

RELIGIONS OF OUR WORLD

This article is presented by the Fraternal Relations Committee as part of a continuing effort to bring to students of *The Urantia Book* a flavor of the religious diversity and spiritual unity that currently exists among the peoples of the world. All of the material quoted below is taken from an uncopyrighted pamphlet published by the Swedenborgian Press, Newton, MA, entitled:

This We Believe

by Rev. Paul Zacharias, Swedenborgian Church, Ret.

Every so often we need to stand back and take a long, objective, honest look at our religious faith. What do we believe in? Why do we cherish certain particular concepts? What difference does it really make? This challenge to re-examine our "value system" applies to us all, whatever our religious orientation happens to be, Christian and non-Christian alike. We all require a belief-value system that makes sense to us. As responsible persons we need to examine periodically the philosophical and religious frame of reference in which we live and move. If we don't do this, we stagnate; we drift along on a borrowed, second-hand faith which will not serve us in the crunch of life.

Agnostics and atheists alike are called upon to evaluate their life-style; they, too, must know what they believe in, as well as why they reject certain ideas. We all need to have basic convictions, attitudes and values that are reasonably coherent and meaningful, otherwise there is no direction or purpose to life.

When we look at life from this point of view, we start from a framework of thought found in the writings of the 18th century scientist-theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg, a perspective shared by many, including members of the Swedenborgian Church. You may find it valuable to compare this perspective with your own. Some within this tradition might differ on certain phrasings and emphases but in general, when we look at the main issues of our lives, *Swedenborgians see it this way.*

THE CREATIVE LIFE FORCE

This comes first because as Swedenborgians we accept the premise that there is a perfect, supreme Being who is life itself and from whom all life comes. We are because God is; without God we would not be here. God is self-conscious Divine Love and Wisdom. Swedenborgians believe that God is a Divine Person, who is ever present and permeates every living thing. All creation is sustained from moment to moment by God's constant inflowing divine energy. God is aware of what is going on in your life and mine, and is deeply concerned about our welfare. The past and the future are both the present because God is simultaneously within time and space and yet outside of both.

Comprehending God's fulness is forever beyond our grasp. This is why God broadened our understanding by being born as Jesus Christ. When we read the Gospels about the teachings, the compassionate love and the sheer goodness of Jesus, this speaks to us of his continuing presence in our midst as the God-Man. By this perfect life in the world he opened up new dimensions and possibilities for human life, and by his continued presence among us enables us to reach towards them.

LOVE IS LIFE

God is love. Love demands the giving of itself in the hope

that it will be returned. This is what life is all about. We can easily test this assumption. Make a list of the most significant values in your experience. Probably the list will include some of these:

- Deepening your relationships within the family circle.
- Strengthening your friendships.
- Being happily married/or happily single.
- Building your self-esteem.
- Becoming a better person.

All these aspirations express some form of loving. They are love in action. We know from our own experience how important love is. Paul Tillich calls it the "Ground of Being"; Swedenborgians call it "Ultimate Reality." Without love, expressed and enjoyed and shared, life would not be worth living. The kind of love we're talking about is made up of many qualities. It includes understanding, kindness and compassion. Love manifests itself in joy, awareness and acceptance.

All of these take on tangible form in the deepening of our human relationships—the warm beating heart of love. It is helping others with no thought of reward. It is rejoicing in our friends' good fortune and weeping with them in their sorrow. Love makes no demands. It does not compel or dominate, but rather appreciates and encourages the responsible expression of individual differences.

We all know what it means to love and to be loved. We have all thrilled to those exalted experiences, short in time but long remembered, when we felt such intense at-onement with a member of the family or a friend or God. In more ways than one, love makes the world go 'round.

ETERNITY IS PRESENT NOW

Because God is love, and love is eternal, all life is forever purposeful. As Swedenborgians we believe that when we die we pass from the consciousness of one world to that of another. When our physical body dies, we remain our true selves. The process of dying does not change our loving, thinking, desiring and memories. We immediately wake up in a spiritual body in the spiritual world. Actually this realm of the spirit surrounds and interpenetrates our material world all the time.

Usually we are unaware of it. Sometimes artists, poets, as well as others like ourselves, have caught glimpses of this real inner world. Wordsworth, Browning, William Blake, Goethe, Shakespeare and thousands of other sensitive persons in all walks of life have had "intimations of immortality," and a conviction of the continuity of personality.

Life flows endlessly on. We gradually free ourselves from the misconceptions and imitations of our earthbound existence. We are with people whom we know and love, people with whom we share similar interests. We have work to do that we enjoy doing and which best serves the well-being of people

around us. All of our best talents are fully utilized. Life in heaven is a well-balanced experience of service, fellowship and recreation. New vistas constantly open up before us. Always the challenge is to become a more authentic person.

This unfolding process as a person must begin here in this world. In a very real sense eternal life begins for us here and now. We make our own heaven or hell, both here and hereafter. Our ultimate destiny depends upon our freely chosen day-by-day decisions, large and small. This is the way life is.

MARRIAGE LOVE

Swedenborgians believe that the highest human form of love is the affection that unites a man and woman in marriage. Granted, there are many loveless, unhappy marriages in the world today, but think for a moment about the ideal, about the happy and successful marriages we know. There is nothing more wonderful than a marriage in which both partners continue to be lovers, each deeply concerned about the happiness and well-being of the other. Where there is a growing trust and a mutual respect, where joys and sorrows are deeply shared and where, as the years go by, there is an ever increasing openness to each other, and a deepening sense of oneness as well as a growing appreciation of the other as a person.

Such "marriage love" is beautiful indeed. In its intimate union and mutual involvement, it is the embodiment in human experience of the union of the perfect Love and Wisdom that is God. It is this harmony with Ultimate Reality that truly sanctifies marriage, giving husband and wife the most vivid intimations of heavenly joy and assuring them of their eternal happiness within this blessed relationship. This ideal of marriage love becomes an ongoing reality for those who are willing to work, to sacrifice and to grow in order to achieve it.

THE FLOW OF PROVIDENCE AND THE SECOND COMING

All of this points to our Swedenborgian concept of Divine Providence: How God is governing the universe, moving in history and working to bring the kingdom of heaven upon earth. While we believe, along with the Catholic theologian, Teilhard, and many others, that all creation and all history is gradually converging toward God, we firmly believe that this can only come about with our freely given cooperation.

God has a magnificent plan for the human race which is nothing less than a heaven on earth. This will come about, not by God's winding up of history nor by a divine destruction of the world many believe, but only through our daring to build a brave new world in the light of God's plan for a new and finer humanity. In the challenge and confusion and changes all around us, we see the birthpangs of a New Order of Life as it struggles into being at the divine hand. In the newness and wonder which set our times off from all history, we see the beginnings of our Lord's Promised Second Coming: the Spirit of Truth that is to lead us into all truth, into a new freedom and to a new humanity as our Eternal Lord moves to "make all things new." We further believe that the Lord's gracious providence has as its further goal a heaven of redeemed men and women in the world of spirit where this larger life can be realized more and more fully and joyously to eternity.

God is calling each one of us to have a humble but very significant part in these cosmic and eternal purposes. As we respond, meaning is given to our existence and significance to our striving. Then we know what it means to trust God, to trust

other people, to trust ourselves.

THE WORD OF GOD

Through the ages God has been revealed in many forms: in the created universe, in human beings made "in God's image and likeness," and uniquely in the incarnation as the historical Christ. For us, today, the Bible is the fullest disclosure of our Lord God. Here we come to know our Lord as Creator and more personally as saviour and redeemer. Here, in the Abiding Presence among us, our Lord God remains close at hand and accessible. The Bible is the Eternal Word because it enables us to encounter the many revealings of God.

Swedenborgians believe that the Bible contains a deeper meaning symbolic from beginning to end. This describes spiritual life as it has been experienced by the human race, as it can be achieved by every individual, and as it was lived to perfection by the God-Man. For example, our Lord told the Parable of the Sower, and then interpreted its hidden meaning. He said the "seed" falling upon different kinds of "grounds" pictures divine truth entering various types of minds; whether rejected or accepted, it produces living results. This Holy Word is therefore much more than the allegorical story of creation, the history of the Jewish people, the record of the Lord's life and the account of the founding of the Christian Church.

Swedenborgians believe that because the Holy Word expresses the mind of God—divine truth adapted to our understanding—it is written throughout in this symbolic way. The Bible is God speaking directly to the spiritual conditions, the needs, and the aspirations of Everyman, today and always.

A NEW REVELATION

Where do we find these new spiritual insights into our Christian faith which presents the Bible afresh as God's Holy Word and sets all life in a different perspective for us? No one but God creates divine truth. Humanity at best is but a channel through which divine truth comes to us from that divine source. What sets us apart as Swedenborgians and gives us our distinctive perspective is our conviction that Emanuel Swedenborg, eminent 18th century scientist-theologian, was enlightened by our Lord God to a remarkable degree. As one of the greatest spiritual pioneers of all history, he was instrumental in bringing to the human race a new revelation from God. In the writings of this great man, who humbly called himself "Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ," we find the ideas and insights which we have tried to share with you. At the same time we do not believe that ours is the only saving faith, or that our church has a monopoly on divine truth. On the contrary, Swedenborgians believe that the Church Universal, the Church as it is in the Lord's sight, includes all good living people throughout all creation. All who live up to the best they know, whether Christian, Jew, Moslem or pagan, are truly members of the Lord's church and are welcomed into that body of redeemed men and women in the spiritual world which we call "heaven."

Foremost, perhaps, among the new truths which have burst forth from God through this illustrious man is the bold announcement that our world is standing on the threshold of a New Age. Our Lord Jesus promised to send us the spirit of truth, "the truth will make us free." All that is asked of us is that we stretch our spiritual muscles and reach for the stars.

Copies of this pamphlet or other informational material may be obtained from: Swedenborgian Church, Central Office, 48 Sargent Street, Newton, MA 02158.