

When I have blotted you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. All the bright lights in the heavens I will make dark over you, and I will put darkness over your land. (Ezekiel 32: 7, 8)

This order of devastation appears regularly in the Bible, and has come to be associated with all kinds of end-of-times outpourings in recent years. And yet looked at in its deeper sense, it contains an irony that even those who know that it points to the end of a certain phase of spiritual evolution, fail to recognize the modernity of this deeper sense. Writing in the 18th century, Swedenborg explains this statement as follows:

This refers to Pharaoh and the Egyptians who are used in the Word to mean the sensory and the factual. The meaning here is that they will have blotted out love and faith by means of sensory evidence and factual knowledge. (*Arcana Coelestia* 31)

“Sensory evidence and factual knowledge” is unambiguous, and today we would read this as a reference to science. Given the constant reference to Egypt throughout the Old Testament, and given this explanation, it is strange to find virtually no references to this in the usual exegeses, and therefore to miss the relevance of this to modern times. This is partly because we tend to think of science as something relatively new, and so impervious to comment from a Bible that is not associated with such

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criticism in the popular mind, when in fact it is the word “science” itself that is new and not the form of understanding that it represents.

Science was originally called natural philosophy, and this is a better definition since it carries its history along with it, and can be more readily translated as the pursuit and the desire to discover what can be known by our own lights and understanding. After all, is this not what science actually means? As someone passionately interested in the nature of reality, it is hardly surprising that for most of his life Swedenborg was engaged in its investigation from what we would call this scientific perspective, but at a time when science was historically in its spring.

This is an apt metaphor, since given its successes, these in turn became advertisements that drew the intellect towards itself, much as any light will draw a crowd of moths. There is nothing as compelling or as seductive as success, and everybody wanted a piece of it. Lines of enquiry that may formerly have pursued the perennial philosophy (the relations of the temporal with the eternal) suddenly clamored for a more modest investigation, the relations of the temporal elements among themselves. It is this that became science. What was knowable, as a philosophical investigation, came to be regarded as that which could be incorporated in a purely rational system, with lip service paid to anything concerning matters eternal.

But even though it was the springtime of science, for Swedenborg who had already gone as far as he could with it, it represented a range of concerns that did not possess the conceptual structures that would allow him to continue his own work, which was always fired by the perennial philosophy. So while it was a spring time for rational thought generally, for him it was already in its winter. But as any winter carries within its meaning the end of the old world and the beginning of something new, so Swedenborg realized that he needed to free himself of his scientific concerns, having recognized their limitations, and so began an entirely different kind of journey, one that required a sloughing of the old skin of thought as a preparation for the transition to the perennial philosophy, and which concluded with an exegesis of the Bible so vast in its implications that we are barely scratching the surface of understanding it.

This in itself is telling. Most people are more or less familiar with the opening chapter of Genesis; yet on reading Swedenborg on its meaning,

one comes to realize how familiarity is not equivalent to understanding. I will take it as read that the deeper meaning is one with which Swedenborg readers are familiar. The detail of his exegesis is exquisite while the development of a continuous sense is unparalleled. Yet even here, Swedenborg states how little of its meaning he has actually revealed:

Yet so many are the arcana that several volumes would not be sufficient to explain them all. Here only a very few have been stated, such as may serve to confirm that the subject here is regeneration and that this starts with the external man and moves on to the internal. (AC 64)

This last line is also significant, for it implies something about the kind of movement, or shift, or change that must occur in the mind whereby understanding itself must be acted on if this inner meaning is to make any kind of sense—indeed, is to have an impact in our lives. It should be realized, therefore, that the emphasis given to “Egypt” as representative of science is a major theme in the Bible, as symbolic of external man concerned with his own state, and therefore that it has a great deal to say about modern times which are dominated by science.

Set against this is the perennial philosophy whose concerns are of a different nature entirely, but which nonetheless perceives science as possessed of a vital function in the scheme of things. Here the concern is merely to note this duality of thought present in us, and not to consider the finer points of regeneration. Swedenborg’s own life and experience testifies to a certain order of operation that exists between them. In fact, their relation is somewhat paradoxical, and reminiscent of the quantum state; the more one is concerned with the nature of reality on the material level alone, the less one is likely to know anything about the spiritual state. The reverse of this is somewhat different, for it begins where the other leaves off, as though it were a kind of stepping stone towards the spiritual. This is clearly simplistic, but stated in these terms to indicate that spiritual knowledge begins with material concerns, and does not exclude them. The reality of it is this—given their different orders of concern, they exist in a state of antipathy in terms of effect. Man cannot serve God and Mammon. Nonetheless, we must begin in the external. We begin with what we can know from ourselves. The move to know in a different way requires that

we perceive the limits of such learning. This is not an easy process, and is usually met with great resistance, often culminating in denials, that there is no more to the nature of reality than that which reason is able to present. Yet in spite of such protestations, Egypt constantly represents that limit as a starting point, which is why it was necessary for the Israelites to leave it, and why it was necessary for Jesus Christ to begin his life there in order to be called out of it. Everything in the Bible is structured around this process of movement from the external position to the internal one, while at the same time emphasizing the necessity of such sensory knowledge as a first step.

It may not appear to be such a radical perception, yet what is reintroduced with Swedenborg is not the sense of opposites in which the pursuit of one curtails the other, but a real sense of a relationship. Considering that religion in the popular mind is, generally speaking, regarded as an “otherworldly” concern, Swedenborg’s position is one in which there is always a constant reference to our ordinary, material lives. Indeed, the constant references throughout the Bible to feet, hair, outer garments and so forth is a concern with finding the true manner in which the heavens and the earth reflect each other (which is the concern of the perennial philosophy) and is built into the Lord’s prayer as a fundamental statement of intent: “Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth.”

Yet such thinking and such ideas more or less fall on deaf ears in the modern world. We are now present in a world that is dominated by this natural philosophy, and which is at the same time in its wintertime. It is exactly the kind of time that is referred to in the quotation from Ezekiel at the beginning. What are the characteristics of a form of thought in its winter? Firstly, it becomes brittle; secondly, it becomes complacent in the sense that its power base is firmly established. Having become so, it is just one small step away from becoming dogma. Is this what science has become?

The objections to religion in the past were concerned with its alliance to secular powers serving secular interests. In this way religion corrupted itself in that it lost sight of its own purpose and motivation, having bent them to the service of political advantage. It is in this way that religion became dogmatic and was enforced. In our own times, while the shape of dogma is different, exactly the same relationship exists between science

and the same secular authority. While the springtime of science helped greatly in freeing thought from the old dogmas, in its wintertime it has simply become a dogma in its own right. It is no accident that the Royal Society runs an exchange program in which scientists spend time with politicians in their working environment to learn something about the workings of government and vice versa. The following is a statement of intent found on their web-site:

We think it important to increase the capability of scientists in general to engage with and influence policy makers. Our successful MP-Scientist Pairing Scheme and its European equivalent will therefore be developed, as will other activities including internships in government departments and training workshops. Influencing policy is equally important in developing countries, and we will work with our sister academies in those countries to help them inform scientific developments.

200 MPs and scientists have taken part in the MP-Scientist Pairing Scheme since its inception in 2001. ([www.royalsoc.ac.uk/page.asp?id=1142](http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/page.asp?id=1142))

This will, of course, be regarded as perfectly reasonable behavior, since it is these two bodies, science and government, which largely shape the world we are in. But no doubt the same argument could have been put to the church and state in the previous incarnation of dogma. It is these dogmatic patterns representing such alliances, and serving specific interests, that have led to the creeping introduction of the 'big brother' syndrome in which, for instance, the privatization of traffic law has been transformed into a profit-making venture (since "we have the technology . . ." et cetera) under the guise of reasonability, while the language of statistics (a product of scientific practice) is constantly invoked as argument for policy. In other words, it is a natural alliance for no better reason than this: we have got used to it, and we can do it.

By and large, the arguments in favor of such alliances outweigh the arguments against for obvious reasons, but this is to miss the point. Bear in mind that the concerns here are not about science but dogma, and how a form of thought transmutes into such a shape, and what the implications are for the larger picture which includes the spiritual dimension. Bear in

mind also that we have been raised and nurtured under the blanket of such an alliance and have got used to it. Indeed, it may seem ridiculous to question this, such have been the results and the benefits that can be easily pointed out.

However, it is necessary to take a philosophical line here, for it is the business of philosophy to bring to task the obvious, the taken-for-granted, and indeed those things that seem to be the most real in our lives and run the risk of ridicule. In the case of dogma, this is far more significant because dogma encourages us to go to sleep on a bed of assumptions that in themselves are in the exclusive service of presenting a narrow bandwidth of experience. That this has already happened can be easily demonstrated if we consider how the very words we use have changed their meanings over time as dogma has set in. Take the word “scepticism” as an example. At one time, when thought itself was less categorized and open, a sceptic was one who would not fall to one side or another in debate, for this then ran the risk of allowing thought to ossify into dogma. However, the modern version is quite different; it belongs to a culture already steeped in dogmatism and filters meaning through the sieve of rational thought—a sceptic is one who falls neither to one side or another until there is evidence to support such a move, the sensory evidence and factual knowledge that Swedenborg referred to above. Notice how these two definitions of scepticism may look the same outwardly, but while the former is a permanent state that prevents the onset of dogma, the latter is a temporary condition in its service, since its position is one of looking for the very security in thought that science appears to provide, but which is philosophically unobtainable in this form. It expresses a level of satisfaction which is unsatisfactory to the true sceptic. Yet given the status of such thought in our times, the older form of scepticism is seen as dithering, not able to make decisions etc., as though avoiding dogmatism were a fault.

Yet there is always something more to reality, which cannot be contained within the strictures of a particular compartment of thought, but which that compartment refuses to recognize or acknowledge, once it has attained to the heights of seeming authority and become dogmatic.

But there is yet one final sign of dogma. The comments just made can be easily dismissed as conspiracy theory, and rightly so. The point is that we do not feel the onset of dogma, nor is it the aim of any form of thought

to attain to such a position. Yet in spite of itself, it cannot help but to revert into such a state. As already stated, science was a key to freeing us from one form of dogmatic tyranny, yet somehow it seems to have managed to become the very thing it was intended to replace. It is less open to criticism than it used to be, and rails against any alternative manner of discernment. At the same time that it argues for openness, for exploration and dialogue, it does so by setting the parameters of what that dialogue should be, and the method that should be adopted for investigation. Consequently, one finds that serious criticism tends to be disregarded or attempts are made to make it appear foolish. Paul Feyerabend was one such critic, yet in *A Companion To The Philosophy Of Science*, the editor caricatures his thinking, and then says: "he told us these things in Switzerland and in California, happily commuting between the two in the ubiquitous product of science—the airplane."<sup>1</sup>

In dogmatic times, this then is the argument aimed against critics—do not bite the hand that feeds you. Perhaps philosophers can blame themselves for this, since by adopting the scientific methods of procedure themselves, they have lost their independence and become virtual ambassadors of science. Indeed, we can find very many modern thinkers who take this hard line view. Instead of questioning science from a philosophical position, they have become their agents and foot soldiers. Daniel Dennett comes to mind, who is so enamored by Darwinian theory that he actually called it a universal acid that eats everything in its path. This is not how a philosopher should think, but it is, however, the way that most have gone. In other words, it is the typical form of dogmatic thought.

How then does dogmatism arise? No system of thought aims at it, nor desires it. But when it is allied to power, it suddenly dons a cloak of authority and a social status. Both of these are public accolades that are thrust upon it, and are not part of its own nature. Nonetheless, they have their effect. From such a position, even the most open-minded thinkers cannot but help to consider that maybe the partial view of reality their thinking represents actually contains principles that are capable of an

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Newton-Smith, Editor. *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 2, in the Introduction.

exclusive and complete view. Not surprising, therefore, that the big questions of science are now concerned with large schemes of thought, theories of everything, grand unified theories etc. Needless to say, there is not a hint of anything spiritual about them. It is interesting to note that in a recent survey in which leading scientists were asked about their expectations, the words most common in their responses were “complete” and “entire.” It is a kind of intellectual megalomania passed off as rational thought, attesting to the nature of the ego rather than the nature of reality. The proposal here is that these are the signs of a system of thought that is in its wintertime.

But of course, the story does not end there. When a system of thought lives in an atmosphere of its own exclusivity, it does so by being excluding—of all things spiritual that pertain to matters of faith. The natural antipathy mentioned earlier between the natural and spiritual levels of experience are stretched to breaking point when a system of thought becomes dogmatic. In a recent symposium held in America, attended by leading scientists, and organized by the Science Network, the subject was “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival.” Needless to say, this was not a debate, but a discussion to consider how religion could be done away with once and for all. Given that eighty-five percent of scientists were atheists, the question raised was why it wasn’t 100 percent. Much of the discussion need not be reprinted since it can be easily surmised, how religion had been a bad thing in the past, the evils of fundamentalism, and so on. However, they failed to recognize that their objections had a twofold root that had nothing at all to do with real issues. The first was that science holds within itself the memory of its own conception, that it had been designed to free thought from the tyranny of dogmatism. It retains this memory as a trace element in all its statements in that nothing will be allowed into its own body of knowledge that may be tainted with religion. Even in winter, science remembers its own spring. The problem is that with technology providing new products at an increasing pace, the very presence of these, symbolized by the “ubiquitous airplane,” creates the illusion that it is still in its infancy. Secondly, its concern with religion seems to centre on the fact that for all the experiments that have ever been performed, not a single shred of evidence supports a view that there is a God, however it might be described. This in itself is foolhardy thinking. It



is unlikely that a Geiger counter designed to detect radioactivity will suddenly unearth lead or gold or any other substance. Science is designed from the outset with the exclusion of any spiritual content. How then can it ever conclude something different from what it already assumes and which it builds into its own assumptions before it takes a single measurement? Any statements along these lines can therefore be ignored as serious criticism. But having removed such arguments, what is left?

Given that the word "science" is derived from natural philosophy, this kinship itself is buried in the etymological form of science which reveals its exclusive allegiance to the rational. To "know" something (in the Latin "scire" sense) is to know facts, or know "about"; to know in the "cognoscere" sense is entirely different and applies to knowing people on an intuitive or emotive level. Indeed, the word "conscience" pertains to the latter sense of knowing, which is significant in understanding Swedenborg's principles of thought and action which underline his exegesis. Yet it is clearly not part of the way of understanding represented by science. Natural philosophy, as already stated, pertains to wisdom that can be derived by our reason. The notion of the "rational" also has interesting roots, being derived from "ratio" whose meaning can be taken as an expression of relations from which the Greek philosophers derived the term "Aritmos." However, it is clearly evident (as with the meaning of scepticism) that ratio is no longer a comparative term expressing the relations of the infinite with the temporal, and Aritmos no longer expresses the notion of an ethical universe as a result of that relationship. Both words have been picked clean of their original denotations and then bent to an entirely different service. Having "purified" the language, reality inverts to a significant extent. While it was once the case that experience shaped and informed the language, now it is language that is deemed to be real alone. Since the "said" has been acted on to exclude the spiritual from the common vernacular, the extreme form of rationalism (in its dogmatic, wintertime coat) denies any reality to matters spiritual since its language pertains to nothing that can be "seen" or "touched" or experienced in a way that will give words a significant meaning. And of course, what is "significant" is what can be proved. Spirituality is murdered by the manipulation of semantics, for the same reasons that Cain killed Abel. That makes that story an ironic prophecy for modern times. In scientific lan-

guage, this is not always evident, but as natural philosophy that must admit to its rational bias, we are presented with a picture that suits the rational way of seeing alone, and not the reality it sees.

When falsity reigns, illusion occurs. If it is held up as some kind of truth, the terms of reference defining it are put in place first so that they are not visible in the usual way. These only ever issue in the form of ironies that are not always apparent. It may seem as though the lack of visibility seems to favor the rational, but its very invisibility actually helps to strengthen quite the opposite position. This exposition may seem a little circuitous, but it may help to some extent in providing a crude pointer to a way of reconciling the spiritual/rational rift we are laboring under.

The first Commandment states that there is only one God. It was written in a form that was understandable for a rule-driven people, and contains behind this prescriptive sense a far more significant meaning than that sense is able to convey. It is this: God is One. But even this is hardly comprehensible in the modern vernacular in which the equivalent is loosely contained in ideas of holism and “everything is connected.” While these are less than clear in their meanings, one can almost sense the derivation from “there is only one God” through “God is One.” What is entailed by such a unity, and the kind of framework necessary to give it greater significance, will be the subject in a moment, but it is enough for the time being to note that something of this spirit is transferred over to the motivations in science, though purified of any connection with a spiritual sense. Whether spiritual or physical, the motivation in both is connected to a sense of oneness. However, in the physical realm that is driven by purely rational concerns, the notion of oneness is reconfigured in a way that makes it seem like a legitimate and purely scientific area of concern. Till recently, theories of everything in which all of reality would finally be encapsulated in a single equation, were proposed in books and journals with great confidence. Confidence, whether justifiable or not, can be a great spur in making things public and so veneer them with a thin coat of realism, and these theories, whether the general public understood them or not, were sold on the idea of T-shirts being emblazoned with the terms of a final theory in a very short space of time. For instance, *New Scientist* had no qualms in emblazoning a front cover of the magazine with this

headline: "REALITY'S TRUE NATURE—An End To 300 Years Of Delusion." The article addresses the terms of a final theory, but closes with the usual sideswipe against religion:

As Darwin's principle of the survival of the fittest eliminated the need for the hand of God to guide evolution, so the environmental interpretation of the anthropic principle eliminates the necessity for a guardian angel to fine-tune the laws of nature.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, after many years of predicting the imminence of such a theory, Stephen Hawking finally stated that such a theory would always be out of reach since it would have to participate in the reality it described. This would alter it so that it could not be called a theory of everything. This statement, however, was not to be found on front covers, or written about widely, but was tucked away in the back columns of the same journal.

But even here, there is irony. What Stephen Hawking is saying is something like this, that to know something is to act on that which is known. But to act on something is to alter it; to change something through the act of knowing it is to not-know it, paradoxically. This may sound a little "Rumsfeldish," but it is a statement that was made in *The Sophist* by Plato about 2500 years ago, and appears in different guises in most esoteric and eastern philosophies. It seems that science is playing catchup. The tragedy is that this is really quite a simple, basic philosophical tenet that became overlooked in the usual course of the practice of science. But it is not only this that has led to the excessive claims of science. It has also forgotten that it can only ever be a partial view of reality. This also is well-known philosophically. The following statement appears in the opening pages of *Process and Reality* by Alfred North Whitehead:

In its use of this method [of generalization] natural science has shown a curious mixture of rationalism and irrationalism. Its prevalent tone of thought has been ardently rationalistic within its own borders, and dog-

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<sup>2</sup> Leonard Susskind, "A universe like no other," *New Scientist*. 2419 (Nov. 1, 2003): 41.

matically irrational beyond those borders. In practice, such an attitude tends to become a dogmatic denial that there are any factors in the world not fully expressible in terms of its own primary notions of further generalization. Such a denial is the self-denial of thought.<sup>3</sup>

Whitehead is probably one of the last of that breed of philosophers that one could truly call a polymath, having written extensively on a wide range of subjects, especially science and mathematics. Yet in his philosophical work he retains the classical sense of scepticism which developed fully in his process philosophy. It is interesting to note the academic genealogy of his thought which can be plotted back through Bergson and others to concerns that are strikingly similar to those of Swedenborg. One need only consider the emphasis both gave to the notions of novelty and variety as significant concerns, concerns which modern thought pushes to one side in favor of a search for the sameness of things expressible in immutable laws. Indeed, one can sense this similarity of thought in just this one line from Whitehead:

The things which are temporal arise by their participation in the things which are eternal.<sup>4</sup>

For many readers, these may seem to be dry, academic concerns. Be that as it may, they concern the poor state of spirituality in the modern world and the impact this has had in the growth of fundamentalism as a growing force. To repeat the earlier question, how is it possible that such a dogmatic position has been reached yet again?

Clearly, natural philosophy has overextended its claims of completeness, and done a great disservice to thought by attempting to stake sole rights. This has only been possible because philosophy itself, the guardian of free thought, has been demoted, its subject matter reduced to limited concerns, and couched in language that only very few can understand. These days, philosophy appears on university courses united to other

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. Edited by David Ray Griffin & Donald W. Sherburne. (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

subjects; PPE (philosophy, politics, and economics) is a case in point. In such a context, it is hardly likely that the concerns of such a triumvirate will have any but a secular content. Simply by removing the perennial philosophy, it then becomes possible to make any number of outlandish claims in the name of science and pass them off as possessed with a warrant of realism. Not only that, but its very exclusivity has spawned a language of finality that cloaks its own defeatism with a garnish of rational limitation as though it were a virtue. At the same symposium mentioned above, it was clear that any notion of the eternal was anathema. One of the speakers stated the following after she suggested highlighting the fact that our atoms came from stardust and would return to the cosmos—as mass or energy—after we die.

We should teach people to take comfort from that thought. We can find comfort in knowing that everyone who has ever lived on the Earth will some day adorn the heavens.<sup>5</sup>

Notice how the phrase “take comfort” is used twice in so short a space. The previous *New Scientist* quotation is preceded by a similar thought:

If this view of nature is correct then there is *cold comfort* for those who look to the anthropic principle for a deeper meaning to their own existence.

A previous article in the same journal, concerned yet again with a final theory (“YOU ARE MADE OF SPACETIME. Our ultimate Origins Revealed”), also concluded with the same defeatism:

Tangled up as we are, we could at least *take comfort* in knowing at last that we truly are at one with the universe.<sup>6</sup>

This last quotation is probably the most telling, for clearly we are to resign ourselves to a pastiche of oneness that is originally drawn from a spiritual

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Brooks & Helen Phillips, “In place of God,” *New Scientist* 2578 (Nov. 18, 2006): 8–11. This report is based on talks given at a symposium (Salk Institute for Biological Studies) organised by the Science Network, and more information about it is available at [www.tsntv.org](http://www.tsntv.org).

<sup>6</sup> Davide Castelvecchi, “Out of the void,” *New Scientist* 2564 (August 12, 2006).

tradition in which its implications are far more epic, and for this we are exhorted to comfort ourselves.

This would be a good point at which to be reminded of the opening biblical reference and Swedenborg's explanation. Egypt represents what we learn by our own earthly powers. At no point is it suggested that this is an evil thing. Quite the contrary. What is becoming unique to Swedenborg's exegesis is the constant reference to the necessity of factual knowledge:

Factual knowledge is what those who are being regenerated must learn first, for that knowledge is the groundwork for things that compose the understanding, and the understanding is what receives the truth of faith, and the truth of faith what receives the good of charity. From this it may be seen that factual knowledge constitutes the first level to be laid down when a person is being regenerated. (AC 6750)

It should be stressed that what is referred to as factual knowledge had more to do with the way the natural world reflected the spiritual world. However, with the passing of time, this link became lost to posterity as what became more important was the manner in which the natural world reflected man's intention alone. Consequently 'Egypt' had both good and bad connotations. The corrupt form of knowledge is therefore that which attempts to gain some kind of access to spirituality through the use of factual knowledge alone, or imagining that totality was somehow available to purely rational inspection without reference to any kind of propensity within us other than our ability to rationalize. What is surprising, indeed shocking, is that while this is precisely what is going on at this time in the twenty first century, it is yet to be recognized that this kind of thinking is a major theme in the Bible. Consider the following passage from Ezekiel 32: 2,13

You have come forth in the rivers, and have troubled the waters with your feet and trampled their rivers. I will destroy all its beasts from over many waters and the foot of man will not trouble them any longer, nor will the hoofs of beasts.

Swedenborg explains this passage as follows:

This refers to Egypt, which meant forms of knowledge. Thus by 'feet and hoofs which trouble the rivers and water' are meant facts gained from sensory and from natural things, on the basis of which people reason about the arcana of faith and do not believe anything until they grasp it by this method. This amounts to not believing at all, for the more such people go on reasoning, the less believing they are. (AC 2162)

The New Testament echoes all these themes that are found in the Old Testament, and "the doubting Thomas" episode is a summation of this theme concerning the limits of what the senses can provide. It is not a testament exhorting the virtues of blind faith, but rather that faith cannot be found through this methodology. Indeed, if it were it would not be faith. Richard Dawkins has written his own exegesis of the episode in the Old Testament where Lot offers his daughters to the men of Sodom rather than allow them to defile the angels in his house. Dawkins is unable to see the inner sense, that spiritual knowledge cannot be discovered through factual methodology, so that his thoughts on the subject reflect the paucity of his own thought, and not the meaning of the text. However, the irony stands out. Not to understand this meaning is to perceive only that which is on the surface and take this to be all meaning. The denial of thought mentioned by Whitehead is reflected here as a denial to meaning, in which even the Bible is expected to be confined to this kind of literalism. No doubt, Dawkins may imagine that the angels in Lot's care came out of the house and gouged out the eyes of the men.

But perhaps this is a useful springboard from which to explore something of the deeper meaning of oneness than is presented by rational thought alone, and which consequently sheds an entirely different light on the story of Lot, indeed on all the stories of the Bible. But it would be foolhardy to ask "What is Oneness" as though the application of reason alone will suffice in procuring an answer. However, an indication of its meaning as it has been found in religious traditions is a reasonable indicator of its scope and area of concern.

In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* there is a story about a frog who lives in a well, and who had lived there his whole life. One day, he is told by a visitor that there was a place like his well that was much bigger. A brief conversation follows in which the frog tries to ascertain the size of this expanse of water, so he is taken to the ocean. On seeing it, the frog's head explodes.

We may take this as an amusing little story, yet it is in its own right equivalent to a parable, and possessed with a deeper meaning. The word "expanse" has a derivation from the word "brih" in Hindu religion and philosophy (the terms are not separate as in our culture) from which the word "Brahman" is derived. In fact, the use of the word "firmament" in some translations of the bible is equivalent to the word "expanse" which is more generally used. In its literal signification, this word is often taken to mean something sky-like, yet in so many ways, it has more in common with Brahman than with such literalism. Verse six of the opening of Genesis refers to an expanse acting as that which separates what is usually taken to be clouds and ground water. Yet because these words are inspired by God, such literalism is restrictive. Given that everything in the Bible is concerned with regeneration, this is reflected in the very specific use of words, and this word "expanse" is no exception. Swedenborg explains the deeper meaning of this passage:

After the Spirit of God, which is the Lord's mercy, has brought out into the daylight cognitions of truth and good, and has shed the light of dawn to reveal that the Lord does exist, and that He is good itself and truth itself, and that no good or truth exists except from the Lord, a distinction is at that point made between the internal man and the external man, and so between cognitions which reside with the internal man and *the facts which belong to the external man*. The internal man is called "an expanse," and the cognitions residing with the internal man are called "the waters above the expanse," while the facts belonging to the external man are called "the waters below the expanse." (AC 24; emphasis added)

This is a subtle distinction often too easily overlooked. Both sides of the expanse concern a direction from which information is derived. The word "information" is too narrow to carry the meaning implied, and is



perhaps better served in the hyphenated form “in-formation.” That which is received in either direction (from below or above) both forms and informs the recipient. This is what is meant by influx. Furthermore, far from being simply a view of humanity as a composite of internal and external parts, there is the implication that there must exist a midpoint within us, the interior person, acting as intermediary, tailoring the influx to suit the requirements of the particular individual. This is not an easy idea to explain because our language, and consequently the perception of ourselves, is largely structured by a subject/object form suited to the objective stance of rationalism. However, buried within the heart of the notion “God is One” is an apparent duality which is beyond the reach or understanding of a language structured by the subject/object dichotomy. In Swedenborg, the apparent distinction is between Divine Love and Divine Wisdom. Yet given that “Brahman” also contains the same notion of expanse, it also has an apparent duality akin to Swedenborg’s, and is called Atman-Brahman. It is generally translated these days as “soul” yet it means a great deal more than this. It infers two selves that mirror each other, the microcosm/macrocosm reflection that Swedenborg refers to as the little heaven that is a reflection of the whole or the Grand Man. It is the coming together of these two selves, the self and the Self, that is contained in the Lord’s Prayer as “Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth,” mediated by the Expanse.

Key to understanding this is the necessity of mediation, for without that the individual composite, that is, each individual, would receive more in-formation than they could handle. Metaphorically speaking, it would be like plugging a small lamp into the national grid—the frog’s head explodes! Unlike the light bulb, however, the amount of metaphorical electricity received is determined entirely on the direction of interests of the receiver. In each direction, there comes a sense of “something more,” a sense of incompleteness and lack. It is no coincidence that this lack is inscribed in our very nature as both hunger and desire, for it is these, not the rational partner, that is the true source of our inbuilt drives. It is these that are referred to by the use of the word “affections” used in numerous ways by Swedenborg, and it is these that are at the heart of all religions, as can be seen from this short passage taken from the *Upanishads*:

You are what your deep, driving desire is.  
As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is,  
so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny.

It is a basic prerequisite in understanding Swedenborg's exegesis to note the emphasis given throughout his writings to the nature of conscience as that which represents the distinction between the Very Ancient Church and the Ancient Church. In the former, actions and thoughts were so immediately linked that desires and thoughts would express themselves in immediate actions. With the corruption of desire, there was no way to impede its influence since the desire would immediately dictate the form of thinking in service to it. What is noticeable in terms of conscience is this, that actions are now mediated by consideration, so that where will had dominance in the Very Ancient Church, this is now supplanted by understanding. Indeed, the notion of supplanting is a constantly recurring theme, built into the name of Jacob himself as representing the first stage in the regenerative process, which itself is rooted in the external, and which Swedenborg calls the Divine Natural. (Note again the necessity of the physical world as a first step in approaching spiritual understanding.) But it is crucial to recognize something of this new relationship between the understanding and the will, between what we think and what we feel. This distinction itself relates to the apparent dual forms of affections and cognitions, and explains the many references appearing throughout the Bible to this state. If this is not understood, and generally speaking it does not appear to be, these couplings are more often than not taken to be a kind of literary emphasis, and the subtlety of this distinction lost. Yet just as desire is so fundamental a notion in Eastern traditions of philosophy, Swedenborg reveals the same emphasis in the Bible:

When therefore the Lord foresaw that mankind would perish eternally . . . he made provision for the will part to be separated from the understanding part, and for man to be formed, not as he had been formed previously by a will for good, but by having charity conferred on him through the understanding of truth, such charity looking very much like the will for good. (AC 640)

This new mind is fundamentally different from the old, and to be brief, given the emphasis on understanding, it would receive whatever was necessary to bring about the regenerative state, while all the time respecting the absolute necessity that such regeneration was willed by the individual freely. In the Upanishads, there is a particular passage made famous by T.S. Eliot entitled "What The Thunder Said" in which the creator speaks one word which is heard differently by three classes of people. Yet when they repeat them back to him, they each receive the same reply: "you have understood." This is no mere equivalent of social relativism or post-modernism, but an awareness of the nature of spiritual freedom. Whatever influx we receive, we are free to use it in whatever direction we choose to take it. This is the backbone of regeneration, and Swedenborg constantly emphasizes how our desires can open or close our minds to the Lord, or indeed separate us further.

The forming of conscience as a historical event hardly figures in current thinking. Julian Jaynes is probably regarded as something of a maverick on this score in modern studies, whose book *The Origin of Consciousness . . .*<sup>7</sup> dealt with this issue, but which received little attention by academia. Consequently our way of seeing the past is still dogged by the notion that past cultures were "primitive" while our own represents an advance in all areas of thought. Yet the problems facing ancient peoples had little to do with understanding the world as we purport to understand it, and had more to do with finding a way of returning to the unification that was found in the most ancient cultures. Consequently, religion developed along two paths. One path was to regard the natural world as illusory, or as Maya. By separating as far as possible from this world, through ascetic methods, it was hoped that a way might be found to return to the old ways, of a more direct link with God. However, another strand of thought took an entirely different approach. We know of it as Zoroastrianism, and in this we find that the natural world is not treated as illusory, but rather that the way back was to recognize the new mind with its emphasis on understanding, and how intrinsically rooted this was in the

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<sup>7</sup> Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

natural world. As a consequence, the way back was to acknowledge rather than escape the natural world, and it was this acknowledgment and rootedness that led to the formation of what Swedenborg called correspondences. Correspondences should be regarded as neither proofs nor metaphors. Proofs as such pertain to an exclusively external perspective that imagines an unpeopled reality. Metaphors in themselves have come to be not much more than literary devices, struggling to cope with the notion that reality is a “live” state, while being unable to grasp this word conceptually since our culture is now rooted in the metaphysics of inertia and “owned” by the extreme rationalism that denies any realism to what might be called the animistic view.

Central to the notion of correspondences is the inner person, the internal man, the intermediary that is looking towards the perennial philosophy. The notion of proofs is something that belongs to the purely external man, looking for levels of certitude in the purely natural world, even going so far as to deny the existence of an internal sphere for the sake of it. This is to come full circle and to realize the corrupted form of “Egypt” that looks only towards itself as the basis for knowledge. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Ezekiel, just preceding the opening quotation:

Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great sea monster lying in the midst of his rivers, who has said, It is my river and I have made myself. (Ezekiel 29: 3)

Without being aware of this as a reference to factual knowledge, this would be taken as poetic description of a despotic ruler. But here, the Pharaoh represents a certain state of knowledge that now comes to glory in its own power, at what it has achieved by its own means without any reference to an inner person being in-formed.

“Sea monsters” mean those facts, general sources, below which and from which details derive. Nothing whatever exists in the universe that does not depend on some general source for its commencement and continuance. In the Prophets, sea monsters mean those general sources of facts. (AC 42)

In terms of the continuous sense and the coherence of structure within the Bible, those “general sources” are allied to the individual natural mind which had its inception as a thematic element in Genesis, with reference to the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. It is the theme of usurpation, that the natural mind rejects any notion of an inner mind as its source of being, and chooses the sense of self-achievement, of “‘have made it myself.” Accordingly, the tree of knowledge overlays the tree of life, and so attempts to eclipse it, and subsequently is found to stand in the middle of the garden, just as the sea monster, the source of and symbol of all factual knowledge, stands in the midst of the rivers. Such a mind-set is totally unmoved or cognizant of correspondences (for these require the mind to be open to influence from the true influence that is in the heart of things) and renders up its own caricatured version in terms of proof accordingly. To recognize such symbolism is not to perceive the idiosyncracies of a past culture, but it is to see that these describe our own times. The symbology of correspondences, now as then, is entirely stripped away. It is a process that occurs without any intention on the part of the culture, but is a natural consequence of the shutting down of the inner person which is unable to operate in a cultural atmosphere whose form is dictated by dogmatic thought. Of course, this may sound like intellectual scare-mongering, or over-generalization, not at all representative of “how things really are.” But in considering this possibility, one should bear in mind the amount of media attention currently given over to the promulgation of the atheistic view, particularly when it is voiced by scientists. For instance, the following quotation from a respected scientific journal, quoting the Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin, is now a quotation on the internet, the spirit of which is accepted generally by virtually all academic communities, especially those with a say in the development of policy:

We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori*

adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.<sup>8</sup>

The irony of the use of the word “uninitiated” should not go unnoticed, for the parallels between dogmatic science and dogmatic religion are well documented. It is not the intention to labor the point, merely to note it. The point is that it is clearly the case that a correspondential view cannot possibly operate within such an ethos where the internal person is denied any kind of relevance. However, from a perspective in which such a propensity is awakened, the denial of spirituality becomes a denial of thought itself. It is a defeated view taking cold comfort from dead ashes.

The method of correspondence initiated by the Zoroastrians was no isolated occurrence. Chinese philosophy is founded upon it. The I Ching and the Tao of Lao Tse develop their inner core of thought through constant observations of nature, and how these correspond to inner states:

All creatures, trees and plants, are soft and tender in their early growth, and in dying become withered and dry. Thus we may say that rigidity and hardness are related to death while weakness and tenderness are related to life . . .

It is such a way of seeing that developed into the influential Yin/Yang duality, which eventually became the *To Peras* / *Apeiron* aspectual form of duality (the loose and the stiff) in Greek philosophy. But as stated earlier, Greek philosophy has more or less been purged of its spiritual connotations, and these notions have corrupted into superficial forms of opposites, and in most people’s minds seem to indicate naive differences such as black and white, male and female, while the tension of reconciliation between them as inner propensities is virtually lost. It is this tradition of

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<sup>8</sup> The passage quoted is taken from a review written by Richard Lewontin of Carl Sagan’s book, *The demon haunted mind*, but has been oft quoted outside this book. There are many places on the internet where it can be found, such as:

[http://wiki.cotch.net/index.php/Lewontin\\_on\\_materialism](http://wiki.cotch.net/index.php/Lewontin_on_materialism)

dualities in its deeper form that we find reinvigorated in Swedenborg, represented by the fundamental forms of conscience as understanding and will, and to which that which is true and that which is good relate respectively. In fact, if it were possible to capture his whole work in a sentence, it would be this—that God is One, and that the nature of that oneness is expressed through the distinct relations of good and truth as they pertain to the will and understanding.

We are constantly told that we live in a materialist world, and that this is the sole concern and interest of science. These interests relate to the understanding, and are pursued in a way that does not refer to the will. Given that objectivity infers distrust of feeling, this is hardly a surprise. And yet because we are comprised of both, the discarding of will for the sake of understanding does not make it go away. On the contrary, as much as God is not allowed a foot in the door, so such materialism that issues from science becomes prey to the will's equivalent of materialism which is acquisition. In effect, we do not live in a materialist world, for materialism is merely a cover for the desires of the will which are purely acquisitive. When considering any wars of the past, religious or secular, these have sometimes been fought over rationalized ideologies but more often over possessions. Science is not as objective as it believes itself to be, for more often than not it exists to further the cause of acquisition. The merchant philosophy that currently dominates is one that never can reveal the dual aspect of will since the corporeal limitations of understanding can only relate to those terms which have a proximity of form. To understand is to grasp or to "get it," identical to the form of will that it feeds on unknowingly. One hungers with the will, imagining that the understanding can satisfy it, but the hunger itself is the key to a correspondence that points to an entirely different order of hunger. It is this correspondence that goes beyond mere metaphor when Jesus Christ teaches us that we drink to slake our thirst, and then we will in a little while be thirsty again, and that he provides the food and drink that truly satisfies.

The fact that this is virtually incomprehensible to the purely rational mind indicates something about the nature of the relationship between the rational and the spiritual that has already been mentioned, which is that these exist in a state of natural antipathy. But this is not a fault. There

needs to be such a resistance for regeneration to take place. This may not appear to be at all logical, but one should consider that what is meant by regeneration cannot be imposed in some public manner, but that it should be approached individually and with the willingness of the individual. This in turn points to the essential role of freedom that is hardly understood at all in the public domain of rational expression, where only that which can be made public is deemed worthy of the status of realism. To arrive at a point of regeneration is to become aware that the inner self, driven by an inchoate sense of not-enough (a word that also drives the need in the rational to find complete theories etc.) cannot be satisfied with what the rational presents it. On the other hand, in the unregenerate form, the sense of not-enough becomes a constant drive to acquire more that is physically available, and imagining that this process will lead to satisfaction. Yet because the will is a drive that is like a hunger that cannot be satisfied, the pressures to continue the process of acquisition become inexorable, and at such a point, such a process, logically incoherent and unsustainable, dons a mantle of reasonableness in order to make it appear both coherent and logical. It is for this reason that regeneration must begin with the natural, for it is through the experience of such processes that in the regenerative state, an inversion takes place, in which quite literally a different order of priorities become inscribed on the heart. Without such a process, that requires this resistance, we would be nothing more than an equivalent of God's pets, with no mind of our own.

This in itself is both the turning point of faith as well as the sticking point for atheism in its true form. We want to solve our own problems. We want to be masters of our own destiny, and not be led like sheep without a will of our own. The subtlety of regeneration, however, takes account of this, and yet it is the hardest thing of all to express since our language is structured and defined by impulses that are averse to it. Such a dramatic sea-change is often expressed as the submission of our will. Indeed, the word "Islam" implies exactly that, yet in itself it suggests exactly what is opposed by the atheistic stance, and this is not what is meant by submission.

In terms of the purely natural mind-set, we imagine that a great deal is achieved by our own powers, yet in terms of spiritual evolution, it should be noted that the natural mind has limited range and produces nothing



that is truly creative by its own powers. Indeed, looking at the evolving state encountered in the regenerative process, one finds that it is only when there is an acknowledgment of a receivership, that the phrase "be fruitful and multiply" begins to appear in the opening chapter of Genesis. Prior to this, we find the process of evolving a suitable external world that will lead towards it.

To return to the Hindu notion of Atman-Brahman, it is perhaps a little clearer in that language of the two selves (the self and the Self) what is entailed at this turning point. Here, the submission of the self to the Self is described as finding one's true self. What we find in Swedenborg is a view of "surrender" that is so subtle and so beautiful in its simplicity that it almost escapes notice. It is simply this, that we should act as if the actions stem from ourselves, while knowing that they stem from God.

That phrase, "as if" is possibly the most significant phrase in any language. There is another way of putting it that perhaps makes it clearer in a modern world concerned with its external forms which is that we should act as if this were the only world. The great errors of the past reflected in some religious trends, especially those that became dogmatic, is that the external world became insignificant, giving it no role at all to play in the process of spiritual evolution. It was something to escape, to get away from, and religious practices became a kind of insurance that allowed one to buy one's way into heaven. But the phrase "as if" does not allow this as a legitimate path. It is not an escape *from* reality, but a progression to reality and through reality. Each pertains to the self and the Self. When Christ said "Without me you can do nothing" He is not making an egotistical statement, but indicating the necessity of receivership. It is this receivership that is acknowledged, not as a mere "surrender," but as the birth of a new mind and a new heart. Therefore, by the phrase "as if" is not suggested an escape or a flight and all that is entailed by this of the sense of "getting away," but quite the opposite view. The more appropriate image of this meaning and its implications is that of a kite, for this can only truly be borne upwards by the wind when it feels a resistance in the cord which anchors it to the ground.

Yet the purely rational mind also acts "as if" this were the only world. It is the blind confidence of its own actions that seduce the mind in such a way that it is convinced that the "as if" quality is transformed into an

exclusive “is” form. Yet no amount of evidence could ever establish this. There is always doubt because there is no such thing as a complete view. To insist otherwise is to open the door to a strange form of solipsism which can only survive by convincing the whole world that, as Wittgenstein put it, the world is all that is the case. He was talking about the limits of what can be done with language, how it always bends to a materialist view, but indicated a more mystical point of view in stating that this aspect of reality can only be “shown,” not “said.” Yet the current form of reality is one that emphasizes the said, since this serves the natural viewpoint, devoid of spiritual content.

This process of regeneration is one that is described in Hindu thought as the taste of poison which ultimately tastes as sweet as nectar. The converse also holds, that the sweetness of nectar tastes like poison in the unregenerate state. Again, we find here the necessity for the state of antipathy between the spiritual and the natural. What is acquired is that which is grasped, (which is, ironically, the meaning of the name Cain) and yet that which is spiritual is inevitably paradoxical. In *Divine Love and Wisdom*, Swedenborg describes this in a definition of love, that love is only possessed when it is given away. How is one to have something by the giving of it? A real mystery to the mind steered by the acquisitive will. And yet it is this love which characterizes all true religion. Krisna exhorts all actions to be done out of love, the sign of which is that they are to be done without a desire for merit or reward. The love of God and the love of man are the source of all actions in the Bible, and it is this that Christ taught. It is through such actions that a door begins to open on a spiritual life. It is not something available to a select few initiates, versed in ancient wisdom. It is the perennial philosophy that remains alive in every age, albeit often in a muted state, and potentially contained in everyone.

The question of the nature of love is too big to consider here, where the aim has been to show how dogma in any form closes the mind to inner influences, and how these dogmas are usually a veil disclosing aspects of acquisition. (Incidentally, the meaning of the land of Canaan already holds this meaning in its name, meaning merchandise.) The focus has been largely on the scientific, but it is more relevant in some ways to say something of the effect of dogma on religion. When science was in its summertime, about the middle of the nineteenth century, a great debate

sprang up when it was disclosed that the earth was several millions of years old, in contrast to the age of the earth calculated from a study of the Bible. It will be known to Swedenborg readers that the significance of numbers is such that they transcend such literalism, and that these relate to certain states reflecting spiritual conditions. Furthermore, the collapse of the inner meaning of the Bible so that one is left with the merely literal speaks of a state of mind that is no longer able to reach inwards and upwards. At such times, what happens is that one looks elsewhere, usually to authority that will disclose meaning, yet if that authority itself is dogmatic, what will ensue is a creation myth garnished with spiritual language. The great sadness for our own times is that this is still very much the case. The great debate, particularly in America, is the creation by design versus evolution theories, as if these represented fundamental, irreconcilable polarities. At the heart of this debate, one can sense the reaching up amongst largely well-meaning people who see religion under attack, and who wish to accord a status of realism to religion that is as strong as that attached to science. The danger of this has been to look for evidence in support of such claims as if the Bible were a scientific treatise. At such a time, the Bible itself takes matters in hand and seals itself from such approaches, for the only approach that can open it is the one that acts through the opening of one's inner self, which occurs only through the correspondential method. It may be a good point to finish here by referring back to Dawkins's exegesis of the incident at Sodom, when the men of the city tried to gain access to the angels, and who were blinded for their troubles. This is not because the angels attacked them, as though it were a punishment brought down from an angry God. When the natural mind tries to expose the spiritual world to a methodology that is purely rational, any such action, were it to succeed would reveal a light so strong that it would quite literally blind the perceiver. Literalism represents the state of mind that is as yet unregenerate. The inner, deeper sense, the one that has the sweetness of nectar, reveals itself in gradual stages, most of which taste bitter initially, for that is what it means to become regenerate. Is it any surprise, therefore, that an atheistic exegesis, if there is such a thing, could find nothing compassionate in the word of God, when it is only able to see what is on the surface. The irony of this is, of course, that the scientific position only deals with this skin. Given the depth and richness of all these

ancient texts that deal with the oneness of God, one has to marvel at the inanity of modern times that sweeps it all away for the sake of a caricature of oneness whose best guess is that we should take comfort in the notion of purposeless existence.

This ends where it began, and perhaps as you read the same opening passage here, at the end, you may feel something of the real intent its words contain, and that what is blotted out is any sense of the relevance of love in the modern world, since the modern world is driving it out deliberately. We are in darkness, and we are taking it for light. □

When I have blotted you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. All the bright lights in the heavens I will make dark over you, and I will put darkness over your land. (Ezekiel 32: 7, 8)