

# Mystics, psychics, and Christian orthodoxy

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I want us to look at two remarkable mystics and psychics, and to see what they can teach those of us who remain within the main stream of Christian orthodoxy.

The first of these is Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), whose life and thought were the subject of Arthur Shepherd's book *A Scientist of the Invisible* (1954). Shepherd was clearly aware of the inadequacies of a materialistic understanding of the world, and of the aridity which characterised so much of what passed for scientific thought in his day. Science, he believed, does not *have* to be reductionist; it should be possible to follow the scientific method and yet hold to a belief in the spiritual foundations of the universe. It was this which led him into a study of the life and work of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy and the inspiration of the body known as the Christian Community Church. Steiner had studied science at university, but his own clairvoyant perceptions led him to what he termed "higher knowledge" of a supersensible world lying behind and above the world of the senses, by reference to which he believed he could explain the phenomena of the natural and visible

world, and which gave him clues as to man's origin, evolution, and destiny.

He elaborated this in a system he called "Spiritual Science". The difficulty in commending this to outsiders lay in the fact that it was based on his own clairvoyant intuitions and therefore — unlike the data of conventional science — it could not be checked out by any other independent person. "It is clear", wrote Shepherd (*op. cit.*, p.206), "that none of Steiner's followers has developed a clairvoyant knowledge comparable with his own", though he pointed out that many people were following the path of self-development which Steiner taught and had reached varying stages in higher knowledge. Steiner himself did not wish to be regarded as beyond challenge or criticism. He encouraged his followers to use their own powers of reason and argument in testing and proving the conclusions to which his unique clairvoyant intuitions led him, and he disliked being treated in an authoritarian way. "Accept nothing", he remarked (as quoted by Shepherd, p. 212); "accept nothing I have ever said or shall say, on blind faith; ... disaccustom yourself from the principle of authority; ... you must take nothing on authority."

And, indeed, it is easy for an orthodox Christian to find things in Steiner with which he must profoundly disagree. The goal of his system was the possession of occult knowledge in such a way as to develop the spiritual self, and God seems to be more of a principle than a person. Steiner claimed that Christ had a central place within the anthroposophical system, but in Shepherd's distillation of Steiner's teaching, there seems to be little

contact with Jesus of Nazareth and the words of the canonical Gospels. Even Golgotha sounds more like an abstract principle than a bloody event. There is a lot in Steiner's thought which makes it look like a combination of Pelagianism, adoptionism, gnosticism, reincarnationism, and occult teachings based upon unverifiable items of private clairvoyant revelation. We are not surprised to learn that, in 1919, the Roman Catholic Church condemned the whole system.

If that were all there was to it, however, why should I have wasted your time and mine with a description of some aspects of it? Because, I think, it shows up some of the dangers we are in if we expose ourselves to mystics and psychics and visionaries. They have seen something; they want to tell us about it; it is an apprehension about the nature of the universe which comes to them as a primary datum and which therefore they cannot deny. But as soon as the original visionary tries to pass on that primary datum to the rest of us, who have not had his primary experience, something happens to it. It is never the same. By its very nature, it *can* never be the same. When Peter sees the vision of Jesus in glory on the Mount of the Transfiguration, and wants to make it permanent and objective and incapable of misunderstanding, and wants to build tabernacles to house the unhouseable and make the fleeting moment permanent, he has to be told that it cannot be done. Life is not like that.

Steiner did not want himself to be set up as an authority. He was disturbed when some theological students prevailed upon him to help them found the Christian Community Church.

When the insights of a visionary are taken up by an organisation, the life is in danger of going out of them. Steiner was essentially a clairvoyant visionary; but the visionary can only communicate his vision to other people by using human words and concepts. Immediately, that process transforms the perception of the

vision — rather as an electric transformer takes a high voltage source and converts it into a form of electricity which is more manipulable and manageable. In the case of the visionary, what was a poetic and symbolic way of trying to evoke in the hearer something analogous to what the visionary had experienced in his own secret and inner being, has been mistaken for a factual, historic, or plain statement as to the objective nature of things. So is the perception of the mystic reduced and his insights neutered and made unproductive, and subject to attack by the logic of the orthodox theologian, who can only ask whether what he has been told is formally consistent with the propositions of his systematic theology. We have taken a rainbow and built a cage around it; no wonder it is not the same rainbow by the time we have done that — no wonder that the process has destroyed the very rainbow it has attempted to analyse!

To encapsulate him within a system is not the right way to treat a visionary, a mystic, a psychic. And yet that is so often the things we try to do. It happened to Steiner; it happened to another clairvoyant visionary, the tercentenary of whose birth we celebrated in 1989 — Emanuel Swedenborg. Let us turn for a while from Steiner and Shepherd, and see what happened to a Swedish mystic of the eighteenth century, Emanuel Swedenborg saw things about heaven and hell which have been vouchsafed to few men either before him or since his time.

It was on 29 January 1688 that Sara Swedberg presented her husband Jesper with the third of their nine children. Jesper, at 35, was an up-and-coming man. He was one of the court chaplains to King Charles XI of Sweden, and destined for high office. He became Bishop of Skara at the age of 49, was raised to the nobility seventeen years later, changing the family name from Swedberg to Swedenborg, and he died full of years and honour in 1735.

But his fame was to be eclipsed by that of his son Emanuel. Emanuel Swedenborg was by all accounts a pious young man, but he made his main studies, not in theology, but in mathematics, physics, and mining. As often happened in those days of the great polymaths, his scientific and mechanical interests were wide-ranging; by his early thirties the Bishop's son had published writings on chemistry, metallurgy, astronomy, navigation, and harbour works. He became Assessor in the Royal College of Mines and continued to publish both practical and theoretical papers, and to rise in his profession and in the esteem in which he was held both in scientific circles and as a member of the House of Lords of the Swedish Parliament.

It appeared, however, that Emanuel Swedenborg had other gifts of a very different nature. He was a natural psychic, and stories of his telepathic prowess began to go the rounds. Perhaps two of the best-known of these are the stories of the great fire of Stockholm and of the lost receipt of Madame de Marteville.

The first of these happened when Swedenborg had just returned from a visit to England. He docked at Goteborg on the Saturday afternoon. That evening, at dinner, he became greatly alarmed because (as he said) a dangerous fire had just broken out in Stockholm, 300 miles away. It was like arriving at Dover and saying there was a fire in Durham! By eight o'clock he exclaimed with joy that the fire had been put out, only three doors away from his own house. News of the fire reached Goteborg by special messenger a couple of days later, and full details the following day. It was as Swedenborg had said, in detail, including the fact that the fire had been put out at eight in the evening, three doors away from his own house.

The other story concerned Madame de Marteville, the widow of the Dutch envoy to the Swedish court. A goldsmith was pressing for payment of a bill which she knew her husband had settled before his death, but she could not find the receipt. Knowing what folk were saying about Swedenborg, she asked him whether he could help her. Three days later, he was able to tell her about a secret drawer in her late husband's cabinet. The assembled company went to investigate, and there — sure enough — was the hidden compartment, containing private correspondence and the lost receipt.

Stories like that, however, were trivialities compared with what was happening to Swedenborg himself in terms of his spiritual awareness. It first happened in 1743, when Swedenborg was 55. To use his own words about his experiences,

I have been called to a holy office by the Lord himself, who most mercifully appeared to me, his servant, in the year 1743; when he opened my sight into the spiritual world, and enabled me to converse with spirits and angels, in which state I continue up to the present day. From that time I began to print and publish the various secrets that were seen by me or revealed to me about heaven and hell, the state of man after death, the true worship of God, the spiritual sense of the Word, besides many other most important matters conducive to salvation.

This secret life of the scientist and parliamentarian continued from 1743 until his death at the age of 84, nearly thirty years later. For some time he kept up his scientific work and writings, but eventually gave them up completely, to devote himself to theological work. But what a theology! This

was not a work of academic systematics, but a description of the visions he had seen by his inward eye, and of the things about God and man and scripture that he had been told by the angels with whom he had been talking in these visions.

His two most famous writings were, firstly, *Heaven and Hell* or, to give it its full title, *Heaven and its Wonders, and Hell, from Things Heard and Seen* — and then *Arcana Caelestia*, or "Heavenly Secrets", which is largely a highly allegorical explanation of the meaning of the first two books of the Bible. At first he published anonymously, then let his name be known; but he was careful to derive neither riches nor notoriety from his writings. He tried to keep away from fruitless arguments on the grounds that he simply took down what his spiritual guides told him, and it was for his hearers either to accept them or not. If they were of God, they would not be able to be overthrown; if they were of man, they would surely come to nothing — the "Gamaliel" principle (Acts 5. 38f.).

Swedenborg produced a complete scheme of theology. Some of it is orthodox, but like the views of Steiner, some of it is not only idiosyncratic but downright heretical. His views on the doctrine of the Trinity or on what books of the Bible are or are not Holy Writ, distance him from the main body of Christianity. But, idiosyncratic and heretical or not, the whole of his corpus of divinity is based upon the conviction that there is an unseen world besides the visible world which all of us know and in which we all live. He states this, not out of dogmatic concern or as the result of philosophical argumentation, but because he had *seen* a glimpse of that

other world, and had been shown secrets about heaven, and hell, and what heaven and hell are like, and how we can be sure of attaining the one and avoiding the other. Like Steiner, he spoke of the things that he had experienced. His views were first-hand, not derivative.

Steiner and Swedenborg were mystics, visionaries, psychics. What do we do with people like that? Some of them we lock up, because we believe that they are mad. Sometimes we are right so to believe; but being a psychic or a visionary is not *in itself* evidence of an unhinged mind, though many unhinged minds have let themselves loose on religious fantasies and sick visions. Swedenborg was able to carry on his scientific, organisational, and parliamentary duties during the years when his visions were coming to him. If he was a lunatic, he was a notably sane lunatic. Mistaken he *may* have been; mad, never.

If we don't lock them up, what *do* we do with them? One answer is to found a new church or organisation to perpetuate their teaching and to ensure that it is never lost to the world. That happened both to Swedenborg and to Steiner. In Swedenborg's case, the Church of the New Jerusalem was founded fifteen years after his death, although Swedenborg did not wish to form a new organisation and hoped that his teaching could be propagated through the existing Churches. The same fate overtook Steiner; as we have already heard, he was unhappy with the thought that his insights could be systematised within such an organisation as the Christian Community Church.

There are three reasons why I believe that this is not the best way forward. I have already mentioned the first: when we try to encapsulate the insights of an original visionary within a Church or organisation which is devoted to the



preservation and propagation of his views, we lose his living, changing, inconsistent, prophetic voice and we end up with a developing orthodoxy which is in danger of stifling the life out of the message he had for the universal Church. Karl Barth once deprecated the growing industry of writing Ph.D. theses on aspects of his theology, by saying that whatever else Karl Barth was, he was *not* a Barthian. Steiner might well have said the same of the Christian Community and Swedenborg of the New Church.

A second danger is that, once such specialist churches or organisations exist, the rest of the Church feels it can safely leave the propagation of such views to the specialist body. In that way, the message is ignored by all except those who are enthusiasts about it. The wider Church loses the insights it needs; but the smaller body loses out as well. It loses the sense of being part of a larger body with wider concerns; it loses the criticism and the cross-fertilisation that come from being part of a greater whole; it loses the chance of developing through being exposed to the interests and concerns and changes of emphasis of a bigger body. In the end, it becomes one-track-minded and is in danger of thinking that its own specialist interests *are* the whole body of Christian truth.

The third stage comes when the rest of the Christian Church not only ignores the insights of the visionaries in question, but begins to feel positively threatened by their very existence. At that stage, the Church starts thinking that these outside bodies exist in order to disseminate heretical views, and therefore it had better warn people off them. So the visionary becomes the subject of a ten-penny tract in which his teaching is simplified and distorted and in which anything that he has said in the course of his voluminous writings which is incompatible with formal orthodoxy is taken out of its total context and highlighted as if it were the centre of his system; or he becomes the subject of a misguided chapter in a book which is designed to warn the faithful off a variety

of pernicious heresies. What began as an attempt to open the eyes of Christians to truths they were in danger of overlooking, ends in schism and accusations of heresy.

So I come back to my question: what *do* we do with our mystics, our psychics, our visionaries? If we are not to lock them up and call them mad, and if we believe it is a mistaken policy to allow them to lock *themselves* up into separate organisations or new churches, how do we listen to them, and how do we evaluate what they have to say to us?

When I first began to take Swedenborg seriously, I was warned off the New Church on the grounds that its doctrine of the Trinity was defective. That doctrine is foundational to the Christian faith, in that we believe the Father to be God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; yet not three gods but one God. Yet beyond and behind this paradoxical statement lies an absolute quagmire of metaphysics and philosophy. Most theological students plodge their way through it in the Early Church History course and leave it thankfully behind them after ordination. For them, the differences between Sabellianism and Monophysitism are as arcane as the differences between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The whole thing is incomprehensible.

After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, the Armenian Church was declared to be *in partibus infidelium* because of an alleged defect in its Christology. The twentieth century is going behind those early anathemas to see that churches which may have formally incompatible

standards of faith, equally surely confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. They can come together in understanding and love. Is it not time for the mainstream churches to do the same to the New Church, looking, not at the metaphysics of the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but at whether that church confesses that God made the world, redeemed mankind, and sanctifies his holy people, and that these three aspects of the Godhead are *distincte unum*?

If we of the mainstream Churches were to do so, I am convinced that we would want to extend the right hand of fellowship to a body which has been on the outside for too long, in a way which has been helpful neither to the New Church or to the older churches. Isolation has deprived the wider Church of the wisdom and insights of Emanuel Swedenborg; and that cannot be a good thing.

John Chadwick had an article recently in the *Swedenborg Society Magazine* (No. 4, 1988, pp. 8ff.), entitled 'On Translating 'The True Christian Religion.' He ended it with these words:

*New Church* ... is not a title but a description; that is to say, it means a church which is new, not the New Church as the name of an organisation.. The new church which the Lord established after the Last Judgement was not intended to be a separate body of people with new doctrines, but rather a transformation of the existing Christian churches from within.

He went on to write, in his final paragraph, about the guidance of the Holy Spirit in changing the attitudes of the various Christian denominations to one another, and called it "an outward and visible sign of the inward change which is resulting from the Lord's revelation of the internal sense of the Word and the establishment of a new church."

I believe the time is now exactly right for a concerted effort on behalf of the New Church to ally itself with the ecumenical endeavours of Christianity. The ecumenical scene today is fluid as never before, and an entirely remodelled Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland is in process of formation. If at the very beginning of this new ecumenical endeavour the New Church could resolve to apply for membership, who knows what could result? The insights of Emanuel Swedenborg would no longer be the preserve of a little sect at which the bigger churches looked disdainfully askance, but they could be shared within the whole Body of Christ. That would be good for the New Church and good for the old churches. On the verge of the land of promise, Joshua bid the people of God to be strong and of good courage. Can the New Church likewise be brave and resolute in attempting something which could be for the good of us all? It would help the whole of Christendom to take account of Emanuel Swedenborg.

To take account of Swedenborg. What does that entail? It means taking him seriously, but taking him critically. Taking him seriously is not the same as taking him literally, and taking him critically is not the same as arguing against him. Let me enlarge:

If we take Swedenborg literally, we shall soon be in trouble. Much of his allegorical interpretation of Genesis is merely idiosyncratic, and it would be hard to find a serious student of the Old Testament who agreed with him as to its real import. But he is not telling us what Genesis literally means; he is using Genesis as the vehicle for teaching which he wants to share with us. Similarly, if you take Swedenborg's visions literally, you will believe (for example) that there is pen and paper in heaven and that the angels use them to write in a script that resembles cursive Hebrew. But then, if we take all our visionaries literally, how many contradictions there would be between Steiner, and Swedenborg, and St John who wrote the book of Revelation, and the prophet Ezekiel with his heavenly chariots and wheels within wheels, and William Blake, and Boehme, and Law, and hundreds of others! It is a hopeless task to make a system out of the insights of a visionary. Rather, take them as "hints".

That word "hints" takes me straight to the great Victorian theologian Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-72). He hated the systematisation of theological knowledge and his great *magnum opus*, *The Kingdom of Christ*, was sub-titled "Hints ... respecting the principles, constitution, and ordinances of the Catholic Church". Dr Alec Vidler wrote of him that "he had and has a rare capacity for setting thought in motion" (*The Kingdom of Christ* [1958 edition], p. 10). Merlin Davies, who trained me as a deacon, had this to write of F.D. Maurice:

One of Maurice's chief messages to theologians with a craving for systematic theology is his reiterated warning against its dangers. Systems witness to a divine order and then proceed to become miserable substitutes for it. Hating systems, Maurice hates most those which are most perfect, because "most lifeless, inhuman and godless"... Christ's Church is a "kingdom rather than a system. . . .

Our belief is to be in an actual Person and King and not in any system whatsoever" (*Theology*, Vol. 62 (1959), pp. 76f.).

So do not take the visions of Swedenborg or the insights of Steiner and turn them into literal data which can be used as the building-blocks of a system of divinity. But still take them seriously. We need to allow that there are things in heaven and earth of which most of us, for most of the time, are completely unaware; but that there are some people, like Steiner, like Swedenborg, for whom the veil between the two worlds shifts and becomes thin, and who see things (like some shepherds did once, on a hillside above Bethlehem), things which other people do *not* see. When they try to describe them to us, the poverty of human language is immediately manifest, and sometimes what they think they see and describe is almost risible if we take it as literal truth — casting crowns of gold into a sea of crystal, or whatever. The truth about the spiritual realm has had to be refracted through a human understanding, and the best we can hope for is that we can perceive it through a glass, darkly.

So, take them, not literally, but seriously; and take them critically. When faced with an alleged new revelation, do not reject it without examination, but equally, do not accept it without asking some searching questions. In the words of St John, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, to see whether they are from God" (1 Jn 4:1).

Where does all this leave us, as we think our way through the revelations of such psychics and mystics as Steiner and Swedenborg? The content of these revelations is far from trivial, the life-style of the two seers we have been considering is exemplary, and what they say has considerable contact with

Christian orthodoxy as well as significant divergencies from it. So: let me try and sum up my impressions.

One of the objects of my ministry, particularly as Chairman of the Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, is to try to integrate the psychic faculties (and the discoveries to which those faculties point us) within mainstream Christianity; not to use them to build up closed and complete theological systems. When we read orthodox theologians like Barth and Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer, they stimulate us to think about God and to test their insights against our own experience and knowledge. So do present-day thinkers like David Jenkins! *Some* of us fall for a particular theologian in a big way and become Barthians and Bultmannites; but more of us simply recognise particular insights and integrate them within our own personal, individual, even eclectic, faith. Some parts of our chosen theologian's system don't "click" with us, and we may think them to be mistaken; other parts resonate so strongly with our own understanding of God that we take them on board and make them our own. A similar critical eclecticism seems to me to be the only way to treat people like Swedenborg and Steiner responsibly. In that way, you can learn an immense amount from them, of permanent value.

The visions of Swedenborg and Steiner are pointers to the existence and priority of the supersensible world. As a member of the Church of England, holding office within it, I can see those visions as an apprehension of reality. I do not become a member of the New Church, but remain an Anglican, because I know that orthodoxy is not a strait jacket which constrains me within its close parameters, but an initiation into the glorious liberty of him "whose service is perfect freedom".

Steiner (and Swedenborg, and Blake, and Yeats, and many, many others) can still help us with that steady assertion of the reality of the super-sensible, providing we do not let them map out that vast country in too great and definite detail. That, too, is the work of the CFPSS — to take the poetry of the visionary, and set it within a wider understanding of Christian orthodoxy than many orthodox Christians had imagined possible. Not by turning the insights of the mystics and the visionaries and the psychics into a system of thought, but by letting their strange ideas act as "hints" whereby some of the marvels of God's strange world may be revealed to us. Our God is mysterious, and terrible; there are things about him, and about the worlds seen and unseen which he has created, that should cause us to shudder in numinous awe. If we feel that we have God nicely sewed up within the covers of a volume of systematic theology, then what we have got sewed up is an idol of our own manufacture, and the living God is still free and untamed and unknown to us. Read the mystics and the visionaries; but take them, not as guides to the geography of the worlds beyond, nor as interpreters of the exact and allegorical meaning of scripture, but as signposts to the fact that eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor human understanding encompassed the glory of God and the things he has in store for us. We are creatures, not simply of the earth, earthly; we are destined for a future of which the clairvoyant perceptions of a Swedenborg or a Steiner are no more than the fringes of the garments of our God. We shall not see until we have come to wonder, and we shall not know until we realise that the truth of God passes all understanding.