

RENEWING THE CULTURE

BY THE REV. WALTER E. ORTHWEIN

"..no idea can be had of spiritual life except from the things that are in civil life; therefore, if the latter is set aside, the former falls to the ground, until at last it is no longer believed in." (Arcana Coelestia 4366.2)

Because this world is an outgrowth of the spiritual world and lives every moment from it, it follows that a new order in the spiritual world cannot but affect the state of things in this world. For example, the Last Judgment of 1757 cleared the way for the establishment of a New Heaven in the spiritual world and its outgrowth will be a New Church on earth. That is why the New Jerusalem was seen coming down from God out of heaven into this world. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth.." (Revelation 21:1). We can therefore think that a new world, a whole new way of life, is being created, from the inside out. A new civilization is being created, or, as people are wont to say these days, a new culture.

We are told, at the end of the work on *The Last Judgment*, that the state of the world after the judgment would be similar to what it had been before, with civil affairs, wars, peace treaties, and so on. The church, though, while similar outwardly, would be different internally: "..henceforth the man of the church will be in a more free state of thinking on matters of faith, thus on the spiritual things which relate to heaven, because spiritual freedom has been restored to him. For all things in the heavens and in the hells are now reduced into order, and all thought concerning Divine things and against the Divine inflows from thence—from the heavens all thought which is in harmony with Divine things, and from the hells all which is against Divine things" (*Last Judgment* 74, emphasis added).

The fact that the freedom we now have is freedom to think about "spiritual things which relate to heaven" shows the

importance of the new knowledge about such things which the Lord has revealed in His second coming. Greater freedom of thought about spiritual things presumes greater knowledge of them. And since this knowledge is meant to be applied on the natural plane of life, I think the need for greater civil liberty is also implied. Greater spiritual freedom requires a corresponding expansion of such civil liberties as freedom of speech.

Generally speaking, freedom means the ability to do what you wish, but spiritual freedom only comes with desiring the right things -- namely, things in harmony with the truly human order of life produced by Divine love and wisdom in heaven. True freedom is the freedom to think, will and do, not just anything, but that which is good and true (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 240, 264, 425).

There is confusion in our society about what freedom means, a lack of understanding of the difference between freedom and license, or between genuine freedom and the illusory freedom of hell, which is really slavery. What good is civil liberty if the soul remains imprisoned by "the vanity of the world and the allurements of the flesh, the pride of self-intelligence and the lust of power, sordid avarice and covetous desire?" The Last Judgment gave us the freedom to follow the Lord, but also the freedom to turn away from Him. If the loves of self and the world cause us to turn away from Him, then the new freedom we've received has not served the purpose for which it was intended. A sense of responsibility to the One who restored our freedom is part of the situation.

"Separation of church and state" is necessary for the protection of both; but banishing religious ideas from public discourse of civil affairs is a destructive modern perversion of that principle. Adhering to the truth of the Word is not contrary to civil liberty; just the opposite -- this is the truth that makes us free (John 8:32). Were not appeals to that truth a major element in the abolition movement, and later in the civil rights movement?

Why should religious truths now be excluded from the debate on such topics as abortion, stem cell research, euthanasia, and what constitutes marriage? Of course we have to distinguish between Divine truth and the human inferences drawn from it and proposed applications of it, but we can do that. One of the uses of discussing these things in the public square is to separate the wheat from the chaff.

All logic rests upon some premise, which is simply assumed as self-evident, or axiomatic. The premise is not arrived at by logic; rather, it is the starting place and foundation upon which reason and logic rest. Facts and logic can confirm a theistic premise or paradigm just as well as a materialist one. So there is nothing inherently "logical" or "reasonable" about materialism, and nothing illogical or irrational about the theistic paradigm.

The specter of "theocracy" has been raised, but this is a red herring. Accepting a theistic paradigm—much less even considering one along with others — is hardly theocracy. In fact, since everyone's "God" is what they value most highly, then the basis of all passionately held opinions could be said to be "religious." The god in question may be nature or human reason, but if that is what is accepted and appealed to as the highest good and source of truth, then that is "god," and those who appeal to that god as the basis of their arguments could, ironically, be said to be trying to "impose their religion" on society. Forcing the removal of the Ten Commandments from a courthouse wall would in that case be really just as "theocratic" as placing them there in the first place, although the "religion" that dictated their removal is a secular one.

The Culture Wars:

Leading up to the Last Judgment there was "war in heaven," in which "Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought, and his angels..." (Revelation 12:7). The war was a "spiritual war, which is of falsity against truth, and truth

against falsity." The "heaven" referred to is "the former heaven which passed away," spoken of in the 21st chapter. It was an imaginary heaven produced by evil spirits in the world of spirits. "Michael" stands for *"those who confirm from the Word that the Lord is the God of heaven and earth.."* It is from such people that the New Church is formed. The "dragon" represents those who turn from the Lord to themselves, and from heaven to the world, and thus become *"sensual from the corporeal"* (Apocalypse Revealed 548).

The description of the "dragon" seems quite pointed when we consider the strains of extreme individualism, intellectual conceit, materialism and hedonism in our "post-Christian" culture. In saying this, I do not mean that these are the only traits or even the dominant ones in the culture, or that there is an absence of beneficial influences which are favorable to the establishment of the New Church. The "Michaels" of the New Church are not alone in resisting the dragon, and we should gratefully acknowledge the help provided by many others whose thought is based on the Scriptures and whose work is especially impressive because they are doing it without the additional support of the Heavenly Doctrine.

The war in the spiritual world was won by the armies of the Lord, and a new spiritual order was established. On earth, however, the battle rages on. Along with thoughts inspired by new truth from heaven, we are also influenced by thoughts from hell which are against Divine things. This is as true of New Church people as anyone else.

This, I believe, is the spiritual cause behind the so-called "culture wars" in which our society is engaged at present. What are we to make of these "culture wars?" I find myself in sympathy with many of the stands taken by Christians, but, knowing what *The Writings* say about the state of the former church, as well as being aware of some of the incredibly wicked things in history which were carried out in the name of

Christianity, my sympathy with the Christian position in the culture wars is not absolute. I assume that some of the Christian leaders whose analysis of social trends I find illuminating would take a dim view of the New Church. But there are some particulars on the agenda of religious groups responding to the extreme secularism and moral disorders of contemporary society with which I think New Church people can make common cause.

The doctrine of conjugal love—and the whole relationship of the sexes and their respective uses—has often been a focus of controversy within the New Church, and occasionally between the New Church and the world around it. And this same area of life is very prominent in the "culture wars." This is not surprising when we consider who the central figure is in the story of the "war in heaven": a woman about to give birth. Later, in Revelation 21, the New Church is compared to "a bride adorned for her husband." It is not surprising that marriage and childbirth are two of the main fronts in the culture wars.

Freedom is a property of love, and since conjugal love is the highest of all loves it brings the greatest freedom (*Conjugal Love* 257). We can see, then, that the restoration of both freedom and of conjugal love are closely linked. Both have been renewed in the new heaven; both are in the process of being established on earth. It is a difficult, laborious process of birth. But the Lord has provided for new and expanding freedom in this world, and has given us the promise that "*conjugal love will be raised up anew by the Lord....such as it was with the ancients....with those who are made spiritual by Him through the Word*" (*Conjugal Love* 81e).

The New Church on earth has not been persecuted so violently as the Christian Church was in its beginning, but when it comes to the application of its doctrine to how we actually live—that's where the challenge comes. The challenge from our own contrary inclinations should be our primary concern, but the culture around us is also challenging.

There are two opposite errors we must avoid: one is self-righteous accusation of others—pointing out the speck in others' eyes while ignoring the plank in our own; the other is to be so paralyzed by awareness of our own sin and unworthiness that we fail to sound a warning when we see a wolf approaching the fold.

The Last Judgment culminated in the formation of a new heaven and the birth of a New Church on earth. The next step—what we need now—is a new culture, which will support and help nurture the order of life the church is seeking to establish. Here is the progression: The Word comes from the Lord. The church comes from the Word. The culture comes from the church. And (ideally) the church, in turn, is supported by the culture.

I would compare the culture that surrounds the church to the atmospheres derived from the spiritual sun which serve to receive, store up, accommodate, and transmit the life from that sun to the heavens (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 174). Similarly, all aspects of a culture -- the traditions, customs, mores, the kind of language used, art and entertainment -- can serve to communicate the life and faith of the church from which the culture is derived. The culture diffuses the faith just as the atmosphere diffuses the sun's energy.

Or, to change the analogy a little, the culture is like the natural sun in relation to the spiritual sun--that is, an "aid and support" to the spiritual sun. Ideally, this is what a culture should do: aid and support the church in bringing the life of heaven to people on earth. The culture lives from the church and receives its goods and truths, and conveys them to society. It makes those abstract, spiritual, transcendent things real and visible and present with people; it weaves them into the fabric of their daily lives. This is why the state of the culture around us is a matter of concern for the church.

One more comparison: the truths of the church are like the tea leaves that impart flavor and color to the whole cup. The "leaves" are rational truths from the tree of life in the midst of

the New Jerusalem; the "tea" is the culture that surrounds the church and gets its quality from the truths of the church.

I once read an interview by Bill Moyers with Isaac Asimov, the great science fiction writer. Asimov did not believe in God or an afterlife in which we would be judged, and he rejected the idea that human morality depended upon such belief. Human reason is enough of a basis for morality, he said, and claimed that he was a moral person. I don't doubt that he was, but I think that his morality was very much derived from religion, although indirectly. His mind was formed within a culture produced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. The ethos, the character, the mental atmosphere that surrounded him was steeped in that tradition. In his mind the "tea bag" may have been removed, but the water Asimov was imbibing and swimming in retained the quality it had received from it. The moral sensibility that persists among people in a secular society is a remnant of a departed spirituality, not the product of human reason. And as the "tea" becomes increasingly diluted by secular thought, the moral influence from the former age also weakens.

We're told in the Writings that the angels think of God as Human, and cannot think of Him in any other way. The reason is that "their thought proceeds in accordance with the form of heaven" (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 11). Our minds, also, are strongly influenced by the culture in which we live.

People whose minds are thoroughly grounded on the Word are immune, more or less, to false assumptions, attitudes and currents of opinion in society, but still, the culture should reinforce and nurture and enrich their spiritual outlook, not continually work against it. A supportive culture is especially important for those whose minds have not been formed by the Word, and who are thus ill-equipped to order their lives according to its truths. The culture should strengthen what is good and true in people, rather than pander to the worst inclinations of human nature and constantly try to lead people

astray.

I am trying to present a general idea, which I think is true, but I am aware that it could be used to justify a stifling atmosphere of intrusive moralizing by professional scolds. That would be an abuse of the principle. But real freedom and happiness can exist only with order; not an order that depends mainly upon external enforcement, but which arises spontaneously from within people who love the end for which the order is maintained. The kind of cultural matrix I have in mind is nothing like the oppressive culture of political correctness that prevails on so many college campuses. Rather, think of the "micro-cultures" (as we might call them) composed of people in certain professions: historians, scientists, doctors, lawyers and educators all belong to a culture that maintains the standards of the profession. The general culture of the whole society should perform a similar use, upholding and inculcating basic human decency, including reverence for the things of religion and marriage.

Our culture today does exert a positive influence in some areas: regarding the way we speak about people of different races; the abusive language that once was acceptable and now is not, language which society simply won't tolerate. On the other hand, taking the Lord's name in vain is now something even little children assimilate from the popular culture. The culture (and even civil law to some extent) could just as well inculcate reverence and chastity instead of blasphemy and obscenity. And this is what it ought to do. (see *Divine Providence* 129:2 and 136:2)

The Writings explain that the flowing of the spiritual into the natural depends upon favorable conditions in the natural. If spiritual truth finds an inhospitable environment in the natural, it recoils and withdraws (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 254). It is like something touching a nerve in your tooth. Or like hopping out of a warm bed onto a cold floor -- you want to hop right back in again.

This shows how important the culture is. It can either invite the presence of angels, or repel them. Just as animals need a suitable habitat in the natural environment, so angels, and people on earth who get along with angels, need a habitat in the spiritual environment. We want to establish a culture on earth in which angels can feel at home.

If this sounds too idealistic, substitute the word "children" for angels -- we want a culture in which children will be valued and safe and encounter good and true and beautiful things to enrich their minds and character.

Therefore a church can't be indifferent to the state of the society around it. Just as a culture needs a church to give it its vital essence, so a church needs a culture in which the spiritual life it seeks to convey to the world can be expressed and find a foundation. Luther said "the world is God's enemy," and there is a certain truth to this; a certain amount of tension between the church and the world is healthy, just as it is healthy for a person to be troubled by conscience at times. But this does not mean it is healthy for the world in which the church must exist, and which depends upon the church for its spiritual life, to be hostile to the church.

The Writings tell us that in the spiritual world whenever any new truth is introduced into a person's mind, some reason for doubting it also shortly arises. Doubt is a useful thing. It causes us to consider carefully what is actually true. A truth which is accepted too easily is likely to be understood shallowly, without nuance or subtlety, and with little sympathy for those who see things differently (see *Arcana Coelestia* 7298).

I think this applies to society as a whole, also. Each new truth introduced into society is met by an opposing falsity; each new falsity by an opposing truth. This produces a combat, which the Writings compare to the chemical process of fermentation. Eventually what is false and useless is rejected, and the issue becomes clear—just as the lees sink to the bottom of the bottle as the wine ferments and becomes clear (*Divine Providence* 25, 284).

I think this is a good way of viewing the "culture wars" going on around us in the wake of the Last Judgment and the publishing of *The Heavenly Doctrine*. New truth, introduced from the new heaven, meets with opposition and there is heated debate, but eventually greater clarity results.

Judgment is the opposite of profanation, which is the mixing together of what is good and evil, true and false, so completely that the good and true cannot be distinguished and extricated from the evil and false. Getting in the habit of self-examination and clearly labeling the evils we discover in ourselves as evil is the first step in getting free from them. Fulfilling the promise of the Last Judgment—spiritual freedom and the creation of a new world—requires a change in our hearts. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51.10).

But in addition, I think *The Heavenly Doctrine* also challenges us to do all we can to create conditions on earth, in our culture and civil order, which will make it possible for the new spiritual freedom people have to be brought down to earth and made tangible in the way we live. We need to create a culture which will encourage and support and nurture the "better angels" of our nature. The decline of the former church as a force in the world is partly a good thing since that church embraced much that was false, but it has left a vacuum at the heart of western civilization (once known as Christendom) which the New Church must fill.

In conclusion, consider the rich meaning of the word "culture." We see the word "cult" in it, which reminds us that a culture is produced and sustained by a church. We see the resemblance to the word "cultivate," which reminds us that a culture is an on-going work that needs to be tended, that it is the ground in which truths can take root and grow to produce good fruits. And then think of what the word "culture" means in biology and medicine: a medium in which an organism is grown. A civilization is the medium in which we humans grow, and the church is composed

of human beings.

A culture is a living thing, and like all living things, it receives its life from the only source of life, the One who says: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The One who says: "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

In celebration of Swedenborg's birthday, January 29, 1688, we print a picture of Swedenborg's home on Hornsgatan, Södermalm (Southwark), Stockholm. Swedenborg bought this house with a large property ca. 1747. It also contains another house for a caretaker and gardener and his family. Several other buildings were a library, stables, a mirror pleasure-house, a root cellar, a shed, an aviary, and a



labyrinth for the children. There was still room for an orchard and gardens. The property served Swedenborg for his entire enlightenment period of writing and publishing the *Writings*. It was

his home-base when sailing or sending copies overseas to publishers in London or Amsterdam. The building was torn down in 1888. His Summer House, which has been preserved and can still be visited at Skansen, Stockholm, was yet another building located at the other end of the property. This is a copy of a painting by Nils Anderson, 1853. Photo by Ed and Kirstin Gyllenhaal.