

REVIEW

SWEDENBORG AND THE REVOLT AGAINST DEISM

Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism, by Robert H. Kirven.~ Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1965. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1965. Publication No. 65-14,424.

Dr. Kirven* has written a thought-provoking study concerning the relation of a central idea in Swedenborg's Theological Writings to the movement away from Deism which took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His dissertation examines the interaction between that central idea which Dr. Kirven calls the idea of "empirical revelation," and the intellectual movement generally known as the revolt against Deism. How might the revolt against Deism be characterized? What is meant by "empirical revelation"? Answers to these two questions are crucial for an understanding of Dr. Kirven's study.

Deism is described as a product of natural theology and philosophical rationalism. Natural theology tended to ignore revealed religion, accepting what was subject to rational proof. An attempt was made to reconstruct Christianity, but this attempt was inconsistent with the supernaturalist world view and commitment to the authority of Holy Scripture found in traditional Christianity. Philosophical rationalism involved a commitment to the authority of the faculty of reason in knowing, and tended toward a dualistic view of reality. According to the dualistic view, reality was seen as consisting of two parts, each equally real and having no attributes or qualities in common; these parts were identified as mind and body, thought and extension, or spirit and matter. The consequence of rationalism, as well as naturalism, for Deism was to make the authority of human reason superior to revelation. Deism, following the mechanistic view of natural theology, viewed God as totally transcendent, as symbolized by the comparison of God to a "watchmaker." Deism, following the dualistic tendencies in rationalism, ascribed equal status to spirit and nature.

*Dr. Kirven is a Minister in the General Convention and a teacher at the Swedenborg School of Religion, Newton, Mass. He is also the Editor of the *Messenger*. (Ed.)

According to our Author the revolt against Deism developed among men too strongly influenced by Deism and the forces which shaped it to "turn back"; this revolt was clearly different from conservative calls for a total rejection of Deism and a return to "true religion." Those involved in the revolt against Deism attempted to face directly the issues it raised. Two of these issues are particularly significant for Dr. Kirven's study: how reason and revelation are related in knowing, and whether or not an alternative to dualism can be found. In response to the dualistic view of Deism, the revolt against Deism seemed to be faced with only two alternatives: a movement toward naturalism or a movement toward a monism which included mind and body, spirit and matter, in one kind of substantial reality. Dr. Kirven claims that Swedenborg developed an alternative to dualism which could be described as "holism." According to this point of view, spirit and matter are equally and similarly objectively real, together forming a whole that is indivisible in reality. Further, Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation is especially relevant to the relation between reason and revelation, and questions concerning the priority of one or the other. In examining the relation of Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation to the revolt against Deism, Dr. Kirven concentrates primarily on the relation of revelation to knowing, rather than the search for an alternative to a dualistic view of reality, although the latter issue also arises from time to time.

Dr. Kirven describes Swedenborg's revolt against Deism as involving his conviction that Deism was not religious enough to be an adequate system of religious thought. Accordingly it is argued that Swedenborg attempted to expand the Deist concept of religion to include "mystical" or "spiritual" concepts, while viewing this inclusion as consistent with his own inclination towards rationalism and the scientific method. Crucial for Swedenborg's own revolt against Deism and influential in the revolt against Deism in general was what Dr. Kirven describes as Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation.

Swedenborg claimed immediate revelation by means of sensible experiences in the spiritual world. He further claimed that his psychic experiences were revelatory, and that the revelation he was commissioned to transmit to the world was received in and through these psychic experiences. For his claim to revelation,

Swedenborg provided three kinds of supporting evidence. First of all, he regarded his experiences as empirically certain and equivalent to the certainty that normally accompanies sense perception. Secondly, he supports the assertions based on his claim to revelation with comparative data; this comparative data was most frequently taken from Biblical texts, but sometimes involved observations of nature or of human experience, or references to traditions of the Church. Thirdly, he supports his claim to revelation by referring to a view of man and human potential; man is seen as a spirit clothed with a body, having a capacity of conversing with spirits, a capacity which has fallen into disuse.

According to Dr. Kirven, Swedenborg saw his psychic experiences as both revelatory and empirical. Not only did Swedenborg claim that he received revelation through his psychic experiences, but he regarded the data of this revelation as compatible with all empirical data and of equal truth value with the data of sense perceptions. Thus Swedenborg makes no distinction between physical and psychic experiences, and treats them in completely parallel ways. Swedenborg, according to the interpretation suggested by Dr. Kirven, regarded the idea of empirical revelation as self-certifying and apparently felt no need to justify it except by using it.

After outlining the idea of empirical revelation, Dr. Kirven considers its potential and actual impact. He compares the revolutionary nature of this idea with the Copernican Revolution.

"The fact that Swedenborg's idea did not stir such violent and widespread reactions—that in many cases, it was dismissed without serious consideration—may obscure the radical challenge it presented to systematic thought. Its potential impact is fully appropriate to comparison with the Copernican Revolution for the assumption that psychic and physical data could be considered together, if taken seriously, would have threatened the philosophy of being, of knowledge, and of God, with the same kind of anxiety" (pp. 23-24).

Although the actual impact of Swedenborg's idea fell far short of its potential impact, it did have a significant impact on the revolt against Deism. This impact is thoroughly examined.

According to Dr. Kirven, there were three basic issues around which there was an interaction between Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation and the revolt against Deism. One was the philosophical question of what reality there is and by what means

knowledge of it can be acquired or validated. A second was the ecclesiastical question of what to do with the newly perceived knowledge, whether to reform the established Church or to separate from it. A third was the psychological question of what the new knowledge reveals about the knowing capacity of man, and how the new understanding of the knowing process clarifies the problem of knowledge. In all three of these areas, Swedenborg's idea contributed to or provoked anti-Deist alternatives. Swedenborg contributed to the search for a more inclusive and holistic view of reality and theory of knowledge, but also provided a negative stimulus which contributed to Kant's attempt to confine knowledge within the limits of certainty, and exclude revelation and psychic perception from philosophy as yielding no legitimate claims to knowledge. In the ecclesiastical aspect of the revolt, Swedenborg's idea led to sectarian separation, despite an original effort by "Swedenborgians" to avoid sectarianism. Finally, Swedenborg's idea stimulated the introduction of psychological issues into the revolt, including an analysis by Herder which was a forerunner to the discipline of psychology of religion.

The Author supports these historical conclusions by tracing in detail the influence of Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation on various participants in the revolt against Deism. Some of the participants considered are J. A. Ernesti, Kant, F. C. Oetinger, Thomas Hartley, John Clowes, Robert Hindmarsh, John Wesley, J. G. Herder, Blake, Coleridge, Balzac, Goethe, and J. F. I. Tafel. After examining in detail the influence of Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation, Dr. Kirven claims that no judgment as to the truth value of Swedenborg's claim to empirical revelation or any part of it can be made on historical grounds. Judgments of the truth or falsity of Swedenborg's claim, he says, must be made on other grounds.

"Its acceptance or rejection presupposes prior decisions regarding the ontological status of spiritual (*vis-a-vis* material) reality, and the epistemological status of psychic (*vis-a-vis* physical) perceptions" (p. 304).

What Dr. Kirven has provided is a historical investigation of the interaction between Swedenborg's idea of empirical revelation and the revolt against Deism. Dr. Kirven's methodology is historical, but many philosophical issues are raised in the course of his study. I will devote the remainder of this review to a con-

sideration of some of these philosophical issues. The issues to be considered can be summarized in the following questions.

1. What is involved in Swedenborg's holism? Can this point of view resolve problems dualism fails to resolve?
2. What kind of knowledge claim is involved in a claim to empirical revelation? How might such a claim be supported by reasons?
3. What view of religious language does the idea of empirical revelation suggest?
4. Can Kant's attempt to limit empirical knowledge be answered?
5. What sort of answer does the idea of empirical revelation suggest?

Although Dr. Kirven does not attempt to answer these questions, and could not be expected to do so in a historical study, his study could provide very valuable insights in the search for answers to them. I will not attempt to provide any answers in this review but will suggest some possible approaches which might contribute to the search for those answers.

To answer questions concerning holism as an alternative to dualism and Swedenborg's commitment to holism, it would be necessary to consider certain concepts found in Swedenborg's Theological Writings. These concepts, which present an ontology or theory of reality, would include "correspondence," "influx," "degrees," and "form," particularly "human form." These concepts do seem to suggest a unity rather than a duality which would consist of two totally distinct and separate kinds of substances.

Holism would seem to be an alternative both to dualism, the idea that reality consists of two distinct and separate kinds of substances, and to monism, the idea that all reality consists of different modes, aspects, or appearances of one substance. The views of reality found both in Swedenborg's philosophical works and in his Theological Writings suggest, for example, that mind and body, or spirit and matter, are not to be seen as non-contiguous substances, that one is not a mode of the other, and that they are not simply different modes of some further substance. Nor does Swedenborg suggest a pluralistic view of reality, which would involve regarding reality as consisting of many distinct and separate ultimate substances. What is suggested by Swedenborg may be a movement away from the entire controversy between dualism,

monism and pluralism, as found, for example, in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, and an attempt to develop a new approach to the concept of substance and to ontology in general. Explication of the notions of "correspondence," "influx," "degrees" and "form" could make it clear what this new approach involves and how successful it might be.

Both the idea of holism and the ideas of empirical revelation suggest revolutionary approaches to philosophical problems. Just as the idea of holism seems to constitute a radically new approach to problems in ontology, so the idea of empirical revelation seems to constitute a radically new approach to certain problems in epistemology or theory of knowledge. What kind of a knowledge claim is involved in a claim to empirical revelation? The knowledge claimed to be gained from such a revelation would seem to be immediate and direct. Yet it would also seem to be supportable by evidence; one can give reasons to support claims to empirical revelation.

On what basis might a claim to empirical revelation be judged to be true? This question can be approached by means of the comparison between psychic experiences and sense experiences presented by Dr. Kirven and suggested in Swedenborg's Theological Writings. Sense experiences have a kind of immediate certainty; similarly a claim to empirical revelation would involve the immediate certainty of a psychic experience. Further, one may support a judgment about a particular sense experience by showing that this particular sense experience is coherent with other sense experiences. Similarly one may judge particular claims included in what is judged to be an empirical revelation by whether or not the psychic experiences these claims involve are coherent with one another. In addition to judging a claim to empirical revelation by immediacy and coherence, one may judge it by whether or not it is consistent with experiences other than psychic experiences, including sense experiences. The idea of empirical revelation indicates that in making such judgments, psychic experiences should be on an "equal footing" with sense experiences. In order to adequately answer the questions of what kind of knowledge claim is involved in a claim to empirical revelation, and on what basis such a claim would be judged to be true, it may be necessary to explore in depth the relation between psychic experiences and sense experiences.

A third philosophical issue to be considered is what view of religious language the idea of empirical revelation suggests. Particularly relevant to this issue is Dr. Kirven's discussion of J. A. Ernesti's reactions to the interpretations of Scripture developed in Swedenborg's Theological Writings. Ernesti developed a rigid "one word, one meaning" principle, while Swedenborg describes each word of Scripture as presenting an idea in which there are things "so innumerable . . . that it can never be believed" (AC 1870). In contrast to Ernesti's literalistic view of religious language, the idea of an "internal sense of the Word" developed in Swedenborg's Theological Writings suggests that the language of the Bible should not be interpreted in a merely literal way, since there are internal meanings within this language. Although the language of the Bible was viewed as unique and special in Swedenborg's Theological Writings, it might be generalized from suggestions made in these Writings that religious statements in general are symbolic and analogical rather than merely literal. Yet the idea of empirical revelation suggests that although religious language can be viewed as symbolic and analogical rather than literal, such language does involve knowledge claims. The Theological Writings of Swedenborg clearly distinguish the statements of the Bible from all other statements which might be regarded as religious language. However, the idea of empirical revelation may still suggest two theses about religious statements in general: (1) that they are to be interpreted as symbolic and analogical rather than merely literal; and (2) that they involve knowledge claims.

A final question concerns how one might attempt to answer Kant's effort to limit empirical knowledge in a way which would exclude any claim to revelation. Kant's limitation suggests that no claim to revelation can be legitimately regarded as a knowledge claim, and thus no claim to revelation can be established as true. One possible answer to this would be to agree that claims to revelation are not knowledge claims, and to regard such claims as involving "belief" or "faith," but not knowledge. However, the idea of empirical revelation, as suggested in Swedenborg's Theological Writings and considered in Dr. Kirven's study, does involve the view that claims to revelation *are* knowledge claims. One might try to answer Kant by accepting his limitation of empirical knowledge, and claiming that revelation establishes a kind of knowledge other than empirical knowledge. However, the

idea of empirical revelation implies that claims to knowledge involved in empirical revelation are claims to *empirical* knowledge, and not some other kind of knowledge. Thus the idea of empirical revelation would seem to require a rejection of Kant's limitation of empirical knowledge as too narrow. On what grounds can Kant's limitation be rejected? These grounds would seem to involve the regarding of claims to revelation as empirical claims to be judged by empirical criteria. What these criteria are has already been suggested in considering how one might attempt to establish a claim to empirical revelation as true. One would judge such a claim by the immediacy of the psychic experiences involved, the coherence of psychic experiences with one another, and whether or not such psychic experiences are coherent with other experiences, including sense experiences. Along with such criteria, the idea of empirical revelation suggests the revolutionary assumption that in judging whether or not claims to revelation are true, psychic experiences should be on an "equal footing" with sense experiences. Thus a successful answer to the question of on what basis a claim to empirical revelation can be judged to be true would also be a successful answer to Kant's attempt to limit empirical knowledge in a way which excludes claims to revelation.

In raising these philosophical issues, I am attempting to suggest possible ways in which one might attempt to build on the results of Dr. Kirven's excellent study. I think that his study is not only a successful venture into the history of ideas, but it raises many important questions which lead beyond a historical examination of the topics considered. The philosophical issues I have considered are simply a few of the questions which Dr. Kirven's study suggests.

J. THEODORE KLEIN

Urbana College, Ohio