

THE DOCTRINE OF THE FOUR AGES

HUGO LJ. ODENER

The teaching of the Writings is that the heavens, as a kingdom of uses regarded, constitute a human form or a grand man (*maximus homo*). This is true of the angelic heavens from the entire universe—from all inhabited earths and satellites—taken together. For these are all needed to compose a perfect functional whole. But it may also be said that every complete society is, as to its uses, a human form; and a country, or a church, is thus a “man” in this wide sense of the word. Sometimes, also, the Writings indicate that the human race on our own earth, or all the spirits who now survive in the heavens from this particular planet, must be regarded as a *Maximus Homo*, with a history (or biography) of its own; a collective man which was born and passed through stages corresponding to infancy, childhood, youth, and manhood.

The teaching in this respect is as follows: “As regards the successive states of the churches on our globe, they have evidently been similar to the successive states of a man who is being reformed and regenerated; namely, that to become a spiritual man, he is first conceived, next is born, then grows up, and is afterwards led on further and further into intelligence and wisdom. The church, from the most ancient times to the end of the Jewish Church, progressed like a man who is conceived, born, and grows up, and is then instructed and taught; but the successive states of the church after the end of the Jewish Church, or from the time of the Lord even to the present day, have been like a man increasing in intelligence and wisdom, or becoming regenerate. To this end the interior things of the Word, of the church, and of worship, were revealed by the Lord when He was in the world; and now, again, things still more interior are revealed; and in the measure that things interior are revealed can man become wiser; for to become interior is to become wiser, and to become wiser is to become interior” (AE 641).

The picture is here given of a continuous upward progress, an advance into ever greater wisdom. But another passage—viewing the racial man from another aspect—states that “inmost Divine truths” were revealed to the Most Ancient Church, “more external Divine truths” to the Ancient Church, “most external or ultimate

Divine truths" to the Hebrew and Israelitish Church (where at last all Divine truth perished, so that the Lord had to come—a corporeal embodiment of Divine truth); after which "interior Divine truths" were revealed to the Christian Church and "now still more interior truths for the church that is to come": so that "there has been a progression of Divine truth from inmosts to ultimates, thus from wisdom to ignorance; and that there is now a progression of it from ultimates to interiors, thus from ignorance again to wisdom" (AE 948:3).

The testimony of these two teachings appears to be paradoxical. We are left in uncertainty as to how to regard the growth of the racial man—whether the period of its childhood and adolescence was an advance or a retrogression!

But the problem suggests another: Is man's own growth from birth through adolescence an advance or a retrogression? Indignant parents will perhaps protest our even considering the question! But let us reflect. For parents also universally feel a regret—perhaps a selfish regret—when infants grow up and lose that sphere of innocence which impels a response of love from almost all about them. Children become undoubtedly more external as they grow up. In knowledge and skill they progress continuously. But on becoming more and more immersed into the world around them, the children leave the inner world of tender fancy which held them while they were young. They scoff at the mother's caress. They become self-conscious actors on the stage of society, seek plaudits, are apt to cultivate worldly ambitions, and to become intolerant and aggressive and lose some of their idealism.

We also know that the spirits which are present with little infants are consociated with the celestial or inmost heaven, while in childhood only the spiritual heaven can approach, and in youth natural spirits predominantly lead him (HH 295, AC 5342). The remains of celestial good also can be insinuated best in tender infancy, while in childhood spiritual remains (of truth in the form of parable and example) are more effective; and finally, in youth, the rational goods of morality and natural truths become the means of progress.

There is therefore, in every man's life, a decline in state and in the actual degree of the spiritual forces which most potently affect him while his mind is ripening. And the same must be said of the human race on our earth, when it is regarded as a spiritual man.

As a whole, the racial man progresses and grows. Its first states—which are those of the celestial church of certain of the most ancient peoples—are not lost to that grand man of mankind. They still are preserved in the heavens, and are still modifying and controlling and blessing human lives, just as do the remains of infancy upon which our individual salvations depend.

The steady growth of the eternal racial man in the heavens is not prevented by the fact of this decline in state within our race. For evil, which caused the decline and made it necessary for the Lord to accommodate His Divine truth to men in more and more external forms before the Advent, has no real part in the Grand Man, but is excluded. The progress of the heavens goes forward, on the whole, even though this progress may at times be delayed and suspended until a judgment has set the obstacles aside. Before the Lord's advent, the Grand Man grew as an infant grows towards natural maturity, the while celestial and spiritual remains of love and of symbolic truth are preserved within; although the mind becomes absorbed by the natural world more and more, until spiritual life seems endangered. And after the Advent, an actual spiritual regeneration could commence, through the truths of the Christian gospel and, now, of the Heavenly Doctrine.

There has been a great deal of speculation, in all ages and with all peoples, concerning the human race, its past and its future. Until a recent rise of skepticism, Christians, from a belief in the literal sense of the Scriptures, have generally been satisfied with the Hebrew account of mankind's creation, of Adam as the first man and Eve as the mother of all living, and of the life of this happy pair in paradisaical conditions of eternal spring, in innocence and bliss unclouded by the shadow of want. And it was supposed that when evil overcame them through their disobedience, their paradise was closed and their descendants—with the earth they lived on—came under the curse of this "original sin"—to be redeemed at last through the atonement of Christ, and given the hope of a new heaven and a new earth after the last judgment which would destroy the old with fire.

But science—as interpreted by those of little faith—changed this picture for modern men. Instead of being born in the calm wisdom of innocence, our race was represented as arising as a branch of animal creation, its brute infancy spent in a tortured struggle with the

cruel forces of nature, in caves and forests; while its childhood, when the rise of arts and inventions gave to man a superiority over the beasts, was one round of internecine wars. By forced necessity, cities and nations came into being, for mutual defence, and knowledge and skill became specialized and grew until civilization and scientific advances promised to create an artificial paradise for men to live and die in: until another planet might collide with ours, or the sun's power gives out, and all go back to the atomic dust, without trace or remnant, and with none even to remember the strange, incredible accident of human life!

These two extremes of belief, each with its due burdens of distorted truths, leave room for unlimited variations of opinions and fears and hopes. However far from men's grasp, the truth, they feel, must lie somewhere. Even the brief span of history shows too many instances of conditions and events recurring in ordered cycles—even as the seasons repeat themselves in the years—for anyone to doubt that somehow the progress of the race on earth follows some kind of a pattern; if not a plan, yet a habit or a necessity. The development of civilization is more than a massing of men and events. It shows the workings of laws; even such as we observe in the growth of a tree or the formation of an embryo. It is organic.

Shall we believe that these cycles can be *spiritual* as well as natural? that the forces of good and evil also undulate in obedience to a pattern of organic growth? that the spiritual life of mankind has had its ebb and rise, an epoch of righteousness followed by one of sin and degradation, and this succeeded by a renewal of religious devotion and enlightenment? And if so, are these undulations between good and evil foreordained by fate or by the cold law of averages, undisturbed by the exertions of man's free will; making their destined appearances in an inevitable circuit which cannot be avoided, and simply repeating again and again the problems of human life with no hope of any final solution? as if history was a Divine tragedy—a drama without a complete plot, a story with no ending, a war without victory, a race without a goal, a question without answer?

The Writings have given the answer. But to the men of our present world this answer carries no authority or conviction. "It is but one of many answers," they say. "So many answers have been given—all *possible* answers have been suggested. Why should yours be the right one? Besides, your answer is not new!

Even Hesiod and Plato, in pagan Greece, told the story of the four ages; and Swedenborg, as a student and lover of the classics, is but embellishing an ancient tale, in his doctrine of the Five Dispensations!"

But wait. This charge is untrue. The answer in the Writings is astonishingly new, and avoids the errors of other views, both modern and ancient, which show some resemblance to it. But before we substantiate this our statement, let us once more look at some other possible alternatives which have been advanced.

One such alternative is the theory involved in the religious faith of teeming millions in India, today as well as in ancient times. It presupposes four periods or Yugas in the world's history, four periods, each less virtuous and happy than the last, following each other like infancy, childhood, youth and adult life; a cycle which is repeated a thousand times, after which the world is dissolved without a trace—as an experiment that failed or as a tragic labor without fruit. (It is a pessimistic philosophy, giving slight incentive and small recompense for living, and involving no high concept of the Creator.) These four Yugas punctuated a steady decline.

But in Greece and Rome, although we so often stress their belief in a Golden Age, there were also legends and philosophies which exulted in the progress of mankind and looked back on the distant past as barbaric and crude, and in no sense a "golden age." Thus the legend of Prometheus presupposes that mankind was in considerable misery and in a degraded state before Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind as a means of raising them into civilized life. (Parenthetically, it would appear from Hesiod that up to this time no women had existed, only men; and the first woman, Pandora, was created to make trouble: she was the revenge of the gods upon mankind. What kind of a golden age was that, without woman?) It is relatively simple for New Church men to see the real meaning of the fragmentary legend of Prometheus, and where its parts fit into the story of spiritual development. But the Greeks, as far as we know their thoughts, never knew its real meaning; and later philosophers have been divided in their views, whether to share the resentment of the Olympian gods at man's foolish and daring desire for cultural advance, or to scoff at mankind's efforts towards external civilization and laud as idyllic the life of primitive simplicity. So, for instance, Seneca (whose works were sedulously studied by Emanuel Swed-

berg at least in his school-days), Seneca, while believing that the first men were indeed uncorrupted and happy in a stoic fashion amidst arduous and austere conditions, also noted to the contrary that "virtue is not bestowed by nature," but "it is an art to become good." Seneca, like the Hindoos, looked for an end of the world, followed by a new, fresh, good beginning, which will again decline and be consumed. And Lucretius (in his *De Rerum Natura*) speaks of animals and the first men as born from wombs formed in the new-born earth, and pictures the history of our race as an ascent out of filth and barbarism to a greater and greater degree of law and social morality, although the progress was often broken by war and strife.

The Ages, According to Hesiod

Thus there was no clarity, and no unanimity, in the ancient world, concerning our tender beginnings. The clearest and first picture of the Golden Age is given by Hesiod, who merely tells that when Chronos still ruled in heaven there was on earth a "golden race of speaking men," among whom there was no toil, no want; a merry, idle race, feasting in paradise; who were god-like, who died not from disease but in sleep, and who now survived as mighty and noble demons who guarded men against injustice and dispensed wealth.

Plato, citing this legend, adds that there were no arts or governments, no property or clothes or houses: men and beasts were all vegetarians. Sexual reproduction did not occur, but men were born from the soil and returned to the earth by death. And all were shepherded by God or by the demi-gods. But this primeval race of men, it was made clear, vanished completely, presumably when Chronos (or Saturn) was dethroned by Zeus. Ovid explains that in the age of Saturn (or Chronos) the earth had eternal spring, with rivers of milk and water; making travel or trade unnecessary.

The second race—"of silver"—was the creation of Zeus. But they were, according to Hesiod, a foolish race which never grew up to rational years, though it romped in childlike play until a hundred years old. They were rebellious, vicious towards one another and impious to the gods; so that Zeus for shame hid them away. But they too turned into mighty demons honored by men. The Latin version of the story, by Ovid, gives this race more dignity, but pictures the earth as having a more inclement climate, and

describes their use of domestic animals and tools; and caves are said to be their homes.

The age of Bronze was that of a people "made by Zeus from the ash-tree (or spear) terrible and strong." Violent and cruel, armored in bronze, they finally destroyed themselves, and now are in Hades.

Next came, says Hesiod, an age of Heroes, the demi-gods who perished in the Trojan war. Later writers conveniently forget this interlude, and mention only four "ages." The heroes, however, died valiantly, and were transported to the Isles of the Blessed, where they are ruled over by Chronos.

The fifth age was that of a "race of iron." This was apparently the race to which Hesiod belonged—an evil generation, using might for right; envious, foul-mouthed and immodest; lying and irreverent to age and impious to the gods; unfaithful to guest or kin. But even with these, good is mixed with their evils, and Zeus holds his hand from destroying them until they reach the point of being "born old"! And in the meantime, its fate is restless anxiety and unending toil. Duty departs and the gods leave the earth. Ovid follows the story of the Iron Age with an account of how Jupiter sends a deluge, after which a new race is created—a sixth, or fifth, as you may count—out of stones cast by the two human survivors, Deucalion and Pyrrha. And this hard race, made for toil, Ovid presumably counted as the present.

Out of this welter of myth and story, of vague race-memories handed down in many versions, confused and contorted by human fears and hopes, there stand out a few bare symbols of the four dispensations. But these legends, as a whole, were never accepted as any final truth by the Greeks or Romans. They carried no sacred authority but only imaginative appeal and bits of common sense. The skeptics, the stoics, the poets, the great comedians, all criticized them freely, revised them to suit their purpose, and even ridiculed them.

There was a factual basis behind the names of the Four Ages. There was no pretense that the legend of the Golden Age could rank as history. But the Bronze Age, and its "race," touched historic times. And the use of iron, from which the Greeks named their own race, was but a few centuries old when Greek literature was born.

The Writings sometimes adopt the names of Hesiod's Ages for the four churches; partly, of course, as a classical allusion, to bring to mind the race-memories of an original age of innocence; but mainly, because these four metals correspond to the qualities characteristic of the successive churches. *Beyond this, we find hardly any resemblance in the four churches to the Greek or Roman description of the four ages!* In respect to the Silver Age and the Bronze Age, it must be noted that Swedenborg's account of the Ancient Churches had practically no points of similarity with the original Greek legends.

For the Writings speak of spiritual states, not of cultural periods. It is true that the cultural Bronze Age seems to coincide with the time of the Hebrew and Israelitish Churches, and the use of iron for weapons and tools coincides with the last part of the Jewish period and, especially, the entire Christian epoch. But the terms silver and gold are used for the Ancient and Most Ancient Churches without any historical coincidence, and with a purely symbolical meaning.

One more point needs to be emphasized. Swedenborg sometimes uses the series of four ages—golden, silver, copper and iron—for as many stages of religious life in the pre-advent period by itself. Thus, in the work *Conjugal Love*, Swedenborg relates visits to those of the four ages, in their spiritual abodes. And the Iron Age is described as being with those in pre-Christian Tartary (CL 78). And in this loose use of the ages of the symbolic metals Swedenborg has a precedent in the Greek and Roman usage, which was most elastic.

Terms and applications may be elastic. But the *truth* is firm. And in the doctrine of the successive churches, the Writings give a tremendous wealth of teachings concerning the churches which existed beyond our present horizon of historic knowledge. These teachings are not, like the surviving legends of Greece, an outside view of the past cultures; but they present the states of the church on earth as viewed *from heaven*, and thus speak of those nations or groups with whom there was a reception or response to Divine revelation. And in these teachings there is nothing derived from Greek or other sources; except perhaps an occasional coincidence as to some minor detail, which is of course unavoidable. And where that occurs, it is sometimes because the Greek legend contains some echo of the same ancient truth that is described in the legends

of paradise and of the antediluvians in the book of Genesis—a section taken from the Ancient Word.

On one point there is some agreement. There *was* a “golden race” which now has utterly disappeared. In the scientific works, as in the *Principia* and in the *Worship and Love of God*, Swedenborg speaks of the climate, social and cultural conditions, which probably obtained at that time. But in the Writings it is the spiritual life of this people that is pictured, and the various external characteristics, under which such a life flourished, are only brought in incidentally. There is a tremendous difference between the account of Hesiod and that given in the Writings, even as to these externals. The Most Ancient Church arose within a silent race, before articulate language had been formed, a race which had developed as the summit of an age-long progress which began in a state of almost animal ignorance, but which reached celestial wisdom and social maturity, yet remained culturally in pastoral simplicity; but with much variety as other racial branches fell heir to its traditions. The race was thus not born in wisdom, but it was born in the order of creation which was such that it would naturally *lead* to wisdom.

Now at this point our critics might resume their attacks. Granting that the concept of the Most Ancient Church was in most respects new with Swedenborg, and not derived from the classical tradition, what about the influences of Swedenborg’s own century upon his thought?

For it might be pointed out that in the wake of the Revival of Learning there came over Europe a wave of freer thinking. It took form partly as a *rebellion* against ecclesiastical control and against social institutions. It began to question the use of the inhibitions and artificialities of civilized life. It looked back to the peaceful Arcadia of ancient Greek shepherd life, and weltered romantically in mythological lore. It blamed the complex social environment and, usually, the possession of property, for all human ills, idealized the life of primitive man, and preached the “natural goodness of man.” “The less law, the more virtue,” came to be a frank belief. Such were the views of *Diderot*; and of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1712–1778), who in 1750 expressed this theory in learned fashion,* claiming that the retrogression of the human race kept pace

* *The Theory of Historical Regress*, read before the Sorbonne.

with the growth of civilization. Rousseau placed impulsiveness and feeling above reason, and urged a return to the "state of nature."

This romantic idea had a wide influence. It became one of the motivations of the social rebellion which came to a climax in the French Revolution; yet in that revolution itself, with all its upflaring of human nature in its rawest and most violent forms, it was, strangely enough, Reason that was exalted as a goddess.

The question as to whether Swedenborg was influenced by the Encyclopedists and Romanticists of the eighteenth century may be dismissed when we realize that these movements were just emerging when Swedenborg published the *Arcana Coelestia*, with its picture of the celestial church of the most ancient peoples. Yet Swedenborg was surely aware of the tendencies of his contemporaries. And he shows plainly that the celestial and primitive way of life is not for us. The order of nature has, in *our* present-day race, been perverted. Human nature is no longer to be trusted. "Natural good"—the apparently virtuous side of our hereditary dispositions—is now the cloak for infernal loves; and our spontaneous affections must therefore be disciplined by the understanding, instructed by Divine revelation, and controlled by the reason enlightened by the Lord as the spiritual sun.

It is quite natural that when a Church has reached its consummation, and a civilization has turned effete and disillusioned, there should come upon the world these moods of discontent with the present, a lack of hope for the future, and a nostalgic longing for the far off past—for the good old days. It was so in classical times, at the opening of our era, when the Ancient Church had perished; and it was so in the century of the Last Judgment. Something similar occurs whenever our human powers seem to be strained overmuch and our existence becomes too complicated. The child, after his lessons, returns to his toys. The youth feels abused when faced with the responsibilities of riper years, and longs for his care-free childhood. In social life, there are times when one wants to overthrow, or at least overhaul, the conventions which bind one's actions. In economics, there are efforts to go back to some sort of primitive communism, where laws and governments will eventually become unnecessary! The criminal is in rebellion against civic laws. The libertine tries to rationalize that institutions such as marriage be abandoned. The vegetarian thinks the world's future

depends on a return to primitive diet. And all of us at times react, and sometimes justly, against artificial restrictions, against too much intellectualism, or too much science and caution and discipline, too much legislation, too much social planning, too many mechanical aids to living. We desire to taste the simple delights of nature, to let our hearts free in shout and song, to turn from learning to poetry, to smell the fragrance of wild flowers and hear the sougling of the pines. We long to return to the golden age.

And so we can and may. If anyone is such that he can never mingle in the laughter of children, he is a sick man in spirit and in body. And any race that is born old, Zeus will destroy. The Writings tell us that the heavens of the golden age are not far off, but inflow with love and blessedness wherever there are hearts open to receive. But they also tell that this influx will not affect us *except most externally* unless our hearts be pure. The paradise of Eden, with its tree of life-giving fruit, and its river of water of life, cannot be reached except by a new way. For it is now confined within the walls of the golden city New Jerusalem. It can be restored to us only by our coming to understand the laws of life which are no longer impressed on our hearts from birth, but which are recognizable to us as a *doctrine* of love and charity.

The cycles or periods of the Grand Man of the human race are therefore not to be repeated in unprofitable and prescribed sameness, nor are they to end in a final cataclysm of destruction. But as a man—despite the ignorance and error of childhood, and despite the sins of his youth—is born again in spirit even while his body is adult, so the preparatory churches (with their remnants of ancient doctrines and their storehouse of good hidden in their heavens) shall become the ground of spiritual-rational and celestial-rational progress on our earth and in heaven. Cycles there will continue to be, both of cultural and of spiritual life. But these cycles of states and conditions, wheel within wheel, are not such as to predestine any man's soul to condemnation: but to provide for each individual soul a freedom to pursue his own goal within the compass of his responsibility. For these cycles of circumstance and of heredity and of spiritual opportunity, in the future as in the past, are but the starting points—different for each human soul—of an eternal progress towards a common perfection within the Grand Man, wherein each delights to give his all to provide what may be lacking in the other, and all share in the whole.