

Some Thoughts for the New Church

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(This is slightly condensed from an article written for *Things Seen and Heard* for the Swedenborg Society in London, England. Reprinted with permission of the author.)

As someone who came into the New Church in my early 50s nine years ago, not knowing anything about Swedenborg or the Church's theology, I thought it might be useful to try to explain its appeal and why its continuation is vital.

My initial encounter with *Arcana Coelestia* 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 Catholic schools, and like many others, fell away from it in my late teens to early 20s. This was a gradual stepping away, coinciding with the development of other interests. In fact, between my teens and early 50s, apart from being preoccupied 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 a person 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

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the full explanation for me.

Then a few years ago – probably 2009 – Dr. Erland Brock from the Swedenborg Scientific Association sent me a section from *Words for the New Church*, a series of articles written in 1879 and subsequently published as a book in the United States. The sub-heading is, *A Serial Controlled by the Academy of the New Church*. It read very much like a manifesto in which the New Church clearly outlined much of its distinctive function and character. Very near the beginning is this statement of purpose: “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 realized why the New Church was significant to me. The questions that had arisen 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 exclusively for me. The world today is full of people much like myself. Secular education promotes its own advantages, but it is common for a person’s actual experience of it to reveal how narrow a view it presents of reality. “What’s in it for me?” is the kind of question that shapes that view of reality, and one soon discovers how limited that vision is. (By “soon,” I mean a period of years that can extend, as in my case, from the age of 18 up to 50 or 60.)

Just to emphasize, 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 reduces it to metaphor at best, a kind of poetic expression viewed as typical of a pre-scientific age.

What I am suggesting is that, for many people at least, the surfeit of “things” provided by the modern world no longer have the ability to hold us in their thrall, and this has given rise to a sense of lack, of something missing. There is a growing army of people under the radar of public perception who live in a silent awareness indicated by expressions like, “there must be more to reality than this.”

This kind of loss of confidence over time is described by Swedenborg as a process of “vastation,” something easily grasped by newcomers like myself aware of a need for a kind of reality more radical and substantial than modern culture can provide. This is because the solution to human yearnings is mostly cosmetic, providing the same things in a new format that ultimately fails to satisfy our deepest human cravings.

In short, one could view Swedenborg’s thought in 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 learned 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?

Though rarely discussed, they are part of the reason why they have intellectually separated themselves from religion. For instance, the story of the serpent in the garden will bring up all the old, negative associations that story has for them. (Couldn’t be true, a harsh and unfair judgment, and so on.)

Here in 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.

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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 they lack words to express the sense of dissatisfaction they feel, or to put the story in a more favorable light.

But in reading this passage of the serpent in the garden again, as presented in *Arcana Coelestia*, we find another way 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 this has on someone like myself who has come into the Church immersed in the study of the natural sciences.

Is it possible that science, or at least the kind of thinking it represents, which 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? Indeed, the truth of it had been obscured by layers of miasmal spirituality that I had been raised in and that had no real connection with the reality of my experience.

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Needless to say, the task of the serpent is to seduce the mind, to create an impression of wholeness which is really incomplete and leads to self-service and principles of gain, and ultimately, expulsions from the Garden of Eden. Can it be that *Genesis* is actually describing the modern world?

But here is the point: this is exactly the picture that emerges from Swedenborg's exegesis. More than that, he always shows how the spiritual is rooted in the natural, that is, at the level of reality we are most familiar with.

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Ours is a world thoroughly absorbed in external concerns; and since we are told that the Israelite nation was selected because of how external they were, we might conclude that there is a message for us in their long-ago history because our condition is the same as theirs was. The natural mind is represented by Egypt, referred to more than 600 times in the Bible. Is it just coincidence that the modern mind corresponds perfectly with everything that is said about Egypt?

Egypt, we note, was the focus of the old New Church serial, *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 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.

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

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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.

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.

In the opening pages of *Exodus*, Pharaoh doubles the work load upon the Hebrew nation in order to purge them of their desire to practice their religion. One can easily see how this relates to our world today, in which religion is being marginalized.

But it is true that spirituality must be grounded in the physical. The kind of religion that shines through the Bible and which is taught in Swedenborg's Writings is firmly rooted in the natural. Here is the novel idea: spirituality must rest upon physical reality, which is illustrated by the Lord's incarnation.

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, we can see how influx works by considering advertising. It is all around us, and yet for the most part we are hardly aware it is going on.

By showing how everything in the natural world has a correspondence with something in the spiritual realm, the Writings show us how important the natural world and our experience of it is in preparing us for spiritual life. Swedenborg's Writings refer to this often, and it gives us a sense that the Bible always contained a vital message for a future age, which is now here, for which its message is vital.

To what extent has the current New Church forgotten its basic teachings? Does the important message of *Words for the New Church* no longer apply? Is the New Church losing its distinctive character?



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