

Dr. Helen Keller's Introduction to The True Christian Religion *

by Emanuel Swedenborg, a Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ

SINCE I was sixteen years old, I have been a strong believer in the doctrines given to the world by Emanuel Swedenborg. It was his mission to teach men to listen to the inward voice rather than to opinions and disputations. After many years of reverent study of the Bible, I gratefully wonder if I am not more indebted to Swedenborg for the faith that turns my darkness to light than I have yet realized. I acknowledge my profound indebtedness to Emanuel Swedenborg for a richer interpretation of the Bible, a deeper understanding of the meaning of Christianity, and a precious sense of the Divine Presence in the world. I have many times tried to recall the feelings that led me to take Swedenborg's interpretation of Christianity rather than my father's; but I can find no satisfactory answer. It was with me as it was with Joseph Conrad, when an irresistible impulse urged him to go to sea. Like him, I took 'a, so to speak, standing jump out of my associations' and traditions — and the rest is what I have grown to be.

Swedenborg's Theological Teachings Are Summed up in The True Christian Religion...

The theological teachings of Swedenborg are in many long volumes. The summation, the universal theology, is found in this *magnum opus*, *The True Christian Religion*, which is now being brought to thousands of new reverent readers. Yet his central doctrine is simple. It consists of three main ideas:

- God as Divine Love,
- God as Divine Wisdom,
- and God as Power for use.

These ideas come as waves from an ocean which floods every bay and harbour of life with new potency of will, of faith, and of effort. To our conception of God, the Word, and the Hereafter, which we have received on trust from ages of unproved faith, Swedenborg gives a new actuality, which is as startling, as thrilling as the angel-sung tidings of the Lord's birth. He brings fresh testimony to support our hope that the veil shall be drawn from unseeing eyes, That the dull ear shall be quickened, and dumb lips gladdened with speech. There is among us a distressing indifference to all things of faith, and an impatience at any effort to explain the laws of life in spiritual terms.

The only really blind are those who will not see the truth — those who shut their eyes to the spiritual vision. For them alone darkness is irrevocable. Those who explore the dark with love as a torch and trust as a guide find it good. Blind people who have eyes know that they live in a spiritual world inconceivably more wonderful than the material world

that is veiled from them. The landscapes they behold never fade. The flowers they look upon are the immortal flowers which grow in God's garden. Swedenborg's message is like the rock smitten by Moses, yielding sweet streams of healing water, even an abundance of truths for those who hunger and thirst in their pilgrimage through an age of materialism and selfishness.

Doctrines Set Forth By Swedenborg Bring Men By A Wondrous Way To God's City Of Light...

The doctrines set forth by Swedenborg bring men by a wondrous way to God's city of light. I have walked through its sunlit ways of truth, I have drunk of its sweet waters of knowledge, and the eyes of my spirit have been opened, so that I know the joy of vision which conquers darkness and circles heaven. Of one thing I am sure; any effort is worth while that brings comfort to limited, struggling human beings in a dark, self-centred age; and Swedenborg's message has meant so much to me! It has given colour and reality and unity to my thought of the life to come; it has exalted my ideas of love, truth, and usefulness; it has been my strongest incitement to overcome limitations. The atmosphere Swedenborg creates absorbs me completely. His slightest phrase is significant to me. There is an exquisitely quietening and soothing power in the thoughts of Swedenborg for people of my temperament. I wish I might be able to radiate the spiritual illumination that came to me when I read with my own fingers *Heaven and Hell*.

All The Days Of My Life Since Have `Proved The Doctrine' And Found It True...

All the days of my life since have `proved the doctrine' and found it true. If people would only begin to read Swedenborg's books with at first a little patience, they would soon be reading them for pure joy. They would find much to be glad of in heaven and enough to show them that the soul is everywhere, and enough to prove that love and God are so closely allied that we cannot know much about one and miss the other. His *Divine Love and Wisdom* is a fountain of life I am always happy to be near. I find in it a happy rest from the noisy insanity of the outer world with its many words of little meaning and actions of little worth. I bury my fingers in this great river of light that is higher than all stars, deeper than the silence which enfolds me. It alone is great, while all else is small, fragmentary. Were I but capable of interpreting to others one-half of the stimulating thoughts and noble sentiments that are buried in Swedenborg's writings, I should help them more than I am ever likely to in any other way. It would be such a joy to me if I might be the instrument of bringing Swedenborg to a world that is spiritually deaf and blind.

The conclusion forces itself upon the mind of one who patiently read his works through, that Swedenborg described a world which was as distinctly objective to him as the world we live in is to us. It is also a fact that that world presents a system of perfect order, and every part of it fits into every other part. The same laws are shown to apply to the constitution of the spiritual realm, the interpretation of the Bible, and the mind of man. If the reader believes in revelation, he will find convincing proofs of Swedenborg's teaching in the Bible itself.

Swedenborg Teaches That All True Religion Is Of The Life And That The Life Of Religion Is To Do Good...

Three characteristics of his philosophy are completeness, homogeneity, and the universal adaptability of its principles. As a leaf grows out of a twig, or as the body depends on the mind, so is any part of this system bound to any related part. All through his writings, Swedenborg teaches that all true religion is of the life and that the life of religion is to do good. He also tells us that the Word — the Law of Life — has its fullness, its holiness, and its power in the sense of the letter and in our acts. Every parable, every correspondence in the Word demands our faithful performance of every service essential to the health, enlightenment, and liberation of mankind. This means that we must strive to fill the practicalities of the world with the Spirit. If we think this is impossible, how can we call ourselves disciples of Him who died upon the cross that we might all have life and have it more abundantly?

Theologians have always endeavoured to grip in permanent form man's momentary impressions of God from the fleeting, changing aspects of His World. From this process of dogmatism have arisen many of the contradictions in the literal sense of the Bible, and misunderstandings of God's nature and His purpose.

Swedenborg had a genius for interpreting the sacred symbolism of the Bible similar to the genius of Joseph when he revealed the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams in the land of his captivity. The theologians of his time darkened counsel with many words without knowledge. While they were helpless before the curtains of the Shrine, Swedenborg drew these aside with subtle insight, and revealed the Holy of Holies in all its glory. The beautiful truths of the Divine Humanity had become distorted, dissociated, dissected beyond recognition, and our Lord Himself was lost in deadly dialects. Swedenborg brought together the scattered and broken parts, gave them normal shape and meaning, and thus established a 'new communion with God in Christ'. Swedenborg was not a destroyer, but a divinely inspired interpreter. He was a prophet sent of God. The first and last thought throughout his writings is to show that in the Bible, rightly read and interpreted, is the truest and noblest conception of God possible.

Most Human Minds Are So Constituted That There Is In Them A Secret Chamber Where Theological Subjects Are Stored...

Most human minds are so constituted that there is in them a secret chamber where theological subjects are stored, and their centre is the idea of God. If the idea is false and cruel, all things which follow it by logical sequence partake of these qualities. For the highest is also the inmost, and it is the very essence of every belief and thought and institution derived from it. This essence, like a soul, forms into an image of itself everything it enters; and as it descends to the planes of daily life, it lays hold of the truths in the mind and infects them with its cruelty and error. Beliefs which set up fictitious excellences, encourage devotional feelings and ceremonies which do not have for an object the good of mankind, and which are made substitutes for a righteous, useful life, such beliefs darken all morality and make it an instrument of a supreme being worshipped indeed with adulation, but in truth most repulsive to the good and the wise. A

wandering idea of an invisible God, Swedenborg declares `is not determined to anything; for this reason it ceases and perishes. The idea of God as a spirit, when a spirit is believed to be as ether or wind, is an empty idea; but the idea of God as Man is a just idea; for God is Divine Love and Divine Wisdom, with every quality belonging to them, and the subject of these is man, and not ether or wind'.

Guided By The Light Of The Divine Word, Swedenborg Saw The Oneness Of God In Person And Essence...

Guided by the light of the divine Word, Swedenborg saw the Oneness of God in Person and Essence, and Jesus Christ as God in the humanity which He assumed on earth, and the Holy Spirit as the Infinite Power for creating good and happiness. Jehovah wrought the most stupendous act in earth's history as gently and unobtrusively as He pours His light upon mind and nature. One of the infallible tokens of Divinity is its perfect quietness and self-effacement.

When the Lord 'finited' Himself, as it were, and became a little child, there was no glory, except a light on the hills, where the shepherds heard the angels sing, and a star in the far East. There was no sign of worldly magnificence or pomp. There was not even a man of perfect form and stature. Only a little babe lying in a manger. He was apparently just like any other child. His growth, mental and physical, was normal, and as we follow the story of His life, we find Him a man with men, earning his daily bread as they did, walking with them along the seashore and by the hill-side paths. Yet He was Immanuel, God with us. This truth is the centre of all Christian doctrine, and unless one perceives it clearly, the Scriptures cannot be rationally understood. So one can joyously worship One God.

The Joy Inspired By Such A Concept Of The Lord Is Like The Sun With Its Threefold Glory Of Warmth, Light And Activity...

The joy inspired by such a concept of the Lord is like the sun with its threefold glory of warmth, light and activity. It is like the satisfaction with which one beholds the happy balance of soul, mind and body in a beautiful human being, or the perfect work of seed sprouting into blossom and the blossom yielding luscious fruit. How sane and easy and capable of fitting into the nature of all things such a concept is!

Yet what prodigious effort it cost Swedenborg to plant it so that it could grow and flourish! The new thoughts about the Unity of God which Swedenborg offered to replace the old are priceless because they give one insight to distinguish between the real Deity and the repelling appearances with which a wrong reading of the Word and the anthropomorphic ideas of passion-driven men have invested Him. *The True Christian Religion* shows how Swedenborg sought to elevate those un-christian concepts to something nobler.

God Is Omnipotent, Because He Has All Power From Himself, And All Others Have Power From Him...

Hear him say: `God is omnipotent, because He has all power from Himself, and all others have power from Him. His power and His Will are one, and because He wills nothing but

what is good, therefore He can do nothing but what is good. In the spiritual world, no one can do anything contrary to His will; this they derive there from God whose power and will are one. God also is good itself; therefore, while He does good, He is in Himself and cannot go out of Himself. From this it is manifest that His omnipotence proceeds and operates within the sphere of the extension of good, which is infinite'.

And again: `It is a prevailing opinion at this day, that the omnipotence of God is like the absolute power of a king in the world who can at His pleasure do whatever He wills, absolve and condemn whom He pleases, make the guilty innocent, declare the faithless faithful, exalt the unworthy and undeserving above the worthy and deserving; nay, that He can under whatever pretext deprive His subjects of their goods, and sentence them to death; with other such things. From this absurd opinion, faith, and doctrine concerning the Divine Omnipotence as many falsities, fallacies, divisions, and chimeras have flowed into the church as there are subjects, divisions, and derivations of faith therein; and as many more may yet flow in as pitchers might be filled with water from a large lake, or as serpents that creep out of their holes and bask in the sunshine in the desert of Arabia. What need is there of more than two words, omnipotence and faith; and then to spread before the people conjectures, fables, and trifles, as many as occur to the senses of the body? For reason is banished from them both; and when reason is banished, in what does the thought of man excel the thought of a bird that flies over his head?

Such Teachings Lift One Up To A Mountain Summit Where The Atmosphere Is Clear Of Hatred...

Such teachings lift one up to a mountain summit where the atmosphere is clear of hatred, and one can perceive that the nature of the Divine Being is Love and Wisdom and Use, and He never changes in His attitude towards any one at any time. But all through Swedenborg's books shines an image of the Eternal Love which embraces every human being, and saves him from sinking into deeper sin.

Religion has been defined as the science of our relations to God and to our fellow-men and what we owe to ourselves; and surely Christianity, rightly understood, is the science of love. When the Lord dwelt upon the earth visible to mortals, He declared that on the two commandments, love to God and love to the neighbour, `hang all the law and the prophets'. Yet for two thousand years so-called believers have repeated `God is Love', without sensing the universe of truths contained in these three momentous words or their stimulating power. Only when Swedenborg arose out of the cold age of logic-chopping called the eighteenth century, did Love as a doctrine again shine forth as the centre and life, the beauty and the preserver of all things. He interpreted the whole world of human experiences as love and in terms of love — states of love — activities, powers, and functions of love — the constructive, preventative, and courage-stirring dictates of love. Moreover, the seer discovered that love is identical with the Divine Itself, `that the Lord flows into the spirits of angels and men', that the material universe is God's Love wrought into forms suitable to the uses of life, and that the Word of God, rightly understood, reveals the fullness and the wonders of His Love towards all the children of men. Thus at last a faint ray, travelling through infinity from the Divine Soul, reaches the mind of deaf, blind humanity, and lo! the Second Coming of the Lord was an accomplished fact.

Swedenborg's Own Mind Expanded Slowly To The Higher Light, And With Deep Suffering...

Swedenborg's own mind expanded slowly to the higher light, and with deep suffering. The theological systems of his day were little more than controversies, and so full of long-drawn-out hairsplitting that they seemed like caverns in which one would easily get lost and never find one's way out again. Swedenborg had to define important key-words such as truth, soul, will, state, faith, and give new meanings to many other words so that he might translate more of spiritual thought into common language. For love he had to find a special vocabulary, indeed, it almost seemed as if he were himself learning a different language. Out of his heart and out of heaven's heart he wrote, in *The True Christian Religion*: 'The love whose joy is essentially good is like the heat of the sun, fructifying and operating on a fertile soil, on fruit trees and fields of corn, and where it operates there is produced, as it were, a paradise, a garden of Jehovah, and a land of Canaan; and the charm of its truth is as the light of the sun in the time of spring, and as light flowing into a crystal vessel in which are beautiful flowers, from which as they open breathes forth a fragrant perfume'.

Perhaps no one had ever endured such a pressure of soul against prison-bars of flesh as he did, and there was no reassuring nearness of equal intelligences to lighten his burden. He gave his life to learn, and what could he do with his colossal treasure of knowledge! He was naturally glad when more of light, more of opportunity was let into his difficult days; but I question whether he ever felt at home upon earth after his 'illumination'. Only such face-to-face knowledge gives reality to things, since it springs from life, and Swedenborg's living testimony will shed a slow but ever-increasing light upon the dark 'hinterland' of our soul experience, and reinforce our groping efforts with the daring of immortal purpose.

Swedenborg's Books Are An Inexhaustible Well-Spring Of Satisfaction...

Swedenborg's books are an inexhaustible well-spring of satisfaction to those who live the life of the mind. I plunge my hands into my large braille volumes containing his teachings, and withdraw them full of the secrets of the spiritual world.

HELEN KELLER.

* This short appreciation first appeared as the introduction to the Everyman edition of Swedenborg's "The True Christian Religion."