theology I had been raised in, but even though the theology was a distinctive feature of Swedenborg's thinking, still this was not the full explanation for me.

Then a few years ago, (probably 2009) Erland Brock from the Swedenborg Scientific Association sent me a section from a series entitled 'Words for the New Church' subsequently published as a book in the USA. It was written in 1879 with the sub-heading 'A Serial controlled by the Academy of the New Church'. To begin with, it read very much like a manifesto of the New Church in which it clearly outlined much of its distinctive function and character. Very near the beginning is this paragraph:

To preach the Doctrines of the New Church simply from the letter of the Word is not sufficient; for in this case we should be able to reach only those who have already a belief in the Divinity of Sacred Scripture.

The fact that Christianity is declining is evidenced by falling attendance figures, particularly in countries where the belief in science and its influential progress has overshadowed religion, and perhaps not without reason. This is arguable of course, but the point is that here was a church that had a vision that reached beyond the 'preaching-to-the-converted' philosophy. Who, then, was the target audience? I have to say that I was more than surprised and actually jumped out of my chair as I read the next line in this passage:

But the Doctrines of the New Church are also for those who have intellectually separated themselves from the foundations of Christianity, and whose minds are absorbed in the study of the natural sciences.

Reading this, I realised why the New Church was significant to me. The questions I had raised in my mind about the appeal of the Writings were answered – I was that person described as 'separated from Christianity' and immersed in the 'study of the natural sciences'.

That is not to say that the New Church came into existence for me exclusively. It is more the case that the world today is full of people much like myself in terms of type. That is to say, what follows generally speaking is a common experience: secular education promotes its own advantages, while subsequent experience of it shows how narrow a view it presents of reality. 'What's in it for me?' is the kind of question that ultimately shapes that reality, and one soon discovers the restrictive scope of its vision. (By

'soon', I mean a period of years that can extend, as in my case, from the age of 18 up to 50-60, depending on individual disposition.)

Just to emphasise, this is a conclusion discovered by experience rather than study, a conclusion many feel dawning over them gradually as they discover the limits of the kind of mind that is 'absorbed in the study of the natural sciences'. In a modern context, that phrase covers just about all levels of experience. It almost goes without saying that the promotion of such study goes hand in hand with a simultaneous demotion of religion that is reduced to metaphor at best, a kind of poetic expression alleged to belong to a pre-scientific age.

This could easily become an essay that strays away from the point, which is to explore the relevance of the New Church and the kind of thinking developed in Swedenborg's thought in the modern world. Still, the previous paragraph should be enough to suggest that in some ways, the modern world has inadvertently prepared many people for a different kind of vision for no other reason than this: bred within us is a sense of lack by the very means that provides excess and a surfeit of 'things' that no longer have the ability to hold us in their thrall. That is to say, there exists a growing army of people under the radar of public perception who, because there are no words or ideas that can express it, are virtually invisible but who nonetheless live in a silent awareness covered by expressions like 'there must be more to reality than this'. That in itself is interesting, since the kind of loss of confidence over time is described by Swedenborg as a process of vastation, something easily grasped to newcomers like myself aware of a need for something more radical than modern culture can provide, since its concept of a solution is virtually cosmetic, providing the same things in a new format that ultimately satisfies no craving. In short, one could view Swedenborg's thought in semi-commercial terms as identifying a substantial niche in the market that is currently going begging. It is clearly a market that is identified in 'Words for the New Church'.

With this in mind, try to imagine what it must be like for people coming upon New Church thinking for the first time. Keep in mind that they will have some memory of a past in which they learnt and absorbed Bible stories, and that some key figures will be etched in their memory, for who has not heard of Adam and Eve, the serpent in the garden, events like the flood and much else besides? Though rarely discussed, they are part of the reason why they have intellectually separated themselves from religion.

Take a particular story like the serpent in the garden. Memory will kick in, reminding of all the associations adopted with its recall – the devil, Satan, or at any rate some kind of negative link with what is bad or evil. Early religious instruction had done a good job of forging these kinds of links, and it is these that were at heart the cause of rejection as one quietly removes oneself from the scene, as there are no words that can effectively express the sense of dissatisfaction.

But in reading this passage of the serpent in the garden again, as presented in the *Arcana Caelestia*, there is suddenly another way presented for engaging with its meaning. Swedenborg says nothing at all about the devil, but something else entirely:

'The serpent' is here used to mean man's sensory perception in which he trusts...Man's sensory powers they [the most ancient people] called serpents, for just as serpents are next to the ground so do the sensory powers come next to the body. Consequently, reasonings based on sensory evidence concerning mysteries of faith they called serpent-poisons...

The text continues in this vein, and while it is well-known in the New Church that this is a far more meaningful exegesis than that which is traditionally associated with it, it is hardly possible to describe the impact that this has on someone like myself who has come into the church immersed in all that has been absorbed in the study of the natural sciences.

Is it possible that science, or at the very least the kind of thinking it represents that is so heavily dependent on the senses, is actually being described here in an ancient text? And if so, why had this never been taught, and indeed obscured by layers of miasmal spirituality that I had been raised in that had no real connection with the reality of my experience?

Here in very concrete terms, previously difficult to articulate, is the source of the real problem facing the 21st century. Science creates an appearance of the complete picture when in reality it has only ever been a partial view made possible by the eradication of all things spiritual, as though the whole universe were its subject-matter. In reality, the appearance of that scale of things far from placing humankind in the centre of the picture, turns him into a minor player in a reality that is cold and 'accidental' in which the appearance of humanity is virtually irrelevant. And it is this meaning we find prescribed in these very simple ideas, known by everyone, that is hidden within the coils of the story of the serpent. Needless to say, the task of the serpent is to seduce the mind, to create an initial perception of wholeness of view, yet ultimately, as experience testifies so often, it merely leads to self-service and principles of gain, both of which are entailed by the casting out from the garden of Eden. Could it really be true that Genesis is actually describing the modern world? Surely not?

But here is the point: this is exactly the picture that emerges from Swedenborg's exegesis. More than that, whatever Swedenborg has to say, he always shows how what is spiritual is rooted in the natural, that is, at the level of reality that is our experience. But there is something else as well.

The Bible as a spiritual document is one that is effectively timeless, yet a picture of reality that is inherently contained and which is Swedenborg's focus is one that relates particularly to the modern world. That is to say, the Bible contains a much deeper layer of meaning hidden within its words, but there is a sense in which the relevance of that meaning relates in a very precise manner to our world today, in a world to which they apply in the most extraordinary way. Is it possible that the Divine Providence could have foreseen the state of things as they are today, such that the Word has a very specific message for it, in terms that it can understand? Ours is a world that is thoroughly absorbed in external concerns almost exclusively, and we learn that the Israelite nation is selected for their very externality. Is it possible that there exists a message for us stretching over the ages precisely because our condition is the same as those that applied to the Israelites? The natural mind is represented by Egypt and has over 600 references in the Bible; is it just coincidence that the modern mind corresponds perfectly with everything that is said about Egypt? Pages could be written on this aspect of the Bible alone, and it is amazing to discover that this Egyptianism was the very focus of the manifesto that is 'Words for the New Church':

The truths of the spiritual world rest upon the truths of the natural world; and consequently, the truths of the church rest upon the truths of natural science.

...The New Church will become a power in this world, and will be able to convince all those who are willing to be convinced, just in proportion as it brings its spiritual doctrines within the radius of vision of men in this world, by preaching them in the first place immediately out of the letter of the Word; and in the second place by bringing down the doctrines into the knowledges of the natural world, and thus within the sphere of natural light, and hence of natural science.

(This passage is an interpretation of the vision of the woman bearing a child in the wilderness in Revelations, in which the significance of the rod of iron in the man-child's hand is explained.)

The modern Egyptians also use their knowledge of natural things in declaring the independence of matter from spirit, and in denying man's immortality. Yet the fact that the modern scientists make such a perverted use of the natural sciences, is no reason why the church should turn its back on science and why it should declare the cultivation of the natural sciences unnecessary and injurious. The church ought not to reject and condemn natural science, but it ought to despoil the modern 'Egyptians' and thus make the vessels of natural science, vessels of truth, instead of falsity...The New Jerusalem, the Lord's New Church, needs the vessels of the 'Egyptians' for her own use and adornment, and in order that she may arise in all her glory and power, and therefore she must go and borrow them.

(The reference here is to the episode in Exodus where the Israelites are ordered to 'borrow' the gold from the Egyptians prior to their exodus.)

What one reads here is a supremely confident statement of intent, and it is clear that the New Church saw itself as a power in the world by showing how the spiritual grows out of the natural, in the face of a natural that, like the Egypt of Exodus, is intent to keep reality religion-free. We find this described in the opening pages of Exodus, where Pharaoh, representing the collective mind in its power, doubles the workload upon the Hebrew nation in order to purge them of their desire for a spiritual level. One can easily see how this equates with a present in which the apparent concerns of this world, far from being alleviated by the advances in knowledge, is constantly maintaining an economic pressure through rising costs to keep people occupied, and religion marginalised. Yet the kind of religion that shines through the Bible and which is revealed by Swedenborg is one that is firmly rooted in the natural, and indeed where its life begins. Here is the novel idea that has been out of reach for so long: spirituality, like the Incarnation, is fundamentally physicalised.

On the surface, many of the ideas proposed and investigated by Swedenborg may seem difficult to grasp, yet experience makes them quite easy to understand. For instance, however we might come to think of influx rationally, the spiritual model for it is already presented on a physical plane. Think about it: influx, or spiritual influence, works on us without our awareness of it. The correspondence for this on the natural plane can be found in advertising. It invades a huge fraction of our waking lives, and yet for the most part we are hardly aware it is going on. Music stations and TV programmes are constantly interrupted by them, and hoardings just about everywhere encourage us to keep wanting more things. These parallels are called correspondences, and the fact that so many people are feeling that there must be more to reality than is currently presented is an indication of just how influx operates in the modern world.

To sum up, Swedenborg reveals a structure of reality in which the spiritual levels in our lives are seen to evolve quite naturally within our physical lives. This has been difficult to see with the rise in creationist accounts that emerge when these two levels are treated separately, but by showing how everything in the natural world has a correspondence with something in the spiritual realm, we begin to see how important the natural world, and the experience of it is, as a necessary preparation for a spiritual life. There is hardly a page of Swedenborg that does not refer to this level, and it is by revealing this level of meaning that we begin to discern a sense of prophecy, that the Bible had always been intended for a future age which is now here for which its message is vital.

However, and these are the critical points, to what extent has the current New Church forgotten its basic teachings? As critical as these remarks may seem to be, there is a sense in which 'Words for the New Church' no longer seem to apply. Consider the following: while the book of Revelations in the minds of most people is still a kind of obscure reference to some apocalyptic end of ages, given that the subject of the Bible is spiritual, its concern is therefore with spiritual welfare; the imagery it contains is always concerned with spiritual emergence when a previous tradition loses its way and seeks purely self-driven aims. As a kind of prequel to this emergence, the book of Revelations cites seven churches all of which are warned of a danger that could result in the loss of the distinctive character that defines the church, a character that can be referred to as the 'first works' of the church. Incidentally, by 'church' one should not think of buildings so much as particular relations within an individual or community with religion. Those 'first works' are clearly the subject of 'Words for the New Church', and while there is much material concerning the Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom, ultimately a form of the spiritual element develops in which the character of its basic teachings is either absent or played down. Yet it is that character which informs the Divine Love and Wisdom, and without a more emphatic emphasis on the physical level, these lose their essential connection to human life, and one is left with a kind of religion that is not that distinctive or different from that of more traditional churches. The New Church has a far more distinctive role. We are aware of spiritual and celestial levels as distinct types of spirituality, yet there is no 'fast-tracking' from one to the other. Unless we remember our roots, the New Church will continue to dwindle. It has a message that the world is in dire need of, and which it is indeed looking for. It is a message that applies to the experience we have in our physical lives. Yes, its two great messages are no different from that of other churches, the love of God and the love of neighbour, but it has a context which fills them with a clarity and logic that is unknown for the most part in the outside world, and it is that clarity for which there is a great need.

Here is a good place to end. However, since much of what is referred to here as spiritual evolution is not consciously perceived, it becomes clear to understand the nature of correspondence as a methodology that stimulates the process by acting as the important link between our spiritual and natural levels of being. It is this that gives the natural level its status of great importance, and perhaps it is best left to Swedenborg to give us a flavour of this:

...our inner mind probes the material in our natural memory and uses the fire of heavenly love to refine the things there that support it, to draw them off and purify them to the point that they become spiritual concepts. We are not aware that this is going on as long as we are in our physical bodies because in this state, though we are thinking both spiritually and naturally, we still do not notice what we are thinking spiritually... (Heaven and Hell 356)

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July 2013