

An Ancient Cousin:

The Impact of Swedenborg's Teachings about China

Andrew M.T. Dibb M.Div. D.Th¹

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Abstract

Swedenborg never visited China, he may have never known any Chinese. However, his few references to China, particularly Chinese religion, continue to fascinate Swedenborgians. Swedenborg posits that before the Jewish religion was established, between the Biblical account of the Flood and the life of Eber, an ancient religion flourished. The chief characteristic of this religion, or the Ancient Church, was an understanding of the correspondential relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds. The Ancient Church spread across the world, into Europe, Africa and Asia, penetrating even to China. Over time the Ancient Church sank into idolatry as correspondences were forgotten, but common threads between widely diverse religions physically remote from each other, are believed to be the result of the influence of this Church. The wisdom of the Ancient Church was recorded in the long lost "Ancient Word," of which little remains except very early parts of Genesis. Tantalizingly, Swedenborg asserts that the Ancient Word may still be extant in "Greater Tartary." This paper examines Swedenborg's statements on the Ancient Word and efforts of Swedenborgian scholars to identify traces of thought from such a document, including an effort in the 1990s, to search in China for the book itself. ²

Introduction

Swedenborg's theology is intensely theocentric. The source of everything is God, who is pure divine love expressed in a corresponding wisdom. Divine love can be said to have three essences: love of others who are different from self, a desire to connect or conjoin with them, with the purpose of making them happy. This in a nutshell describes the qualities of God, and provides the basic pattern of all creation. The process of bringing love into existence is wisdom, which in the divine is a perfect matching of the motivation of love with a means to achieve it. The result is humanity, created in such a way that while human life originates from God, people have a complete sense of self life. To all appearances and by design, people are outside of God, acting as independent beings, guided by their own reason brought into action by their own free choice. This is the only way the essence of God's love can be satisfied, for the human being, freely and understandingly can connect with God in a bond of love, and this opens people to receive the blessings God wishes to impart to all people.

This framework provides the readers of Swedenborg's theology with an answer to the question of why God created: the goal of creation, Swedenborg says, "is a heaven from the human race" (DP 27). Every activity of God works towards this end. Yet experience shows that people are born with no knowledge of God, no concept of goodness or truth, no idea of what it takes to become an angel of heaven. All this has to be learned, acknowledged and practiced so that people in freedom can bond with God. To make this possible, from the moment of birth onwards, God stores up memories of love, peace and comfort in

¹ Andrew M.T. Dibb is an Associate Professor at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church. He is the Dean of the Theological School and Co-Director of the Master of Arts in Religious Studies program.

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the human mind, providing a frame of reference for later life. Frequently unconscious, these memories provide an impetus to learn, to seek a conscious reconnection of these states. Knowledge makes it possible for a person to choose a course of life, to become a rational human being, to recognize others outside of self, and enter relationships with them with the goal of imparting blessing; through knowledge, to become an "image and likeness of God." Not all knowledge leads in this direction, people also learn to be selfish and greedy, putting themselves ahead of others. This kind of knowledge is the antithesis of wisdom, leading not to happiness, but to misery. The tension between these kinds of knowledge puts people into the position of having to make choices, to exercise freedom to put selfishness and greed aside or to embrace it, so becoming what they wish to become, an image of God or the opposite.

Since people have no innate concept of goodness, and no inborn truth to achieve it, Swedenborg describes that knowledge has to be learned from a source other than ourselves, for if it comes from self, it will be tainted with self-interest and lead unopposed to selfishness. To preserve the appearance of self-life and the freedom of choice it brings, God does not provide the truth directly, but indirectly through others (Divine Providence 135, 171, 254, Conjugal Love 207, True Christian Religion 694). Faced with a direct revelation of God, people would have no choice but to believe, and this compulsion would destroy their freedom, undo the sense of separation from God, and so undermine the first essence of divine love of loving others outside of self. The result would be the unthinkable idea of a divine selfishness.

To prevent this and to provide the truths needed for conjunction, God has provided religion of some sort across the world. Swedenborg takes a very different stance of religion than many others. Many Christians adhere to the belief that "there is no salvation outside the Church," which may mean a specific church, or Christianity in general. Muslims have a similar belief. Limited salvation on this sort rests on adherence to a specific belief system, and failure to do so leads to damnation. Yet what of the billions of people who are neither Christian, Muslim or Jewish, who fall outside the tradition of Abrahamic religions? Swedenborg approaches the topic from a different angle: the goal of creation is heaven, and heaven is premised on love with faith being a means to that end, not the end itself. Divine love allows people to choose a relationship with God or not, but will not be thwarted by ignorance. Swedenborg sums this up in the book, *Heaven and Hell*.

Anyone who thinks from any enlightened reason can see that no one is born for hell, for the Lord is love itself and His love is to will the salvation of all. Therefore, He has provided a religion for everyone, and by it acknowledgment of the Divine and interior life; for to live in accordance with one's religion is to live interiorly, since one then looks to the Divine, and so far as he looks to the Divine he does not look to the world but separates himself from the world, that is, from the life of the world, which is exterior life. (Heaven and Hell 318)

Regarding non-Christians, Swedenborg wrote,

I have been instructed in many ways that Gentiles³ who have led a moral life, and have been obedient, and have lived in mutual charity, and have received some sort of conscience according to their religion, are accepted in the other life. (Arcana Coelestia 2590)

The Essence of Religion

If belief is a means to an end, and does not constitute salvation itself, and if, as Swedenborg says, God has provided religions across the globe which, although quite different from each other, facilitate entrance into heaven, what makes this possible? Just as Swedenborg describes the essence of God's love and uses that as a framework upon which to develop his theology, so his definition of "religion" and "church" must cohere to the same framework. Religion rests on the appearance of that life comes from one's self, and the reality that one must act in freedom according to reason. The goal is connection with God and reception of blessings flowing from Him.

In order for a religion to lead to connection with God, two essential aspects must be present: a belief in God, and a life in accord with the teachings of that religion. These may be elaborated in many ways: in Christianity the belief in God must include a recognition of the divinity of Jesus Christ, because that is the central element of Christian belief. However, this does not hold true for religions outside of Christianity. Similarly, different religions require different lifestyles. Yet even though the expression of these essentials varies from religion to religion, they have a similar effect.

Belief in God requires people to look to a higher authority, leading a person outside of him or herself and submission to a power greater than self. This develops humility as one sees oneself in relation to God, and consequently the willingness to be led by God. The second essential follows from this: submission to a power greater than oneself requires one to discipline one's thoughts and consequently one's actions. Basing life on the teachings of a religion begins as a person first learns the teaching of the religion, then through thought, analysis and experience, comes to recognize the truths within it, and so to practice it. Since all truth originates in the divine, a life based on truth is a life based on God. This process of internalizing religion is universal, and because it applies to all religions, the effects are the same, so that every religion can lead a person into conjunction with God.

Swedenborg indicates those who adhere to their religion and live according to its teachings enter heaven. This is a general principle applying to all religions. He wrote:

I have been taught in many ways that the non-Christians who have led a moral life and have lived in obedience and subordination and mutual charity in accordance with their religion, and have thus received something of conscience, are accepted in the other life, and are there instructed with solicitous care by the angels in the goods and truths of faith; and that when they are being taught they behave themselves modestly, intelligently, and wisely, and readily accept truths and adopt them. They have not worked out for themselves any principles of falsity antagonistic to the truths of faith that will need to be shaken off, still less cavils against the Lord,

³ Latin: "qui Gentes seu Gentiles vocantur". *Gens*—A race, nation, people. *Gentilis*—A member of a race, nation, people. Can mean a "non-Christian", but since this passage is already about non-Christians, the first definition seems more appropriate. Suggestion: "the people, or members". The inference is to the mass of non-Christian humanity and the individuals who make it up.

as many Christians have who cherish no other idea of Him than that He is an ordinary man. (HH 321)

The Source and Communication of Religion

Since the object of religion is to connect people with the divine, and the means to do this comes from the divine, it follows that God is the origin of religion. In his description of religion, Swedenborg notes two further aspects to it: an interior and an exterior. The interior aspect of religion exists within the inner states of a person who adheres to the religion: it rests in the universal development of humility and willingness to be led by the God of that religion by subordinating one's life to it. The internal of religion develops in people the qualities necessary for conjunction with God. The exterior of the religion lies in its practice, both in ritual and in life which is the visible aspect of religion. Since the externals support the development of the internal states of religion, it matters little if they vary from one religion to the next, providing they do no present obstacles to the development of the conjunctive qualities which are the point of religion; an external expression of religion that does not develop humility and a willingness to follow, does not achieve the essence of religion.

The process of acquiring religion is also universal: people first learn the external expression of their religion—the teachings and practice—and as they internalize it, so they become receptive of the internal coming from God. Swedenborg asserts that religion must begin outside a person, as something first learned from other people.

For no one has any religion on his own, but receives it from someone else who knows from the Word, either independently or by transmission from others, that there is a God, a heaven and a hell, and life after death, and that God must be worshiped for a person to be among the blessed. (DP 254)

And later in the same passage he says:

Once religion has been implanted, that nation is led by the Lord in accordance with the precepts and tenets of its religion, and the Lord has provided that every religion contains precepts like those in the Decalogue, as that God is to be worshiped, that His name is not to be profaned, that a holy day is to be observed, that parents are to be honored, and that one is not to murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness. The nation that makes these precepts Divine, and lives according to them in conformity with religion, is saved. (DP 254)

This raises the question of how the teachings of religion, since they spring from one course and yet are not conveyed by direct communication from God, but through human agency, spread across the world? As a Christian, Swedenborg acknowledged that the Bible contained divine truth expressed in terms of the natural world. Divine truth, however, does not lie in historical content of the stories of the Old and New Testaments, but the secrets of heaven which they contain. The letter itself is no more living than a human body with no soul or spirit within it. The same truths contained within the words of the Bible are present in other words in other religions. This is what constitutes the actual truth, and is present in other vehicles in greater or lesser degrees of purity and clarity, which nevertheless still make it possible for those who do not have the Bible to enter into a conjunctive relationship with God.

The Bible, as we know it, was written in time, and refers to historical events of ancient Israel, many of which can be dated and corroborated by other historical facts. As such, it does not account for the

presence of truth that can be passed from one person to the next in some form, verbally or written. Nor does it account for truths of a divine origin existing among nations and cultures around the world, and regarding the focus of this paper, in China. Swedenborg's answer is that the spread of divine truth around the world long predated the Christian Bible and this earlier dispensation conveyed the same inner truths as the Bible, although in a different external form.

The Ancient Churches

Building on the framework of God's desire for connection with humanity, and the need to preserve the human freedom to act rationally, Swedenborg describes a sequence of "churches" in human history. In Swedenborg's theological writings, the word "church" means be a variety of things, but in this case, it reflects God ceaseless effort to remain connected to humanity as the human race went through its various changes down the millennia. In this context a "church" is more closely related to a "dispensation" in which God accommodated to a steady decline in human spirituality. Swedenborg describes a progression of five such dispensations since creation of humanity able to receive and respond to the God.

Human beings at the dawn of humanity were different from "modern" people. Archeological evidence shows a distinct difference from early humans, culminating in Neanderthals, to be physiologically different. Most importantly, the shape of their heads was different, indicating that their brain functions would be different, with the frontal lobes of the brain not as developed in modern humans.

A hundred years before Darwin, Swedenborg described these first humans as the "Most Ancient Church," a race with different brain functions from ours. The people of the Most Ancient Church were not intellectually motivated as are modern humans, instead they were driven by their will, and the intellect followed to enable the will to act. In the early stages of creation, the will of these people was still innocent, devoid of selfishness and greed, along with the other tendencies towards these things which plague later people. Because their will was in this state of innocence—rather like a new born child—the people of the Most Ancient Church were receptive to God's love, and without any evil they had direct contact with heaven and through it with God Himself. They could be led to increasing states of love, and so to increasing wisdom. This was the first, or Most Ancient Church, represented in the book of Genesis by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, naked and not ashamed.

However, as in the Biblical story, the people of the Most Ancient Church gradually became increasingly aware of themselves, turning themselves away from divinely given love towards an increasing focus on their own wants and desires. Because the understanding function of their minds followed the leadership of the will and served only to allow the will to express itself, they lacked the ability to resist or turn away from these developing states of selfishness. In time, represented by the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden down to the story of the flood, the people of the Most Ancient Church, generation by generation, fell into greater and greater states of selfishness, until eventually they became incapable of receiving and reflecting any of the love needed to bond them to the Lord. The demise of this church, a consequence of turning away from God towards self, brought an end to this humanity in this form.

Swedenborg relates that rather than allow humanity to die out completely, God recreated it by separating the will and the understanding. This would have had a physiological effect, indicated by the change in brain and skull formation of the homo sapiens. These new people, like the members of the

fallen Most Ancient Church before them, also had strong inclinations towards selfishness and greed. But unlike the people of the Most Ancient Church, they could learn to control their urges by compelling themselves to think separately from their will. Unlike the people of the Most Ancient Church, they could resist evil.

These new people formed what Swedenborg called the "Ancient Church," and this church forms the common ancestor of all religions, and is why the religions of the middle east and Europe and those of Asia, while so different in external form, are distant cousins in internal forms. According to Swedenborg, all religions come from a common source, and internally have closely connected teachings. The differences of external ritual and expression varied from place to place, but they all served to create a bond between the individual and God, making it possible for God once again to bless receptive souls.

If the transition from Neanderthal to homo sapiens was indeed the transition from the Most Ancient to the Ancient Church, it is possible to put a rough estimate of when this happened. Neanderthals were the last of a type of human that came into being around three million years ago. they covered the earth for about the last four hundred thousand years of that period. However, about forty-five years ago, homo sapiens migrated from Africa. The transition took about five thousand years, which could, in Biblical terms, be called the duration of the flood when the Most Ancient Church perished and the Ancient Church was born. Thereafter that time, only homo sapiens were left as the human representatives on this planet.⁴ This means that when one thinks of the span of the Ancient Church the vast majority of its existence on earth lies beyond the current scope of our knowledge. Our knowledge of ancient people and civilizations does not penetrate much beyond six thousand years ago, which is very brief when we consider the duration between the advent of homo sapiens and the beginning of the common era. By the time we can see it, the Ancient Church was in its final stages.

The Ancient Word

The need for all people after the flood to learn about God's will from an external source is deeply embedded in Swedenborg's theology, beginning with the Ancient Church. He describes how, as the Most Ancient Church declined and fell away, so spiritual insights were collected during that process and passed on from generation to generation, becoming in time a body of teaching that Swedenborg refers to as the "Ancient Word."⁵ This Word existed long before the Judeo-Christian Bible, and was the source of truth across the world until it was corrupted and lost.

Swedenborg relates that the Ancient Word contained symbolic or correspondential stories, like, but not the same as the parables of Jesus in the New Testament. These stories described both historical events and provided doctrinal teaching by using correspondences. For example, the description of the fall of the Most Ancient Church is described as the flood, in which the destruction of the earth represents the destruction of the mind by selfishness, greed and the ideas that support it. All life perishing in the flood describes how the life of the Most Ancient Church could not continue in such a state. Noah on the ark

⁴ <https://insider.si.edu/2015/08/why-did-neanderthals-go-extinct/>

⁵ Speculatively: it is well known that Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons cohabited the earth for ten thousand years. Their contact included interbreeding. Could the spiritual insights of the Neanderthal people have been imparted to the Cro-Magnons, forming the beginnings of the Ancient Word?

indicates the beginning of the Ancient Church, the rescue, so to speak, of humanity. This is but one incident in the Ancient Word.

The people of the Ancient Church, at first, knew the meaning of these stories and drew teaching from them:

The inhabitants of all these kingdoms had a representative form of worship, and thus a knowledge of correspondences. The wisdom of those times came from that knowledge, which endowed them with inward perception and communication with the heavens. Those who knew the correspondences of that Word were called wise and intelligent, and in later times soothsayers and sorcerers. (TCR 279)

As time went on, the people of the Ancient Church fell away from the correspondential meaning of their Word. The stories became externalized and morphed into ancient myths, passed on as stories and valued for their antiquity, but not understood by correspondences. The common themes and images of these myths among religions across the world, however, point to a common origin. As Swedenborg wrote,

The religious beliefs and practices of many nations were derived and transmitted from that [Ancient] Word. For instance, they were transmitted from the land of Canaan and from various places in Asia to Greece, and from Greece to Italy, and through Ethiopia and Egypt into several countries in Africa. But in Greece the people used correspondences to create fables, and they turned the attributes of God into so many deities, the greatest of which they called Jove, after Jehovah. (De Verbo 15 [5])

As the forms of correspondential worship in the Ancient Church, lost their meaning, images created to remind them of aspects of God, because gods themselves, and idolatry developed. Similarly, sacrifices, originally correspondential became external acts, and were gradually debased. In time the Ancient Church, like the Most Ancient before it, succumbed and was lost.

Traces of the Ancient Word

However, that does not mean that all traces of the Ancient Church disappeared. According to Swedenborg, there are references to it in the Old Testament, some brief, with the longest section being the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Two of the books of the Ancient Word are "The Wars of Jehovah"⁶

⁶ Num 21:14-15 Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord [Jehovah]: "Waheb in Suphah, The brooks of the Arnon, And the slope of the brooks That reaches to the dwelling of Ar, And lies on the border of Moab."

and "The Utterances" mentioned in Numbers chapter 21⁷, and a third, the "Book of Jasher" is mentioned in Joshua (10: 12, 13)⁸, and again in the Second Book of Samuel (1:17, 18).⁹

Swedenborg related how this Ancient Church spread across the world carrying the Ancient Word with it,

The Noahitic, or Ancient Church, was diffused (dispersa) through the whole of Asia, especially into Syria, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Chaldea, the land of Canaan and parts adjacent to it - Philistia, Egypt, Tyre, Sidon, Nineveh, - and also into Arabia and Ethiopia, and in the course of time into great Tartary, and thence downward even to the Black Sea, and from this into all the districts of Africa . . . (Coro 39)

The spread of the Ancient Church and the teachings of the Ancient Word provide an explanation for the many commonalities amongst the religions of the ancient world. An example is the common flood story, found in many cultures, including ones that are believed to have been cut off from each other. It is not uncommon for scholars to believe that the Genesis account of the flood was drawn from earlier myths and legends, a concept much in tune with Swedenborg's teaching that the first eleven chapters of Genesis, including the flood story, are from the Ancient Word.

Swedenborg's teachings about the Ancient Church provide another narrative about the origins of religion. The Ancient Church was initially monotheistic, with polytheism developing as the Church fell away from its original teaching. Evidences of monotheistic religion exist in many ancient cultures, even when the original monotheism has been hidden under millennia of polytheism.

Traces of the Ancient Church in Asian Religion

If Swedenborg is right, one should expect to find common threads among the earliest Asian religions and the teachings about the Ancient Church. Swedenborg and modern interpreters of religion begin at very different places regarding the origin of religion. Current scholarship attributes religion to the need of primitive people to explain the forces of nature around them by investing them with sentient spirits who worked for or against them. In time these spirits developed into gods, and eventually monotheism evolved as a more sophisticated way of understanding. The development of modern science and the hubris of current times, provides answers to the questions of ancient times, dispensing with the need for any god. An example of this theory, presented as fact, is by Emily Mark:

The gods grew out of people's observance of natural phenomena which either frightened them and caused uncertainty or assured them of a benevolent world, which would protect them and help them succeed. As time passed, these beliefs became standardized and the gods were given names and personalities, and rituals developed to honor the deities. All of these practices were

⁷ "The Books of the Prophetic Enunciators" (respecting which see Num. 21:27-30). In the New King James Translation is this: "Num 21:27 "Therefore those who speak in proverbs".

⁸ Josh 10:12-13 "Then Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon; And Moon, in the Valley of Aijalon." So the sun stood still, And the moon stopped, Till the people had revenge Upon their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day.

⁹ Josh 10:13 "So the sun stood still, And the moon stopped, Till the people had revenge Upon their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day."

eventually standardized as "religion" in China just as similar beliefs and rituals were everywhere else in the ancient world.¹⁰

Swedenborg takes the opposite tack. The purest and earliest religions were monotheistic, and the ancient people saw correspondential reflections of God in the world around them and reproduced them in images. Over time, as religions became more external, the correspondences were forgotten, and the images became idols. Polytheism was a factor of a failed monotheism, rather than monotheism a progression from polytheism. This approach to the development of religion underpins the Swedenborgian approach to studying religions in many contexts. It calls into question the assumptions of modern scholarship and offers an alternative view of what archeological evidence reveals.

Setting aside the religions of the Ancient Near East and Europe, some of the closest parallels in religion come from India, mostly in Aryan literature as it sheds light on the pre-Aryan people. Vedic literature says very little about the indigenous religion in India, generally categorizing the original inhabitants as barbarians. Archeology in the Indus Valley, however, tells a different story. A civilization predated the Aryan invasion.

Archeologists also found that these pre-Aryan Indians had a written language. Unfortunately, this language has not yet been translated and the great amount of information that it could supply regarding the life and religion of these people remains hidden. (Hopfe and Woodward 2012:75)

Included in the archeological findings are statues and amulets, which following the theory that religion began as polytheism and evolved to monotheism, are thought to be fertility goddesses and charms. This may well be, but, if they were descendants of the Ancient Church, they may also be symbolic representations of attributes of the divine. Swedenborg describes how when the people of the Ancient Church fell away, "then the heavenly and spiritual things they represented and so meant remained as traditions with their priests and wise men, who were called magi and diviners; consequently the common people, because of the religious principle which their fathers saw in these things, began to worship them and to call them their gods" (AE 827). While very little is known about these pre-Aryan Indians, history points to earlier civilizations we know very little about, and even less about their religion. Modern theory offers an explanation based on the concept that religion developed from polytheism to monotheism as it evolved. Swedenborg offers a different formula: religion declined from monotheism to polytheism, reaching a point at which monotheism had to be restored in a new dispensation or church.

Aryan religion itself falls into the vast area covered by the Ancient Church, which Swedenborg says spread over all of Asia. The Aryan invasion of India came in the second millennium BCE. This coincided roughly with the time that the Israelites were slaved in Egypt followed by the Exodus. It is not possible to know precisely where in the Ancient Church their religious state fell—it appears to be a mid-state, close enough to the beginning to have monotheistic elements, reminiscent of the Ancient Church, but with an overlay of polytheism, indicating a declining state. In the Vedic texts, there are two levels of God.

¹⁰ <https://www.ancient.eu/article/891/religion-in-ancient-china/>

Whereas the hymns, chants, legends and rituals of the rest of the Vedic material are clearly polytheistic, giving instruction on the proper worship of a myriad gods, the Upanishads operate from a monistic presupposition. The gods of the earlier Vedic literature are not very important. The Upanishads assume that there is only one reality, the impersonal god-being called Brahman. All others are but an expression of Brahman. (Hopfe and Woodward 2012:82)

It is difficult to assess the state of these Aryans. Their concept of God tallies closely with the falling states of the Ancient Church: initially the members of that church worshipped only one God, but because they like to express ideas in correspondences, they made images of aspects of God, gradually forgetting the correspondences, and eventually investing the divine quality into the image itself. Swedenborg described how this happened:

[T]hose who belonged to the Ancient Church gave to the Divine or the Lord various illustrious names which were descriptive of His different attributes as these manifested themselves in outward effects.... And for every other Divine attribute also they had a specific name. But the wise among them did not understand by each of those names anything but the one and only Lord, whereas the simple made images for themselves which were representative of that Divine, as many images as were those names. Then, when Divine worship began to be converted into idolatry, they invented as many gods for themselves. This was how many forms of idolatry arose among the gentiles, who added to the number of these gods. (AC 4162)

In doing this, the Aryans walked the same steps as other parts of the Ancient Church. Similar developments happened in the Ancient Near East, Africa and Europe. This also may provide an answer why gods in different pantheons bear similarities to each other—the correspondences of the Ancient Word took different forms in various cultures, but as they drew from the same source, the underlying similarities existed. There have been many attempts to correlate Aryan gods and myths with those of Greece and Rome, and the similarities reinforce the concept of a common source.

A Common Ancestor

The Ancient Church, with the Ancient Word, can be compared to an ancestor to all subsequent religions. Swedenborg describes the line of descent in the Judeo-Christian tradition: the Most Ancient Church died, and a new order of human being was created, so the Ancient Church came into being. Over time, the Ancient Church lost its knowledge of correspondences and lapsed into idolatry. This necessitated an incarnation of God in the form of Jesus Christ. The Israelite/Jewish Church was a bridge between the Ancient and Christian Churches, during which the Old Testament provided a framework for Christ's progress in this world. At his resurrection, the Christian Church came into being, and when it too fell into decay, was renewed with a revelation of heavenly secrets given through Swedenborg.

This however, only describes one line of descent. The ancient word spread across the world, and other lines of descent, like cousins in a family were born. In India the Aryan invasion combined with the original religions, and Hinduism was born. Many features of Hinduism can be traced back to the Ancient Word, and reappear in other religions descended from it.

So too the descent of Chinese religion. Little is known of the earliest Chinese religions, although as in the case of other religious theorists, it is held that the original Chinese were polytheists who evolved into a form of inclusive monotheism in the god Shang Ti, who, as the supreme god rules all the others.

Above these gods and all the others was Shangti, the god of law, order, justice, and life known as "The Lord on High". Shangti decreed how the universe would run and the lives of all the people were under his constant watch. He was especially mindful of those who ruled over others and decided who should rule, how long, and who should succeed them.¹¹

Yet again, Swedenborgian teaching on the Ancient Church provides an alternative understanding: the Ancient Word, monotheistic and correspondential, was gradually externalized and names given to characteristics of God became recognized as gods in their own right. Shangti was the power behind all the other gods, and while he may not correlate precisely with Jehovah or Brahma, he points to the principle of God being represented in forms expressing particular divine characteristics.

As it spread across the world, the different cultures overlay the teachings of the Ancient Word with their own vernacular. They are found in the myths of Greece and Rome, of Hinduism and in China, the elements of ancient Chinese religion. By searching out the common threads in all these religions it should be possible to develop a concept of the underlying source, the Ancient Word. This raises question of whether Swedenborg's teaching could shed light on the interpretation of various religions by examining them as expressions of correspondences long forgotten.

Search for the Ancient Word

Swedenborg's teachings about the Ancient Church and Ancient Word as a foundation for all religion has captured the imagination of Swedenborgian scholars down the centuries since Swedenborg's time. Swedenborg reports that the Ancient Word exists and is still in use in the Spiritual World, and can be found in the natural world. He describes visiting a heaven inhabited by Asian angels, where he found

sacred buildings here made of olive-wood, and in their center is a sanctuary containing in a chest the Word which was given to the inhabitants of Asia before the Israelite Word. Its historical books are called The Wars of Jehovah, its prophetic books The Utterances. Both of these are mentioned by Moses (Numb. 21:14, 15, 27-30). This Word is now lost in the kingdoms of Asia and is only preserved in Great Tartary'. (Conjugal Love 77)

In another passage he wrote: "Seek for it in China, and peradventure you will find it there among the Tartars" (Apocalypse Revealed 11).

This injunction has been interpreted with various degrees of literalism, but it identifies the existence of the Ancient Word in the present. However, the process of actually finding that Word has proved to have several complicating factors: what does a Word written purely in correspondences look like? Would it resemble the myths of the ancient religions, or does it exist in verbal form? Where to look for it is also a mystery: Swedenborg confidently says, "seek for it in China" where, perhaps, one will find it amongst the Tartars. The existence and place of this Ancient Word provides a mystery for those who wish to seek it out.

The first mention of a search for the Ancient Word is at the very beginning of the organized New Church, in 1790, in the "New Jerusalem Magazine." It was reported that fragments of it were found in Baghdad.

¹¹ <https://www.ancient.eu/article/891/religion-in-ancient-china/>

While there has been no further discussion of this finding, it would seem that Baghdad is a long way from China, beginning the question of the location of Greater Tartary.

Seventeen years later, in 1807, there was another reference to an attempt to locate the Ancient Word. The previous report from Baghdad is alluded to in this article:

An early attempt failed to find the Ancient Word. It is clear that one must actually go to China, which was a formidable task when it was written in 1766. One year of sea travel (by land was nearly impossible-see below), was apparently the only realistic way to get there. For this reason an English New Churchman commissioned the British East India Company sailor, William Goodyer, to travel to Canton, China and to purchase the Ancient Word in 1798. Unfortunately, he died in Bombay, India, on the way to China. (Brush, Bown and Sun 2002:278)

Further references to fruitless searches appear in Swedenborgian literature in 1812 and 1852. It is not until 1994 that an American scholar, Dr. James Brush of Phoenix, Arizona, took up the challenge to locate the Ancient Word. Following the injunction to search for it in China, amongst the Tatars, Dr. Brush toured China and attended classes at the People's University in Beijing. During this time he came into contact a husband and wife team who were Manchus and were familiar with the traditional shamanistic religions of Manchuria, which Brush thought could be part of the Tartary Swedenborg mentioned.

Manchurian religion has shamanistic practices dating back for millennia, and Brush saw in these the connections to the Ancient Church, and within those the promise of the Ancient Word. Shamans bridge the gap between the spiritual and natural worlds,

Shamans fulfilled two general functions: revelatory and/or healing. Both their revelations and their healing were for the tribe or group they served. Indeed, all of the prophets of the Old Testament were in a very similar sense revelatory Shamans... In regard to revelations among the Manchus they revealed principles of life and thought which they wrote down in Manchu, calling them shen ben (meaning spiritual books in Chinese, but which are actually scrolls). Prof. Fu Yuguang of the University of Changchun, a world authority on Manchu Shamanism, has collected many of these shen ben and has searched in them for references to the Ancient Word without finding them. (Brush, Bown and Sun 2002:219)

In other words, Brush held that while Swedenborg does not mention Shamans in relation to the Ancient Word or Church, they served in a way similar to the prophets of the Old Testament, and the Ancient Church lived on, in a way, through them. Brush found evidence of this by examining certain aspects of Manchurian religion and comparing it with what Swedenborg wrote about the Ancient Church. Areas of coincidence are monotheism, monogamy and myths. Monotheism and monogamy are normative in Swedenborg's theology, and both, he taught, existed in the purer states of the Ancient Church. As monotheism declined into polytheism, so there was a parallel decline of monogamy into polygamy. The externalization of religion is reflected in the externalization of marriage. The mythic description of religious principles was also common in the ancient church, as is evidenced in the myths of Greece and Rome, with very similar myths in Indian religion.

In 1996 Dr. Brush made a second trip to China, this time with the intent of studying shamanism first hand. However, after travelling long distances, it was not possible to meet an active shaman. A third trip in

1998, this time with the Rev. Christopher Bown and Huling Sun, searched in vain. It seems that while there are pointers to the Ancient Church in parts of China, the actual Ancient Word itself is illusive. In 1971 Dr. Brush wrote:

If the Ancient Word did continue to exist among a people of Mongol heritage, they would have had to withstand the countless varieties of idolatry, magical arts, divination, spiritualism, human and animal sacrifices, and adulteries which seem to characterize the fall of the Ancient and Israelitish churches. Probably such resistance to decline could only have existed in a setting of rigid cultural isolation maintained for at least 3000 years. (Brush 1971:286)

Conclusion

The title of this paper is "A Distant Cousin" built on the thesis that religion in China, especially in its ancient forms, is a distant cousin to religions of similar antiquity around the world. The common ancestor binding all religions together is the Ancient Church, and the means is the Ancient Word which Swedenborg said was spread across the world. If this is true, the distance in relationship is more a factor of the external expression of religion, with the essential elements containing sufficient truth for the adherents to develop the conjunctive relationship with God. The form of religion, from a Swedenborgian perspective, supports the practice of the religion, and the practice is what creates the conditions necessary for God to realize the essential features of His love: to love others outside of Himself, to want to be one with them in a relationship of love, and to bless them with happiness.

Yet when all is said and done, it is not the external features of the religion that determine a person's relationship to God, but the internal response. Swedenborg writes that when people pass into the spiritual world, they progress through three stages: in the first they are in the external aspects of life, and thus would practice their religion as they had practiced it on earth. In the second, their internal qualities are exposed. In this state it will become clear whether the practice of religion has been sincere or not, whether the qualities of humility and a willingness to follow have developed. If they did not develop—in other words, if the person chose to keep religion a purely external part of life—they are unlikely to develop these in the next life. During the process of this second state, such people separate themselves from God and all into the states of selfishness and greed that could have been conquered but were not.

However, for those who became human and willing to follow, a third state remains: this is a state of instruction where people are educated in heavenly truths. Swedenborg teaches that God never breaks a person's religion, but bends it gently towards the truth. One could imagine then, that in this state Shangti is reinterpreted as God and the lesser gods he rules as attributed to him. Brahma too becomes God, and the pantheon of Hindu deities are seen as aspects of him.

The internal elements of the Ancient Church lie within the elements of all religion like a soul in the body. In the totality of Swedenborg's writings the universal principles remain in inward form, even though the outward expression differs, and humanity is bound together as a family of closer siblings and more distant cousins.

Note: This article represents the position of the author as presented in a CESNUR conference, rather than of CESNUR or its directors.

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