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## THE BASIS FOR A NEW CHURCH VIEW OF HISTORY

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A few years ago a paper published in *New Church Life*\* appealed for a coordinated effort on the part of New Churchmen to write human history from a "New Church point of view." It brought to mind the exercises in this field of study which were printed in *Words for the New Church* under the general title, "Conflict of the Ages," and a sad reflection on the feebleness of human endeavor, that in so short a time, the intellectual labors of an enthusiastic generation should lie forgotten on library shelves, ignored, while the call went out for the work to be done all over again!

One correspondent to the *Life* tried to blow more interest into the topic by remarking that history, without interpretation, is only a dull catalog of events on a time scale. Interpretation, however, is a translation, and in history it springs from the historian's own judgment, according to his lights and perception, which may end in telling his readers more about the historian than it does about the subject of his study. Interpretive history has what commercial parlance calls "built-in obsolescence." It serves its own day, the affections and forebodings of the people for whom it was written, passes out of fashion, and, if it survives a thousand years or so of obscurity, will be rediscovered as evidence of a different kind, perhaps establishing new theories about the society for which it was composed. Who, these days, takes Caesar's *Gallic Wars* as unbiased evidence of how noble civilization brought order into the chaotic savagery of northern Europe, or who reads the work as a

\* November, 1967, pp. 493-505. See also February, 1968, p. 92, and March, 1968, p. 140. (Ed.)

record of how a political and military opportunist, driven by concern for personal survival and ambition, took advantage of the fragmentary association and quarrels of less well-organized tribes.

Scholarship is notoriously wavering in its efforts to establish any interpretive absolutes in history, and some are of the opinion that there are none at all. The presentation of facts is always biased, loaded by every mind which passes them on with a leaven of emotional response, a shading here, a highlight of moral indignation there, or organizing the substance of events into a perspective determined from some a priori doctrine of origins and purposes, perhaps distorting, dramatizing and coloring the record to prove the truth of an adopted position. This kind of thing is not what any historian thinks he wants, least of all New Churchmen, but can they ever avoid it?

Human life is inevitably a matter of interpretation, in heaven, on the earth or in hell. In some respects, men are like machines. They feel free, and act so, provided they have scope to operate from, and indulge their own faculties in any given set of conditions. The angel is not free in hell, nor the devil in heaven. On the level of external appearances, which are the constant subject of interpretation, the good and evil of circumstances are relative things depending upon the quality and interest of the affection from which they are viewed. Obviously, men in the mixed states of good and evil in the world are in a different kind of liberty from that which rules in heaven or that which eases existence in hell. Theoretically it can be perceived as an extraordinary combination of permissions and provisions, from which it is impossible to prove any absolute pattern of operation, for, if that could be done, there must be an end to the essentials of liberty, without which even heaven cannot be derived.

What then, is the use of studying any history? If the truth is so obscurely buried, is history only a vehicle for a frivolous and superficial curiosity about the lives and scandals of men and events which have preceded? In fact, a knowledge of history, right or wrong, make a vital contribution to all civilized life. Upon it depend all the loyalties, ideals, taboos and moralities which any society needs for coherence and the regulation of the lives of the men within its jurisdiction. History is thus deeply involved in education. If anyone wishes to change a society he must first amend its conception of history by having his new version ac-

cepted by the people he desires to redirect, for redirection depends upon modifying the view of the past so that the values of the present can be changed for the sake of future ends. By "Common Sense" and "The Rights of Man," Thomas Paine obtained the popular acceptance of a revised attitude towards civil authority, knocking the props from under the established view of it, and his argument stretched back as far as William the Conqueror. Despite the relativity of good and evil in the appearances of human affairs, a knowledge of history is necessary to the teaching of doctrines about good and truth, evil and falsity, so that these things can be recognized when they appear in the light of the doctrine of the society which rests upon them. Nor, just because these ideas contain an element of prejudice and are so far in error, can we condemn them out of hand. Without them men could not have any ideas of justice, civil and moral good and evil, or proceed to carry out any undertaking requiring orderly progression. There would be universal anarchy. Obviously, it is better for men to have some kind of orderly state in which to dwell with known limits of security, than to be abandoned without precedents to govern his behavior and provide for his protection—unless it is ideal that each man should live alone on a desert island, which in time would destroy the human race.

The New Church teaches that "Religion is of life, and the life of religion is to do good." For the New Churchman therefore, it is imperative to know what "good" is. The question can be made to seem difficult, for what is seen exteriorly as good can be interiorly evil. The converse is also possible, otherwise Divine Foresight and Permission could not be effective. There are goods which can be mixed with evil, and there are truths which can be mixed with falsity, and again the converse. Representatively the speckled and the spotted are often more likely to promote human welfare, when men are not in a state to endure pure good and truth. Even the angels of the highest heaven are not pure. The spectrum of life which provides for the doing of good is very wide indeed, and New Church historians should be mindful of this. Yet there are evils which cannot be mixed with good and falsities which cannot be mixed with truth, such things as bring about murder, adultery, theft, false witness, blasphemy and the sin against the Holy Spirit. But without doctrine what these things are cannot be known, and doctrine has to be drawn from the Word

where it is often presented in an historical form. Nor can that history be rewritten without destroying the means of drawing true doctrine. Consequently the New Church man is forever committed to an a priori position, the quality and character of which depends upon the validity of his doctrine in relation to the Word, not to politics, nor to science, nor to material scholarship.

Consider some of the distinctive things which affect the New Churchman's thought about history, none of which will be acceptable outside the New Church, and none of which is open to material proof:

1. All men are created for the sake of uses in heaven.
2. Every man is provided with the means by which the Lord can regenerate him if he is willing.
3. Every man is free not to regenerate.
4. The Lord rules all things for the sake of the end, which is good.
5. The Lord permits evil for the sake of the same end.
6. The good are sometimes kept from material success and honor because these would impair their eternal welfare.
7. The evil are sometimes given material success and honor because from self love they can be led the more diligently to perform uses valuable to the welfare of other people.
8. Everything provided and permitted in the world is brought about for the sake of establishing a genuine church among men, that thereby they may be led out of evil and into good.
9. Therefore, everything which happens, is done for the sake of the Word, that by means of it there may be salvation.
10. Divine Providence in all that it does is most secret so that men may deny it if they wish, but those who wish to affirm it can find reason to do so in events after they have taken place.
11. Men should do good as if of themselves but acknowledge that whatever good is done is done by the Lord through them and not from themselves.
12. There have been four churches or general dispensations among men from the beginning, which together constitute one series, which came to its end in 1757 in the Last Judgment. There is now a fifth or new dispensation which is called the crown, and which is like the rock, hewn without human hands, which smote the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, ground it to dust and grew until it filled the whole earth, and it will never be superseded.

How, then, is a New Churchman to rewrite history with a credible relationship between his a priori doctrine and whatever may be true in the material record of human existence and the prospects of the human future? What follows is merely a personal exercise in this kind of study. It hangs on certain radical opinions respecting doctrine, the origin of evil for instance, and it attempts to avoid any idealism about the primitive character of the material world.

The origin of literary history is interesting and instructive. It begins with fictional histories which loom out of the misty distances of early times and passes without any obvious sign into the history of actual men. In his best state, the man of the Most Ancient Church neither built nor wrote anything which he could leave behind to impress posterity. The area of his influence was geographically limited, being confined to that tract which we call Canaan. He saw the sun rise in the east, ascend towards the south and then decline into the west. And yet he did not attend to this as a geophysical fact, but as a spiritually significant pattern representing goods and truths about the Lord, the order of His Creation and the condition of mankind.

We are informed that the Adamic Church did not encompass all of mankind. It was constituted in the world of those who had permitted the Lord to open in them the celestial degree of the mind. But suppose that Church had extended in integrity and these celestial men had increased in numbers which obliged them to spread over the earth. Eventually we can suppose some must have crossed that geometrical line beyond which they would have begun to see the sun rise in the east and ascend towards the north before sinking into the west. And yet they would not have attended to this as a material effect, but would have seen in it a similar representation as before. To the celestial man the whole natural universe is representative, sun, moon, stars, and all the flora and fauna of the world as well as its waters, rocks and earths. Had this Adamic Church remained in its integrity our conception of human history would never have existed, for there would have been no need for the Lord to be born into the world as a man. (AC 2661)

The men of the Adamic Church were not the only human inhabitants of the world at that time. They were surrounded by other peoples. They were, however, unique, since they alone, so

far, had been willing to subdue the natural with themselves and allow the Lord to make them first into spiritual men and finally into celestial men, thus putting aside the evils of the proprium and receiving a new proprium from the Lord. Because of this they lived in a state of tranquility and peace in themselves, and by means of their spiritual sphere they had open communication with heaven, and thereby the rest of the human race, as yet outside the church, had enlightenment of mind by which means the Lord could continue to extend and perfect His essential work of Creation, the salvation of the whole human race.

But not all the offspring of these celestial men were content to have proprium from the Lord. Some wanted to have proprium from themselves, and, of course, they already had it, for they were all born with a natural which required regeneration. Gradually the quality of the church declined and at last it lost its tranquility and its gift of perception, and in their place arose the insatiable love of themselves and an unwillingness to accept anything they could not confirm from the natural senses. But there were still those among them who valued the trappings of wisdom. To preserve these for their own purposes they collected the remembered perceptions of the church and preserved them in artificial forms of fictitious but representative histories, for they had no records of actual history, and no other language than the one which described spiritual ideas by means of natural uses. But the rejection of living perceptions in favor of artificial representatives is contrary to order, and to true wisdom, for the former are unrestricted in the subtleties of their significance, while the latter are like graven images and liable to become objects of idolatry. The posterity of the Most Ancient Church invented history and established it as a means of directing the course of terrestrial human life.

But it could not reestablish the church with them, for with them, it was from themselves. From it they received no enlightenment. While they and their kind would ultimately destroy themselves, there were all those other inhabitants in the world who were not derived from celestial stock and for whom spiritual enlightenment was obscured by the destruction of the celestial church. For these, the historical representatives drawn according to the circumstances of the land of Canaan and its environs, could provide the means for instruction in a doctrine of charity which was the inspiration of the Noatic or Ancient Church. Thus was a written Word

established in which the sun always rose in the east, ascended towards the south and sank into the west, and wheresoever the Ancient Church spread abroad its representative forms were adaptations of significatives in its Word, derived originally from Canaan.

The Ancient Word, consisting of sensual representatives, was liable to abuse, for as well as an idea of genuine charity and faith, representatives can be used for idolatry and magic. Those called Ham and his offspring were in an external worship which was interiorly corrupt. By degrees the quality of the Ancient Church declined until the tenuous connection between men in the world and the heavens could only be maintained through a people which strove to be chosen, settling in the land of Canaan, where their whole way of life was regulated to provide a representation of a true church according to the significant types collected in the Ancient Word. With them, however, the uses of religion did not depend upon their interior state of life, but only upon the careful performance of external rituals which could represent an interior state of spiritual and celestial things until Shiloh should come and remove the sceptre from Judah. But it is not only with Abraham and his seed that history emerges from the ages of invented patriarchs into the apparent light of a world inhabited by identifiable individuals. Elsewhere the earth was strewn with races and aristocracies descended from gods, coming forth out of legends and superstitious myths, illustrating the favors of heaven and the fury of nemesis, affecting actual men and women according to the state of their lives, and gradually developing into sophisticated philosophies about religion, morals, power, economics and human liberty.

Freewill presents a problem in every history drawn to a tidy pattern of Divine Ordinance. But it is clear that freewill is the root and cause of our history, beginning, as it does, with the Adamic Church choosing to incline towards proprium from itself, when the prophecy was given that the Lord would come into the world to save men from their evils. Yet it is not acceptable to suppose that the Lord created the Adamic Church to fall of necessity, and give cause for His advent. 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 proprium.

There exists a form of pre-ordained history arguing that the human race was prepared for the Lord's two advents by Greek and Roman humanism in the first instance, and by the Renaissance in the second, though this hardly harmonises with the a priori position that the Lord makes His advent at the end of a former state, bringing light and judgment where otherwise there could only be darkness and despair. From doctrine it would appear the spiritual value of a church is probably in inverse proportion to its interest in exercising control over material affairs. The Lord did not choose to be born in a king's palace. Nor did he require that the church He established should control the Roman Empire. Indeed the decline of the First Christian Church dates from the period when it became a political force, and matters of orthodoxy and heresy began to be factors involved with civil government. It is a matter which should give the New Churchman cause to pause lest he become too eager for that day when from being among a few, recognition of the new dispensation shall spread among the many.

In the original invention of history time is merely a convenient strand upon which to thread a sequence of events like so many beads. The first "historians" appreciated a sense of time which could be used representatively rather than practically. Perhaps they could not think of it in any other way, and, in any case, it was not their concern to make their histories of wisdom materially practical in any mechanical manner. The antediluvians survived to fantastic ages, yet the whole universe was the work of six short days. Their ancestors of the Most Ancient Church, who were wiser than we, did not measure time as a thing in itself. They saw in a day, "an evening and a morning" defining a change of internal state, and the short period spent in the shadows of the natural world was as nothing compared with the eternal heaven they perceived to be in preparation for them by the Lord.

Fundamental to any view of history is the way in which time is regarded. In our western tradition it is conceived as a continuous stream of instants of universal simultaneity. Out of this, sticking up like Saracen stones giving scale and location, are a number of



prominent events, one of which we use daily, dividing B.C. from A.D. That the whole system is artificial rarely occurs to us, though we may laugh at incongruous tales, as of the Roman coins, found in the shingle between Deal and Dover, bearing the date of 54 B.C. ! But our western, Christian Church attitude towards time is not the only one possible, or necessarily the most correct.

Philosophically there can be but one state of simultaneity, and this only exists with the Lord and Creator Himself. Elsewhere, simultaneity is very local indeed, geared to our material perceptions. Extended across the universe our view consists mostly of things which seem to have happened in the remote past. Concentrated into the smallest forms which can be measured, simultaneity is equally elusive. Our sensual idea of "before and after" is drawn from a conviction that our time has a real basis in a universal clock which ticks off simultaneous moments everywhere to the same scale, scarcely differing from the mechanism of the familiar watches we wear.

With the Most Ancients it was obviously different. When the men of that church fell from integrity they then received a dictate in their failing perceptions that the Lord would at last come into the material world and be born in time to save mankind.

Thus the Ancient Church rested on the hope of the advent of the Messiah, designing its calendars to inspire and call to mind the routines of representative worship until the Lord would come with His deliverance. Time was but a recurring cycle of repetitive states looking to this end.

For the First Christian Church there was the conviction that the Advent had taken place. For it, time was divided by the idea of the Lord's birth. Deductions according to the ages assigned to the patriarchs and antediluvians in Holy Writ established the precise moment when creation began. It looked for a final end of time when the Lord should fulfill His promise to come again and the last Trumpet would sound. In the western tradition time is a very material dimension, bearable because it looks to termination in universal glory. Even the political atheist expects a paradise, an ideal state in the world, from which wickedness will be banished by universal, unselfish concord, a last perfect pinnacle at the summit of the evolutionary mountain—or is it a tree?

The New Jerusalem is founded on the conviction that the Lord Jesus Christ reigns, and that He has made His Second Advent

coming in the clouds of heaven, two hundred years ago. How then shall the New Church regard time? It cannot expect a termination. There will not be another Advent, and heavenly glory is not fabricated out of the things of this material world. Do we face the prospect of untold millennia of recorded history just like the last six or seven thousand years? For the writer it passes belief that, say, 30,000 years hence, students on this planet will be carefully scrutinising the details of this 20th century age of chaos, and the great events, institutions, priests, rulers, philosophers and systems of subsequent ages, all set out with interpretation to account for the ever widening influence and majesty of the New Church among the many! In any case, what of the history we already think we know and interpret? If we believe our western conception of time, it seems to tell us that human habitation on this globe has only covered a minute fraction of the age of the oldest rocks, and has nothing to boast in comparison with the slow drift of continents, the building of mountains and their erosion, or indeed with the brief age in which reptilian monsters are said to have stalked the earth. Surely our notion of material time and its function must be gradually changed, otherwise the outlook into an unending void of time such as we are acquainted with becomes too absurd and shocking to contemplate.

The complement of Paradise Lost is Paradise Regained. Allowing for external differences, there must be a certain basic similarity, paradise being in the internal man, not the external. In their integrity, the Most Ancients had no idea that the Lord's Church with them could end. With His sheep who remained on the mountain, it never did end. Time for them was only a sequential matrix for the changing of internal states, with themselves and those they loved. An extraordinary feature (to us) of their character was their complete anonymity. They counted themselves as nothing and valued only those things which they saw to be with them from the Lord. Therefore Adam was the Lord's creation, not their own, and they called nothing human which they did not perceive to be from Him. This state has always been described as golden, infancy, morning and springtime, for it was a state of perpetual renewal in the souls of the men of the church. As to their bodies, these progressed from infancy to youth, to manhood and old age, and finally they died. But that was only the external body, and it signified the proprium, as it were, from themselves.

As to the soul, it was in heaven for ever, for that was the Lord's own, and could be raised up to everlasting life.

When their posterity inclined to proprium, even to love it, they derived an external form for their wisdom which was finite, like their own bodies. In its first form it was like the wisdom of the Most Ancient state, infancy, morning and springtime, but being finite like the body the external form must needs advance, and so the cycle of natural progression with the Word began, putting off successively each age as it is rejected, until, finally, like the proprium, like the body, it dies. Thus it passed from infancy, morning and springtime into youth, noonday and summer, and then to maturity, evening and autumn, and thus to old age, night and the "winter of our discontent." Finally, it died!

Some have attempted to see the New Church as part of this cycle. But the orthodox pattern does not provide a place for the New Church within the cycle. The New Church is again an infancy, a springtime, and in this it is like the Most Ancient Church, which after all, was the church the Lord purposed to create and was a seventh day towards which His creation ascended. There is nothing higher than the celestial state. Subsequent churches were an accommodation to man's deterioration in time, and the separation of the will and the understanding with the Noatic church was not a mysterious piece of spiritual surgery, but an adaptation which permitted a church to be established with men who had not ascended to the celestial church, for all those with whom celestial seed had been formed, namely the posterities of the Most Ancient Church, finally perished. Like the Most Ancient Church, the New Church is also the Lord's creation, the Holy City descending from heaven, a new beginning in parallel with that Garden which the Lord planted eastward in Eden, that rock, hewn without hands, which smote and overthrew Nebuchadnezzar's dream image. What the Most Ancients derived from interior perception and open communication, the New Church man must derive from a published doctrine and reflection upon the instruction given in its external form. So long as this doctrine survives, scattered over the earth like seed in the minds of men, it will sprout according to the soil of its reception, and bring forth an abundant harvest for the consolation of mankind. Men, and the institutions formed from them, must grow old as to their bodies, and progress from infancy to youth, manhood and old age, and at length they die, for

the last state of material life is always death. It is the soul which is capable of renewal, not the body, and surely this is the real hope which the New Church offers to mankind, for it cannot offer an external, material heaven in this world, for this never was the purpose of the Lord's creation, either with the Most Ancients, or with us.

As for human history, recorded from its first paradise to its tumultuous death, as the stench of its carcass recedes, will it not become a fossil in the rocks of human spiritual experience? Will it not become a dreamlike legend which lasted but a little while, illustrating that howsoever man loves himself according to the appearances of nature, and it is granted to him to do so, the Lord's infinite love and mercy is never prejudiced against the human race, nor is the salvation of those who are willing to be saved destroyed, because the Lord is able to use even the products of evil lusts to serve the eternal welfare of humanity at large.

The writer whose work stimulated this essay, at one point in his article asked, "Who is our New Church Einstein, Toynbee or Freud?" Perhaps there never can be any such. It is to be hoped that New Churchmen are as capable as any others of scholastic and technical excellence, that by their conscientious lives they should be valued for their material services to the society of the world in which they dwell. But may it not be that mankind is sufficiently blessed or cursed by the great names which arise elsewhere? Whatever we endeavor to do, it is the Lord who provides for the growth of His church, and the Most Ancients in their best states were anonymous! In AC 139 we read,

"In old time they were said to dwell alone who were under the Lord's guidance as celestial men, because such were no longer infested with evils. . . ." but of their posterity before the Fall, they "were not disposed to dwell alone, that is to be celestial men, but to be amongst the nations like the Jewish Church, and by reason of this disposition it was said that it was not good for man to be alone, for whosoever has a disposition to evil is already in evil, and it is granted to him."

Truly we may not be celestial men, but it seems we should be cautious in entertaining ambitions to be "honored amongst the nations," not because it could not be attained, but because it is not a use that the church can desire for itself, if it would remain a church.