

PLANETS AND PERSPECTIVES: NEW CHURCH THEOLOGY AND THE PLURALITY OF WORLDS DEBATE*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Emanuel Swedenborg's first major theological publication, *Arcana Caelestia*, we find a simple statement making an amazingly grand claim about the physical reality of the universe:

Where a terrestrial body exists, so does the human being; for the human being is the end for the sake of which a terrestrial body exists, and the Supreme Being has created nothing without that end in view. (AC 9237)¹

Contemporary New Church people may find this statement unexpected and unsettling. What do we find surprising about it? It is no surprise to a Swedenborgian's ears that the purpose of creation is a heaven from the human race and that therefore humans might be found anywhere where conditions permit. The idea that human life exists elsewhere in the universe fits comfortably within a New Church world view, and so it is not the plurality of worlds assumption in this statement that troubles us.

The trouble we have with this statement is that to date there is not one whit of evidence that any life at all, much less human life, exists anywhere in this solar system, or indeed in the whole universe, except right here on planet earth. This is not to say that life does not exist elsewhere—we cannot prove that. But taken at face value, and even more so when seen in context, the statement predicts that we *should* find life—even *human life*—

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¹ All references to theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg are given parenthetically by abbreviations for the titles of the works followed by section number. Abbreviations are: AC for *Arcana Caelestia*, DLW for *Divine Love and Wisdom*, DP for *Divine Providence*, EU for *Earths in the Universe* (or *Worlds in Space*), HH for *Heaven and Hell*, SE for *Spiritual Experiences*, and TC for *True Christianity*. See "works cited" for complete bibliographic information.

everywhere we find a terrestrial body. The simple fact is that we do not. As I am sure you are aware, many Swedenborgians have developed elaborate explanations for this dearth of evidence.² The number and nature of these explanations register the difficulties the community of believers has with these teachings.

My purpose in exploring this topic is not to critique the theories that have been offered to explain that there really are people on other planets in this solar system. Nor is it to offer my own theory on how there could be people there but we cannot see them. My training is in biochemistry—the chemistry of living systems. When I bring my training to bear on this topic I find little with which to work. Planets lacking either solid, or gaseous, or liquid material seem also to be lacking the essentials that sustain physical life. Much as I would love to find life—any kind of life—elsewhere in this solar system, I find it unlikely. Perhaps the best we can hope for is evidence of past microbial life on Mars.

My curiosity about the plurality of worlds topic in the Writings does not stem from any hope of confirming the predictions made there about the physical nature of life elsewhere in the universe. Rather, my curiosity on this topic comes from a hunch that there is something else going on here. When I ask myself why the Writings contain information on the plurality of worlds I get no satisfaction at all from the answer that it is there to tell us things that we could find out on our own through physical observation—sending spacecraft to at least some of these presumably inhabited worlds. I do not believe that God uses revelation to tell us what we can find out through physical means. Revelation serves another purpose. Revelation tells us those things that we need to know and cannot discover on our own—that God exists, God’s nature, and God’s purpose in creation. My curiosity turns then to the question: Why do I need to know anything about the plurality of worlds from revelation? What spiritual reality does it unveil?

The plurality of worlds topic is not one of minor significance in the Writings. Swedenborg’s unpublished preparatory work, *Spiritual Experiences*, contains about a hundred pages recording his travels in the spiritual

² For an outline of ten theories on why we do not see people on the Moon see Alfred Acton’s “Life on the Moon,” *New Church Life* 116 (June 1996): 256–263.

world to spirits who inhabited other planets in this solar system and in solar systems beyond ours, his observations of their characteristics, and his conversations with them. The published work *Arcana Caelestia* presents much of this information between chapters explaining the inner meaning of Exodus. Most of the material on the plurality of worlds in the *Arcana Caelestia* then appears again in another published work, *Worlds in Space (Earths in the Universe)*. And it appears another time in one section in Swedenborg's most widely read book, *Heaven and Hell*. Swedenborgians, much to their consternation, are known for their belief that human life exists elsewhere in the universe.³ This has become an embarrassment to many believers, but it was not always this way. Nor does it need to be a stumbling block today. In fact, I hope to show tonight that the Swedenborgian belief in the abundance and distribution of life throughout the universe is a glorious achievement of this faith—that this belief has much to do with what makes the New Church new.

To get to this desired destination we need to travel back to the time when Swedenborg penned his observations on the plurality of worlds. And we need to travel back even before then, taking an inadequate though necessary tour through about 2000 years of thought on the question of whether or not we are alone in the universe.

II. ONE OR MANY WORLDS?

What thoughts about the cosmos and our place in it influenced eighteenth century European thinking? Most scholars trace that influence back to fifth and fourth century B.C. Greeks—philosophers such as Democritus (ca. 460–370 B.C.) and Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) who argued for a plurality of worlds, and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) who argued that there can be just one.

³ For example, see Theodore Wright's 1897 editorial, "The Planets Inhabited" in *New Church Review* 4: 117–121. Wright opens this piece by lamenting: "Much ridicule has been heaped upon the New Church because its members believe the other planets to be intended, like this globe, for human habitation. Perhaps there is no point in regard to which our people are so sensitive as this, for they continually hear scornful remarks, as if the single fact of our holding this belief were enough to discredit all else." He goes on to quote a clergyman who called the idea of pluralism "Swedenborgian nonsense."

A. The Debate in Ancient Greece

The atomists, Democritus and Epicurus, founded their belief in the plurality of worlds on their concept that creation is made up of an infinite number of atoms. These atoms can combine with one another in various ways, making all substance. Where there are atoms there is substance and where there are none there is void. In his impressive and thorough work, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate*, Michael Crowe highlights some of the atomists' postulates relevant to the plurality of worlds question that sound remarkably modern:

1. . . . matter is composed of atoms
2. . . . the present state of nature is the result of a long evolutionary process
3. . . . life exists elsewhere in the universe
4. . . . there is no God, or at least no personal God (Crowe 1986, 3)

What is the logical sequence of these postulates? The Epicureans began with a concept that matter is composed of atoms, these atoms having intrinsic properties including an ability to combine. If the atoms are infinite in number and can combine, then the number of possible combinations must also be infinite. Material complexity—soil, trees, flesh—is simply the result of various combinations of atoms, arrived at over a long, evolutionary process. If these ideas are correct, then there is no reason to believe that the atoms are not also combining and evolving living forms elsewhere in the universe. And if atoms can do all this from their own intrinsic properties then there is no need for a God who puts things together. Material constructs itself.

It is curious that when the Epicureans thought of a plurality of worlds, they were not thinking of the *planets* as being other worlds. To them the word “world” meant not the earth, but the earth along with all the celestial objects. To them a plurality of worlds meant a plurality of entire systems beyond this one, complete with their own heavens. What this means is that their prediction of a plurality of worlds was based not on thinking of heavenly objects as inhabitable, but on their atomic theory (Dick 1982, 6). Today the idea of many unobservable *kosmoi* (universes) exists again at least in string theory (Greene 2004, 393).

Aristotle did not see the world as composed of atoms. He had a different theory about the nature of substance. His well known four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, and the four qualities, hot, cold, wet, and dry, were all he needed to explain chemical substance and transformation. Aristotle's theory was based on his belief that matter was continuous and capable of infinite mixing and therefore infinite conversion. He entirely rejected the idea of atoms since these are chopped up bits of substance that always retain their nature and so cannot be transformed from any substance to any other substance.

Aristotle also rejected the idea of a plurality of worlds because of his idea of natural place. According to Aristotle, each of the four elements has a natural place. The natural place for "earth" is the center of the earth. Thus when we throw a rock up it falls back to the earth, seeking its natural place. Being intermediate between earth and air, water floats on earth and rests beneath air. Being more ethereal than the water, air finds its natural place above earth and water. And fire, heat, seeks its home in the sun and so rises up above even the air. Using his theory of natural place, Aristotle concluded that there can be just one world because if there were more than one then the earth of one would attract the earth of the other and they would join (Aristotle *de caelo* Book I, Chapter 8, 277a lines 11–13).

As I tell my chemistry students who get to explore Aristotle's theory of matter at the end of the first year course in chemistry, Aristotle's theories are elegant and attractive and are not easy to defeat. Many people for many centuries held to these notions because they make sense. It was not until the latter part of the eighteenth century that people like Lavoisier (1743–1794) were able to show that Aristotle's theory of matter was inadequate, which led to the modern atomic theory, Dalton's atomic theory, described in 1803.

B. Debate in the Scholastic Circles (1100–1500)

Greek ideas of matter and of the plurality of worlds or lack thereof came to the fore in medieval Europe with a Latin translation of Aristotle's *de caelo* in 1170 (Dick 1982, 24). Led by men such as Albertus Magnus (1193–1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), the thirteenth century scholastics concerned themselves with harmonizing Christian faith with Aris-

totelian reason. Christians found that they could strengthen their faith using reason, and that the Aristotelian world view was a powerful example of what reason could achieve. This harmonization was not, however, without its dangers. While Christians embraced the explanatory power of Aristotle's theories and the glory they saw in the perfection of the heavens and the impossibility of a void, they were less comfortable with the idea that God could create just one world. This idea seemed to limit God's power. What fascinates me is that their dilemma was not whether or not there actually were many worlds—no one thought there was more than one. As Christians they could not conceive of humans beyond the earth because of the difficulties that produces in Christian theological ideas of the fall and Jesus' sacrifice. Rather, they were concerned that *in theory* God could not create another world.

Aquinas sought to reconcile a concept of an all powerful and perfect creator with a single world by arguing that perfection is found not in a plurality of imperfection but in one perfect world. In his *Summa theologica* (1267–1273) Aquinas wrote:

Those can . . . assert that many worlds exist who do not acknowledge any ordaining wisdom, but rather believe in chance, as Democritus, who said that this world, beside an infinite number of other worlds, was made from a casual concourse of atoms. (Aquinas 1921, 262)

Aquinas' statement sounds strikingly similar to arguments brewing even today about purpose and chance in creation.

Aquinas' reasoning did not satisfy all of his Christian readers. In 1277, three years after Aquinas' death, Bishop Tempier of Paris condemned 219 beliefs commonly held in the universities but viewed by him as heretical because they denied God's omnipotence (Dick 1982, 28). One of these was that "The First Cause cannot make many worlds." To avoid the wrath of the Church, the scholastics had to reexamine their thinking. Ironically, Tempier's condemnation eventually led to a weakening reliance on Aristotle and a closer approach to Democritus, an avowed atheist.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries all those seeking the masters of theology degree wrote commentaries on Peter Lombard's (1095–1165) *Book of Sentences*. The *Sentences* were a collection of opinions, "Dis-

tinctions,” on many issues. Distinction XLIV (44) addressed the question of “whether God could make anything better than he has made.” Though this question does not specify a plurality of worlds, nearly all the commentaries took the question in this way (Dick 1982, 31). These commentaries provide a way of tracing developments of thought on the plurality of worlds question among the scholastics. Ockham (1280–1347) allowed a plurality of worlds by stating that the *center* is relative to the *world it is in* (Dick 1982, 34). Oresme (1323–1382) took the next step, declaring that each heavy body sets up a series of lighter bodies around it, isolating one heavy body from another (Dick 1982, 36). These and other commentators on the *Sentences* still maintained that there is just one world. Their thoughts were confined to the question of the *possibility* of worlds beyond this one.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) was the first to consider this world (universe) as boundless. Instead of thinking of a plurality of worlds as worlds *beyond* this one, he thought of the earth as being in the universe and that there may be other earths besides this one in this world (universe). In his *Of Learned Ignorance* he wrote:

Life, as it exists here on earth in the form of men, animals and plants, is to be found, let us suppose, in a higher form in the solar and stellar regions. Rather than think that so many stars and parts of the heavens are uninhabited and that this earth of ours alone is peopled—and that with beings perhaps of an inferior type—we will suppose that in every region there are inhabitants, differing in nature by rank and all owing their origin to God, who is the centre and circumference of all stellar regions. (Cited by Dick 1982, 42)

Thinking of this universe as peopled elsewhere than on the earth was a remarkable turn of events, all the more remarkable because it predates the Copernican revolution.

Christian thinkers after Cusa and before Copernicus (William of Vorilong (d. 1463), John Major (1469–1550)) suggested that creatures living elsewhere in this universe could be another order of being—angels—and that they were not descended from Adam (Dick 1982, 43). This conclusion spared them the trouble of explaining how the Fall and Jesus’ crucifixion applied beyond this earth. Thinking of these extraterrestrial inhabitants as

another order of being also removes the problem of how they might live on stars—people had not yet thought of planets as solid objects like the earth. That new perspective concerning the planets required a transformation in the way people saw the earth's place in the universe.

C. The Copernican Revolution Changes the Debate

Cusa's idea that *this universe* contains life elsewhere received support in the sixteenth century when Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543) published *De revolutionibus* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) in 1543. With the earth no longer privileged at the center of the universe, people could, for the first time, think of the planets not as wandering stars but as solid objects like the earth, orbiting the sun. Instead of being a theoretical possibility in another cosmos, or a distant possibility for another order of being way out in the stars, suddenly life, earth-like life, beyond this earth became possible, in people's minds, on the wanderers (the planets) they had been watching for millennia because our earth is just like any of the planets.

It is difficult for us to imagine just how dramatic that thought must have been. Nothing in Christian theology had prepared people for that sudden and shocking shift in perspective.

The Catholic Church was not eager to embrace this new idea. This scientific and philosophical challenge came at a time when the Catholic Church was already shaken by Martin Luther's (1483–1546) theological challenge, his *95 Theses*, nailed to the Wittenberg Church door in 1517.

The perfect and unchanging heavens above the center of creation, the earth, provided a comfortable place for Catholic Christianity. Humans were God's special project, requiring special care, which was provided them by the intercession of the Church. The heavens, perfect and unchanging, stood as the constant reminder of God's magnificence and his promise (and veiled threat) of paradise. Copernicus's method of simplifying calculations on the motions of the planets greatly complicated humankind's calculations of our place. If we are not the center, then where are we? Are we already moving in the heavens? What, then, is the difference between the earth and the heavens? And if we are not in the center of God's creation, then where are we in relation to God?

Copernicus' simplification robbed people of their place, and then a series of astronomical observations robbed the heavens of their Aristotelian perfection. In 1572 and then again in 1604 new stars appeared, impossible events if the heavens are unchanging. Then in 1609 Galileo pointed his twenty-power telescope at the Moon and found to his surprise that the surface is not smooth, but mountainous like the earth's (Galileo 1989, 40). His 1610 publication, *Sidereal Messenger*, was a warning shot to the Western world to prepare for a new age of astronomical observations challenging preconceived notions.

In 1616 the Roman Church, sensing this new age coming, did what it could to stop it and condemned Copernicanism. But the idea could not be unthought. In 1632 Galileo published his *Dialog on the Two Chief World Systems*, and the battle of world views was on.

The Copernican revolution changed the way people conceived of what their eyes had been telling them since the dawn of our time on earth. You might recall the moment when you first heard that the stars are suns, and that many of them may have planets orbiting around, and that on those planets somewhere in that enormity of space might be people looking up into the heavens, catching, perhaps, a faint beam from our sun and wondering if it might have life nearby. Perhaps you remember the impossible shift that thought had on your being—how the mind suddenly feels small and awed and fearful and joyous all at the same time. I remember it. It was the time of the Apollo Moon landings and I was four or five years old. My family was out for a night time walk. I must have asked about the stars. My mother answered, "They are suns, just like our sun." I remember how, as my mother's words were coming into my ears, the heavens above me seemed suddenly to grow much, much larger than I had imagined. It was as if a page in a book became suddenly a three-dimensional world.

Now imagine that moment happening not as isolated psyche-shaking events in small children's minds, but happening all over Europe and in minds of adults and children alike. Though it took more than a century for most of Western civilization to accept Copernicus's simplification, that transformation, when it came, was enormously rapid and profound, shaking the very foundations of Western thought.

The Copernican revolution changed the nature of the plurality of worlds debate. From being a theoretical question among the Scholastics it became an urgent question in the minds of everyone as each looked with new perspective at the night sky.

D. The Debate in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Copernicanism entered the seventeenth century as a radical and still new idea, accepted by just a few. By the middle of the eighteenth century, 1750, it was well established (Crowe 1986, 37). Along with a sun-centered solar system, many accepted as well that there is life on other planets. The debate was no longer whether or not there are many worlds like ours, but over the meaning and consequences of this reality.

Many authors contributed to this transformation. We do not have time to trace the steps of this journey, except to list a few of the more interesting figures contributing to the debate in three areas: natural philosophy, theology, and literature.

Philosophers and scientists:

- René Descartes (1596–1650): *Principia* (1644). Vortices. Each star a sun with possible orbiting planets. Leaves plurality of worlds unanswered.
- Isaac Newton (1642–1727): *Principia* (1687). Laws of motion—the heavens operate under the same principles of physics that apply on earth.
- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716): *Théodicée* (1710). In answer to the problem of evil in the world. This is the worst world, as insignificant as it is, in the best of all possible universes.
- Christian Wolff (1674–1754): *Elementa matheseos universae* (1735). Jupiter’s inhabitants are 9.6 feet tall.
- Anders Celsius (1701–1744) (of thermometer fame), professor of astronomy, Upsala University. Directed a dissertation by Eric Engman (1740) that concluded against a lunar atmosphere and the moon’s ability to sustain life. In 1743 Celsius directed the dissertation of Isacus Svanstedt who argued for a populated universe, including even the possibility of life on the moon (Crowe 1986, 34).

Theologians:

- Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655): Attempted to reconcile certain parts of Epicureanism with Christianity, leaving atheism out. Wrote expositions on Epicureanism in 1649 and 1658.
- Henry More (1614–1687): Changed his mind on the plurality of worlds question—from unfavorable (1642) to favorable (1646). In 1668 he suggested that God saved people on other planets by revealing the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and redemption here.
- Richard Bentley (1662–1742): 1692 lectures: Attempted conjunction of Newtonianism, Christianity, and pluralism. Like William Vorilong and John Major of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, suggests that Adam’s fall and Christ’s incarnation may not be a problem because life elsewhere could be another order of being (Crowe 1986, 23).

Popular writers and poets:

- Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757): 1686 published *Entretiens sur la pluralité de mondes* (Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds). Extremely popular work, going to 12 French editions and 16 English translations by 1760 (Dick 1982, 136).
- Christian Huygens (1629–1695): 1698 (posthumously published) *Cosmotheoros* (Celestial Worlds Discovered: or, Conjectures Concerning the Inhabitants, Plants and Productions of the Worlds in the Planets.)
- Alexander Pope (1688–1744): *Essay on Man*: 1733–1734.⁴

Pope’s 1738 paraphrase of the Lord’s prayer, his “Universal Prayer,” includes the verse:

Yet not to Earth’s contracted Span
Thy goodness let me bound,

⁴ Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or system into ruin hurl’d
And now a bubble burst, and now a world. (I, lines 87–90)

Or think Thee Lord alone of man,
When thousand worlds are round

The frequent mention of God Almighty and infrequent reference to Christ in reverential pluralists' poems of Pope's day leads Crowe to note that "the rapid assimilation of pluralism to religion in the eighteenth century was not unrelated to the spread of deism" (1986, 84). The connection between deism and pluralism is strong, which leads us back to the reason we have taken this quick journey through the plurality of worlds debate. The Copernican revolution led to a widespread challenge of Christian orthodoxy by people of profound reverence for God. We must grasp the depth of this challenge if we are to see why the Writings for the New Church deal with the plurality of worlds question.

III. THE PLURALITY OF WORLDS DEBATE AND DEISM'S REFUTATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Thomas Paine's (1737–1809) *Age of Reason* (1794–1795) was a widely read publication that brought a full assault on what Paine called "Christianism." Paine argued passionately for a theistic view of creation—his prose reveals a concept of a personal God who interacts with his creation. Paine proudly called himself a deist, and the purpose of his book, *Age of Reason*, was to refute the mysteries of faith in revelations to churches, and to replace this with what reason teaches us when we open God's book of the universe.

Paine's *Age of Reason* was a major contribution to the cause of deism, reaching a wide audience in England (60,000 copies sold despite government suppression), France, and America, where it went to seven editions within a year (Crowe 1986, 164), and engendered responses longer than the work itself (Crowe 1986, 172). Paine's book touched a raw nerve, unleashing into public discourse what had before been nearly confined to private thought and conversation (Crowe 1986, 164). Paine made public what deists had been, for the most part, keeping to themselves.

Paine brings two major attacks against Christianity. The first is on written revelation, and the second is on the atonement doctrine. Reason

serves as his weapon in both attacks, and the plurality of worlds idea serves as his ammunition.

Though Swedenborg's theological works predate Paine's *Age of Reason* by more than two decades, Swedenborg's works both sympathize with and answer the thought presented in this work. And Swedenborg's use of the plurality of worlds concept plays a role in both regards. But before stepping into the way New Church theology answers deists' charges we should let Paine speak for himself.

Perhaps the greatest force of Paine's attack on "Christianism" comes from his appeal to his readers' sense that God has placed living creatures throughout the universe. This strategy is particularly effective because it embraces God, the Creator of the universe, and fulfills the urge felt centuries earlier by most scholastics and Church leaders for a God too great to confine his creation to this one small world. Many people have a sense that there must be life elsewhere in the universe. Many of these same people also have a sense that Christianity has something of real value in it. Paine asks them to reason over both of these convictions and see if they agree:

Though it is not a direct article of the Christian system that this world that we inhabit is the whole of the inhabitable creation, yet it is so worked up therewith, from what is called the Mosaic account of the creation, the story of Eve and the apple, and the counterpart of that story, the death of the Son of God, that to believe otherwise, that is, to believe that God created a plurality of worlds, at least as numerous as what we call stars, renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous; and scatters it in the mind like feathers in the air. The two beliefs can not be held together in the same mind; and he who thinks that he believes both, has thought but little of either. (Paine 1896, 66)

Upon reflection the contradictions between the two become clear. In case they do not, Paine points them out:

From whence . . . could arise the solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on his protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple! And, on

the other hand, are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a redeemer? In this case, the person who is irreverently called the Son of God, and sometimes God himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of death, with scarcely a momentary interval of life. (Ibid., 73–74)

Paine prepares his readers for this assault beforehand by weakening their reliance on written revelation through a clever and multilayered critique of the Bible and a devastating attack on the reasonableness of the atonement doctrine. His calling on the plurality of worlds serves as the final blow, demonstrating that what he dubs the “Christian myth” must be false.

Amidst this attack Paine offers comfort to his readers who have just had their Christian faith shaken by giving them another reverential theology in its place—deism. Using dramatic imagery, he assures his readers that they can find a better theology there:

Deism . . . teaches us, without the possibility of being deceived, all that is necessary or proper to be known. The creation is the Bible of the deist. He there reads, in the hand-writing of the Creator himself, the certainty of his existence, and the immutability of his power. (Ibid., 188–189)

As to the theology that is now studied in its place, it is the study of human opinions and of human fancies *concerning* God. It is not the study of God himself in the works that he has made, but in the works or writings that man has made; and it is not among the least of the mischiefs that the Christian system has done to the world, that it has abandoned the original and beautiful system of theology, like a beautiful innocent, to distress and reproach, to make room for the hag of superstition. (Ibid., 51)

To press his case further, Paine takes aim at two bulwarks of Christian theology: mystery and miracle. With his wit he dispatches each as frauds, *mystery* being an invention to fog the mind when reason finds repugnant some doctrine or another, and *miracle* being a trick to dazzle the senses and

cover the “lameness or weakness in the doctrine that is preached” (Ibid., 79).

Paine’s main dispute with *mystery* and *miracle* are that these tools serve to bewilder the senses and the mind and thereby remove freedom (ibid., 77). Shock and awe cannot bring freedom. Reason, Paine claims, is a gift from God (ibid., 44), and freedom is essential to our happiness. On freedom and reason he writes:

Here we are. The existence of an Almighty power is sufficiently demonstrated to us We cannot conceive how we came here ourselves, and yet we know for a fact that we are here. We must know also, that the power that called us into being, can if he please, and when he pleases, call us to account for the manner in which we have lived here; and therefore, without seeking any other motive for the belief, it is rational to believe that he will, for we know beforehand that he can. The probability or even possibility of the thing is all that we ought to know; for if we knew it as a fact, we should be the mere slaves of terror; our belief would have no merit, and our best actions no virtue.

. . . As this is the state we are in, and which it is proper we should be in, as free agents, it is the fool only, and not the philosopher, nor even the prudent man, that will live as if there were no God. (Ibid., 188–189)

On the one hand Paine’s arguments sound harsh and frightening, but they also have a familiar ring. According to New Church theology, freedom and reason are gifts from God—in fact the work *Divine Love and Wisdom* states that it is these two abilities from the Lord that make us human (DLW 264). Paine’s appeal to reason and assumption of freedom is similar to rhetorical methods Swedenborg employs in his theological works. And more importantly, freedom and reason are seen in the New Church as fundamental to why we have existence at all. Reason is not to be shunned in the New Church. The work, *True Christianity* reports famously that “Now it is permitted to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith” (TC 508.3).

But we know also that New Church theology accepts the Lord’s divinity and the Word, and rejects natural theology. In that same work we

read that “This new church is the crown of all the churches which have up to now existed upon earth, because it will worship one visible God, in whom is the invisible God, as the soul is in the body” (TC 787). And so New Church readers can move with Paine only to a certain point. A New Church audience does not mind an attack on the atonement theology of the Catholic and Protestant churches, nor does that audience mind the use of the plurality of worlds question in this attack. What is it about New Church theology that withstands, even celebrates, Paine’s line of reasoning?

IV. NEW CHURCH THEOLOGY AND THE PLURALITY OF WORLDS DEBATE

A. Pluralism Calls for a More Universal Theology

Before addressing why New Church theology stands up well in the face of Paine’s attack, we should bear in mind why traditional Christianity does not. The Christian system does not predict, and the atonement doctrine does not allow, the existence of humans beyond the earth. This is because the Christian understanding of condemnation and redemption are earth-specific—Adam and Jesus. As Paine and others point out, pluralism and Christianity are incompatible, and this incompatibility was brought to a crisis in eighteenth century Europe. This is precisely the time the Lord chose, according to New Church believers, to come again and reveal Himself anew. How will this new revelation deal with a major cause of the crisis in belief?

The answer is that New Church theology embraces the concept of a plurality of worlds, as we saw in the passage at the beginning of this talk—the claim that “wherever a terrestrial body exists, so does the human being” (AC 9237). The compatibility of pluralism with New Church teachings showcases the great achievement of this new theology—a theology whose vision of God and salvation are not confined to this one planet, or to merely natural-level concepts of God.

B. Redemption in a Plurality of Worlds Context

The culminating theological work in the New Church canon, *True Christianity*, repeatedly points out the earth-bound weakness in traditional Christian dogma. One passage, with meanings possible on several levels, reads:

This idea of redemption [suffering on the cross] has turned the entire [Christian] theology from something spiritual into something earthly of the lowest kind. This is because mere earthly characteristics have been attributed to God. Yet everything about the church hinges on its concept of God and its view of redemption (which is the same as its view of salvation). (TC 133)

This passage occurs in a brilliant chapter on the meaning of redemption and glorification. The first numbered section in this section lays out a vision of what the Lord came on earth to do, pointing out a radical difference from the way Christian atonement theology deals with salvation:

1. Redemption was actually a matter of gaining control of the hells, restructuring the heavens, and by so doing preparing for a new spiritual church.
2. Without this redemption no human being could have been saved and no angels could have continued to exist in their state of integrity.
3. The Lord therefore redeemed not only people but also angels.
4. Redemption was something only the Divine could bring about.
5. This true redemption could not have happened if God had not come in the flesh.
6. Suffering on the cross was the final trial the Lord underwent as the greatest prophet. It was a means of glorifying his human nature, that is, of uniting that nature to his Father's divine nature. *It was not redemption.*
7. Believing that the Lord's suffering on the cross was redemption itself is a *fundamental error* on the part of the church. That error, along with the error about three divine Persons from eternity, *has ruined the*

whole church to the point that there is nothing left in it anymore.
(TC 114, emphasis added)

In *Age of Reason*, Paine's reason and sense of moral justice led him to conclude that the atonement doctrine must be false. After making the case against the doctrine using cold reason, he then employs some of his most impassioned words:

[As a child] I revolted at the recollection of what I had heard [a sermon on the redemption], and thought to myself that it was making God Almighty act like a passionate man, that killed his son, when he could not revenge himself any other way; and . . . I was sure a man would be hanged that did such a thing. . . . It was to me a serious reflection, arising from the idea I had that God was too good to do such an action, and also too almighty to be under any necessity of doing it. I believe in the same manner to this moment; and I moreover believe, that any system of religion that has any thing in it that shocks the mind of a child, cannot be . . . true . . . (Paine, 64–65)

I am reminded here of Jesus' appeal to child-like states:

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.
(Luke 18:16–17, *NIV*)

Paine continues:

The Christian story of God the Father putting his son to death, or employing people to do it, (for that is the plain language of the story,) cannot be told by a parent to a child; and to tell him that it was done to make mankind happier and better, is making the story still worse; as if mankind could be improved by the example of murder; and to tell him that all this is a mystery, is only making an excuse for the incredibility of it.
(Paine, 65)

A true Christian system cannot accept the idea of a vengeful Father appeased by the murder of his Son. The work *True Christianity* makes statements that in part sound strikingly similar to Paine's argument:

Surely . . . everyone with decent reasoning enlightened by the Word can see that God is compassion and mercy itself. . . . It is a contradiction to say that compassion itself or absolute goodness could look at the human race with anger and lock us all into damnation, and still keep its divine essence. Attitudes and actions of that kind belong to a wicked person, not a virtuous one. They belong to a spirit from hell, not an angel of heaven. *It is horrendous to attribute them to God.*

If you investigate what caused these ideas, you find this: People have taken the suffering on the cross to be redemption itself. The ideas above have flowed from this idea the way one falsity flows from another in an unbroken chain. All you get from a vinegar bottle is vinegar. All you get from an insane mind is insanity. (TC 132.2–3, emphasis added)

The sheer unreasonableness of the atonement doctrine should have been enough to defeat it, but the idea is deeply rooted. It must touch some part of our psyche that we do not want to lose. It took the plurality of worlds debate to bring the earth-bound nature of atonement Christianity into contrast with the nature of the universe. Paine takes full advantage of this in his attack.

C. Agreement between Pluralism and New Church Doctrine

The idea of a plurality of worlds becomes a touchstone differentiating presumed true and false ideas in theology. Given the challenge the plurality of worlds idea was bringing to Christianity in the eighteenth century, it was absolutely imperative that any new revelation given at that time deal with this question, and Swedenborg was anxious to do so.

So anxious was Swedenborg to deal with the plurality of worlds question that almost as soon as his visions began he sought to visit with spirits from other worlds and was allowed to do so (SE 460, 519). What he discovered shook him, causing him to change the name he used to refer to

God. The Reverend Daniel Goodenough has shown (in a paper he wrote for the Council of the Clergy and kindly shared with me) that it was Swedenborg's conversations with spirits from Jupiter over a period of two weeks in January 1748 that brought Swedenborg to refer to God as "the Lord." Previously Swedenborg used names such as "God Messiah." This dramatic shift in terminology came in recognition of the fact that the Supreme Being of the universe is the Lord Jesus Christ. Goodenough's hypothesis can be reinforced by comparing what Swedenborg wrote in *Spiritual Experiences* during this time with what he would publish a few years later in *Arcana Caelestia* and *Worlds in Space* on his conversations with spirits from Mercury and Jupiter regarding who they worship (*EU* 40, 65).

Swedenborg's recognition of the Lord as the God of the universe was a profound moment in this new revelation, and the means by which Swedenborg came into this knowledge has interesting implications that we do not have time to discuss now. Suffice to say that Swedenborg's experiences with spirits from other worlds played an important part in his enlightenment, demonstrating to him the universality of God's presence and purpose.

A universal God suggests a universal theology, and New Church theology, more than Judeo-Christian theology before it, embraces and is embraced by the idea that life can exist elsewhere in this universe.

Why do belief in many worlds and belief in the New Church get along? There are several reasons. The plurality of worlds idea is consonant with New Church teachings that:

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is the universal Supreme Being (*EU* 65)
2. The purpose of creation is a heaven from the human race (*DP* 27)
3. We are not condemned by Adam's sin but by our own choices (*DP* 83)
4. The Lord's mission on earth was not to serve as a sacrifice to appease the Father's anger (*TC* 114)
5. The laws of salvation are the same throughout the universe (*DP* 325)—salvation does not require mediation by the Catholic Church or knowledge and faith in Jesus
6. The physical and spiritual worlds are discrete degrees apart (*DLW* 184)—the physical heavens, the stars and planets, are not the same as the spiritual heavens

7. The Word has an internal sense (*AC* 1–5). The first chapters of Genesis are not to be taken as a literal history of the world’s creation.

By pressing the point that humans exist elsewhere in the universe Swedenborg is, like the deists, highlighting fundamental weaknesses in Christian theology. And he is replacing that broken form of theology with a better system.

But Swedenborg’s use of the plurality of worlds concept does not end with refutation of traditional Christian dogma. He uses it also to refute the deists’ position that Jesus was a mere mortal. In the Swedenborgian system Jesus is Divine, and through his glorification “he became the Redeemer forever” (*TC* 127). This suggests that the Lord does not need to be born into other worlds to rescue them. The Lord has the form needed to interact with his creation wherever and whenever needed. Nor does Jesus’ divinity result from a necessity for atonement—to serve as the perfect sacrifice. Jesus’ divinity is necessary because only the Divine in human form can combat the hells and rescue us (*TC* 114).

D. Pluralism in the Writings: A Challenge and an Opportunity

Pluralism serves as a philosophical confirmation of New Church theology. There is just one problem. It is not a big problem, and, actually, I think it is a blessing in disguise, but many have seen it as a problem. This problem is, of course, that the descriptions of life on other planets in this solar system provided in the Writings for the New Church are, at least in the most obvious sense, not true. There is no wood on Jupiter to make houses from. Probably there is no solid there at all—it is a gas giant. The Moon has no atmosphere or liquid. Mars is a frozen waste land—no liquid. Mercury has no gas or liquid. And Saturn also is a gas giant. Swedenborg’s assignment of humans to these places with flocks of sheep and woods and rivers and churches and houses has certainly not been confirmed by scientific observation. And so we have a problem. Many have dismissed the veracity of Swedenborg’s works because of these errors, and many who believe in spite of these descriptions of life on the Moon and elsewhere are embarrassed by these teachings. It is not the sort of material that we distribute to seekers.

It is interesting that Swedenborg saw it quite differently. When the *Arcana Caelestia* was not selling well Swedenborg produced five books, each drawing heavily on the *Arcana*, apparently in an effort to interest people in the larger work. One of these small works was *Worlds in Space*. Swedenborg was promoting his descriptions of life elsewhere in the universe. Not only does this material appeal to an avid interest of that time, but it also serves as a response to the challenges the deists were bringing against all forms of Christian belief. With that audience (the curious and the deists) in mind listen to how Swedenborg introduces this remarkable work:

By the Lord's Divine mercy I have had my interior faculties . . . opened, so that I have been enabled to talk with spirits and angels, not only those in the vicinity of our earth, but also with those near other worlds. Since therefore I was desirous of knowing whether there were other inhabited worlds . . . I was allowed by the Lord to talk and mix with spirits and angels from other worlds. . . . It needs to be known that all spirits and angels are from the human race; they are near their own world. . . . (EU 1)

It is a very well-known fact in the next life that there are many worlds inhabited by human beings, and that there are spirits and angels who have come from them. Anyone there . . . is permitted to talk with spirits from other worlds, so as to get proof of the multiplicity of worlds. He can thus learn that the human race does not come from only one world, but from countless worlds; and moreover what these people's character is and how they live, and what sort of religious worship they practice. (EU 2)

Anyone who believes, as each one of us should, that the Deity's sole purpose in creating the universe was to bring into existence the human race, and from this to people heaven—the human race being the seed bed of heaven—must inevitably believe that, where there is a world, there must be human beings. (EU 3)

As regards the religious worship of the inhabitants of other worlds, it is generally true that those of them who are not idolaters all acknowledge the Lord as the sole God. They worship the Deity not as something

invisible, but in visible form, because in fact when the Deity appears to them, He does so in human form, as He did once to Abraham and others in this world. All who worship the Deity in human form are acceptable to the Lord. They say too that no one can properly worship God . . . without having some idea of Him which can be grasped; and this is possible if He has human form. Without this . . . the power of thinking about God . . . would be lost. Thought then could not help slipping into the idea of God as Nature, and then this would be worshipped as a god. (EU 7)

When they were told that on our earth the Lord took on Himself human nature, they pondered for a while; and then said that this was done to save the human race. (EU 8)

This beautiful work does several things at once:

1. It accepts the deists' argument that the universe must be filled with life
2. It accepts the Christian's view of Jesus as Divine
3. It corrects errors in both the Christian and the deists' positions by showing that God and salvation are not earth-specific and by showing that the Lord the Redeemer is the Redeemer of the entire universe
4. It uses the enthusiasm many people have for believing that there is life in the universe beyond the earth to announce a new form of theology that is in agreement with that belief

Behind all of these is the Swedenborgian idea that God created the universe to people heaven (EU 3). Richard Goerwitz III highlights the newness of this idea and its application to the presence of pluralism in the Writings in the conclusion of his well reasoned and researched "Study of the Intellectual Context of Emanuel Swedenborg's *Earths in the Universe*" (Goerwitz 1985, 483–484).

V. CONCLUSION

Pluralism in the New Church canon highlights the theological soundness of this new revelation. Unfortunately, today this soundness is often

eclipsed in our minds by the information there that is inconsistent with scientific observations of some of the same worlds Swedenborg describes as being populated. It is true that believing New Church people have a challenge explaining how what is written in *Worlds in Space* can be as different as it is from what we see when we examine nearby planets. But this problem is small in comparison with the very significant theological challenge facing the rest of the Christian world, which is that if there is human life anywhere in the universe beyond the earth then some of the fundamental principles of that family of religions will be proven false.

I see beauty in our uncertain situation. The contemporary view of the cosmos is that it is magnificently large beyond our comprehension, containing billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars. Undeniably there is a chance that we are not alone. There is also a chance that we are. And so we have a choice in what kind of universe and God we wish to believe. This freedom is in keeping with the laws of Divine providence, well cherished in the New Church.

Swedenborg's use of pluralism in the Writings demonstrates the soundness of the theology. This is a religion that accepts God's loving and wise presence and purpose throughout the universe. Pluralism in the Writings is an embarrassment only if we make it an embarrassment by asking this revelation to do what, most likely, God never intended it to do: to stand in the place of reason and observation.⁵

Maybe we face today another Copernican moment. Perhaps there is something we have thought of as unmoving and the center that is actually just one of many, moving around a more proper center, absorbing a tiny little bit of the Lord's loving and glorious heat and light.

In her groundbreaking study, "The power and limitations of language in Swedenborg, Shakespeare, and Frost," my colleague, Dr. Kristin King, invites us to allow uncertainty:

Not only the Bible but also much great literature reveals characters who receive divine words from oracles, prophets, and angels, and who think

⁵ For a more extended discussion of the usefulness of keeping belief and observation in dialog, see the author's chapter in *Faith and Learning at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church*.

they know what the words mean. But truth comes home in unexpected ways. Often what the words turn out to mean is that we have not yet become the people we need to be in order to understand them. When we read revelation we need to remain humble and open to unexpected meanings. (King 1999, 20)

Remaining humble and open to unexpected meanings is just what was required when Copernicus's geometry and Galileo's telescope revealed shocking differences between what people expected and what they came, with some anguish, to see. It is what is required today as we compare New Church revelation and experience. I suspect that, as the Copernican revolution suggests, reality is much greater than we realize. □

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