

EXTERNAL CONFIRMATIONS OF TRUTH

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What is the place of reason and rationality in religion? Can man discover spiritual truths by his own efforts? No, the Writings say. There is no such thing possible as natural theology. Is man, then, to accept the teachings of revelation blindly, without understanding them? Again the Writings say, no. Nothing is part of man's faith, unless, to some degree at least, it be understood.

In the late Middle Ages the place of reason in religion was the subject of rather violent controversy, especially during what we might call "the better days of scholasticism." (And in spite of all prejudice against it, scholasticism had its better days. It played a most important role in bringing about western Europe's revival of learning.) Anselm (1033-1109) believed that all Christian doctrines could be *explained* rationally. Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who came exceedingly close to New Church doctrine, stressed the idea that human reason by itself could *arrive at* all Christian truths. Thomas Aquinas (?1225-?1274), the greatest of the scholastics, held that human reason could arrive at certain Christian truths—e.g., the existence of God—but that the distinctive "truths" of Christianity—the tri-Personal God; the resurrection of the body—were beyond the realm of human reason. (How right he was!) William of Ockham (d. 1349) and Duns Scotus (d. 1308) apparently divorced reason from religion, teaching that *all* of Christianity was beyond the understanding of the human intellect and had to be accepted on faith. In that argument, however, they did mankind somewhat of a service. Reason was divorced from religion; but it was left as a polite and justifiable human attribute, and it could now go on its own way to investigate the natural truths of science. It did. (I would here note my increasingly strong conviction that Duns Scotus has been too much maligned in history. He quibbled in theology, yes; all scholastics did. But I have found nothing in his teachings to justify the fact that his first name is the origin of our word "dunce.")

What, then, is the place of reason in religion? The Heavenly Doctrines give clear-cut answers in their teachings concerning

external confirmations of truth as they explain the Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not swear falsely, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths. But I say unto you, Swear not at all. . . . But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." (Matt. 5:33-34, 37)

The highest angels of heaven, the celestial, never reason about spiritual truth. Much less do they argue as to whether or not it is true. From the supreme good of life that they have achieved, they can perceive upon first hearing whether what is said to them is true. If it is, they say, Yea, yea; if it is not, they say, Nay, nay. For them there is need of nothing more. They need no proof, no argument, no reasoning to support the truth. They have no desire that truth be confirmed externally, for such confirmation could add nothing to the truth they already clearly perceive. It would be beyond their comprehension that anyone should take an oath that a thing is true.

Merely external men, however, want the truth confirmed externally by oaths. Because they themselves are not inwardly in the truth, they doubt that anyone else is. Hence they want to confirm their statements by oaths and swearing, and even place credence in the oaths of others—as though a liar would not swear to a lie, or as though truth actually needed external support.

Internal or spiritual men, on the other hand, do not need the truth confirmed externally and do not want it to be confirmed by oaths. Men even more internal do not even want it confirmed by reasons. Internal, spiritual men are averse to taking oaths, and shudder at them, feeling that the demand to swear to a thing imputes to them dishonesty. Hence, when the Lord began to establish an internal or spiritual church on earth, He abrogated all swearing or taking of oaths: "Ye have heard that it hath been said. . . . Thou shalt not swear falsely. But I say unto you, Swear not at all."

Concerning this the Writings teach, "They who have conscience do not swear." (AC 2842:9) Again, "The Lord taught that we are to 'swear not at all.' By these words is meant that we should not swear at all by Jehovah, nor by anything which belongs to Jehovah or the Lord." (*ibid.*, sec. 10) Again, "After the

representatives of the (Jewish) Church had been abrogated, the use of oaths was also abrogated by the Lord." (AR 474e) And,

Oaths are made solely by those who are not interiorly in the truth itself, that is, by those who are not interior but only exterior men; consequently they are never made by angels, still less by the Lord. . . . Merely natural men want to have the truth confirmed and witnessed by oaths, whereas internal or spiritual men do not want this; nay, they are averse to oaths, and shudder at them, especially those in which God and the holy things of the church are appealed to; and are content to say, and have it said, that a thing is true. . . . As to swear is not of the internal man, and as the Lord, when He came into the world, taught men to be internal or spiritual . . . , He forbade swearing by God and by the holy things of heaven and the church. (AE 608)

In spite of such plain teachings, nevertheless, we are not to conclude that all swearing, even in the name of God, is in itself taking the name of the Lord in vain; for it is specifically said, "But to swear by God and His holiness, by the Word or the Gospel, at coronations, inaugurations into the priesthood, and inductions into offices of trust, is not to take the name of God in vain, unless he who takes the oath afterwards discards his promises as vain." (TCR 297)

In treating more deeply of these words of our Lord, however, the Writings touch upon a matter of even greater importance. This is the insistence upon external, sensual proof before accepting the truths of revelation (always an evil), and the desire to confirm accepted spiritual truths with natural and intellectual reasonings (permissible if done along certain well-defined lines and today practically a necessity, even though something less than the highest ideal).

To believe the truths of revelation *because* of external sensual proof is not to believe revelation, but is to believe sensual proof. No truth of revelation can be proved scientifically; it is beyond the realms of science. To insist upon external proof before being willing to accept revelation, therefore, is foolish. More than that, however, it partakes of the evil of which the Lord spoke when He said, "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." The ideal for all men, whether of spiritual or celestial genius, is to accept the teachings of revelation *because the Lord has taught them*. That, in fact, is the only acceptable starting point.

But the question immediately arises, How do we know that the Lord has taught it? "Because it is the plain teaching of His Word" should be answer enough; but for most people it is not. Most people have to go on: How do we know that what is called revelation is really the Word of God? Is the New Testament true? Is its explanation of the Old Testament correct? And are the Writings of the New Church what they claim to be—the unfolding and further development of these former revelations? Most people at some time have to answer some such questions; and some have a harder time with them than do others.

This is really a rather remarkable process! Finite man, with limited, mortal intelligence, taking the truth spoken by the infinitely wise God, and asking if it be true. It is a wonder that the Lord allows it. Yet man being what he is, there is no other way for him to make Divine Truth his own. Man's very essence consists of liberty and rationality; and truth must be accepted with both these faculties before it becomes a part of man himself.

At some time, then, man must ask himself, Is this really Divine revelation? And with his own rationality he must find the answer. There is no scientific proof. If there were, man would have no spiritual freedom; he would have to believe. But there are certain indications that can help him in his quest. In the light of the Writings, there is an utterly remarkable consistency in the three Testaments of revelation. The teachings of the Writings rationally cohere; and the more one learns of them, the more rational they seem. But the greatest proof of all is in what the Writings term "the self-evidencing reason of love." Love—love to the Lord, love of the neighbor's benefit, love of what is good, love of truth for the sake of truth—love opens the eyes of the mind to see that this is true, Divinely true, the very Word of God; and on all planes of life, love then finds evidence to support its belief.

It is after he has reached this starting point that man must accept the truths of revelation for the simple reason that the Lord has taught them. He hears in them the voice of the Lord; and whether or not these teachings disagree with his pre-conceived ideas or go against his natural desires, he immediately assents to them and conforms to them his ways of life and thought. He has heard the truth; he accepts it. Whatever opposes the truth, he rejects.

Is anything more than this really necessary? For the celestial angels, apparently not. To truth they assent; from falsity they dissent. They do not even want the truth confirmed by reasonings, believing that anything more than, Yea, yea; Nay, nay; cometh of evil. And even though, because of this attitude, they are said to appear in their own eyes and in the eyes of others as childlike and simple, nevertheless, in the last analysis, in that belief they are quite correct.

There are few men on earth today, however, so fully regenerate as to be of such a celestial disposition. For most men, furthermore, it would be both foolish and dangerous to pretend to be such. If some day we can attain to that degree of regeneration, well and good; we too can then be content with, Yea, yea; Nay, nay; wanting nothing more. Meanwhile, we must have more, and the Lord has revealed the proper means of attaining it.

Most men today must have the truth confirmed with intellectual and rational reasonings, and it is right and proper that they should. Do not the Writings themselves reveal the Lord's specific promise to the New Church, "Now it is permitted to enter with the intellect into the mysteries of faith"? Do we not term the Writings a rational revelation, and speak of them as a revelation of spiritual truth to the rational plane of the mind, the highest plane of the mind into which man can enter on earth? And are we not specifically taught that the Lord has loved our earth more than others, because with us spiritual and celestial truths are grounded in natural truths, and that only thus may order be perfect? (SD 1531)

Many things which at once are perceived to be true, we are told, may afterwards be weakened by fallacious arguments, even to the point of denial, if they are not illustrated and confirmed by reasons. (DP 136) So too it is said that unless truth is confirmed by particulars, it merely remains in the memory as something dead, and afterwards is dissipated. (AC 3388, 4364)

Let us say that at first hearing we accept the truth that man has free will in spiritual things but that thereafter we do not think about that truth again nor bother to find illustrations of spiritual freedom in our own lives, nor to confirm it with such rational considerations as that if man did not have free will, God would be responsible for evil—an untenable proposition. In such case, the truth would remain for a while in our memory, but only as

something dead, and we would soon forget it altogether. Or, perhaps, before we had forgotten it (but still had not bothered to confirm it with particular reasonings), we might meet up with a predestinarian, with his many arguments against spiritual freedom, or with an amateur psychiatrist with his so-called proofs that we are what we are today entirely because of certain external influences that played upon us in childhood. Our initial perception of the truth would be weakened, perhaps even to the point of denial.

We must have natural illustrations and rational confirmations of spiritual truth. There is too much evil in us and around us for us to be safe if we do not have them. Hence it is said that it is the part of a wise man, and it is rational, to see first whether a thing is true, and afterwards to confirm it. (AC 4741) Indeed, we are even told that knowledges do not become truths with man until they are acknowledged in the understanding, *which takes place when they are confirmed by him* (AC 5276); and that *truth must be confirmed and illustrated by many things* before it can be elevated from the natural man into the rational, wherein alone man's real humanity resides. (AC 3175)

There is no doubt, then, that it is permissible to confirm spiritual and celestial truths with natural truths, with rational and intellectual reasonings and with particular illustrations. Indeed, it is necessary and it is the part of a wise man to do so. Only thus may order be perfect.

But what then of the Lord's words, "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil"? The resolution of the question is found in several short key passages in the Writings. One of them is to the effect that although celestial angels do not desire external confirmations of truth and cannot bear to hear reasonings about the truth, nevertheless, because they are "in the truth itself, they can see from it endless things which belong to that truth." (AC 2715:6) The other explains these words of the Lord as meaning that "Truths Divine are to be confirmed (with internal men) from the Lord and not from man." (AC 9166:3)

Celestial angels, then, never let a newly perceived truth lie as a dead thing in their memories. As soon as they hear it, they perceive that it is true, and they at once, without any argument or doubt, apply it to their lives. They need no external or rational confirmations to support the truth. But then, because they them-

selves are inwardly in the truth, they see from it endless things that belong to it. Everywhere in their daily lives, that is, they see illustrations and examples of that truth. Thus, even with them, celestial truth is rooted in as-it-were natural truths, and thus is order made perfect. Thus, even with them, truth is strengthened and made alive by many particulars.

For us, however, who at best are only spiritual and who need rational confirmations of truth, as well as natural illustrations and examples of it, such confirmations and illustrations are not only permissible, but are also desirable, provided only that they be from the Lord and not from ourselves. "Confirmations of truth from the Lord and not from self"—what are these? They, too, are part of the self-evidencing reason of love. Accepting what the Word teaches simply because the Lord has said it, the internal or spiritual man will also refuse to let a newly understood truth lie as a dead thing in his memory. He will think about it rationally and see how it can be applied to his life. He will look around him at all things of life to find confirmations of it; and, led by the Lord through his love of truth for the sake of truth, he will everywhere find evidence and support for it. What is not confirmatory of it, he will cast aside as of no importance. What is confirmatory, he will take to himself, to bolster and support it. And thus will he, too, root spiritual truths in natural truths, and even with him, order will be made perfect.

SWEDENBORG'S FLYING MACHINE

Machine att flyga i Wadret. Enligt utkast av Emanuel Swedenborg. Bokforlaget Facsimilia, Stockholm, 1960.

For ages man has gazed at the sky and admired the flight of the winged creatures and dreamt of the ability to move around in the air as easily as the eagle. Until recent times, however, few had taken practical steps towards realizing that dream. It is not surprising that among those few we find Swedenborg as one of the foremost. His searching and active mind had an ability not only to grasp ideas with great intuition and imagination but also to see their practical applications.

Scientists of his day tried to solve the problem of flying along the lines of the "system lighter than air." Swedenborg, however,