

HOW LONG OH LORD, HOW LONG?

William R. Kintner*

A topic which is of continuing interest to members of the New Church is why the Roman Empire officially adopted Christianity within 300 years after the birth of Christ, while today only a handful of people scattered around the world have accepted the Crown of Revelations. We live over 200 years after Swedenborg had written the concluding volume of the Writings. Why so quickly in the first case, why so slowly has the New Church spread in the second?

There is no clear-cut answer for the difference in time of the acceptance of the Christian Church compared with that of its successor, the New Church. Yet it may be profitable to explore some of the possible reasons.

In the first place, most of the people living two thousand years ago were ignorant and unsophisticated. There were very few scholars or thinkers. The bulk of the people knew almost nothing about the forces of nature which they believed was ruled by God or gods. Hence it was easy for them to believe in the supernatural. So when Christianity presented them with the vision of a God full of love and mercy it had a natural appeal. The Roman rule was normally tolerant, yet the heroism of the few Christian martyrs standing up against the Roman oppression of the new faith won converts by their courageous example.

An additional aspect of that period was the fact that the Messiah was born at the spiritual nadir of human existence. After His glorification, Divine influx from the spiritual sun flowing through the heavens was far stronger than before. The prior dominance of evil for centuries made it necessary to quickly establish an earthly base for Christianity.

This establishment was facilitated by the Roman Empire which enabled travel and communication between its diverse people. Also the fact that Latin was the universal language (and to a lesser extent Greek) made communication between people relatively easy. The rest of the

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world, outside the Roman Empire, was *terra incognita*. Except for expansion into these areas of Europe after the fall of this Empire, Christianity was largely confined to the Roman Empire area. Until the Moslem explosion, however, North Africa was also mostly Christian in character.

The world at the time of the acceptance of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine was quite different than that of today. Also, the number of Christians at the time Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire was relatively small.

The World Environment Today

At the close of the twentieth century today's world bears little resemblance to that of Christianity's birth. Today the whole world is the eventual goal of New Church evangelization, not just the relatively small area of the Roman Empire. Nor are the potential believers Semites and Caucasians, but the members of all human races. The variety of mankind is immense, as recent travels of mine to Japan, China, Southeast Asia, and Hawaii, and almost a hundred other countries previously, have shown. While no one now is trying to convert the entire world to any particular faith, that may be a conceivable goal of the New Church in the future. The variety of mankind may create both obstacles and opportunities for the acceptance of the Crown of Revelations. These differ throughout the present human global structure and environment.

Let us turn to the status of existing religions. Of the roughly five billion people living on earth today some one billion are Christians, divided between Catholics and Protestants; about the same number are Moslems, divided between Sunni and the more radical fundamentalist Shiites. Since most Moslems are also anti-western nationalists, they would have little interest in exploring a revelation brought to the world by a prominent 18th century westerner. Some one billion of the world's population are reincarnationists, the majority being Hindus and the remainder Buddhists. About one half billion people live under the rule of the quasi-religion of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union being the leading and most important exponent. Finally, 1.2 billion people live in the People's

Republic of China—almost a quarter of the human race. The brand of "socialism" pursued by the Chinese contrasts considerably with the Moscow model.

There are assorted other beliefs, the most significant being Shintoism as practiced in Japan. In its beginnings Shinto, like ancestor worship in China, lacked as dogma moral precepts or sacred writings. Over many centuries it was influenced by both Buddhism and Confucianism. In the 18th century it became a nationalist religion with the doctrine that the Japanese were superior to other peoples because of their descent from the gods. In recent years Japan has become the world's largest creditor nation and as an article in a recent issue of the *Economist*, "Off With the Mask" stated, "Japan has carried money politics to an extreme." In the December 1988 issue of *New Church Life*, Tatsuya Nagashima wrote, "In a materialistically affluent society we are poverty-stricken with a loss of spiritual nourishment."

Much the same could be said of the spiritual state of most people now living, regardless of their professed religions. Within the Christian world the many challenges to papal authority will increasingly plague the Catholic church—yet the Catholic insistence on moral behavior and good works may ease the way for disillusioned Catholics to explore and accept the Writings. The pernicious doctrine of faith alone acts as a bar to the recruitment of many Protestants. Why accept a religion that requires practice when you can get a ticket to heaven for nothing? In addition, in the United States the financial exploitation of followers by some fundamentalist TV preachers has turned many people against all religion.

The built-in hostility of the Mohammedan religion against all opposing religions is aggravated by the domination of Moslems for hundreds of years by Christian nations. It will be a long time before the Writings find much acceptance in the Moslem world.

From those who believe in reincarnation, as do most of the people who live in India as well as in Buddhist countries like Thailand or Sri Lanka, the Writings will gain few adherents until this widely held negative belief disappears. In Thailand for example, a person who is well-born enjoys the benefit of wealth because he lived an exemplary life in his previous existence. At the same time, he would have no sympathy for the wretched poor or for those afflicted with leprosy. These unfortunate people are

suffering now because of their misbehavior in a prior life. Finally, the end of reincarnation is the end of the personality as the individual is absorbed into nirvana.

The advent of Marxism-Leninism has forced millions of people to live under rulers committed to aggressive atheism. This ideology is rooted in unabashed materialism. Under providence it seems essential that a system based on the belief that man's unaided reason can solve all problems came into being to demonstrate the fallacy of this self-glorifying concept. Gorbachev's faltering efforts to reform the Soviet Union indicate that the Marxist-Leninist approach will eventually fail. Meanwhile, efforts to enforce atheism have led many people to turn inwardly to spiritual belief. Hence communist destruction of the old Orthodox Church—Caesar-papism—may one day help the people who have lived under this cruel experiment to become prime targets for New Church evangelization.

The case of China differs greatly from that of the Soviet Union. China has never had a transcendental religion. Several hundred years before Christ, Confucius established a code of conduct and manners which justified the existing feudal system. Subsequently he was deified by most Chinese for several centuries. Finally Taoism—worship of ancestors and the forces of nature—regained its dominant place.

Buddhism, which came into China over the Himalayan mountains, won many converts and then almost died out. Moslem faith came into China via the silk route to the west but never became significant. In the 19th century Christianity spread rather well, but the conduct of some Christian missionaries tarnished the reputation of the Christian faith. Communism was the last foreign faith to be adopted—this time by force of arms. Developments since, particularly the savage Cultural Revolution of 1965-68, led communism to lose its luster. Many of the younger Chinese today are searching for a new set of values to guide their personal behavior, but they have not turned toward any spiritual source from whence their values might come.

For example:

Everyday Behavior Standards for Primary School Students, which list 20 rules for China's 130 million primary school children, were issued in September, 1988 by the State Education Commission.

'China's future depends on children's moral quality,' said Ma Liming, dean of Beijing's First Experimental Primary School. 'Our school gives top priority to the standards, which require children not to be finicky about food, to be honest and not lie, to learn some simple work skills, to cultivate a collective spirit and to respect their elders,' Ma summed up (*China Daily*, Beijing, October 21, 1988).

Meanwhile corruption within both the bureaucracy and the party is widespread. Most of the Chinese today are atheists. Over time, as China fully joins the modern world, this essentially secular people may be prepared for consideration of the Writings.

Japan's culture was initially derived from China. Hence Shintoism resembles in many ways Taoism in China. The old belief that the line of emperors came from a divine source has essentially eroded. The Japanese may also be ready for a new infusion of belief in spiritually derived values. The rapid acceptance of the Unification Church via a well organized program of evangelization is a case in point. What might happen if the New Church had the means to organize a comparable campaign?

Let us turn to the very important, but numerically small members of the world Jewish community in discussing how religions may impede or aid the spread of the Crown of Revelations. Even in Israel only 20% of the Jews are orthodox. Many of the rest of Israel's Jews are irreligious. Since the Writings assert that Jews survive so that the Torah will be read on earth in the Hebrew language, one wonders how progressive Jewish secularism will affect future acceptance of the Writings by them. Those comparatively few Jews who have come into the New Church have brought with them a heritage that has enriched the Church as a whole.

Finally, let us turn to Africa, south of the Sahara. The potential for acceptance of the Writings by black Africans was well described by Bishop King's report of his visit to Ghana which appeared in the *New Church Life* for September 1988. Swedenborg also gave Africans whom he met in the spiritual world the highest possible spiritual rating. Surely Africans are more will-oriented than other people on earth. But since they have been exposed to Europeans and Asians for several centuries, they may, in many ways have been corrupted by this exposure. In addition, the economic troubles that have occurred in most African countries since

they became independent may block interest in spiritual matters. Yet this is a unique "acceptance" area which the New Church should and is pursuing with its limited means.

The Writings and Intellectuals

The Writings were written by Swedenborg during the 18th century, the so-called Age of Enlightenment. By that time many of the leading European intellectual figures had rejected the spiritual authority of the Bible and the validity of any religious belief. Swedenborg's efforts to gain acceptance of the Writings by contemporary intellectuals met with almost no success. Most western intellectuals today also reject the authority of any revealed religious belief. In many intellectual circles the prevailing judgment is that religion is the preserve of the ignorant. Some intellectuals are so intoxicated with the power of their own intelligence that they dismiss revealed religion as Marx did—as opium for the masses. Yet these same intellectuals play a leading role in educating young people, including those who become media personalities who frequently propagate the philosophy of a valueless society far and wide, or if not, they deny the spiritual source of the humanistic values which they espouse.

A classic example of secular humanism was thus expressed by Corliss Lamont:

Humanism is the best way of life creating joy and beauty in the here and now. Naturalistic or secular Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the welfare, progress and happiness of all humanity in this one and only life. There is no pie in the sky awaiting us. To achieve its goals, Humanism relies primarily on the methods of reason and science, democracy and compassion.

Until western intellectuals are led to give up their present hostility toward religion, the chance that the Writings will be accepted by those whose mindsets were shaped by present day intellectuals seems slim indeed.

A strong element of this intellectual disdain for religion is the significant role played by Marxists in western university circles. It is worth noting that Corliss Lamont has long been a supporter of the communist party, USA. Despite the utter failure of Marxist-Leninist ruled societies

to produce the good life for the mass of the people, the role played by Marxist professors in American and other western universities remains astonishingly high. Marxist philosophy teaches the primacy of economic factors and the class struggle as fundamental shapers of society, and attacks all religious beliefs as hostile to human well-being.

The dazzling achievements of science and technology since the Writings were published has had a paradoxical effect on religious belief. If man can reach the moon and explode the atom does he need a God to run the universe? While the Writings assert that there is no incompatibility between science and religion, the triumphs of science have led many people to conclude that God is no longer necessary.

The intellectual confusion over two scientific issues also serves to hinder acceptance of religious beliefs based on the Word. One is the concept of evolution, the other is over the reality of creation. Obviously the earth endured after being spun out from the sun some billions of years in the past. But did man evolve from an animal prototype thousands of years ago as many evolutionists assert? If so, the idea that man was created in the image and likeness of God is a figment of human imagination.

Also, if the universe always existed, the story that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth is a fabrication. Some, but not all concepts of evolution and creation antithetical to religious belief are widespread and their influence on people's belief patterns can make acceptance of the Writings impossible. Even the Marxists have trouble in dealing with evolution, as a November report from China indicates:

Human evolution is a sensitive subject in any culture. In China, Old Guard Communist Party functionaries blocked the opening of the exhibition 'Origin of Man' because it contained too much naked flesh and deviated from the Marxist contention that the ability to engage in productive work separated humans from animals. The cadres ordered the Beijing Natural History Museum to remove a photo-montage of a nude man and woman embracing and to display instead Friedrich Engels' maxim "Labor created man."

The show's designers refused. 'In the past we simply quoted slogans without further analysis,' said Zhou Guoxing, vice director of the museum. 'Now we want to let people think with their own brain' (*Time*, Asia Pacific Edition, Nov. 7, 1988, p. 17).

Implications

Members of the New Church take for granted that a long delay in general acceptance of the Writings is inevitable. They take comfort from the statement in Revelation that acceptance of the New Church will take "time and times and half a time." Surely, this acceptance will take place in the course of the Lord's Divine Providence. But the Lord works through human beings. What we do or do not do will shorten or lengthen the duration of "time and times and half a time."

The assessment in this article is comparable to a situation report prepared by the military prior to launching an attack. What are the enemy's strengths and weaknesses; how can his strength be overcome? The currently strong obstacles toward acceptance of the doctrines of the New Church can be weakened or eliminated by an intellectual assault on them. This task could be undertaken as the present Academy of the New Church develops into the New Church University of the future. For example, the concept of reincarnation can be demolished by demonstrating that the individual human being is formed in the ultimates of nature—the fertilized receptacle ovum. Ultimate natural form establishes unique personal identity that cannot be changed; it cannot reenter another process of ovum fertilization. Also, the process of evolution of the earth, plant, and animal life prepared the way for the initial creation of human beings on earth, but via a Divine intervention and not a natural progression.

Similarly, the fact that the Moslem religion has the same Old Testament roots as the Jewish and Christian beliefs should lead to exploration of the Moslem concept of charity so as to discover bridges between it and the New Church. Hopefully, a future New Church cosmologist can build on current scientific theories of creation to demonstrate beyond doubt that the universe was created and did not exist from eternity.

Some future New Church Sinologist might study meticulously the soul of China and so discover best how to present the essential doctrines of the Writings in such a way as to attract tomorrow's Chinese to them. In this way the most truly gentile people on earth may one day be led to the New Church.

The task of intellectual preparation for acceptance of the Writings need not be postponed to the indefinite future. There are scholars today who

might undertake this ground-breaking work. One such person is Dr. Leon Jakobowitz, Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii, who found and accepted the Writings some five years ago. He is convinced that the psychology of the future will be firmly based on Swedenborg's revelation.

Also, Dr. Jane Williams-Hogan, a member of the faculty of the Academy of the New Church is doing pioneering work in sociology. Specifically, she is currently using insights from the Writings to develop Weber's concept of charisma to make it serviceable for understanding modern religious phenomena. Charisma in the Weberian framework is a personal gift which endows an individual with the capability of rationally breaking through traditional social structures, if he or she is recognized by others to possess such a personality gift. From this perspective charismatic leadership is the vehicle through which modern rational society emerges, but charisma itself appears to have no special function once a rational world comes into being. To overcome the limitations of the Weberian framework, Williams-Hogan believes that this is just an example of the sociology which could be informed by a New Church perspective so as to add a new dimension to future sociology which might lead future sociologists to turn to the Writings. These examples indicate how current work by New Church scholars might ease acceptance of the Writings.

Two caveats must be mentioned in conclusion. First, the truths of religion cannot be completely demonstrated intellectually, for that would destroy man's spiritual freedom. Secondly, can the New Church be presented apart from its Judeo-Christian roots? If not, it is unlikely to exist except with relatively few. If the Crown of Revelations will only be accepted by a few, then the spiritual troubles affecting modern man will never be reduced. It is better to act on the conviction that now it is permitted for all mankind to enter rationally into the mysteries of faith. Once the future New Church University undertakes to make intellectual acceptance of the Writings easier, the duration of "time and times and half a time" will be shortened. ■

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