

Notes and Comments

On Church History and Gentile Religions

A number of issues are raised by Rev. E. Sandstrom's letter (*New Philosophy* 88:3:537) which are of interest to New Church scholars—both specific ones about Zoroaster and Buddha, and more general ones about the nature of the Most Ancient and Ancient Churches. Some are very puzzling indeed. Although not a professional scholar myself, perhaps I might be allowed to give a layman's impressions.

The teaching of Zoroaster (628-551 BC) is unique among non-Christian religions in that it contains no falsities—at first glance anyway. The falsities of the Parsee religion derived from him originate from later additions. Possibly, then, Zoroaster was indeed a true "prophet," a divinely inspired writer. Maybe one could decide if he was on the basis of his surviving writings, especially if these were of any spiritual moment. But it seems of little spiritual moment to a Christian, though intellectually interesting. An alternative interpretation would be that in Iran there was an exceptionally pure stream of tradition from the Ancient Word. Either way it presents us puzzles which are hard to fit in with our picture of the history of the church.

On the other hand the life and teaching of Buddha (563-483 BC) and his very similar contemporary Mahavira (599-527 BC), the founder of the Jain religion, present the greatest of puzzles to reconcile with the world view of both the New Church and other Christians. One is the many parallels between the lives of these teachers and the life of the Lord—miraculous birth, temptation by the devil, rejection by the disciples, a traitor among the disciples, to name only some; yet there is neither an influence on the Gospel writers, nor by them (even though the extant Jain and Buddhist canon is quite late). Their doctrines afford a still greater puzzle. They seem to be gentile religious teachings of an internal character. Love to the neighbour, obedience to the commandments (from four to ten) is taught; also the existence of a state of salvation, hells, and imaginary heavens. "This life is short, having a sequel elsewhere,"

said Buddha. On the other hand they deny the existence of God. This may tempt us to dismiss them as mere Satanic manifestations. Such a response seems to me mere bigotry however, though I can't easily define my reason for thinking this. It is something about the spirit both of their writings and their individual adherents which makes it hard for a Christian to follow the obvious course of dismissing them. It is also noteworthy that when they hear about the Lord they tend to believe that He was more than a mere man and that He really did perform miracles. For myself I cannot see in the Buddhists and Jains anything other than a manifestation of the Lord, though of what kind I can scarcely guess.

This leads on to the more general issue of the nature of the Ancient Church. New Church scholars will be aware that the difficulties in Swedenborg's account of church history are second only to those concerning the earths in the universe. Broadly, Swedenborg's account is of regress rather than progress in church history. But scholars and archeologists tend to see progress in religion and morals. It is of course hard for a layman to judge how far they may read their evolutionary prejudices back into the record, or are subject to other sources of error. The Egyptians, Sumerians, Iranians, Indians and Chinese themselves all believed their pre-history to be one of *regress*. Nevertheless the scholarly opinion must be founded on pretty strong appearances, which are somewhat as follows: The human race has gone through stages of savagery (the Most Ancient Church?) and barbarism (the Ancient Church?), and although it is fashionable to deny the moral overtones of these terms, they have some foundation. We may well doubt, with Cowper, whether a virtuous character is possible except in a civilized man. Monstrous actions like cannibalism and human sacrifice, as well as treachery, adultery and minor crimes, become increasingly frequent as we go back in time, and among the surviving remnants of peoples in similar stages of cultural development. As the death in the fourth millennium BC of one of the earliest kings of Egypt (perhaps Menes the legendary founder of the Old Kingdom) some 300 concubines as well as other servants were slain and placed in his tomb. The decapitated bodies found in the tombs of the great in the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 BC), which is a prehistoric dynasty, seem to show that the practice of killing people to accompany dead nobles was more frequent then than in historic times, i.e. Chou dynasty 1122-221 BC, though it continued in China till the 17th century.

Can these findings be reconciled with Swedenborg's teaching of

an Ancient Church of greater purity than the present—if the Writings are divinely inspired? The most radical way of reconciling them would be to suppose that the Most Ancient and Ancient Churches are no more to be taken literally than Adam and Noah. But less radical proposals should be considered. One such would be to suppose that the Ancient Church was a greater state of purity only in intention, in relation to the brutality and ignorance of its times. Another would be to juggle with the dates. The latter course is suggested by the fact that Swedenborg attributes the Assumption of Moses, a still extant late Jewish work, to the Ancient Church (Jude v. 9, AE 735). This suggests that some of the Jews themselves actually *were* the Ancient Church. And by the same token, were the Jains and Buddhists not just the corrupt Ancient Church, but the Ancient Church itself? Doubtless many interpretations are possible. It would be interesting to hear your readers views on these issues of the Ancient Church.

I agree with Mr. Sandstrom that the coincidence of dates is interesting in relation to events in the Jewish Church and the foundation of religious movements further East. The floreat of Zoroaster, Mahavira and Buddha (600-550 BC) is about a generation after the finding of the Book of the law in the temple, and the reforms of King Josiah (640-609 BC). It is even more tempting to connect a later development of Buddhism, the Mahayana (i.e. Great Chariot) doctrine, which began early in the Christian era, with the new light from the Lord's presence in the heavens in His Divine Human. From our viewpoint the Mahayana was a progressive movement, at least in some ways, because it taught the existence of God and also love to the neighbour in a yet greater degree than the elder Buddhism. However, it degenerated in Tibet into a religion which has *outwardly* the features of Babylon which the Last Judgment ascribes to the Roman Catholic hierarchy inwardly, but which, in the West, never existed outwardly. Dragon-like teachings also cropped up among the Mahayanists. The parallels with Christian history are suggestive at least, though perhaps we will never know, in this life anyway, the real causes. Such parallels were also found in the history of Islam, though here we have some Christian influence in the natural world as well as in the world of spirits.

The following tabulation of dates, with some comments, concerning Jewish and Gentile religious history may help the reader put my remarks into clearer historic context. Sources are the Bible and *Encyclopedia Britannica*. All dates BC.

Dates in Jewish Religious History

640-609	Reign of Josiah the great reformer
609	End of Assyrian empire
597	Babylonian captivity of 3023 Jews
586	Destruction of temple and captivity of 832 Jerusalemites
538	Release of Jews from captivity by Cyrus
516	Destruction of second temple

Note that the prophetic canon was almost completed in this period, and later books (Daniel, end of Zachariah) refer back to it also. The Babylonian captivity appears to have been not just a political event but a spiritual one, after which the Jewish church, previously so prone to idolatry, achieved a firm insight into the oneness of the Lord, firmer than that of Christians (see TCR 183:1; c.f. Book of Ezra in the Bible).

Dates in Gentile History

621-551	Life of Zoroaster, founder of Parseeism
599- 527	Life of Mahavira, last Tirthankara of Jainism
6th century	Life of Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism
563-483	Life of Buddha
551-479	Life of Confucius
580-500	Life of Pythagoras, founder of higher Greek religious tradition
470-391	Mo Tzu, founder of school teaching universal love for the sake of God the Father

From this it appears that the most important dates in gentile religious history and some of the most important dates in Jewish history (amounting to a second foundation of Judaism) were in the 250 years between 650 and 400 BC, especially the century from 600-500 BC.

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