

PUBLISH AND PERISH? A FOUNDING FATHER AND THE FATE OF THE SWEDENBORG SCIENTIFIC ASSOCIATION[†]

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As you know, philosophers love questions and, some would say, they love questions more than answers. Philosophers dwell on questions the way a baseball player prepares to step up to the plate: they love to make all manner of adjustments, observations, checking and rechecking the helmet, the bat, the dirt in the shoes, the stance, and so on. Socrates, that gadfly and midwife of ideas in ancient Athens, was fond of asking questions and dropping hints at his own answers to them. I shall carry on that tradition this evening by raising a series of questions about the future of the SSA in preparation for its upcoming 100th anniversary.

What is the SSA? What needs should it try to meet and how can it meet them? Who should it serve? These are the *general* questions that I propose we spend a few minutes reflecting upon. We can begin by returning to the early days of the SSA and its founding father and first president, Rev. Frank Sewall.

Frank Sewall was born in 1837. In 1858 he graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine. For the next year and a half he traveled with his family in Europe, stopping in Marseilles, France first and gradually making his way via Rome, Florence, and Vienna to Tübingen, Germany where he studied with Dr. Immanuel Tafel. As a young man he was fluent in several languages, loved philosophy, poetry, architecture, drawing, playing organ, and was fascinated by different religions. In 1863 he was ordained into the ministry and became pastor of the Glendale Society in Ohio. From 1870 to 1886 he was president of Urbana University and pastor to the society there. During the 1880s he translated the *Rational Psychology* and,

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after taking up a pastorate in Washington D.C. in 1889, his activity to promote Swedenborgian thought increased. In 1902 his alma mater conferred upon him the Doctor of Divinity. He was a member of the American Philosophical Association and attended its meetings, as well as the meetings of several other clubs and learned societies. Sewall, for example, reports on his attendance at the American Association for the Advancement of Science held at the Johns Hopkins University in 1908. There he witnessed great debates between the idealist Josiah Royce and the pragmatist John Dewey.¹ In 1910 he was the presiding officer of the section on philosophy at the International Swedenborg Congress in London.

In the mean time, he helped start the SSA. C.E. Doering notes that in the late 1890s there was a "spontaneous interest throughout the Church in the study of Swedenborg's philosophy."² Interest indeed! At the turn of the century there were several philosophical clubs that supported Swedenborgian thought, such as the Principia Club of Bryn Athyn, the Pittsburgh Philosophy Club, the Urbana University Scientific Club, and the Swedenborg Philosophy Club of Chicago.³ These were heady days both in the New Church and in American philosophy and science. As one old friend of Dr. Sewall's put it, "There were giants in those days!"⁴ In April, 1898 the Rev. Frank Sewall published in various New Church periodicals a proposal to form the SSA. In May, he was elected president.

Sewall's publishing record is remarkable. He published eight books on Swedenborg's philosophy and theology; a textbook for learning Latin; nine devotional books (some for children and teens); he wrote an introduction to Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*; and he organized a prayer book and hymnal for Convention (the General Church still uses "Roll Out O Song to God!" and "Morn of Joy and Morn of Praise!"). He also gave several addresses to various groups (such as the SSA, the Ruskin Society, Urbana University) which were published as pamphlets or articles.

Not only was he a prolific writer, but also a good speaker. Rev. Lewis F. Hite describes the experience of hearing Sewall's annual SSA speeches:

¹ *The New Philosophy* 12 (Jan. 1909): 27-28.

² *Ibid.* 35 (July 1932): 83.

³ *Ibid.* 3 (July 1900): 103-105; 6 (July 1903): 99; 7 (July 1904): 107.

⁴ *The Minister's Quarterly* (Sept. 1 1965): 7.

“It was like drinking annually from the fountain of youth to listen to his vivid surveys of scientific and philosophic approaches to Swedenborg from the outside world of scholars, as well as to his own exalted expositions of Swedenborg’s philosophy.”⁵

Frank Sewall was president of the SSA from 1898 until his death in December 1915. It is clear from the letters and memorials that were written about him, that Frank Sewall was not only respected but also loved. Rev. Sewall is described as zealous, hopeful, forthright, faithful, incisive, a true servant of the Lord having tender affections and a gracious personality.⁶ Sewall, the philosophical theologian to the last, even wrote a brief essay on the meaning of death on the “eve of his journey to the next world.”⁷

What was the original purpose and vision of the SSA? Let’s look at the announcement that was published:

Recognizing the fact that it is unworthy of a true appreciation of Swedenborg’s teachings to allow this great philosophic and scientific writings to remain unpublished or to pass out of print, a number of persons, both of the ministry and laity, including scientific scholars and professors...have expressed a wish that there might be organized, independently of nationality or of any of the existing ecclesiastical bodies of the Church, a “Swedenborg Scientific Association,” having for its object, “the translation and publication of the scientific and philosophic writings of Swedenborg, and the study and discussion of the principles laid down therein.” It is thought that upon the broad basis of this important use, many would gladly unite in cordial cooperation, who have for various reasons acted apart in their ecclesiastical affiliations; that our brethren in England will respond, and that the Church in every section will feel the benefit of this reunion and rejoice in the work it may be able to perform.⁸

⁵ *The New Philosophy* 19 (July 1916): 250.

⁶ *New Church Messenger* (Jan. 19, 1916).

⁷ *The Bright Gate and the Vision Beyond* (Philadelphia: American New Church Tract and Publication Society, n.d.), 1.

⁸ *The New Philosophy* 35 (July 1932): 83.

C.E. Doering says that this announcement was endorsed by laity, clergy, editors of New Church periodicals, and “a number of prominent New Churchmen in [the U.S.], Canada, and England.”⁹ So thirty seven people met in New York city on May 27, 1898 to found the SSA.

I would draw your attention to a few important points in the announcement. First, Rev. Sewall hopes that the broad basis and importance of the uses of the SSA will encourage people to gladly unite in cordial cooperation. Second, because of these important uses, the SSA is supposed to include people from different nationalities and New Church organizations. Thus the SSA is seen as independent of sectarianism and nationalism, and, despite deep differences over theological issues, is to be an association unified by its intellectual uses. Perhaps this reflects Sewall’s own position of sympathizing with the Academy movement, yet remaining loyal to the Convention organization.¹⁰

Article II in the constitution for the SSA declares the goals of the SSA to be

1. To preserve, translate, publish, and distribute the scientific and philosophical works of Emanuel Swedenborg; and
2. To promote the principles taught in those works, having in view, likewise, their relation to the science and philosophy of the present day.¹¹

As for the first goal, C.E. Doering notes in his essay on the history of the association¹² that the SSA had made tremendous progress in the preservation, translation, and publication of manuscripts. This has been the primary focus of the organization for years and to review all of the works that the SSA has helped translate and publish would take quite a bit of time. My first question, then, is:

⁹ Ibid. 51 (July 1948): 225.

¹⁰ Marguerite Beck Block, *The New Church in the New World*, (New York: Swedenborg Publishing Association, 1984 [1960]), 209, 215, 231, 243.

¹¹ *The New Philosophy* 3 (Jan. 1900): 14.

¹² Ibid. 35 (July 1932).

Question 1: Are there any important pre-theological works left to translate? The countless hours, untold energies, and coordination needed to publish Swedenborg's scientific and philosophical works, and so achieve this first use, stands as a monument to the dedication of those men and women involved in the SSA and their supporters. We salute them! We ought not to take for granted the simple action of turning to one's book case and taking from the shelf a copy of *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* and proceeding to read it in English. I think this has been a use well done by the SSA.

Turning now to the second use, its wording was retained until the SSA was incorporated in 1906 when the last phrase, viz., "having in view likewise their relation to the science and philosophy of the day," was dropped. Thus Article II of the Charter simply reads: "Second: To promote the principles taught in these works."¹³ Judging by John R. Swanton's report as editor of *The New Philosophy*, there was disagreement among people over the truth status of Swedenborg's claims in the pre-theological works. Because of this Swanton recommends dropping the second use of the SSA and using the journal to strictly publish translations of Swedenborg's works, while leaving the second use to appear in print in other New Church magazines.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, in the following issue of *The New Philosophy*, it is announced that Dr. Harvey Farrington is the new editor.¹⁵ In his report of 1904 Farrington writes that he has kept in touch with scientists in the world at large by sending copies of *The New Philosophy* to leading scientific and philosophical periodicals with the request that they exchange. He also sent copies of *The New Philosophy* to libraries and reading rooms of institutions of learning.¹⁶ In 1915 Alfred Acton writes that during the six years of his editorship, not half a dozen articles promoting the second goal were offered for publication. He concludes that it is best for *The New Philosophy* to continue to publish translations of Swedenborg's scientific and philosophic works.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid. 10 (July 1907): 229.

¹⁴ Ibid. 6 (July 1903): 89-92.

¹⁵ Ibid. 6 (Oct. 1903): 151.

¹⁶ Ibid. 10 (July 1904): 99.

¹⁷ Ibid. 18 (July 1915): 92.

I think Sewall would have had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, he thought it was important to understand the stages of Swedenborg's development and to mine his pre-theological works for useful ideas. On the other hand, Sewall had a passion for relating Swedenborg's pre-theological and theological thought to the science and philosophy of the day. He suggested, in his final presidential address to the SSA, that the group undertake to write and publish a "primer" on Swedenborg's science and philosophy. By boiling Swedenborg's thought down to its A, B, C in about 100 pages, he hoped that it would be widely used by people. He even presented an outline for the work. I do not know if the task was ever undertaken and if undertaken, ever completed. Obviously the philosophy and science clubs that would have used such a primer no longer exist. Indeed, in his 1948 address to the Association, C.E. Doering says: "I cannot but feel that there is not the widespread enthusiasm and study of Swedenborg's philosophic works that there was fifty years ago. We need to recapture the vision that the leaders in the movement had then..."¹⁸ This brings me to the second question:

Question 2: Is there a need in the church for a primer on Swedenborg's philosophy and science? Would educational institutions find such a book useful to students and faculty?

Prof. Edward Allen, who retired as president of the SSA in 1977, brings up the second use in his last address to this body. He notes that the costs to publish *The New Philosophy* increased dramatically and that the treasurer estimates that an additional 150 members would go a long way to helping support the journal. Prof. Allen asks, "From whence can the interest come that would increase the demand for the journal?" He answers his own question by quoting the second use listed in the original constitution, that is, "The promotion of the principles taught in [the works of Swedenborg] having in view likewise their relation to the science and philosophy of the present day."¹⁹ It seems that the editor of *The New Philosophy* has always been looking for articles and funds to keep the journal going. This leads to the third question.

¹⁸ Ibid. 51(July 1948): 229.

¹⁹ Ibid. 80 (July 1977): 83.

Question 3: There are several periodicals besides *The New Philosophy* devoted to publishing articles on various aspects of New Church or Swedenborgian thought (e.g. *Arcana*, *Covenant*, *Studia Swedenborgiana*); is it time to consider merging them to reduce costs and consolidate readership? I am aware that there are barriers to this, such as differing editorial practices, publishing missions, and funding. Yet I don't think these are automatically insuperable. Could *The New Philosophy* become a strictly "on-line" journal? How many readers are in the market for a journal such as *The New Philosophy*? Could it gain a wider readership if it made an attempt to relate Swedenborg's teachings to contemporary concerns from as many fields as possible (including e.g. political and social philosophy)?

According to Rev. Hite, president Sewall's vision for the second goal also included an Academy of Science and Philosophy:

They [Swedenborg's scientific and philosophic principles] cannot accomplish their end in silence and isolation. They must be proclaimed and brought into the most direct and familiar contact with the science of the day in all its phases. This can be done by the study of the works by qualified specialists, by the publication of treatises...by articles critical or otherwise in the current scientific and philosophic journals, and lastly by a well-equipped and endowed Academy of Science and Philosophy.²⁰

I am not sure what Sewall had in mind by an "Academy of Science and Philosophy." At a minimum, my guess is that he was not thinking of a specific college, but an institute devoted to researching Swedenborg's thought for answers, or clues to answers, on scientific and philosophical issues of the day; an institute open to New Church intellectuals (from any sect) in which research was carried out to show that Swedenborg's thought was relevant and useful to the problems of the day.

Question 4: Dr. Jane Williams-Hogan has successfully run a Swedenborg Seminar at the American Academy of Religion meetings for six years now. Should the SSA sponsor conferences on Swedenborg at set

²⁰ Ibid. 19 (July 1916): 249-50.

times or to commemorate important events (e.g. the 250th anniversary of the publishing of the first volume of the *Arcana* in 1999)? Out of all the projects we could undertake, is it worth the resources to attempt to “evangelize” to various intellectual communities through conferences? Should the SSA help promote research and scholarly communication by turning a building into an Institute for Swedenborgian Research? Are we ready to open up the teachings of Swedenborg to the outside world and provide a place where scholars could reside for a time to pursue their interests?

I will conclude with what I will call the “cultural” aspect of President Sewall’s vision. In his four major philosophical books (*The New Metaphysics* [1887]; *Dante and Swedenborg* [1893]; *Swedenborg and Modern Idealism* [1902]; *Reason in Belief* [1906])²¹ Sewall presents Swedenborgian thought as a viable alternative to other philosophies of life. He sees the Swedenborgian world-view as a vehicle for a New Age. This is *not* the new age of reincarnation and Shirley MacLain. Instead, briefly, the New, or Fifth, Age must steer between the Scylla of modern religious fundamentalism and the Charybdis of modern scientific naturalism. Sewall outlines the characteristics of an Age in which people do not have to forfeit real science in order to have real religion, or forfeit genuine religion in order to have genuine science. Even broader than this was his hope to reinstate the unity of three classically Western ideals: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

This was no philosophical “castle-in-the-sky” to him; he saw it as eminently practical. One can see this in his reflections on nationality, philosophy, and a country’s receptivity for the New Age or new ways of thinking.²² It is also apparent in his remarks on William James’ article on the meaning of life and the problem of suicide in modernity.²³ Again, it shows itself in his attempt to educate his readers in the proper provinces

²¹ *The New Metaphysics or The Law of End, Cause, and Effect With Other Essays*. (London: New-Church Press, 1887). *Dante and Swedenborg with other essays on the New Renaissance* (London: James Speirs, 1893). *Swedenborg and the Modern Idealism. A Retrospect of Philosophy from Kant to the Present Time* (London: James Speirs, 1902). *Reason and Belief, or Faith for an Age of Science. An Examination into the Rational and Philosophic Content of the Christian Faith* (London: Elliot Stock, 1906). Other titles include: *Is a New Church Possible? Seven Neighborly talks, with a Sequel* (Philadelphia: New-Church Popular Series [No. 7] E. Claxton & Co., 1884). *Being and Existence. A Philosophical Discussion* (Reprinted from *The New Philosophy* 11 (Jan. 1908): 1-7, (April 1908): 40-46, (Oct. 1908): 135-138).

²² *Swedenborg & Modern Idealism*, 185-201.

²³ *Ibid.*, 176-184.

and relations between theology, metaphysics, and physics.²⁴ If this educational work could be done, he writes, “many a harsh and worse than useless controversy would be avoided.” Sewall even made a study of educational theories in his book *The Angel of the State; or, the Kindergarten in the Education of the Citizen: a Study of Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Swedenborg*.²⁵ Finally, it is evidenced in his affection for, and skill at, the aesthetic expression of religious experiences in the hymns he wrote, his concern with liturgics, and the active role he played in the design of two New Church houses of worship. Sewall was aware of the cultural importance of religious symbolic expression in the arts.

Given that our culture needs a New Age and the unique philosophy of the Writings, does our culture want it? Sewall had some deep concerns over this issue. He wrote that “in the highest places in Christendom people speak in a kind of awe and veneration of men who clearly and frankly make it their aim in science to prove the sufficiency of nature without God, and the sufficiency of social science for the data of ethics without a revelation.”²⁶ Other Christian intellectuals have taken the Christian message and apologetics to the front lines of the “culture war.” For example, a business man in Ohio has founded the “Veritas Forum.” The Veritas Forum is the organization of lectures given at well-known universities by Christian intellectuals. Phillip E. Johnson, author of *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education*,²⁷ has made his case for Christian theism through these lectures. His work has stirred some secular humanists to make replies, but they generally dismiss the whole theistic approach as obsolete and irrelevant.

This brings me to my final question, which I approach with some trepidation, for I do not know if this question accurately reflects reality, or if it is a projection born of my lack of experience with the world.

Question 5: Is the Swedenborgian alternative able to have a sincere hearing in a popular culture dominated by emotivistic and relativistic sound-bites? Has Western culture spent itself intellectually? If so, another

²⁴ *The New Metaphysics*, 72-73.

²⁵ Boston: E.A. Whiston, 1896.

²⁶ *The New Metaphysics*, 145.

²⁷ Phillip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

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article, book, conference, or lecture added to the existing mountain of words would be ineffective. Perhaps our deeds are now much more important than our words. Yet, what deeds should the SSA perform to show (not just tell) what the New World-view is all about? There are already many missions to feed the hungry, help the poor, cure the sick etc. What deeds, either practical or culturally symbolic, could the SSA do that will point people in our materialistic and naturalistic culture toward a new Christian philosophy? Should we do these deeds alone? Or should we join the growing ecumenical movement among monotheistic religions to oppose the secular establishment through cultural means? I am aware that this would be a radical departure for an organization dedicated to intramural concerns of a strictly intellectual nature. I simply want to offer the idea for consideration.

In posing these questions, I hope I have not given offense or been perceived as a pesky impertinent Gadfly like Socrates was. Rather, I hope to play that other much more positive role associated with Socrates, namely, that of Midwife, that is, one who helps people give birth to ideas. In researching for this speech, I have been impressed with the energy, talents, character, and creativity of the people involved with the SSA. The Association has always managed, providentially, to produce valuable results on a shoestring. Today, even though the world and the Church have changed, we continue to have energetic, talented, thoughtful people who are capable of uniting behind an important use; and this, after all, is the most important resource there is.

Finally, for their assistance, I would like to thank Rev. Dr. William Woofenden; the Archivist at SSR, Elizabeth Balcom; Rev. Grant Odhner, and Allen Bedford; and I thank you for your kind attention this evening. □

