

# REMOVING OBSTACLES: WHY SWEDENBORGIAN THEOLOGY RECASTS CHRISTIAN CONCEPTS OF THE LAST JUDGMENT AND THE SINGULARITY OF THE EARTH\*

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Allen J. Bedford†

## I. INTRODUCTION

The material examined in this study is the intersection of New Church teachings on the plurality of worlds and the Last Judgment, teachings that are in opposition to beliefs held by many Christian churches. New Church doctrine holds that human life exists on planets other than planet earth, and that the Last Judgment foretold by Jesus in the Gospels was an event that took place in the spiritual rather than the natural world. These two teachings, while not connected in obvious ways, result from central, New Church beliefs—that the purpose of the natural world is to populate the spiritual world (*SH* 6697, *OP* 4),<sup>1,2</sup> and, so that this purpose could continue, the Lord’s second coming established a new church on earth (*TC* 772–773).<sup>3</sup>

This study traces two intersection points of the Last Judgment and plurality-of-worlds teachings within the New Church canon—the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). At the first, Swedenborg used the concept of the plurality of worlds to develop a new

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† Associate professor of chemistry, Bryn Athyn College, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania.

<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical citations of Swedenborg’s works use titles given the books by the Swedenborg Foundation’s *New Century Edition* (NCE) project. In some cases these titles refer to a work that has not yet been published by the NCE effort and whose title is different from the title given the work in publications that are currently available. In those cases the difference is noted at the first citation. Consult the Abbreviated Titles section of the journal for full title information if necessary.

<sup>2</sup> The title “*Other Planets*” is different from the title given this work in other English translations. The work has been translated into English with two different titles: *Earths in the Universe* and *Worlds in Space*. Also, the abbreviation *SH* refers to *Secrets of Heaven*, the NCE title for *Arcana Coelestia*.

<sup>3</sup> The first volume of *True Christianity* has been published in the NCE. The second volume is not yet available. The title given this work in other English translations is *True Christian Religion*.

perspective on the Last Judgment. At the second, the Swedenborgian perspective of the Last Judgment raises questions about Swedenborgian information about life on other worlds. At both of these intersections, the only material we have to work with is what Swedenborg left us.

According to Swedenborgian theology, the Last Judgment took place in the spiritual world in 1757 (*LJ* 45),<sup>4</sup> dramatically affecting that realm while producing no obvious result in this one. If it were not for Swedenborg's accounts of the event, it is unlikely that anyone dwelling on the earth since 1757 would imagine that Jesus' predicted Last Judgment had occurred in that year.

And, although the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe has captured human imagination since the time of the Copernican revolution, if it were not for Swedenborg's narratives of his encounters with beings said to be from other planets of this solar system, it is extremely unlikely that anyone today on the earth would imagine those planets to be peopled as Swedenborg describes.

Those who accept either or both of these beliefs do so not on the basis of any physical evidence,<sup>5</sup> but on a trust in the veracity of Swedenborg's theological writings. That trust is strengthened by the reasonableness of Swedenborg's theology, especially when viewed in contrast with eighteenth-century Christian doctrines.

At the time when Swedenborg penned his theological writings (1748–1772), the Christian churches, both Catholic and Reformed, believed, as they still do today, that the Last Judgment had not yet occurred, and that it would be unmistakable when it did. And Catholic and Reformed theology of that time, and mostly today also, had no provision for allowing human life elsewhere in the universe, since they saw all humans as descended from Adam and Eve, made guilty by the Fall, and redeemed by Christ's sacrifice. The presence of people on other planets would raise difficult questions about the extraterrestrials' relationship to Adam, and to Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Swedenborg recorded that the Judgment started in the last days of 1756 (*Spiritual Experiences* § 5336).

<sup>5</sup> However, there is supportive evidence through the lack of negation. There is no physical reason that human life *cannot* exist anywhere else in the universe, and the earth has not witnessed the Judgment as predicted in the Gospel accounts—the sun has not darkened, nor the stars fallen, nor have people seen the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 24.29–30).

From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the earth-bound nature of Christian theology became more and more at odds with advances in human understanding of the natural world. In a Copernican universe, widely accepted in the eighteenth century, how could life be confined to the earth alone if the cosmos contained countless numbers of earth-like planets? And in the Day of Judgment, how could that entire universe, stars and peopled planets, fall to the earth? The churches reacted to these persuasive questions with a stubborn refusal to rethink their doctrine. Faith, in short, was dying.

Into this context, Swedenborg introduced a new form of Christian theology, a theology that differentiated natural and spiritual substance. In this new theology, the spiritual heavens are distinct from the natural universe; the spiritual and natural worlds exist at different levels of creation—the one cannot be seen from the other, and therefore the visible stars of the natural universe do not make up heaven. Unlike the purely natural substance of the physical world, God created human beings to exist in both the natural and spiritual levels, though people are mostly unaware of this while they live in the natural world. At the death of the natural body, people awaken with their spiritual bodies into the spiritual world. Those who in their natural lifetime chose in freedom to accept and return God's love come to live in the spiritual heavens, but *all* after death live in the spiritual world. The natural world, therefore, is not all there is to God's creation, but serves as a nursery for peopling the spiritual world.

This new theological view of the universe in many ways agreed well with the prevailing, natural view. Swedenborg's theology allowed the physical universe to be enormously large, filled with stars and planets, all obeying the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, including those laws that allow life to exist on the earth—and therefore on other planets also. Furthermore, in this theology, in which the natural and spiritual worlds coexist, there is no need for God to end the natural world in order to create heaven. A physical end-time would be counterproductive. The expected Day of Judgment would be an event in the spiritual, rather than the natural, world, and would be required whenever good and evil became so mixed in the spiritual world that they could no longer be differentiated. This confusion of good and evil in the spiritual world could result from the

church's corruption in the natural world, and, in eighteenth-century Europe, many believed that the Christian churches were corrupt.

In addition to introducing a theology that allowed human life to exist on other planets and did not require a physical end-time on earth, Swedenborg took the next step in both of these subjects. He reported that he encountered spirits from other planets while he was conscious in the spiritual world, and, even more profound for the Christian world, he reported that he witnessed the Last Judgment as it took place in the spiritual world.

The purpose of this paper is fourfold: to explore why it is important in New Church revelation to address Christian expectations about the Last Judgment and the possibility of life elsewhere in the physical universe; to reflect on why Christian expectations arose in these two areas that had, over time, proved less and less tenable; to consider the possibility of mistaken expectations among those who accept Swedenborg's works as divinely inspired; and to reflect on how a community develops trust in the New Church Word.

## II. SWEDENBORG'S REVELATION AND THE NEW CHRISTIAN AGE

Over a period of more than twenty-five years, Emanuel Swedenborg claimed to have special access to the spiritual world, seeing the heavens and the hells and talking with spirits and angels. Even more remarkable, he states that this access allowed him to serve as the means by which the Lord fulfilled his promised second coming (*TC* 779), and that the Lord's second coming is not in person but in a new revelation of the Word (*TC* 776). The new revelation is an unveiling of the Word's spiritual sense, and this unveiling brings the Lord's presence (*TC* 780). Swedenborg stated that he could serve this call because he was able to "receive the doctrines of this Church with his understanding, . . . [and could] publish them by the press" (*TC* 799). To establish the validity of that doctrine, that it was from God and not from himself, Swedenborg wrote, "I . . . testify that from the first day of my call, I have not received anything pertaining to the doctrines of that Church from any angel, but from the Lord alone while

reading the Word" (*TC* 779). And in his theological works, Swedenborg validates the revelation by careful citation of the Old and New Testaments and by explanation of the spiritual sense, which he shows runs continuously throughout those texts.

The point of view of this study is one of accepting Swedenborg's claim, cited above, that he was able to be present, consciously, in the spiritual world and communicate with angels and spirits, and that this spiritual consciousness was granted him by the Lord, the Creator of the universe, for the purpose of bringing about the Lord's second coming.

Those who accept Swedenborg's claims see themselves as living in a new age, or perhaps the dawning of a new age. The consummation of the Christian Church in the spiritual world has afforded the minds of human beings on earth greater freedom and the potential for enlightenment than had been possible since early in Christian history (*LJ* 73.2). In this post-Apocalypse world, our challenge is not to prepare ourselves for an earth-bound judgment but to search diligently for the Lord's new presence with us. We are to cooperate with Him as He changes our lives and establishes, through people living the Two Great Commandments, the just and peaceful society predicted by the biblical prophets. The promise of the New Church is that the Lord can be present with us in rational thought (*TC* 508), that one does not have to give up thinking to remain faithful. What makes this promise possible is the clearing away of false ideas about God and religion that had accumulated since the founding of the Christian Church, and even before.

According to Swedenborgian theology, human minds exist at least partly in the spiritual world (*LJ* 9.1), and our minds are therefore sensitive to favorable and unfavorable conditions there. Much of the thrust of Swedenborg's theological works is to challenge Christian theology, both Catholic and Reformed, and to replace that theology with one based on the Lord's revelation given in the spiritual sense of the Word—the Old and New Testaments. Because of the way in which they clear away false ideas, both in the natural and spiritual worlds, Swedenborg's theological writings are an important agent of the Lord's second coming.

### III. RESHAPING CHRISTIAN EXPECTATIONS

In the theological works *Other Planets* and *Last Judgment*, Swedenborg addressed Christian expectations concerning the singularity of the earth as the only “world” and the Last Judgment as taking place on that world. These works were published in London in 1758, a time and place where Christian expectations were facing ever-increasing challenge during the Enlightenment. Christ, as Savior of the world, became a strained concept with the acceptance of the Copernican cosmos—a cosmos occupied by countless worlds. And Christ’s expected second coming on this now un-singular world, raising the dead to physical life and establishing heaven on earth, became likewise subject to doubt.

By redefining what the Lord accomplished while living as a man on the earth, and by introducing the concept of degrees, levels, or planes of existence, Swedenborgian theology offered a view of Christ’s first and second comings consonant with the possibility of human life on other planets and with the stability of natural law on this planet and throughout the universe. Rather than destroy faith, improvements in human understanding of the natural world and application of reason, in its best sense, can, in this new theology, inspire greater understanding of and reverence for God, so long as believers avoid the pitfalls that undermined traditional Christian theology.

Swedenborg’s treatment of the Last Judgment and the plurality of worlds supporting human life in the universe are examples of how it is possible to take into account rational conclusions based on physical observations while maintaining faith in what the Lord tells us in the Word.<sup>6</sup> And, more important and remarkable, the theology of the New Church presented by Swedenborg in the Writings *requires* that the Last Judgment *not* be an event taking place in the physical world that raises the dead to a blessed existence on the earth. Instead, New Church theology *requires* that human life *not* be restricted to planet earth alone.

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<sup>6</sup> The biblical story of Abram pitching his tent between Bethel and Ai can be seen as a metaphor of our mental landscape, a place between the natural and spiritual worlds and properly under the influence of each. See “Chemical Education between Bethel and Ai” (Bedford 2003) for an analysis and application of this metaphor.

New Church theology establishes these requirements while holding firm to the same sacred texts that had been the basis of forming the opposite conclusions in the Jewish and Christian churches. The difference in outcome results from a difference in approach to those texts. Core to New Church theology is the belief that the Bible is written in correspondences, that its stories are woven with threads of spiritual meaning. The redemptive truth of the text is not necessarily the physical events narrated but in the things to which the narration corresponds or calls to mind.

### A. The Last Judgment and the spiritual sense of the Word

In the opening passage of the work on the Last Judgment, Swedenborg related the danger of interpreting the Bible with an eye set only upon the most obvious, physical meaning—that this causes many heresies. He stated also that these heresies can be forgiven because “no one . . . has known that in . . . each part of the Word there is a spiritual sense, or indeed, what a spiritual sense is” (*LJ* 1). Swedenborg then very briefly reinterpreted passages from Isaiah and Revelation that say that heaven and earth will perish and a new heaven and earth will be formed. According to Swedenborg, the passages are not referring to the visible heaven and earth; they will remain. Instead, the passages are referring to a new Church that will be formed both in the spiritual heavens and on earth.

Swedenborg derived this new interpretation using the spiritual sense that had been revealed to him and that he had spent years expounding in the writing of his monumental, multi-volume work *Secrets of Heaven*,<sup>7</sup> an interpretation of the books of Genesis and Exodus. *Secrets of Heaven* serves in some ways as a primer to the spiritual sense of the Word. In this spiritual sense, “earth” in the Word refers to the church.

The heaven referred to in the *natural* sense of the cited biblical passages is not heaven, the spiritual realm of angels, but the starry sky above the earth. In the natural sense, the passage predicts the end of the visible cosmos without any reference at all to a realm beyond what our senses

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<sup>7</sup> This work is not yet available in the NCE. The title given the English translation referred to here is *Arcana Caelestia*.

detect. In the natural sense the imagery is based upon an archaic understanding of that cosmos, a cosmos in which the stars are small enough to fall onto the earth.

In the spiritual sense, the heaven referred to in the passage is the spiritual realm of angels or spirits. But if this is the case, why would it pass away? Would not the realm of the blessed be permanent? Swedenborg explained that this first heaven consisted not of angels but of spirits “from a varying religion” (LJ 2). This first heaven is not a true heaven, but a place that, like the earth, consisted of a mixture of people who had good and evil intentions, the “sheep and goats.” The Last Judgment predicted by the Word, therefore, is a spiritual event that clears away this first heaven and establishes a new and pure one. The remainder of the work *Last Judgment* deals with the nature of that Judgment in the spiritual world, why it was needed, why it was delayed, how it happened, and the new state of the world and the church as a result of it. An outline of the Swedenborgian description of the Last Judgment appears in Section IV below.

## B. The plurality of worlds

Before publishing his work on the Last Judgment, Swedenborg wrote about his visits with people in the spiritual world who had lived on other planets. Swedenborg sought out this contact because of his own curiosity at a compelling and new question of his day: are there people on the other planets of this solar system, and if there are, whom do they worship?

The question of life on other planets, pluralism, could not be raised until people saw the planets, the “wandering” stars, as terrestrial bodies like the earth, and that was not possible until people accepted the Copernican view of the cosmos, first described in 1543.<sup>8</sup> Galileo’s publications in 1610 and 1632 eventually led many in the seventeenth century to adopt Copernicanism. Popularization of pluralism by authors such as Fontenelle (1657–1757) in 1686 and Huygens (1629–1695) in 1698—both works going through several editions and translations through the first half of the

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<sup>8</sup>For a review of the other worlds question see my “Planets and Perspectives: New Church Theology and the Plurality of Worlds Debate,” and works cited therein (Bedford 2006).



eighteenth century—spread this intriguing idea throughout Europe and America. Christian churches of the day could not accept the idea of extra-terrestrial human life because of the complications such a reality would have for the doctrine of original sin and Christ's atonement for that sin. By the 1750s, contradictions between Christian theology and the Copernican cosmos raised significant challenges to Christian belief and led many toward deism (Crowe 1986, 37, 164).

At the time of the Lord's revelation to Swedenborg, the incompatibility between traditional Christian theology and ideas about the natural world including Copernicanism and pluralism had brought about a crisis of faith. A new revelation at that time would have to deal with these questions, and Swedenborg rose to that challenge early in his career as revelator.

Swedenborg first published his experiences with spirits from other worlds in 1753, in the sixth Latin volume of *Secrets of Heaven*, the first volume dealing with the book of Exodus. He continued publishing information about other worlds through the end of *Secrets of Heaven*, the final volume published in 1756. He then extracted the material from *Secrets of Heaven* and published it separately in 1758 as *Other Planets*. Five years before first publishing information about extraterrestrials, in an entry in his diary of spiritual experiences dated January 11, 1748, we find Swedenborg's first record of encountering information in the spiritual world about extraterrestrial life (SE 460). Within two weeks of that first encounter, Swedenborg recorded conversations with spirits from Jupiter (SE 519–518<sup>9</sup>).

In *Secrets of Heaven*, Swedenborg provided several reasons for his pursuing and publishing this extraordinary information. He wrote that he had a "desire to know about the inhabitants of other planets" and that the things he learned "deserve to be recorded" (SH 6695). Citing the purpose of creation—populating heaven—Swedenborg argued that people should believe that there is human life elsewhere in the universe (SH 6697) and even claimed that "Where a terrestrial body exists, so does the human being" (SH 9237). Further, Swedenborg argued that reasonable people

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<sup>9</sup> The section numbering in this part of the diary is scrambled. The sequence is 519, 520, 521, 517, 517<sup>1/2</sup>, 518, 522.

who possess faith will conclude that the universe must have life all through it (SH 6698, 9237, 9441). These arguments are echoed in *Heaven and Hell*, published in 1757, in a section on the infinity of the heavens (SH 415–420).

If people from this logic conclude that there must be inhabitants on other worlds, then they must also wonder about the relationship these inhabitants have with God. The central theme of the material Swedenborg published about life on other planets deals with that subject (SH 6700, 7477, 8543, 8547, 8949, 9694). In particular, Swedenborg's conversations and experience with spirits from other worlds established for him that the Lord Jesus Christ is the God of the entire universe and that He is seen throughout the universe in human form (SH 7173, 7252, 8541, 8949, 9359, 9694, 9971, 10159, 10377, 10737). Looking back at what he published in *Secrets of Heaven* and *Other Planets*, Swedenborg wrote that the information about other worlds was revealed to show that the Lord is recognized everywhere as the God of heaven (HH 417).

### C. The written Word on earth

But if the Lord is the God of the entire universe, why would He be born into this particular world? Swedenborg provides a surprising answer. The Lord was born on this planet because this planet alone has writing, and therefore this planet alone has the written Word. The Word in written form can be preserved and passed down to all future generations, spread over the entire globe, and even carried into the spiritual world and to all those from the entire universe who are there (SH 9350–9356). The importance of the Word is that it “constitutes a union of heaven and the world” (SH 9357) because it “teaches people about the existence of God, of heaven and of hell, and of life after death, and above all teaches them how they must live and believe in order to enter heaven and so be happy for evermore” (SH 9352). The Word has an essential function because it is the means by which humans can come to know why they exist and what their Creator asks of and does for them. The “first and most essential truth for the sake of which the Word exists” is to teach that God is in human form and even was born in that form on the earth (SH 9355).

In addition to the earth's having a special role in all the universe in that it has writing and therefore the written Word, people on and from the

earth are also the outermost part of the “Grand Man,” the form in which the Lord sees all people in the entire creation (*SH* 9360). By being born on the earth and uniting His human nature with his Divine nature, the Lord joined the innermost with the outermost form of creation and therefore encompassed all of it, and “became the Redeemer forever” (*TC* 127).

According to Swedenborgian theology, the Lord’s birth on earth does not need to be repeated elsewhere. In this view, the earth holds a unique role not as the geographical center of the entire universe but because it is home to those who developed writing and who focus on the external aspect of creation. Because of these traits, the Lord’s advent on earth bridged the entire gap from the Lord Himself to the most distant or external part of his creation, and, because the world on which He was born could record that event, the news of it spread to all lands and even to the spiritual world.

Swedenborgian embrace of the plurality-of-worlds idea is deep and complex, resulting in and from many key, theological ideas such as:

- 1) The Lord Jesus Christ is the universal Supreme Being (*OP* 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)
- 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 (*SH* 1–5). The first chapters of Genesis are not to be taken as a literal history of the world’s creation, nor do they describe the physical nature of the cosmos

This last point, that the Word has an internal sense, is the fundamental, constructive element of New Church theology. By turning to the spiritual and internal sense of the Word, Swedenborg was able to address misshapen Christian and Jewish expectations, stripping away interpretations that return us to our self-centered nature, and establishing a new set of beliefs and expectations that return us to God.

#### D. The internal sense of the Word

The opening sentence of *Secrets of Heaven*, the first published book of New Church revelation, reads: “The Word of the Old Testament contains heavenly secrets, with every single detail focusing on the Lord” (SH 1). The conclusion of the second paragraph of that work provides a criterion that defines the true Word: “Any expression in the Word that fails to embody [the Lord] within itself, or does not in its own way go back to Him, is not Divine” (SH 2). And the third paragraph connects the status of the Word with the status of human beings:

Without such life [from the Lord] the Word as regards the letter is dead, for it is the same with the Word as it is with man, who . . . is internal as well as external. The external man if parted from the internal man is just a body and therefore dead. It is the internal man which lives and imparts life to the external. The internal man is the soul of the external man. The same applies to the Word which as to the letter alone is like the body without a soul. (SH 3)

Swedenborg’s theology is built, piece by piece, by linking the internal spirit of the Word to its external letter. This reconnection *is* the revelation for the New Church. In the concluding paragraph of his introduction to the entire theology, Swedenborg wrote that no one can possibly know about the internal sense of the Word unless it is revealed by the Lord. Swedenborg then stated that by the Lord’s Divine mercy he had been able to “share the experiences of spirits and angels” and, the reader can infer, through this experience saw the Word as the angels saw it (SH 5).

As stated in the previous section, the essential function of the Word is to reveal to humans why they exist and what their Creator asks of and does for them. One can see an example of this in the opening story of Genesis. In the literal sense the story describes the formation of the heavens and the earth with its living forms. It is a compelling piece of Hebrew metaphor, of God hovering and speaking creation into existence. The physical imagery, if taken literally, describes a cosmos quite different from our contemporary concept. The physical nature of the creation outlined in this story does nothing to show readers what they are to do with their

existence. But the internal sense of this story, familiar within the New Church, is about our regeneration—how we can respond to the Lord positively and allow ourselves to be reformed. The internal sense points directly to our Creator and our relationship with Him.

Going to the text to find out how the world was formed misses the point. Why would the Word tell us about the mechanics of earthly construction? But if we go to the story looking for what it tells us about ourselves, we are likely to find something useful. In addition to the grand sweep of the internal meaning of the story—regeneration and reformation—we can see the narrative as an allegory about our own physical and mental development. For example, the advent of light into what was just emptiness could refer to the spark of life coming into natural material. The vault separating the waters above from the waters below can be the space made for us in the waters of our mother's womb. The dry land appearing could be the formation and birth of our body. The stars, sun, and moon can be driving loves and distant ideas that motivate and guide us. The fish and birds could be developing thoughts borrowed from others that swim around and fly over us. The emergence of animals on the land could be loves and ideas that we make our own, that rest on us. And the creation of humans could be us at an age and development in which we are in possession of ourselves. Seeing the story as an allegory about our physical and mental development, and in correspondence with what the Lord is calling us to do, seems much more applicable and convincing than seeing the story as a description of the earth's creation.

Who is the Lord, and what does the Lord want from me? Those are the kinds of questions that we should bring to the Word. In the treatment of the plurality of worlds, Swedenborg shows us that we on earth are one among many worlds that participate in God's purpose for creation. Swedenborg also shows how it is possible that the Lord, the God of the entire universe, could choose to come in person on this earth. The main reason given—that it was for the sake of the Word—is in line with the very center of New Church theology.

And we may wonder if it is true that our world is really the only one in the entire universe that has writing, or is focused especially on what is external. At present, I find it enough to conclude that humans on earth fit that description, but that the earth may in fact be one among several

planets that do. Does it matter in the way that I respond to God whether or not planet earth really is unique in those characteristics? In the work *Last Judgment* there is an implication that the earth may indeed not be unique. Swedenborg wrote that should the human race on the earth die out entirely the human race in the natural world will continue elsewhere, “for there are some hundreds of thousands of earths in the universe” (LJ 10). If the earth is unique in having writing, and if writing serves an important, divine purpose, then that function and quality would have to be present or transferred elsewhere if human life on earth should come to an end. This leaves open the possibility that we on earth share with other planets the role of being creation’s outward covering.

But what is most important about what is said about why the Lord came on earth is not whether or not the earth is unique. What is most important is what that explanation says about the Lord’s and our nature, and how the Lord’s presence is connected to the Word.

### **E. The Last Judgment and the plurality of worlds**

In at least two important ways, Swedenborg’s view of the plurality of worlds informs his view of the Last Judgment. The first relates to accepting Copernicanism and pluralism. In a Copernican universe the stars and planets cannot fall to the earth. And further, if there are people on other planets, why should a judgment of our earth require the destruction of theirs? The second is more subtle. Because there are people on other planets, the Lord’s purpose in creation is not ended by the failure of a particular earth. In fact, it is against the Divine plan to destroy the natural world. Human life on earth may end, but human life in the universe will go on.

## **IV. SWEDENBORGIAN VIEW OF THE LAST JUDGMENT**

What was the Last Judgment? Why was it spiritual and not natural? Who was judged? Why did it occur in 1757, and why did the Christian Church not notice it? What are the results of the Last Judgment, and why was the event revealed to Swedenborg? In his works *Last Judgment* and

*Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment*,<sup>10</sup> Swedenborg addressed these questions. Because it is the primary material of this study, it is important to outline what Swedenborg presented to his readers about the Last Judgment. I do so here with minimal commentary and with a focus on those parts that are relevant to this study. Others have provided comprehensive study of the topic.<sup>11</sup>

### A. The Last Judgment was a limited, spiritual event

Swedenborg opened his book on the Last Judgment with this heading: “The Day of the Last Judgment does not mean the Destruction of the World” (*LJ* 1). Referring the reader to the spiritual sense of the Word, he raised our minds to consider the spiritual rather than the natural world. In Section III A above, we noted that Swedenborg showed that the destruction of the heaven and the earth mentioned in the Bible referred to false heavens in the spiritual world and to the Church, both on earth and in the spiritual world. The new heaven and earth mentioned in the Word referred to the establishment of a new church on earth and in heaven.

The Last Judgment was a judgment on the false heavens in the spiritual world that had formed since the beginning of the Christian Church, and contained spirits of a mixture of states and motives, some heavenly and some hellish (*LJ* 2). False heavens were gatherings of spirits who were outwardly in order but inwardly in disorder. They built for themselves places that seemed like heaven, and these places were often on mountains (*S* 9, 20, *LJ* 69). The Last Judgment destroyed these false heavens. For example, Swedenborg reported seeing their mountains overturned and cast into the sea (*LJ* 61).

Destruction of the natural world would have limited the Lord’s purpose in creation, and in that limitation the “infinite would perish” (*LJ* 13). The natural world serves as a foundation for heaven, and so destruction of the natural world would destroy heaven also (*LJ* 2). No angels or devils

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<sup>10</sup> The short title for the work *Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment* used in the NCE is “*Supplements*,” herein abbreviated “S.”

<sup>11</sup> See for example Michael Hogan’s “The Last Judgment and New Church Scholarship: Some Implications for the Future” (2005), and Hugo Lj. Odhner’s *The Spiritual World* (1968).

were created in heaven or hell but came to those places after living as people on earth (*LJ* 14). Therefore, the only way to build the heavens is through continuing human reproduction in the physical world. Furthermore, birth in the physical world is necessary because in order to be human we must have both a natural body and a spiritual mind—we are connected to both the natural and the spiritual worlds (*LJ* 9.1). Since the spiritual and natural worlds cannot exist apart from each other, it is against reason that the natural world should be destroyed (*S* 9.3).

Because the Last Judgment is a judgment of spiritual character, it cannot take place until the spiritual character is unveiled, which happens when people enter the spiritual world. The natural part of us “is not guilty of any blame or accusation because it does not live from itself, being only the agent . . . through which the spiritual man acts” (*LJ* 30). The proper time and place for the judgment, therefore, is in the spiritual world where people from many ages are together and their interior natures expressed (*LJ* 28, *S* 5).

The Last Judgment was limited in several ways. It was a spiritual rather than a natural event; it affected only those who were confused about good and evil rather than already committed to one or the other (*LJ* 49, 59); and it applied only to those from this planet and whose lives on this earth were in the Christian era (*LJ* 46, 67). Two previous “last judgments” had occurred on spirits from this planet, one on the ancients represented by the flood, and one at the Lord’s advent (*LJ* 46).<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these communal “last judgments,” we each face a “last judgment” after we enter the spiritual world.

Given the limitations of the Last Judgment that occurred in 1757, we should be cautious with our terminology. When we speak of “the Last Judgment” our words imply a singular event, but, according to Swedenborg, the judgment of 1757 was one of several and may not be the last. Judgments made upon spirits from other planets also occur (*SH* 10810).

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<sup>12</sup> In the first Latin volume of *Secrets of Heaven*, published nine years before *Last Judgment*, Swedenborg provided a list of four rather than two “last judgments” (§ 1850.2–3). The two additional judgments were between the flood and the Lord’s advent.



## B. Conditions requiring a judgment

Judgments occur when disorder in the spiritual world extends to such an extent that communication between heaven and the earth is lost (S 8). This happens when evil and falsity in the false heavens cloud thought in the spiritual world, which then clouds thought on earth also (S 11). The disorder results from a loss of charity in a church, and the loss of charity removes faith also. A church comes to its end when it no longer has any faith and charity (LJ 33).

When a church ends, there must be a judgment because human freedom on earth depends on an equilibrium in the spiritual world between heaven and hell. The church serves to counter the forces of hell, and so when the church is no longer there, equilibrium and freedom are lost (LJ 33). A judgment clears the way for a new church to be established that will restore spiritual equilibrium and open communication again between heaven and earth.

Although the Judgment did not occur until 1757, the Christian churches had been, according to Swedenborg, in decline for a long time before that. What delayed the Judgment was that there was a semblance of order among the church leaders, and through that order the Christian churches were able to lead many people to heaven. So long as outward behavior remained orderly, corruption within could be tolerated (LJ 59). The Lord could preserve false heavens so long as people in those false heavens preserved at least outward order (LJ 59).

Another reason for delaying the Last Judgment was that the false heavens were connected with the lowest parts of the true heavens because they were outwardly similar. If the false heavens were carried away before the outward similarities were broken, the lowest heaven “would have suffered” (LJ 70).

## C. How was the Judgment accomplished?

The key to bringing about a judgment is to make spirits’ interior motivations visible. This took place in steps that involved bringing the higher heavens closer to the lower and false ones, and in visitations by angels in which, like the biblical prophets, they warned of the coming

destruction. As heaven drew closer, the interior nature of the spirits became more obvious, and infighting began. Many then rejected “the Lord, the Word, faith, and the Church,” and they began acting from their interior motivations. When this happened, their palaces and other splendors were destroyed (S 23–26).

#### **D. What are the results of the Last Judgment?**

In the spiritual world the Judgment cleared away the darkness that had been intensifying there, and this new light in the spiritual world also brought new enlightenment to people on earth (S 30). But Swedenborg predicted that the Judgment would bring about no obvious, outward changes in the world (LJ 73). The church on earth, however, would change. It would remain similar in outward appearance, but its inner nature would be new (LJ 73).

Because spiritual freedom would be restored on earth, there would be greater freedom of thought in spiritual matters. However, Swedenborg lamented, people on earth would not notice this change since they do not “reflect upon it at all nor . . . know anything about spiritual freedom, nor about influx” (LJ 73.2).

One result of the Judgment was that it enabled formation of a new church on earth through unveiling the spiritual sense of the Word. Revelation of this before the Judgment would have failed to bring people into order because “in his former state, man would not have understood these truths, and if he had understood, he would have profaned them” (LJ 73.2). The situation changed after the Judgment:

After communication has been restored by a last judgment, man can be enlightened and reformed, that is, he can understand the Divine truth of the Word; understanding it, he can receive it, and receiving it, he can retain it, *for intervening obstacles have been removed.* (S 12, emphasis added)

Heaven and the Church depend on three essentials: the Lord’s divinity, the Word, and charity (S 88). The Judgment restored enlightenment in the spiritual world and on earth, and this made possible a commitment in both places to these three essentials.

### **E. Why was the Judgment revealed on earth?**

False ideas about the Last Judgment damage faith and cause some to reject the Word (*LJ* 15). Even among the faithful, the inability to understand some part of the Word may lead to its rejection, and since the Apocalypse deals with the Judgment, that book in particular could be lost if not properly understood (*LJ* 42, 60).

Because the Judgment was a spiritual event, people on earth would have no way of knowing about it if it were not revealed. In this state of ignorance, people on earth would be waiting perpetually for something to happen on earth that had already happened in the spiritual world (*LJ* 45).

### **F. Why does the Christian Church expect an earth-bound Last Judgment?**

Because the Church was unaware of the levels or degrees of creation, people did not realize that eternal, spiritual life takes place out of sight of the natural world (*DLW* 173–174, 188). They also did not realize that the spiritual and natural worlds depend on each other and that therefore the natural world and human reproduction must continue (*LJ* 6).

The Church also held false beliefs about the soul, thinking of it as a puff of wind rather than a spiritual body. Puffs of wind cannot be judged, and so people thought that the soul would have to return to the body for judgment to happen (*S* 3). With a proper understanding of the soul as spiritual body, with all the senses and abilities of a natural body, people can conclude that the Judgment would be a spiritual event taking place where all are gathered together and where people's spiritual nature is apparent (*S* 3, *LJ* 28, 30).

The reason why people held false ideas about the soul and the Judgment was that their thought was too much confined to the natural world (*LJ* 15.5). Educated thinking saw humans as nothing more than speaking animals (*S* 33), and the Church understood the Word in its literal sense and did so without illustrating or explaining the sense of the letter by using "genuine doctrine derived from the Word" (*LJ* 14). What was lacking was a belief in life after death.

Swedenborg wrote that people could have found evidence for life after death in the Bible. He noted that Bible stories depict people seeing angels and even the Lord after His resurrection. The angels and the Lord were not puffs of wind but were in human form and could speak and even eat with them (*S* 34). Though, because of misunderstanding some passages in the Word, the Church thought of angels and devils as being created from eternity in heaven or hell rather than having once lived as people on earth (*LJ* 14).

In summary, it is not surprising that the Christian Church did not recognize the Last Judgment. The Church's lack of information about the Lord's purpose in creation, the necessity of having spiritual and natural worlds, the fact that these worlds must be separated by level of creation and be invisible to each other, and that the soul is a spiritual body rather than a disembodied puff of air, made it impossible to think of the Last Judgment as a spiritual event that could take place without involving any physical change on the earth.

As Swedenborg pointed out, information was available in the Word that could have indicated that their thinking about the nature of spiritual life was out of order. Information about the natural world also provided evidence that their picture of reality was askew. But, apparently, the thinking in the Church had become so solidified that only a judgment and revelation could free it (*LJ* 40, 56, 60). What brought the Church to this dark state?

For most in the Christian Church, the mistaken expectations they held about the Last Judgment resulted from what they were taught, and what they were taught was at least partially useful. The expectation of an earth-bound judgment prompted people to be mindful of their behavior, knowing that they would eventually be judged by their Creator. Since they could not picture judgment in the spiritual world, picturing it on earth was a workable substitute.

For Christian Church leadership, this situation may have been different. Their vision of what the Last Judgment would be like was one that increased their power. As information about the natural world accumulated that was opposed to the Church's worldview, the Church leadership responded by resisting that new information rather than by using it to question their own assumptions. One motivation for maintaining the

status quo was that it served them. Another is the higher motive of holding to faith in spite of intellectual confusion. Swedenborg's witness of the spiritual world indicates that craving for power had much to do with the falsity that clouded the Christian Church and blinded it to the Lord's purpose and presence.

## V. EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEW CHRISTIAN WORD

Jewish and Christian church history suggests that it is possible for an established church to miss entirely the Lord's presence. Unless Swedenborgians attend to the lessons of that history, we are likely to repeat it. What expectations about their revelation did the previous two Churches hold that prevented them from seeing the Lord in the Advent or in the Parousia? What expectations about the revelation through Swedenborg might lead to similar blindness? What sort of relationship with sacred text should we nurture?

### A. Expectations of local empowerment

Many Jews could not accept Jesus or the Christian revelation because they were expecting a Messiah devoted to their wellbeing above all others. Jewish leaders rejected Jesus on the grounds that He came from Galilee, that He did not obey all of their laws of purity or Sabbath observance, and that He ministered to gentiles. The people rejected Him because He took no steps to overthrow the Roman occupation and establish a new and all-powerful Jewish state. Both the leaders and the people could justify their rejection based on sacred text.

For similar reasons, many Christians were unable to perceive the Lord's second coming and the Last Judgment. Like the Jews before them, Christians thought that the Lord put them in a special position that would give them power over all the world. At the Last Judgment Christ would wipe out all those who did not accept Christian doctrine and authority. The possibility of world domination is tempting, tempting enough to blind many eyes to other ways of interpreting the Lord's purpose and presence. And like the Jewish Church before them, Christians could point

to their sacred texts to reject any notion that the judgment could be a spiritual rather than a natural event.

Given how self-focus has shaped expectations of many in the Judeo-Christian culture, it is possible that Swedenborgians might develop expectations of the New Christian Word that lead implicitly to empowerment of their clan rather than to remain open to much wider possibilities. A belief that this new Word carries no appearances of truth but is actually true in every respect, with no need of interpretation, may be an example of this tendency. If the Swedenborgian Church did possess such a flawless revelation, then its congregations would command insurmountable power over all other people because they would possess the unambiguous Truth while all others would have something less than that. As God did not give that sort of power to the Jewish or Christian Churches, it is likely that God has not vested it in the New Church either, and so we are probably mistaken if we seek to gain that sort of power from the Word.

We might ask ourselves what are we looking for when we open our sacred texts? What power do we give the text?

## **B. Authority of sacred texts**

Sacred texts must have authority to be effective. It is necessary that readers be willing to change in response to the text rather than change the text in response to self. When we accept a text as having Divine authorship, and therefore Divine authority, we treat that text carefully and are slow to question its meaning. This is a respectful and commendable position, but this approach taken too far can also stagnate thought, leaving us unchanged by our encounters with the text because we are not grappling with it. Indeed, learning to question the text appropriately, to enter into dialogue, can enhance the text's authority because in that dynamic, engaging relationship we open ourselves to the life that the Writings tell us lies within the text (*SH 3*). Rather than any logical proofs or arguments urging that the Writings are the Word, it is this tug, the spark of life transferred when we are open, which brings us that assurance.

A challenge for Swedenborgians today is to chart a relationship with the New Church Word. This is a task of tremendous proportion. On the

other hand, it is as easy as reading with a humble spirit. Many New Church scholars have worked to describe the new Word.

One very recent contribution is Bishop Alfred Acton's study on New Church paradigms (Acton 2007), in which he offers a set of assumptions about the nature of the Writings and then discusses several consequences of those assumptions. Acton's description highlights issues regarding the authority of the Writings.

Acton's assumptions about the nature of revelation and the Writings are (Acton 2007, 172–176):

- 1) "The Writings are the Word of God and have Divine authorship" (ibid. 172)
- 2) The Writings have a literal sense
- 3) The Writings reveal the internal sense of the Bible and add new doctrine
- 4) The Old Testament, New Testament, and the Writings all have a spiritual sense—the sense the angels see
- 5) Written revelation is finite and therefore limited.

Acton also describes six categories of finite limits to revelation:

- 1) The mechanics of writing—what is necessary to record and copy revelation (ibid. 268)
- 2) Language<sup>13</sup> (ibid. 271)
- 3) The revelator's mind (ibid. 275)
- 4) The culture and context of the time when the revelation was given (ibid. 306)
- 5) "The limits of angel's knowledge" (ibid. 312)
- 6) The nature of the way Lord appears in the Word (ibid. 313)

Acton concludes that because of the necessary limitations imposed on revelation, the Writings contain fallacies (ibid. 176). That the Writings contain fallacies is a problem only if we "confuse a fallacy with a spiritual reality" for when we do that "we turn the fallacy into falsity" (ibid. 177).

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<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of this topic see Kristin King's insightful "The Power and Limitations of Language in Swedenborg, Shakespeare, and Frost" (1999).

Acton's assumptions, categories of limitations, and his conclusion all strike me as a reasonable and helpful way to consider what the Writings are and are not.

### 1. Fallacy and genuine truth in the Writings

The General Church<sup>14</sup> has had a tendency to deny that the Writings are fallible because the Church sees the Writings as a rational, rather than an allegorical or symbolic, revelation. And, because the revelation took place relatively recently and because Swedenborg possessed extraordinary knowledge of the natural world, difficulties resulting from the limitations of Swedenborg's mind, time, and background are remarkably few, and represent a vast improvement over the contradictions between biblical descriptions of physical reality and contemporary, scientific descriptions of reality. To a large extent, the Writings appear flawless. However, there are glaring exceptions. Perhaps the most dramatic are Swedenborg's predictions about life on other planets in this solar system, but if one searches for them one can find at least trivial problems throughout.

The way to avoid turning a fallacy into a falsity, Acton argues, is to "make a right comparison of passages to unfold the doctrine of genuine truth" (ibid. 315), and another New Church scholar, the Reverend Grant Odhner, recently published a study on that subject.

In his "Responding to the Lord's Word," Odhner builds a compelling and beautiful case for seeing the Writings as the Word, which, like the Old and New Testaments, have both veiled and unveiled truths. The function of the Writings, he shows, is to reveal genuine truth (Odhner 2007, 130). Genuine truths are teachings that are vital for salvation: the essentials of faith, such as the Two Great Commandments (*SH* 2225). In a collection of passages (e.g. *SH* 2225, 3440, 9034.2, 10400.3–40) Odhner shows that genuine truths are what the internal and spiritual senses teach, and are apparent in the literal sense (Odhner 226–228). Readers of the Writings, he concludes, must search out these plain truths in the Writings in the same

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<sup>14</sup> The General Church of the New Jerusalem is one of a handful of church organizations worldwide that accept Swedenborg's theological works as Divinely inspired.



way that we are taught in the Writings to look for them in the Word (ibid. 229, 232).

Acton's and Odhner's analyses are invitations to explore and build our own relationship with the Writings, a relationship that is sensitive to the topography, the landscape, of the Writings. In becoming sensitive to that landscape we are giving the text the authority and power to shape our minds, and, applied to our lives, our hearts also.

## 2. *Sacred text and its community*

Phyllis Bird, professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, has written a powerful analysis of biblical authority for the *New Interpreter's Bible*. In it she argues that the authority of the Bible is not something established by fiat, but develops over time and "involves an element of trust and trustworthiness" in relationship with a community (Bird 1994, 36). Theological debate and diversity are natural and necessary expressions of a community engaging with its sacred texts and indicate that the community holds the text in authority (ibid. 43, 63).

Interestingly, Bird sees community dialog as essential to developing and responding to biblical authority. She writes that "the church is obligated by the form of its Scriptures to listen for the voice of God in the dialog of a community," both the community in the text and the community of readers (ibid. 63). For her, the community who generated and received the Scriptures is integral to the meaning of those Scriptures.

## 3. *The Writings and their community*

The development of the Old and New Testament Scriptures was very different from the development of the Writings. The Scriptures won their status over time as they addressed a community's spiritual needs. The text itself was shaped and reshaped by community, changing, albeit carefully, in response to changes in the community's circumstances. The books of the Bible we have today result from the work of many human minds working through more than a thousand years, and writing for communi-

ties in various circumstances. After original authorship, these texts went through untold layers of manipulation, recombination, redaction, and addition. The Writings do not share that history. They result from the work of one man writing almost entirely in isolation and over a period of about twenty-five years. And in the intervening years between their authorship and today, the community has accepted almost none of the manipulations that trimmed and sequenced the Scriptures. The Writings offer a very large set of, as it were, primary data that unravel the internal sense of the Scriptures and, as Acton and Odhner show, bring forth new doctrine.

If Bird's analysis is correct, the Writings gain authority in our lives as we engage with them as Odhner and Acton ask us to do: by setting "particular ideas in a larger framework" (Odhner 2007, 233); by making "a right comparison of passages to unfold the doctrine of genuine truth" (Acton 2007, 315); and by the resulting community dialog.

Because of the way in which the Writings came to us, there is no mechanism for the sort of manipulation that shaped the Scriptures. However, there is room for sorting the books and manuscripts into categories, for example by publication status, intended audience, subject matter, and developmental context. The Reverends Jonathan Rose, George Dole, and Frank Rose each contributed essays along these lines in the Swedenborg Foundation's *New Century Edition* essay volume on Swedenborg (2005). In our studies of Swedenborg's writings it is important not to lump all the works into one bin, because when we do that we are ignoring basic contextual information such as noting that some were written before and some after the Last Judgment, that some were carried to publication and some abandoned, that some were written for theologians and others for philosophers. Awareness of context and audience is necessary also for us to hear the way the Writings engage readers. As Bird argues, we are to "listen for the voice of God in the dialog of the community." Each work of the Writings has an immediate community it is addressing. We need to know that community and its concerns to better hear what the Lord is saying, because part of what the Word is, is God's response to a community's questions and concerns.

When we read *Other Planets* and *Last Judgment*, we should know that Swedenborg wrote these works for a community that did not know about spiritual and natural levels of creation, that expected a judgment on earth and therefore could not understand how there could be life on other planets, and that was wrestling with the new idea that there could be life on other planets. It was a community struggling with the tug of naturalism and deism and the Enlightenment's critique of Christianity. The works were written for readers living in an age whose scientific reasoning had turned the cosmos inside out. In large part, both *Other Planets* and *Last Judgment* address and correct Christian expectations. If it were not for a community having those expectations, the works would not have been written.

Since the community of readers within the Church today does not hold those same expectations or experience, there is a level of disconnect between the text and its community that we should ponder. The texts were relevant at the time they were written, and are relevant to Swedenborgians today. But what makes them relevant in those two eras is different.

A validation of the text's authority would be to show how over time the text addresses communities' concerns. In order for the text to be relevant in evolving community contexts, what the community gets from the text must be capable of evolving also. Do the Writings have an inherent flexibility or were the doctrines fixed as soon as they left Swedenborg's pen?

### C. Topical development in the Writings

We can consider evolutionary capacity in the Writings in two ways. One would be to examine how the Writings address concerns of various communities separated by time or culture. Another would be to look within the Writings themselves to see if doctrines and other information there develop over time. This analysis is possible because Swedenborg wrote his theological works over an extended period and often treated the same topic in various books. Here, we consider developments in Swedenborg's treatment of the plurality of worlds and the Last Judgment.

1. *Developments in describing and addressing the Last Judgment*

Swedenborg's two main publications on the Last Judgment were *Last Judgment*, published in 1758, and *Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment* (called *Supplements* by the NCE), published in 1763. Both works open with an explanation of why people expect a judgment that will destroy the earth. The explanation given in the first work centers on people's lack of knowledge about the spiritual sense of the Word (LJ1). The subsequent work repeats this central reason and expands upon it, emphasizing that people have a mistaken view of the soul, thinking it just a puff of air (S 3). Since people cannot imagine how a judgment can take place on a puff of air, they conclude that the soul must reenter the body in order to be judged. Swedenborg's argument develops from being impersonal—spiritual judgment must take place in the spiritual world—to addressing the reader very directly—you will rise in the spiritual world with a spiritual body, more real and solid than your natural body, and you will be judged.

Swedenborg also wrote about the state of the world and the church before and after the Last Judgment. The 1758 work predicts that people's thinking will be freer as a result of the judgment "because spiritual freedom has been restored" (LJ 73). The 1763 work goes further, saying that before the Last Judgment communication between heaven and hell was nearly entirely cut off, and that afterwards communication was restored (S 8). "This is why," Swedenborg reports, "after the last judgment, and not before, revelations for the New Church have been made" (S 12). In the 1758 publication Swedenborg did not write anything about *communication* between heaven and the earth,<sup>15</sup> although the last paragraph of that work relates from angels' testimony "that interior Divine truths are at this day being revealed" among a "nation set asunder from the Christian world" (L 74). Both works predict that thought, particularly in spiritual matters, will be liberated by the Last Judgment, but the later work again takes a more personal tone than the former work, the 1763 publication inviting the

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<sup>15</sup> Though the 1758 work does not describe any communication between the spiritual and natural worlds, it does describe connections between the two, stating that people in the natural world cannot exist apart from angels in the spiritual world, and that angels cannot exist apart from people in the natural world (*Last Judgment* § 9).

reader to open him or herself to communication, in some sense, with heaven.

In *True Christianity*, his last major theological publication, Swedenborg relied on the descriptions he provided in *Last Judgment* to make a point about why the Lord had to be born into the natural world in order to save us. In making this point, which has to do with reordering the heavens and hells, he wrote that he could not describe this before “because the restructuring of the heavens and the hells has been going on since the day of the Last Judgment until the present time and is still going on” (TC 123). The “present time” was 1771, fourteen years after the Last Judgment. More than a decade after the Last Judgment the structure of the spiritual world was still fluid. We should bear this in mind when we read Swedenborg’s descriptions of places he visited in the spiritual world, both before and after the Last Judgment.

In this passage from *True Christianity* Swedenborg directs the reader to his 1758 work on the Judgment to get an idea of what a judgment does in the spiritual world. The passage is noteworthy for several reasons. It is an example of how Swedenborg restricted himself to describing only those things for which he had evidence, and, what is unusual, the tone of the passage carries some of Swedenborg’s frustration at people’s lack of awareness:

No one knows the situation [of how hell was attacking the world of spirits] at the time of the *First Coming*, because it has not been revealed in the literal sense of the Word. I have been allowed to see with my own eyes the situation at the time of the Lord’s *Second Coming*. One can draw conclusions about the earlier situation from that. I described this situation in the little work *Last Judgment*, published in London in 1758. . . . My eyewitness accounts appear in that little work, but copying them here would be a pointless exercise because it is in print and there are still many copies available at the printer’s in London. (TC 123)

In addition to acknowledging Swedenborg’s situation as a witness to an event of immeasurable importance that no one else seemed to notice, the passage also shows that Swedenborg was satisfied with the details of the

judgment given in the 1758 book, even though the reordering of the spiritual world was still going on.

The examples given above of augmenting his 1758 arguments in 1763 to include a more personal dimension for his readers, considering the nature of the soul and the possibility of communication between heaven and hell, suggest that Swedenborg's understanding of the Last Judgment and its consequences grew as he witnessed its effects over several years. But in 1771 he also referred to specific information published more than a decade earlier and so must have been satisfied with those details even after the benefit of developments in the spiritual world and in his understanding.

That the Last Judgment remained an important topic after 1758 is clear because references to it occur throughout the published theological works. Five works contain at least twenty numbered paragraphs on the topic: *Secrets of Heaven* (1749–1756), *Last Judgment* (1758), *Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment* (1763), *Apocalypse Revealed* (1766), and *True Christianity* (1771).

## 2. *Developments in describing and addressing pluralism*

The development of the topic of extraterrestrial life in the published works is remarkably different from the continuing attention that the topic of the Last Judgment receives. Pluralism enjoys much attention early in these works, appearing in at least 350 paragraphs of *Secrets of Heaven* and of course in the entire work *Other Planets*, for a total of at least 528 numbered paragraphs. But the topic hardly appears at all in other works published in 1758 or later, and none of the references to this topic in later books provide any information about where the spirits are from or how they live. See Table 1 for details.

**Table 1. Occurrence of Pluralism in the Published Writings**

Book	Publication Year(s)	Number of Paragraphs	Treatment
<i>Secrets of Heaven</i>	1749-53	313	Detailed accounts of extra-terrestrial life
<i>Other Planets</i>	1758	178	Repeat of material in <i>Secrets of Heaven</i>
<i>Heaven and Hell</i>	1758	6	§ 415-420: Immensity of heavens
<i>Last Judgment</i>	1758	5	§ 10, 13, 26, 46, 67: General information that there is life elsewhere
<i>The Lord</i>	1763	1	Preface lists <i>Other Planets</i> as among books published
<i>Marriage Love</i>	1768	1	§ 532: Pluralism listed as a revelation for the New Church
<i>True Christianity</i>	1771	4	§ 32: Refers to <i>Other Planets</i> § 64: Illusion of time and space illustrated § 769: Some think that after death they go to another planet § 846: Parallel to <i>Marriage Love</i> § 532

### 3. Source material for *Other Planets and Last Judgment*

Swedenborg kept a private diary of his experiences in the spiritual world, published posthumously as *Spiritual Experiences*. Swedenborg made entries in this diary (actually a collection of diaries) from 1745 to 1765, with most of the material written from 1747 to 1749, and relatively few entries after 1758. Enough dates occur in the text to place experiences in time.

Many of the experiences described in the published works appear first in the diary. Because of this, Swedenborg's diary allows us to trace many of his reports in published works back to the time he had the experiences. We can see also how much time he spent dealing with a particular subject. Using this process to examine Swedenborg's witness of the plurality of worlds and of the Last Judgment reveals a substantially different time frame for these two topics, even though the two published works on these topics appeared in the same year.

As noted in Section III B, Swedenborg's first mention of spirits from other planets is in an entry dated January 11, 1748, and is under the heading, "About the adroitness of spirits in making up things that appear to be true":

From one experience today, I was able to realize how spirits can counterfeit the truth, and thus play with human minds. The case in point was their depiction of the inhabitants of Saturn, whom they claim to be little people, for the most part small in stature but still good in character. They say they meditate more than they speak, that they live in a cold climate, that they cast out from their midst those who are evil . . . that they worship God the Creator of the universe, and similar concoctions having the appearance of truth.

However, I was able to deduce from these things that the inhabitants of that planet, though they did not know Christ Jesus, must nevertheless have been taught by some Divine Word, so as to have a knowledge of Him. (SE 460)

When Swedenborg wrote this he had not yet had the experiences with the spirits from Jupiter that demonstrated to him that the Lord Jesus Christ is



the God of all creation, a realization that caused Swedenborg to adopt the name “the Lord” for God.<sup>16</sup>

When Swedenborg published information about the spirits and inhabitants of Saturn in *Secrets of Heaven* some six years later, he reported that they are small in stature and are upright (SH 8948), that they worship the Lord (SH 8949), and that they separate out those who “refer to the light at night . . . as the Lord” (SH 8951). The information is not identical to what Swedenborg recorded for himself in 1748, but it is close. Clearly, Swedenborg was feeling his way through his spiritual experiences and was not always sure how to understand them. What he took as misinformation earlier he accepted later as worthy of publication.

Reports of encounters with spirits from other worlds take up at least 189 numbered paragraphs written in 1748. After 1748, just four more paragraphs in *Spiritual Experiences* deal with pluralism: paragraph 4431 on Mercury and memory; paragraph 4673 on “universe dwellers”; paragraph 4742 which mentions communication with spirits from Jupiter; and paragraph 6057 which refers to *Other Planets*. The topic of pluralism is nearly dropped from the diary after 1748, and after 1752 we find no information about extraterrestrials—only a reference to the work published in 1758.

The inverse is the case in diary paragraphs referring to the Last Judgment. From 1747 to 1756, twenty paragraphs refer to it, and forty-eight from 1756–1757. Not surprisingly, diary entries about the Last Judgment increase as the Last Judgment takes place.

The contrast between the way the topics of the Last Judgment and the plurality of worlds develop in the Writings is remarkable. Pluralism, a topic that took up a large amount of attention in 1748 and was published alongside all the chapters in *Secrets of Heaven* on Exodus and was extracted and published again in *Other Planets*, is not developed at all after 1752,<sup>17</sup> while treatment of the Last Judgment continues to the end of the last published work.

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<sup>16</sup> I described this transition recently (Bedford 2006), based on the Reverend Dan Goodenough’s analysis which he presented in a paper to the General Church Council of the Clergy in 1989.

<sup>17</sup> *Other Planets* was published in 1758, but all of the information presented there about life on other worlds was extracted without addition from *Secrets of Heaven*.

#### 4. *The Disappearing Solar System*

The most controversial part of Swedenborg's reported contact with spirits from other planets is that he identifies groups of them as being from planets in this solar system. One might wonder how he could make this assignment. How could he know what planet a spirit is from? The way he does this is that he actually sees in the other world a replica of our local solar system, and he is able to travel to the planets he wishes to visit. One of the remarkable things about this spiritual solar system is that it is earth bound—the point of view is from the earth. Why should a heavenly view of the solar system be from the earth's point of view?

Swedenborg described this spiritual solar system as “the way planets are aligned in spirits' and angels' ideas about them” (*SH* 7171). He also referred to it as the “mental picture that spirits have [of the solar system]” and explained that the

... expression “mental picture that spirits have” is used because neither the sun in this world nor any planet there is visible to any spirit. Spirits have only a mental picture of them; they see them as they exist within that mental picture. (*Secrets of Heaven* § 7247)

The repetitious last sentence results probably from the tremendous difficulty Swedenborg faced in describing this mental image. But difficult as it is for Swedenborg to describe and us to understand what this image is, Swedenborg's assignment of spirits to various planets depends entirely on this “mental picture” of the solar system, and all references to this “mental picture” occur prior to the Last Judgment.

Swedenborg reported that the spiritual world contained many appearances of things before the Last Judgment: fantasy cities with engineering marvels, artificial light, and “devices set before the eyes of those standing at a distance, which do not actually exist among those who are in those devices” (*LJ* 58). Swedenborg also described these illusions as “splendors” displayed by “arts unknown in the world” (*S* 18). All of these illusions were constructed by spirits' imagination, and all were destroyed by the Last Judgment. It is speculative but plausible that one of these

constructions was the “mental picture” that angels and spirits have of the solar system.

Why would spirits construct an imaginary solar system? In the years after the Copernican revolution when people realized for the first time that the planets were earth-like rather than star-like, they also began to wonder if there was life on the planets. This idea is compelling and took possession of the imagination. Upon finding themselves in the next life and wondering about the solar system, it is conceivable that these spirits found a way to see what they believed was there, just as other spirits built for themselves high places and palaces with their imagination.<sup>18</sup>

We may wonder if there was sufficient time for enough spirits to accumulate in the spiritual world from the time of Copernicus and Galileo to 1748 to make such an elaborate construction, but the evidence Swedenborg reported suggests that there was. Consider that the Reformed Church had its start in 1517 and grew to compete with the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. This gave at most 240 years between the start of that Church and the Last Judgment, and yet Swedenborg reported that the Reformed actually held the central positions in the false heavens. There had been enough time for them to construct cities and elaborate “splendors” in the other world (S 18).

If the solar system that Swedenborg reported seeing was actually an artificial construct of spirits’ imagination, then Swedenborg’s means of assigning home planets for the extraterrestrial spirits he visited would be unreliable. Perhaps the information Swedenborg gave about specific planets (Jupiter, Saturn, and so on) really is not about those specific planets but about unknown planets. This speculation does not necessarily call into question whether or not Swedenborg met spirits in the other world who came from other planets; it merely questions the assignment of spirits to specific planets in this solar system. While Swedenborg dropped planet-

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<sup>18</sup> Perhaps one motivation spirits had for producing an image of the solar system was to lead people away from Christianity. Swedenborg used the mental image to lead people back. He did this by showing that it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is worshipped on all those planets. If the spirits’ mental image of the solar system had been set up to oppose Christian teaching, then Swedenborg’s use of the image could be similar to the way Jesus used traps set against him to entrap instead those who set them (e.g. Mt 15.1-12; Mt 21.23-27).

specific information from the Writings, the idea of pluralism remains all the way to the end of *True Christianity*, and, as discussed earlier, pluralism is necessary in a Swedenborgian view of the cosmos.

Why might Swedenborg report information that was unreliable? It is possible that Swedenborg was unaware of the full import or context of what he saw. But after the Last Judgment, if the spiritual solar system disappeared, we might expect Swedenborg to note that. There are several possible reasons why he might not, the most obvious being that he was not concerned about it. Even if he lost the image of the solar system, Swedenborg may have concluded that the planetary assignments he had made were still correct. In Swedenborg's lifetime there was little if any conflict between scientific ideas and the idea of life on the other planets of this solar system. Unless Swedenborg had been presented with evidence to the contrary, there would be no reason for him to question what he had concluded earlier, even if he could no longer see the spirits' picture of the solar system.

Another possibility is that Swedenborg may have thought the planetary assignments questionable but unimportant in what was essential to the message about life elsewhere. He is almost dismissive of the particular information about life on other planets even as he publishes it. In the closing pages of the seventh Latin volume of *Secrets of Heaven*, Swedenborg wrote a prelude to information he would publish in the next volume on life beyond this solar system, both enticing the reader to the next volume and, at the same time, almost scolding readers for being enticed by such things:

The majority in the Church at the present day have no real belief regarding the life after death, and scarcely any regarding heaven or regarding the Lord . . . . For this reason . . . [I have been able to] be present . . . with angels in heaven, and . . . to see the astonishing things there, and to describe them. This has happened to prevent people from saying from now on, Has anyone come to us from heaven and told us of its existence . . . ? But I realize that those who . . . have already refused to believe [in these things] . . . will also be wholly unreceptive . . . . For it is easier to make a raven white than it is to cause people to believe something once

they have at heart banished belief. But let those things which have been shown up to now regarding heaven and hell, and regarding life after death, be for the few in whom belief is present. As for everyone else however, in order that they may be led to some recognition of those things, I have been given consent to mention the kinds of details that gratify and attract the curious. Those that are about to be stated concern the planets in the universe. (SH 9439)

Swedenborg made a similar statement in *Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment* as he introduced information about the spiritual nature of nations:

Because it has been granted me to be in that [spiritual] light, and . . . to see the internal quality of men from one kingdom and another . . . it behooves me, *because it is of interest*, to make it known. (S 39, emphasis added)

Swedenborg wanted to help people find the Lord in the Word. He realized that one way to do that was to appeal to people's natural curiosity, and so he provided information to satisfy that curiosity and gave cues, here and there, not to take that information too seriously.

Watching and guiding this process, our Creator must have future readers in mind also. As the current community of readers struggles with a text that in some ways is in conflict with current information about the solar system, we might reflect on how that conflict is useful in terms of bringing people closer to the Lord.

#### **D. Humility and flexibility in our approach to sacred texts**

At the time and place of their writing, *Other Planets* and *Last Judgment* dealt immediately with a powerful reason people were using to abandon Christian faith. People came to see the cosmos itself as an indictment against what the Christian churches taught.

One of Swedenborg's tasks was to save faith in the age of enlightenment. To do that he would have to publish a faith that was not at variance with the cosmos. New Church theology accomplishes that and more. Not

only are populated planets and the lack of an earth-bound Last Judgment allowed in this new theology, they are requirements of it. Suddenly, instead of opposing Christian theology, the cosmos “declares the glory of God” (Ps 19.1). This accomplishment, the alignment of faith and reason in the eighteenth century, is revolutionary.

Astounding as this accomplishment is, if the new theology cannot transcend the limitations of time, then it cannot establish a long-standing Church. Now, some 250 years after the consummation of the Christian age, we are beginning to see whether or not it can.

The New Church teaching regarding the Last Judgment, or better put, the teaching on the nature of communal judgments—that they are spiritual events occurring when a church on a planet comes to an end because it no longer behaves in accord with the Two Great Commandments—is timeless and strikes many people when they hear it as reasonable and attractive, and more plausible than the old Christian belief in the destruction of the world.

The New Church teaching that human life exists in many places throughout the universe also is timeless, and many people who hear it find this idea also sensible and attractive.

However, Swedenborg’s reports that there are people on Mercury, Venus, the Moon, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, and also on the satellites of those planets, is space- and time-specific and strikes many people as unreasonable and even repellent. Remembering that Swedenborg included this sort of information to entice the curious, it would be ironic if it resulted today in pushing people away. The presence in the Writings of specific information about the plurality of worlds is an opportunity for reexamining our relationship with the New Christian Word.

### *1. Protection*

A fundamental flaw of human nature is arrogance—thinking of oneself as being more special and deserving than anyone else. Many of us want to think of ourselves as especially chosen by God, and in the extreme we want to be god. Without the Lord’s presence with us in revelation we would have no chance to overcome the powerful currents of our own

selfishness. However, the “possession” of a revelation from God can feed our arrogance since we may feel that the revelation gives us special status. If God, the Knower of the human heart, is the source of sacred texts, then it is reasonable to conclude that the texts would contain guards against fueling our arrogance and would lead us instead into humility.

One of the characteristics of sacred texts is that in many cases the most immediate and obvious interpretation of what the text means is fallacious. The perplexity this causes among a text’s community of readers can encourage a sense of humility about how well the community understands its revelation, and it can entice the community to look beyond the surface for deeper meaning.<sup>19</sup>

To make this point clear, imagine that science confirmed what Swedenborg wrote about the planets of this solar system—that Mercury, Venus, Mars, and the Moon have human life on them, and that Saturn and Jupiter are solid bodies and also have human life. Imagine the euphoric feeling of self-righteousness Swedenborgians would feel as we trumpet our proven-correct revelation. That situation would probably be damaging to the Lord’s plan for creation. Not only would it induce tremendous arrogance within our community, but it would also invalidate all those channels the Lord uses to connect with cultures all over the world.

To see how invalidation of revelation might feel, imagine that science demonstrated the factual nature of the creation story, or Noah’s flood, or worse yet, imagine that the second coming actually happened as expected by the Christian fundamentalists. If we were not destroyed by the event, we would probably abandon what we have been calling the New Church to join the “real” New Jerusalem.

## 2. *Reinterpreting the Old and New Testaments*

If planet-specific information in the Writings functions to place a check on our arrogance and prevent invalidation of revelation to other

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<sup>19</sup> In her analysis of biblical authority, Phyllis Bird points out that the early Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254) realized that the Bible’s purpose is in saving us rather than satisfying our curiosity about the world (49). For Origen, the difficulties in the literal sense were signs that we should search for the Bible’s higher purpose and meaning.

communities, it is just one more example of many in the Word that function similarly.

God, in the Old Testament, made a promise to Abraham and then repeated it again and again to Abraham's descendants: God would give them the land of Canaan and this land would overflow with food and drink, and would be peaceful. Instead of realizing this promise, Abraham's descendants never possessed the whole land, and the land was repeatedly under the threat of "sword, famine, and plague" (e.g. Jer. 21.9). Foreign nations took the descendants away into captivity. In this crisis they turned to their prophets and sacred texts, which gave them hope of a coming Messiah who would restore their lands and that they, in Zion, would lead all the people of the world. In the eyes of many Jews today, neither of these promises has been fulfilled.

Rather than living in bitterness at God's "failed" promises, many Jews have found it more fruitful to interpret these promises in less obvious ways. The last 3000 years of history demonstrate that God's revelation in the Old Testament is not true in the most obvious, literal sense. That same history also demonstrates that, in spite of the contradiction between expectations and reality, a people of faith can preserve and revere documents they receive as sacred, and that these documents affect their listeners powerfully. The Jewish texts have a timeless power that exceeds expectations. Would this have been true if Zion was as God said it would be?

And it can be argued that the Lord's promise to Abraham has been fulfilled. The Lord told Abraham:

Leave your country, your people, and your father's household  
and go to the land I will show you.  
I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. (Gen. 12.1–2)

Prior to Abram's call the world was polytheistic. Through Abraham, not just Canaan, but very nearly the entire world, has become monotheistic. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One!" (Deut. 6.4).

In the New Testament the Lord made promises to the Christian Church that in a literal sense also have not been realized. Jesus told his disciples that their generation would not pass before he would come again to judge



the world (Matt. 24.34, Mark 13.30, Luke 21.32). This expectation was so strong in the early Christian communities that no effort to record the Gospels took place until that generation had nearly entirely passed away. The final chapter of John contains a reinterpretation of Jesus' words that had given an expectation that John would see him come again. This reinterpretation was necessary because John had died (21.23). It is amazing to think that people who believed that they had actually shared meals with the Lord of creation would not immediately seek to record all they could about what Jesus did and what he was like. Why did they not do this? It was because they felt that the end of the world was near. There would be no need to preserve this information for future generations because there would be no future generations. But as the generation that walked with Christ died off, the early church faced its first major disappointment: the judgment they were seeking was not happening.

This disappointment resulted in important progress for that Church. The Gospels were written and the followers of Christ realized that the task of establishing a church, rather than simply spreading the good news, rested on their shoulders. With the Gospels came organized bodies to decide on a canon. The phenomenal growth of the Christian Church and its success in shaping much of world history over the next 2000 years resulted from the realization that the early expectations were incorrect and too limiting.

In each of these cases, communities of faith had at first accepted God's words in an immediate sense that turned out to be unreliable. In the case of the Jewish and Christian churches, these challenges resulted in reshaping and empowering the impact their revelations had on their lives.

Today, Swedenborgians are reexamining their sacred texts as changing conditions make wider the differences between expectations of the faith, and reasoned conclusions based on evidence. In no area are these differences more obvious than in dealing with extraterrestrial life.

### *3. Reinterpreting the Writings*

Reinterpretation of the Old and New Testaments is the foundation of New Church doctrine. As stated in Section III D, New Church theology is built up through linking the internal spirit of the Word, the internal sense,

to its external letter. By turning his readers' minds to the internal sense, Swedenborg removed obstacles to faith that had developed through overly-literal and self-referential interpretation of biblical text.

The Reverend Grant Odhner in his "Responding to the Lord's Word" invites New Church readers to apply to the Writings what Swedenborg teaches about acquiring a doctrine of genuine truth from the letter of the Word (2007, 232). Not all of the information presented in the Writings is of the same importance. Just as with the Bible, there are primary truths that illuminate all the rest. The Two Great Commandments are an example. The Word connects us with the Lord, and the Lord gave these Commandments. Whatever we take from the Word must be considered alongside these Commandments. Passages that speak harshly of a group of people need to be seen in the light of the commandment to love the neighbor. And information that has little or nothing to do with primary teachings, information such as the name of the planet that spirits come from, should, correspondingly, carry less weight.

Readers should be on guard especially for interpretations that empower self or one's group over others. The mistaken expectations in the Jewish and Christian churches regarding the way the Savior would return were shaped, consciously or not, by self-importance. Expectations in the New Church about possessing special information about the natural world can be linked to a desire for self-importance.

Increasing our contextual awareness of the Writings, setting "ideas in a larger framework and alongside each other" (Odhner 2007, 233), and building slowly a doctrine of genuine truth from the Writings, gives the community opportunities to develop its relationship with the text and become more supple in response to the text's authority and call.

In *Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment*, Swedenborg gave an example of what happens when people do not have a supple response to their doctrine:

The Dutch cling more closely than others to the principles of their religion. . . . If they are convinced that this or that is not in accord, still they do not say so, but turn their backs and remain unmoved. In this way, they remove themselves from an interior intuition of what is true, for they

*imprison* their rational on spiritual things under obedience. (S 49, emphasis added)

Similarly, Swedenborg reported that certain Jews in the other world “are unwilling to know that, in the Word, by ‘the land of Canaan’ is meant the Church, by ‘Jerusalem’ the Church as to doctrine, and hence by ‘Jews’ *all* those who will be of the Lord’s Church” (S 82, emphasis added). These Jews were so locked in to their thinking that they did not realize that they were in the other world and they were still expecting the Messiah to “march at their head, glittering with diadems, and lead them into the land of Canaan,” with Christians begging them to be admitted (S 82).

And some Catholic spirits, Swedenborg wrote, “strenuously insisted” on the idea that Peter was given “the Lord’s power over heaven and hell.” They could not accept any other meaning to that text because the teaching is a “fundamental of their religion.” They told Swedenborg that “there was not any doubt about it since it is clearly stated” (LJ 57).

Inflexible, spiritless text interpretation causes problems. And on the other extreme, developing doctrine apart from the foundation of the text also leads to difficulties. At the end of *Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment*, Swedenborg wrote about Quakers in the spiritual world whose “religiosity gained such complete possession of them that they believed themselves to be enlightened and sanctified beyond all others. Wherefore, indeed, they could not be withheld from their religiosity” (S 83). And some Moravians in the spiritual world had “an interior confirmation of their dogmas” (90), but that confirmation came from “visionary spirits who confirm in man all the things of his religiosity, and . . . [these spirits] enter more closely with those who . . . love their own religiosity and think much about it” (90). Responding too much to interior perception without engaging with the Word is an invitation for being overwhelmed by one’s own unenlightened ‘religiosity.’

The approach Swedenborg models for us is careful attention to the text along with open-mindedness to the internal sense of that text. Now that the Last Judgment has taken place, communication between heaven and the earth has been restored and so people “can be enlightened and

reformed . . . [and] can understand the Divine truth of the Word . . . [because] intervening obstacles have been removed” (S 12).

#### 4. *Developing Trust*

As readers of Swedenborg, we need to remain sensitive to several lines of evidence. The Old and New Testaments and the Writings bring us evidence of who the Lord is and what the Lord wants from and for us. Our own immediate experience is also evidence of what works and does not work in bringing happiness to us and to those around us.

Swedenborg assures us that the doctrine of the New Church that he is revealing is not from any angel but from the Lord alone and that the doctrine came to him while reading the Word (TC 779). We can trust Swedenborg in this statement, but we should also ponder it. What are the doctrines to which he is referring? What do we do with all those statements Swedenborg reports from “angels’ lips” (e.g. LJ 14)? We cannot trust the text simply because we are told to. We must find ways to connect the text to our experience and concerns, and learn to trust it as we discover how it helps us move toward the Lord.

We must refrain from asking ourselves or anyone else to believe things for which we or they have no evidence. Dismissing evidence or ignoring its power places obstacles along the path toward true faith, obstructing people’s ability to develop real trust. Instead, we should nurture a spirit of openness and engagement in our community, being patient with one another as we use all the tools the Creator has given us and struggle to find our way back to God.

#### **E. Questions for further study**

Organizers of the Last Judgment Conference asked presenters to develop a list of questions that invite further study. This study engages a question that can be approached from many angles. Here, it is approached in terms of faith and reason. This question is, What obstacles block people from living in faith, and can those obstacles be removed? The questions listed below deal with that central issue.

1. What is a New Church community? How does that community develop a trusting relationship with the New Church Word?
2. How can we present the faith of the New Church with minimal obstacles to belief? How can we present genuine doctrine to people who have not accepted Swedenborg?
3. How do the Writings address mistaken expectations in the Jewish and Christian Churches?
4. Are there mistaken expectations among New Church communities? If so, why do they arise and how can they be corrected?
5. How do genuine truths help us avoid turning “fallacies” into “falsities.” How do we find genuine truth in the Writings?
6. What is enlightenment in the New Christian age? How can people experience the reality of the Lord’s presence in their lives?
7. What does Swedenborg’s statement, “I have not received anything pertaining to the doctrines . . . from any angel, but from the Lord alone while reading the Word” (*TC* 779), mean?
8. How did Swedenborg acquire information for the revelation?
9. What were the criteria Swedenborg used to decide whether or not to publish information?
10. In what ways are the concerns and expectations of Swedenborgian readers the same and different in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries? How do we read the text today to address our concerns and questions?
11. Do the Writings have inherent flexibility or were the doctrines fixed when they left Swedenborg’s pen? If there is flexibility, how do doctrines in the Writings evolve from book to book and over time?
12. How is the conflict between the text and the current view of the solar system useful in terms of bringing people closer to the Lord?

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this study we have considered the relationship between two doctrinal topics. The two topics are the nature of the Last Judgment and the idea that the universe supports human life on many planets. The questions

addressed by this study were: why does New Church revelation address Christian expectations about the Last Judgment and the possibility of life elsewhere in the physical universe; why did mistaken expectations arise in these two areas; are there mistaken expectations among those who accept Swedenborg's works as divinely inspired; and how can a community develop trust in the New Church Word?

The issue central to the entire paper is the way that faith can be, ironically, weakened by a need many people feel to strengthen their faith by insistence that natural reality comply with their particular and inflexible understanding of spiritual reality. This need has led to the development of and insistence upon several false ideas. One example is the idea that the Lord will come onto the earth and judge it, destroying it in its present form and establishing in its place heaven-on-earth. Another example is the idea that the entire universe is centered on the earth, the only terrestrial region of the universe, and that all human beings in the universe are descended from Adam.

The churches' insistence on these two ideas, the Last Judgment and the singularity of the earth, in eighteenth-century Europe led many to question or abandon faith. Swedenborg addressed these two points in his theological works, replacing these church teachings with a new vision of why the Lord created the universe and how the Lord saves us. The Writings address pluralism and the Last Judgment in order to restore faith in the Lord and the Word.

The revelation of the Word's internal sense is the fundamental, constructive element of New Church theology. Applied to the Last Judgment, the internal sense of the Word showed that the Judgment was not the cosmological event that the churches were expecting. The Judgment would not destroy any part of the natural world.

In addition to using the internal sense of the Word, Swedenborg relied also on the eighteenth-century view of the cosmos, complete with peopled planets, to argue the impossibility of a judgment actually on the earth. Incorporation of the plurality-of-worlds idea was useful in terms of helping people understand the Last Judgment.

However, along with his writing that human life exists on other planets, Swedenborg named planets of this solar system that are peopled, and even described the nature of life on those planets. These descriptions

are wholly unsupported by contemporary, scientific evidence. This inconsistency between information present in revelation and information available through scientific investigation has recreated the conflict between faith and reason concerning the nature of the solar system. This conflict, if engaged inappropriately, can once again erect obstacles between people and faith.

The method Swedenborg used to assign spirits to particular planets depended entirely on a “mental picture” he saw in the spiritual world. There are no reports of that mental image appearing after 1757, and so it is possible that the image was one of many illusions that existed in the spiritual world prior to the Judgment.

When we understand the presence of the pluralism topic in the Writings as a means to defeating a false and obstructive idea in the eighteenth-century Christian church, we should be on guard not to use that information to create another false and obstructive idea in a twenty-first-century, new Christian church. Swedenborg liberated people’s thinking from the confines of the natural world by revealing the internal sense of scripture. It is this lifting up from literal interpretation that is needed now.

We make a mistake when we go to the Word for information about the natural world. Using the Word to understand natural rather than spiritual reality is what led many in the Jewish Church to see their occupation and control of a particular geographical landscape as a Divine right. It also caused them to expect a Messiah who would help them capture and control that land, giving them a special Divinely-sanctioned place at the center of all the people of the earth. Similarly, many Christians have interpreted the Word in natural terms, expecting natural events in the world to occur as described in that book. Expecting sacred text to be reliable in the natural sense is not itself a mistake, but often the expectation goes beyond innocent trust in the Word. Often the expectations take enormous proportions that, in the end, serve both to confirm the believers’ sense of self-importance and deny the validity of any other group’s connection to their Creator. Too often, natural interpretation of sacred text evolves to justify and strengthen love of self and of the world. In addition to damaging the spiritual lives of those who take their beliefs to these natural extremes, the focusing on natural interpretation of revelation while simultaneously ignoring physical evidence creates obstacles to faith.

A temptation we all face is the lust for power, and there is nothing more powerful than having special access to God. Intentionally or not, churches have used their scriptures to validate their own power over others. The revelation for the New Church could be manipulated similarly. If the information about specific planets in this solar system turned out to be true in a literal sense, then this would invalidate all those other channels the Lord uses to connect with cultures all over the world. It is a blessing that the physical reality of this solar system is substantially different from what Swedenborg described.

The Word in all its forms and senses is central to fulfilling the Lord's purpose in creation—filling the heavens. New Church writers have begun the task of exploring the landscape within the Writings. Not everything said in the Writings is of equal importance in fulfilling the Lord's purpose. By seeking and applying the doctrine of genuine truth, we can begin to understand the terrain and map those landmarks that help us find our way. Without attending to those landmarks, we could repeat the mistakes of the past by seeking natural confirmation of our faith, unwittingly expecting our sacred texts to elevate ourselves above all others in creation.

At one level the promises in the Old and New Testaments that the descendents of Abraham would occupy the land of Canaan and that the Lord would return before that generation died were not true. But in another way, those promises were fulfilled. Throughout the world, monotheism has replaced polytheism. And the resurrection the Lord promised is better than expected—it happens immediately after death and places us in a world of greater possibilities than this one. In both cases, what the Lord promised is much fuller and more generous than people at first realized. The same can be true with promises given to the New Church. □

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