

**THE PRACTICAL NATURE OF THE
DOCTRINES AND ALLEGED
REVELATIONS CONTAINED IN THE
WRITINGS OF EMANUEL
SWEDENBORG**

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Emanuel Swedenborg by Augustus Clissold

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AUGUSTUS CLISSOLD

**THE PRACTICAL NATURE OF THE
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WRITINGS OF
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THE ¹⁸⁻⁴⁴
PRACTICAL NATURE
OF THE
DOCTRINES AND ALLEGED REVELATIONS
CONTAINED IN THE WRITINGS OF
Emmanuel Swedenborg:
TOGETHER WITH
THE PECULIAR MOTIVES TO CHRISTIAN CONDUCT THEY SUGGEST.
IN
A LETTER
TO HIS GRACE THE LORD ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN,
OCCASIONED BY
HIS OBSERVATIONS ON THAT SUBJECT IN HIS "ESSAYS ON SOME OF THE
PECULIARITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION,"
BY THE REV. AUGUSTUS CLISSOLD, M. A.,
FORMERLY OF EXETER COLLEGE, OXFORD.

"It is recommended to take a comprehensive view of any question that may be agitated, instead of being exclusively occupied in answering every cavil that may be brought forward."—*Whately's Bampton Lectures.*

"Our province is virtue and religion, life and manners; the science of improving the temper and making the heart better."—*Bishop Butler's Sermon upon the Ignorance of Man.*

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED BY OTIS CLAPP, 121 WASHINGTON ST.
1839.

TO THE READER.

IN the "Essays on some of the peculiarities of the Christian Religion," by His Grace the present Archbishop of Dublin, occurs the following passage relative to the receivers of the writings of Swedenborg:—"Though his followers insist much on the importance of believing in this pretended revelation, it would, I believe, be difficult for them to state even any one point on which a man is called upon to alter either his conduct, his motives, or his moral sentiments, in consequence of such belief. The system furnishes abundant matter of faith and food for curiosity, but has little or no intelligible reference to practice."

In this statement there appears to be a slight obscurity. It might not, perhaps, be easy at first to determine whether the passage implied, that there was no difference between the practical principles of Swedenborg and those commonly received, or that, as a whole, his writings had little or no intelligible reference to any practice whatever. A gentleman, it appears, conceiving that the latter was meant, wrote to the Archbishop to the effect, that he presumed His Grace labored under some misapprehension; for that, so far from having no intelligible reference to practice, the writings of Swedenborg advocated principles which many distinguished members of the Church of England themselves acknowledged to be practical. So far as the argument went, it appears to be just and appropriate.

His Grace's answer, as appended in the note inserted in the Fourth Edition of the Essays, seems to leave the question where it was; except that, instead of using the term system, and thereby implying that, as a whole, Swe-

Recatalogued 5-2-38. 9ml6

denborg's theological writings were non-practical, a distinction appears to be drawn between Swedenborg's doctrines and revelations, as though the former were practical, and the latter not so. Accordingly, this is the point of view in which His Grace's objections are considered in the ensuing Letter; for, whatever may have been the intention of the Author, this I believe to be the fair meaning of his words. My design, however, on the present occasion, has been rather to take a comprehensive view of the subject, than to answer the particular statements of any individual writer. It cannot be denied, that the Essays regard the revelations of Swedenborg as non-practical, and hence, so far, a delusion; that this, also, is an opinion not unfrequently entertained by others. I have, therefore, viewed Swedenborg's writings, with an especial relation to their practical tendency; first, treating of his Doctrines; secondly, of his Interpretation of the Word of God; and, lastly, of his supposed Intercourse with the Spiritual World. With respect to ordinary misconceptions and misrepresentations of the principles contained in the theological works of Swedenborg, it has been usual to pass them over unnoticed; but where any thing like argument is advanced, and more particularly by a person of influential opinions, the case is different; and it may become advisable for a receiver of Swedenborg's writings to give a reason for the hope that is in him.

May the reader peruse the following observations, with the same spirit in which the author has endeavored to write them; namely, with an earnest desire of that truth which alone is able to make him wise unto salvation.

With respect to the passages in His Grace's Essays, more or less alluding to the subject in question, to quote them all would be to quote a considerable portion of the Essays themselves; it cannot, therefore, be expected that they should all be adduced on the present occasion; hence, if the reader is desirous of being more fully acquainted with them, he is referred to the original works. In order, however, to supply him with a faithful idea of the general argument urged in the Essays, it may be well to subjoin the following extracts, which are those which more immediately gave rise to the present letter, and which

more pointedly allude to Swedenborg's doctrines and alleged revelations.

ESSAYS (FIRST SERIES) ON SOME OF THE PECULIARITIES OF
THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION. Fourth Edition, Revised.

EXTRACTS.

P. 218. "Though enough is revealed to us in Scripture to instruct us in our duty, and to incite us to the practice of it, there is much also that is *not* revealed, which many, at least, would be eagerly desirous to know. It suppresses much of what some vainly seek to find in it, or complain of not finding,—which all pretended revelations profess, and might be expected to profess, to make known,—and which a true revelation, and none but a true one, might be expected to omit."

P. 220. "The peculiar feature (of the Christian Religion) which I allude to, consists in this; that not only of the designs and attributes of the Almighty, there are some which he has vouchsafed to make known to man by revelation, and others which he has thought fit to keep secret; but also those which *are* revealed, have some *relation* to man,—some reference to human conduct,—and are, in some way or other, of a practical character.

"Now, since it is undeniable that there have been, and are, many systems of false religion in the world, all of which profess to reveal something, as to the nature of God and his dealings with his creatures, this circumstance is frequently dwelt upon by those who studiously endeavor to confound all religions together, with a view to hold up all to equal contempt, as so many various systems of imposture and delusion. And others, again, though they do not absolutely reject our religion, are yet so far misled by this fallacy, as to regard it with indifference. It will be worth while, therefore, to examine attentively the point above mentioned; I mean, the exclusively *practical* character which I have attributed to our revelation; and to inquire more fully, whether it is likely to constitute an important and distinguishing feature in any professed revelation which may possess it; in other words, whether the abstaining from *points of mere curiosity*, be a probable mark of a true revelation.

"This inquiry falls naturally under two heads; first, whether or not a *pretended* revelation is likely to contain any matters which are interesting to curiosity alone, and

have no reference to practice; and, secondly, whether this is likely to be the case with a *true* revelation.

"The former of these questions we need not hesitate, I think, to answer in the affirmative.

"That the desire of knowledge, for its own sake, is a part of our nature, is a truth so obvious, as hardly to need being insisted on. For though it is common to hear men imply the contrary, by asking contemptuously, in the case of some pursuit for which they happen to have no relish,—'What is the *use* of learning this or that?—What advantage is to be derived from such and such a branch of knowledge?'—yet the very same persons, if some discovery be the next moment announced to them, of a different kind, which may happen to fall in with their own taste, will probably be found to manifest the liveliest interest, and the most eager curiosity, even where they would be at a loss to point out what practical benefit they are likely to derive from it. So far, indeed, is utility from being the sole standard of value in men's minds, that even such knowledge as is useful, is in general sought more for its own sake, than with a view to utility; nor are men ever more eager in the pursuit of it, than when they have no further object to occupy them. 'Accordingly,' as is justly observed by an ancient writer, who well understood human nature, 'when we are at leisure from the cares of necessary business, then are we eager to see, to hear, to learn something; regarding the knowledge of what is hidden, or of what is admirable, as an essential ingredient of happiness.*' He is quite right in the circumstances fixed on as most exciting our interest; things *hidden*, and things *admirable*, being what men especially covet to know. Now, nothing can be more hidden, nothing more admirable, than the nature, and the works, of God,—the origin and constitution of the world we inhabit—of the rest of that vast system of which it forms a part—and of man himself—the nature of various orders of beings which may exist, superior to man, and of the Supreme Being Himself. Each of these subjects suggests innumerable matters of inquiry, whose grandeur fills the most exalted, and whose difficulty baffles the most intelligent, mind. Is it not, then, natural, that men should eagerly seek for some superhuman means of information, on subjects so interesting to their curiosity, and so much beyond their unaided powers? And is it not, consequently, to be expected, that both

* Cicero de Officiis, b. I.

the devices of an impostor, and the visions of an enthusiast, should abound in food for this curiosity?—that the one should seek for proselytes by professing to communicate what men are so desirous of knowing; and that the other should be altogether occupied with those questions to which the imagination of men is so naturally turned, till a diseased fancy mistakes its day-dreams for a revelation?

“Such, I say, is what we might be prepared, from the nature of man, to expect: and, if we consult history, we shall find our conjecture fully borne out by facts. In all those other religions, and in all those modifications of our own, which we attribute to the imagination or to the artifice of man, the pretended revelations not only abound with matters of speculative curiosity, unconnected with practice, but are sometimes even principally made up of them, so as to appear to have for their chief object the communication of knowledge concerning heavenly things, for its own sake.

“To illustrate this by a full examination of all the various systems of false revelation, would be manifestly both tedious and unnecessary: tedious, inasmuch as even a brief sketch of them would occupy a considerable volume; and unnecessary, for most readers, since a few moments’ recollection will enable them to recall, from their previous knowledge, enough to confirm, to a great degree at least, the remark which has just been made. And the conclusion will be more strengthened, the further the inquiry is pursued.”

After speaking of the mythologies of the Greeks, Romans, and Hindoos, and of the imposture practised by Mahomed, His Grace observes, with regard to the Koran, p. 227,—

“It would be wearisome and disgusting to introduce such specimens as would fully illustrate what has been asserted; though it is scarcely possible adequately to describe in words how forcibly it will be impressed on the mind, on actual perusal, that the prevailing character of the book in question is such as has been described. But those who will be at the pains to examine this and other pretended revelations, with an express view to the subject of our present inquiry, will meet with abundant instances to confirm what has been here advanced; more than they, perhaps, are aware of, if they have a mere general acquaintance with those systems, but have never considered them with

reference to the particular point now before us. Such an inquiry, it may be safely affirmed, would be profitable and satisfactory, if fully pursued; and would communicate a lively interest to the perusal even of the most absurd reveries of heathen mythology, and of the Koran. But it will be sufficient in this place to have suggested some of the principal points, towards which the inquiry should be directed."

After alluding to the fables of the Talmud, and the legends of the Greek and Romish churches, His Grace observes, p. 229,—

"Lastly, to advert to a more recent instance, look to the visions of the pretended prophet Swedenborg; himself the dupe, as is generally supposed, of his own distempered fancy. It is well known, that he professed to have been favored with most copious and distinct revelations,—to have visited the celestial abodes, and to have conversed with various orders of beings; of all which he gives minute descriptions. Yet, though his followers insist much on the importance of believing in this pretended revelation, it would, I believe, be difficult for them to state even any one point, in which a man is called upon to alter either his conduct, his motives, or his moral sentiments, in consequence of such belief. The system furnishes abundant matter of faith, and food for curiosity; but has little or no intelligible reference to practice."

(Note. "I received, some time ago, a friendly communication from a person of this persuasion, referring to the above passage, and complaining of the current misrepresentations respecting the doctrines of the Swedenborgians. He set forth, in a brief outline, their fundamental points of faith, and principles of duty; which were, as he studiously pointed out to me,—essentially in agreement with what is held by our own church.

"From his own account, therefore, it appears, (as I pointed out in reply) that the point *peculiar* to that sect,—the supposed revelation to their founder, in which they believe, is entirely of a non-practical character. Now this is precisely what I was maintaining.

"I was not designing any attack on that, or on any other religious persuasion; nor do I deny its including the fundamentals of Christianity. I had in view only what *distinguishes* the followers of Swedenborg from the rest of the