

the occurrence of the indicative in indirect questions is another; the replacing of *sine* with *absque* and *quod attinet ad* with *quoad* are manifestations of the same trend. The contraction of the vocabulary points to a simplification of expression and there are other tokens of the same tendency (e.g. the concentration of *tantum* upon the consecutive and comparative senses). It is as though Swedenborg, when communicating the elementary truths of his doctrine, strives to express himself as plainly as possible. In this way he created a language that is remarkably regular; it obeys its own rules.■

Extracted from *Classica et Medaevalia Studia* Franz Blatt dedicata: Copenhagen, 1973, pp. 622-8.

## Notes and Comments

### On the Nature of Swedenborg's Theological Works

(A response to a not-so-recent communication by Norman Newton  
[*New Philosophy* 88:3])

Two and a half years or so ago, Norman Newton wrote a reply to my article on Swedenborg's *Earths in the Universe* ("Extraterrestrial Life," *New Philosophy* 88:1 & 2). He began by responding to some false or misguided assumptions he perceived in my work (ones touching on the essential nature of Swedenborg's theological works). After the first paragraph, however, he seemed to move away from the specific context of my article, and began to speak generally about how we as a church ought to be regarding the Writings. Mr. Newton's comments were thought-provoking. Moreover, he treated his subject matter with a pleasant sort of incisiveness which led the reader to want very much to understand what he was saying. What this amounted to was that, although his communication was ostensibly a criticism of my work, I enjoyed his remarks immensely.

The obvious question is why, if I enjoyed his communication so much, am I writing this—admittedly belated—reponse? My reason is that Mr. Newton's remarks, while interesting and enlightening,

betray a serious misunderstanding of what I was trying to accomplish in the *Earths* article. Had he been alone in his misunderstanding there would, of course, be no need for a reply. Time, however, has told me of quite a few friends and acquaintances who hold similar misconceptions of my aims in that article. In offering this brief rejoinder, I am therefore not responding to Mr. Newton so much as clearing up some of the general confusion which has surrounded my work.

Let me begin by saying that I had no theological axe to grind in writing the article in question. My aim, rather, was to find parallels between Swedenborg and his contemporaries, and so, by way of contrast, to draw out those features of his views on extraterrestrial life which distinguish him from others in his day. In this way I hoped to "provide a firm footing for future historical and theological discussion of this topic."<sup>1</sup> To put it more bluntly, my aims were historical and comparative—not speculative or theological: I simply did not want to get involved in questions like whether there are, or were at one time, men on the moon, and if (not) so, what this implies about the nature of Swedenborg's writings. Although one would scarcely believe it of a paper on *Earths in the Universe*, solutions to these problems were never offered!

Problems arose when people tried to read into the paper those very themes which had deliberately been avoided. A few individuals—Mr. Newton, for instance—took my argument as being that *Earths in the Universe* represented a concession on Swedenborg's part to the prevailing belief in extraterrestrial life. He was, according to this view, consciously trying to "make his 'theological message' up-to-date or palatable to the intellectuals of his day."<sup>2</sup> Others saw in the paper an attempt at showing that Swedenborg's belief in extraterrestrial life stemmed from assumptions endemic to his intellectual environment. According to this view, Swedenborg's attribution of life to the moon was occasioned by the fact that he simply would not have questioned its existence on all other celestial

<sup>1</sup> "Extraterrestrial Life: A Study of the Intellectual Context of Swedenborg's *Earths in the Universe*," *New Philosophy* 88:1 & 2 (Jan.-March and April-June issue, 1985), p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> See Norman Newton, "On the Nature...", *New Philosophy* 88:3 (July-September, 1985), p. 539 (bottom). Ironically, one of the points of my paper was to show that not everyone believed in extraterrestrial life (although most probably did), and that of those that did, not all believed that it existed on every other planet.

bodies.<sup>3</sup> Such understandings of the *Earths* paper disservice themselves by ignoring the primarily *historical* information contained in the paper. In essence, they view the paper from the standpoint of theological problems which had purposely been left for the reader to sort out for him or herself.

More problems arose for those who felt that the paper made some sort of statement about the overall nature of Swedenborg's works. Mr. Newton, for instance, feels that I, like others in the church, have fallen into a trap. This trap, he says, waits for all those who see the nature of the Writings as being like that of a Third Testament. In his words, "If [the Writings] are a Third Testament' in the strict sense, then the limitations of Swedenborg's 18th-century science gives them a faulty literal sense. We are then driven subtly to deny what they say, in searching for a chimerical 'internal sense.' "

Mr. Newton raised this issue in connection with a statement on page 438 of the *Earths* article—namely that "New Churchmen today... must decide whether Swedenborg's science must be accepted along with his theological message." Although this whole topic was not really addressed in the paper, let me address it here. In my opinion, if one is to regard the Writings as revealing Divine truth, one must also recognize that this truth was mediated to us through a "mere man." Likewise, we must accept the fact that we human beings cannot perceive Divine truth in and of itself. These limiting factors—both on our part and on Swedenborg's—seem (at least to me) to make accommodation<sup>4</sup> a theological necessity. Such accommodation comes most squarely into play when Swedenborg offers illustrations of spiritual things based on the view of history,

<sup>3</sup> I actually devoted a whole section (p. 443-446 of the paper) to debunking this idea. See especially p. 446, note 74.

<sup>4</sup> The term *accommodation*, by my definition, refers to the Lord's adaptation of truth to human powers of reason through appearances, i.e. by means of things we people can understand and accept rather than by some sort of direct contact with the Divine essence. Although ancient allegorists made much of the concept, the actual term *accommodatio* came into common use in the post-Reformation era as part of Protestant efforts at explaining away things like inconsistencies among the Gospels, anthropomorphic language about God, scientific inaccuracies, etc. See Jack B. Rogers & Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 19, 152, et alibi. A useful article to consult, especially for Jewish thought on this subject, is Stephen D. Benin's "The 'Cunning God' and Divine Accommodation," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45:2 (April-June, 1984), p. 179-191.

or of the physical universe, prevalent in his time. In these cases, ideas surface that are often very different from our own. Such circumstances require that we step back in time, and try to grasp the nature of the scientific or historical framework within which he was working, thereby enabling us to get to the root of what Swedenborg was really saying.

Significantly, this same problem exists not only for sacred texts, but for profane ones as well. For instance, in order to read the works of the famous Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra, one needs to know something about medieval Arabic/Aristotelian natural philosophy. Likewise, if one is to appreciate the works of the Latin philosophical poet, Titus Lucretius, one must know something about atomistic cosmology. In general, whenever one meets with scientific or historical statements on the part of some author, one is inevitably faced with the question of what physical worldview he or she is operating under. Even in cases where this worldview contrasts markedly with our own, we must try to see things from the author's perspective, and, in spite of our possible disagreement with his or her observations, come to appreciate the substance of what he or she was essentially saying.

The point here is that "trying to see things from the author's perspective"—whether in sacred *or* profane texts—does not require looking for inner meanings,<sup>5</sup> although it does often require separating an author's basic message from the specific illustrations or confirmations he or she has adduced. My remark about separating Swedenborg's science from his theological message therefore does not imply any need to become involved in "chimerical 'internal senses' "—just as separating Ibn Ezra's cosmology from his exegetical insights would not imply the need to posit some internal sense within *his* writings.

<sup>5</sup> Nor does it exclude them, either. In my mind, much of the debate over whether there are internal senses to the Writings is clouded by the feeling that the Writings are the sum total of the internal sense of the Word. The true internal senses are actually spiritual senses, and are of limitless depth. What the Writings do is tell us as much of the spiritual sense of the Old and New Testaments as Swedenborg could conveniently put down in rational form. Usually he gives only selections from one or another of these senses (namely, the internal historical, the spiritual, and celestial [the latter being mostly confined to the first chapter of Genesis]). If we are to talk about whether there are internal senses to the Writings, we must keep straight 1) whether we mean rational encapsulations of the spiritual senses, or the spiritual senses themselves, and 2) which sense it is we are talking about.

I say this in objection to Mr. Newton's assertion that my paper had, as one of its overarching theological assumptions, that the Writings were a "Third Testament," or that they possessed some kind of internal sense. As I said above, I didn't get deeply into issues like these in the paper. This was because my aim there was to help people of all theological stripes get an idea of what Swedenborg's contemporaries were saying about extraterrestrial life. My reason for doing this was that Swedenborg was often in implicit conversation with others in his day. At times he agreed with certain of them, more or less adopting their terms and methods of argumentation; at other times he set out on his own, redefining or creating terms as needed. An understanding of Swedenborg's intellectual context is therefore of immense use to serious readers of his works. In essence, it helps us climb into the recesses of the eighteenth century thought-world, and allows us to become more familiar with Swedenborg's relationship to it. Being familiar with Swedenborg's relationship to his intellectual context, in turn, helps us appreciate better the distinctive features of his works. By appreciating the distinctive features of his works we can ultimately gain a deeper appreciation of them—liberals, moderates, and fundamentalists alike, regardless of our particular views on their nature.

What I want to object to in Mr. Newton's interpretations of my paper, therefore, is not that he discussed important theological issues like the nature of Swedenborg's writings. I would object, rather, to the idea that such issues were basic to my *Earths* paper. Certainly a few theological ideas are going to creep into any work of this kind. However, to say 1) that I assumed the Writings to contain an internal sense, 2) that I felt Swedenborg's *Earths* to represent a concession on Swedenborg's part to the prevailing belief in extraterrestrial life, or 3) that I saw Swedenborg's belief in extraterrestrial life as stemming from assumptions endemic to his intellectual environment, reads way too much into the paper. My fear here is that, because idiosyncratic theological ideas are being associated with my primarily *historical* methodology, this methodology will become identified with them, and will thereby fall into disrepute among those who find them, for one reason or another, unpalatable. My purpose in writing this response, therefore, is not to discourage Mr. Newton from engaging in speculation on the nature of Swedenborg's inspiration. I would merely encourage him, and others, to try to separate these speculations from the sorts of issues focused on in my paper on Swedenborg's *Earths*.

Richard Goerwitz  
Chicago, Illinois