

UNCOVERING A CONSPIRACY TO KEEP PEOPLE FROM READING THE WRITINGS — PART TWO

BY THE REV. DONALD ROSE

In the first article on this subject we mentioned the uncovering in the spiritual world of the fact that individuals deliberately tried to keep people from reading the Writings.

A striking example of keeping people from reading can be found in the biography of Robert Hindmarsh by the Rev. C.T. Odhner. Hindmarsh was among the most influential people in New Church history. When he first read a book of the Writings in 1782, he immediately realized these books were of divine origin and set to work letting others know about them. But he could have read them three years previously! He heard about the printing of the first English translation of *Heaven and Hell* and was quite interested, but (reports C.T. Odhner) “reports about Swedenborg’s unsoundness of mind discouraged him from investigating the book for himself.”

That was a dramatic example of how the conspiracy worked. But it was largely a conspiracy of silence. Those books should have been included, or even featured, in official catalogues of theological books. But in *Apocalypse Revealed* 716, we are told the deplorable fact that these books of great religious significance were not even mentioned in the catalogues. Not a word about these books. As we quoted in the first article “nothing is now heard of them” (*Spiritual Diary* 6098).

It is remarkable how the Writings have been kept out of sight. The religious scholar, Guy Erwin, comments about this in his introduction to the recently published *True Christianity*¹. He observes that Swedenborg is not mentioned in places where he should get attention. On page 57 he says that it is “strange that he should not have received more attention from those attempting to survey the history of Christianity.” He calls this an “habitual omission” and later an “unjust omission.” (See page

58.) “Even in the best modern history of the actual church life of the time and place, Swedenborg is only mentioned once.” That one mention includes nothing whatever about the Writings.

The late Rev. Brian Kingslake deplored the scant mention of Swedenborg. “They boycotted him intellectually, ignoring his ideas, excluding his teachings from the syllabus of the theological seminaries, pretending that he never existed!” This is from the preface of one of Kingslake’s books. Exceptions have occurred, but looking at the overall picture Kingslake says, “There was (and still is) a conspiracy of silence about Emanuel Swedenborg.”

Remarkable examples exist of glaring omissions. Take for example the book about angels published by Dr. Billy Graham in 1975. He begins the book by deploring the fact that so little has been written on the subject of angels. One can only speculate on why he does not mention Swedenborg. More than forty pages of the *Swedenborg Concordance* are filled with the references in the Writings to the subject of angels. Several books about angels either give a passing reference to Swedenborg or leave him out altogether. (See a list of such books in *New Church Life*, 1992 p.318.)

Of the exceptions we will mention two that were published in 1988.

Angels, Ministers of Grace by Geddes McGregor is quite forthright. In it we read: “Perhaps no one in the history of humankind has written about angels with such matter-of-fact nonchalance as has Swedenborg.” He goes on to quote and to present an honest picture. Then there is the book *Heaven, A History* by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang. This book gives suitable prominence to Swedenborg.

These exceptions set in contrast the conspiracy of silence. In 2005 Barbara Walters put on a two-hour television special on the subject of heaven. She traveled the world and spoke to the experts and seemingly left no stone unturned. But in her

Reader's Digest article and the television special there is not a word about Swedenborg.

The program was aired on December 20th. On November 22nd a letter was sent from the Swedenborg Foundation to Ms. Walters. It said, "We understand that you will be hosting a two-hour television special entitled 'Heaven'... You may not be aware that Emanuel Swedenborg wrote what is considered the seminal work on the subject of heaven and the afterlife." This positive letter concluded with the "hope that you will be able to include Emanuel Swedenborg and his vision of heaven in your upcoming special."

The letter was too late as the program had already been put together. One wonders what might have happened if the Swedenborg Foundation had been aware earlier.

The Swedenborg Foundation is an example of the antithesis of a conspiracy of silence. And individuals have devoted their energies to making the Writings known. Some such individuals have joined together and formed organizations. In 1782 in England a few gentlemen organized themselves as "the Manchester Printing Society." In the United States motivated people such as Francis Bailey and John (Appleseed) Chapman undertook individual efforts. In 1850 an organization was formed whose purpose was contained in one sentence: "to encourage a wider circulation of the Theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg." It was called the American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society. In 1928 the name was changed to The Swedenborg Foundation.

It seems a curious circumstance that among the receivers of the Writings notions have arisen that seemed to inhibit the cause of making the Writings known. One such persistent notion is that Swedenborg himself did not undertake to make the Writings known. Possibly the word "myth" is more apt than "notion."

I can remember being aware of this myth and assuming that it had a factual basis. But as I began to study the historical record,

I could not find support for it. Indeed I found quite a fund of historical facts that pointed in quite a different direction. I was surprised that striking facts of which I was aware had not come out in the New Church literature.

What did Swedenborg actually say, and what did he actually do? In 1964 I did a series of articles in *New Church Life* which offered documentary evidence of Swedenborg's work of making the books known. And in the years that followed I added further evidence, doing in 2003 a series of short editorials about "Swedenborg Marketing the Books" and "Swedenborg Promoting the Books." Was I endeavoring to slay some imagined dragon?

One has to be careful not to become overzealous or to start exaggerating threats.

There is a publication in Great Britain called *Things Heard and Seen*. Each issue contains the same little sketch about Swedenborg. And there it is said, "Apart from publishing some of his books and having two partially translated into English, Swedenborg seemed to feel little call to actively spread his new teaching." My tendency is to overreact to such a statement. There could well be an historical basis for it. Furthermore, the publication is related to the Swedenborg Society in London, and that is an organization with a splendid history of making the Writings known. I have witnessed the work of the Swedenborg Society at close hand and found ample reason to admire what it has done and continues to do. If there is a conspiracy against the reading of the Writings, we can be thankful for the work of such organizations.

(To be concluded)

Note: Rev. Brian Kingslake is quoted above. Many are aware of his appealing books. Dr. Kurt Simons described these books in *New Church Life* in 1986 (pages 130 & 560.)

¹translation of *True Christian Religion*