

REVIEW

Scott T. Swank's Ph.D. dissertation "The Unfettered Conscience: A Study of Sectarianism, Spiritualism, and Social Reform in the New Jerusalem Church, 1840-1870" (University of Pennsylvania, 1970),* contains much fascinating material and many interesting conclusions. He succeeds in some of the crucial areas in which many graduate students fail. First, he defines his topic in such a manner as to permit him to look at a wide range of subjects without being under compulsion to bring out of them a major piece of social history. Second, he uses a variety of primary source materials previously unused, skillfully tapping them for the study at hand. He particularly depended upon the rich collections of the Academy Archives in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania and the Swedenborg School of Religion Archives in Newton, Massachusetts. Scholars who follow his lead, hopefully including some who identify themselves as New Churchmen, will find Swank a solid inspiration. Finally, (and what words of higher praise could be found) the book is not only interesting, but well written.

His chapters include insights into "The Early History of the New Church in the United States," "The Internal Structure of the Swedenborgian Community," "The Interaction of Spiritualism and Swedenborgianism," "Swedenborgianism and Slavery," "Swedenborgianism and Communitarianism," and "Swedenborgianism and Homeopathy." He presents clear pictures of three main groups, the General Convention, the Academy Movement and the "Free Spirits." The last is Swank's effective term for certain Swedenborgian leaders who did not fit comfortably into either of the first two. He also deals with the abortive effort known as the Central Convention which, for a time struggled to establish a position independent from the General Convention.

The study has good scope. The author briefly traces Swedenborgianism from its English origins under John Clowes and Robert Hindmarsh to its American beginnings under James Glen in 1784. He then supplies considerable detail regarding the growth and development of the New Church in mid-19th century America, with appropriate attention to growing-pains aspects of the New Jerusalem movement. Swank develops a balanced view of the

* Available on microfilm or in xeroxed copy from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106.

New Church in the New World, properly emphasizing important centers of early church activity such as Philadelphia, Lancaster, Boston, New York and Cincinnati. He treats of a large number of major and minor figures including Thomas Vickroy, John Young, Jonathan Chapman, Francis Bailey, David Pancoast, Sampson Reed, Charles Doughty, George Bush, James Stuart, Nathan Burnham, Benjamin Barrett, Thomas Lake Harris and George Field. His treatment of Thomas Worcester, William Henry Benade and Richard DeCharms properly forms a major thread throughout the book. Worcester and Reed perhaps best illustrate the Convention position, Benade and Stuart that of the Academy and Bush and Barrett that of the "Free Spirits." Swank concludes, with good evidence to support his contention, that DeCharms "was the supreme example of the New Church unfettered conscience" (p. 78).

Although Swank does not himself adhere to any branch of Swedenborgianism, his treatment of the movement and its leaders is basically sympathetic. He is obviously impressed with the fervor of the people, the ability of the leaders and the crusading thrust of 19th century American Swedenborgianism. Yet he tries to avoid singling out "heroes" or "villains" (p. 475). In a work so heavily dependent upon the development of brief biographies of persons who, in many cases, exhibited the behavior patterns of single-minded zealots, Swank deserves credit for so closely approaching his stated goal.

Swank applies his best efforts to analysis of the various disputes which repeatedly threatened to tear the New Church apart and demolish its missionary goals. For example, the ministerial salary issue and the conjugal heresy triggered tumultuous relationships among New Church clergymen and between them and their congregations. The conjugal heresy, which grew out of the belief that a true marriage relationship existed between a minister and his parish group, was judged by Swank to have been particularly divisive, over a generation of church development. He seems to make a bit more of this issue than it deserves.

The spiritualism issue properly receives major treatment. Unlike primarily internal disputes, spiritualism attacked the New Church from without. Because Swedenborg had communed with spirits, spiritualists (not to mention assorted mediums, mesmerists and rappers) were drawn to the New Church in numbers which

threatened at times to destroy the movement. Although Swedenborg himself cautioned against all such dabbling with spirit contact, many New Church societies were vulnerable to the powerful, personalized appeals of spirit believers. In Swank's telling phrase, "When Spiritualism surfaced in the United States as a movement, it exploded in the New Church as if someone had lighted a match in a gas-filled room" (p. 197). To the credit of New Churchmen, the dangers of spiritualism were contained with minimum loss of forward momentum.

On the great division of the 19th century, the slavery issue, Swedenborgians deserve less credit. By and large this supreme moral issue failed to stir New Church hearts. Although church spokesmen were largely pro-Union when the war finally came, they supplied little leadership against slavery in the pre-war period. Swank's conclusion that the New Church "generally was pro-slavery" (p. 333) may be a bit harsh but the church clearly seems to have been relatively unconcerned.

The most cutting and enduring New Church dispute was, of course, the question of the nature of the Swedenborgian message. According to Swank, the Convention group centered in Boston viewed Swedenborg, "as an agent of the Lord to reinterpret the Scriptures, not to provide a new revelation to supersede them" (p. 101). Academicians, partly in response to the threat of spiritualists who claimed to be revelators themselves, contended that Swedenborg was "a unique agent of the Lord's special revelation to man" (p. 100). This fundamental division did indeed split the New Church in America and continues to the present time. Swank handles the matter with clarity and with commendable balance.

Swank's study contains certain weaknesses, of course. For one thing, minor errors appear here and there. For example, he misspells the name of the Academy Archivist, Eldric Klein (p. xlvi) and mis-states the title of Sigstedt's *Swedenborg Epic* (fn., p. 2). More importantly he occasionally departs from his dispassionate assessment of New Church leaders and states opinions which seem to conflict with certain of his larger conclusions. For instance he calls Simon S. Rathvon's life story the "only Swedenborgian autobiography that appears to be relatively candid" (p. 306) when he has, in general, commended the Swedenborgian leaders for their honesty and their willingness to state the truth about them-

selves and others. In another case, after having made several laudatory comments about Marguerite B. Block's book *The New Church in the New World*, he concludes that she "castigated the narrowmindedness of the Academy" (p. 475). This reviewer's recollections of Block's book, re-inforced by several recent conversations with the author herself, are directly contrary to the Swank analysis.

But this reviewer finds himself at greatest issue with one of Swank's central conclusions. The author effectively builds, through most of the book, a case against the disputatious nature of so many of the differences which marred the history of the New Church in 19th century America. Surely, if ever a struggling movement needed to subordinate internal quarrels and unify for common advance, the Swedenborgians did. Swank's treatment of the evidence seems to suggest this conclusion. Yet in his summary chapter, he states that the "New Church reached the pinnacle of prestige . . . while split into three warring segments. What was to most Swedenborgians unwanted controversy and undesirable confusion was in fact a source of strength. Instead of being its Achilles heel, the free conscience of these years was its Samson's hair" (p. 476). Swank's error seems to lie in unconsciously equating the "free conscience" with disputatious, interecine warfare.

In reaching for the scholar's Summation, Swank overlooks some of his own, earlier evidence, which was closer to the mark. On one occasion he notes favorably that a prominent New Church leader felt that too many meetings "had been marked by useless bickering over silly, grandiose schemes" (p. 105). And on a second occasion Swank seems to summarize many of the frustrations of New Churchmen when he says of another leader "Like so many . . . New Churchmen . . . [he] looked back upon a life of dedicated work and ambitious hopes and saw so little progress" (p. 157). Emanuel Swedenborg himself advised strongly against doctrinal disputations insisting that if men would make "love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor the principal of faith," "dissensions" would "vanish," "hatred" would be "dissipated" and "the Lord's kingdom would come upon the earth" (AC 1799 and 2385).

But these few reservations should not leave a negative impression in the reader's mind. Swank has done a commendable job,

sorting large amounts of material previously buried in manuscript collections. A non-New Churchmen who is critical yet sympathetic, he deserves credit for the generally fair and balanced judgments he has rendered. While Swedenborgians of various types will no doubt find points of individual difference with Swank's treatment, they will learn much of their early history reading *The Unfettered Conscience*. I have little doubt that they will enjoy doing so.

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COMMUNICATION

Dear Mr. Editor,

I wonder if I can be allowed comment on two articles which have appeared in recent numbers of *THE NEW PHILOSOPHY*? Both studies have been absorbingly interesting and require further deep thought and reflection. I refer to "The Basis for a New Church view of History" by Geoffrey P. Dawson (April-June 1972) and "Evolution" by Alfred Acton II (January-March 1972).

In both cases my thought and hope is to further discussion on one or two points raised and I would like to place them before you.

On page 197 (April-June 1972) Mr. Dawson says "History must be ascribed to its proper origin, human intransigence, a matter of Divine Permission, not Divine Providence, for the Adamic Age was more acceptable to the Lord than those which followed it. The design which emerges is not that of a rousing march of humanity from an ignorant origin towards a paradise of technical ingenuity, but of the persistent Mercy of the Lord striving to withdraw mankind from the exterminating abyss into which he would otherwise cast himself from the lusts of the propium." Then on page 201: "Some have attempted to see the New Church as part of this cycle." (Read previous paragraph for context.)

I don't want to seem as if I am pitting one authority against another, but in the April, 1972 *New Church Life*, page 153, Bishop de Charms writes: "From what has been said it is clear that the Most Ancient Church, the Ancient Church and the Christian Church were necessarily temporary. They were never intended by the Divine Creator to be permanent: this because from the beginning it was the purpose of the Divine Providence that the race should grow up. This was just as true of the race as it is of every individual human being. . . . If there had been no fall, the human race would still have grown up, because this was its appointed destiny, and for this the Lord had provided from the beginning. Indeed, He has provided for it in spite of man's fall. It was with the race even as it is with

the individual." Again, and back in 1937, the late Rev. K. R. Alden said (in line, as I see it, with Bishop de Charms): "The New Church, which was established in the spiritual world on the Nineteenth of June in the year 1770, was unlike any of the former churches that had existed upon the earth, in that they were all destined to have an end." (*New Church Life*, July 1937, page 292.)

And then I turn to TCR 786: "Now all Churches depend on the knowledge and acknowledgment of one God with whom the man of the Church can be conjoined. As, however, all the four Churches were not in that truth, it follows that a Church is to succeed them which will know and acknowledge one God." I would take this to be of Providence, not Permission, as I understand Mr. Dawson to be suggesting.

It seems to me that we have two quite different approaches to this matter. I have previously understood things in the way Bishop de Charms has expressed it, but perhaps there is further light that someone can shed on the subject.

Turning to Mr. Acton's study on evolution, it is his concluding remarks I am concerned with. I have to some extent touched on this in a previous letter * but thought in the meantime has but served to increase my difficulty in accepting some of the conclusions he brings forward. Top of page 165 (January-March 1972) Mr. Acton says "evil is not a specific creation in itself." I think I have possibly covered what I want to say in my previous letter, and I can only refer back to passages such as DLW 347 ("the more imperfect and noxious animals and vegetables originate by immediate influx out of hell") which Mr. Acton, as I see it, has given insufficient attention to.

I am also interested that Mr. Acton finds support for his thesis (as stated in those concluding paragraphs) in AC 1002 where it reads: "in the most ancient times they never ate the flesh of any beast or bird, but only seeds, especially bread from wheat, also the fruit of trees, vegetables, various milks and what was made from them, such as various butters. To kill animals and eat their flesh was to them wickedness, and like wild beasts." Mr. Acton asks: "If there were no carnivores eating meat, how could man regard meat-eating as like animals?" The Latin reads at this point: "et simile ferarum." This brought to mind an article on the preadamites by Rev. Ormond Odhner (*New Church Life*, March 1960) where, on page 105 he discusses the meaning of the Latin word, *ferus*, which can be rendered as either "a wild beast" or "an untamed animal." I don't think we have to reckon AC 1002 as suggesting the rending of its prey by a wild beast. It could, as I understand it, equally mean a bird eating a worm, to which the Most Ancients likened meat eating. I just cannot see that a case *has* been established, either from Revelation or from sense evidence, for the existence of the scorpion, alligator, etc. prior to the Fall (circa 10,000 B.C.). But my thought is not final about the matter (the Lord forbid) and I hope the discussion will continue.

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* See July-September issue, p. 275 (Ed.).