

# THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW JERUSALEM CHURCH IN THE 1780s

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Swedenborgianism in England is best known because of William Blake's response to it. Blake's highly individualized spiritual landscape was certainly unorthodox, but it seems antithetical to sectarianism, which conveys the idea of the rigid and narrow maintenance of heterodox beliefs within a communal setting. Yet Blake was one of the participants in the foundation of the Swedenborgian sect, the New Jerusalem Church. He would never have known about Swedenborgianism if it had not developed into a popular sect. His subsequent bitter rejection of that sect was the end of his involvement in organized religion. Blake was strongly attracted by some aspects of Swedenborgianism. While he subsequently became disenchanted with the seer's teachings, the growing sectarianism of his Swedenborgian brethren added to his irritation. The emergence of Swedenborgian sectarianism is thus interesting not only for its own sake, but in clarifying the formation of Blake's vision.

The first followers of Emanuel Swedenborg in England never anticipated the possibility of the formation of a Swedenborgian sect. They saw themselves as readers and devotees of a unique theosophy, an interpretation of theology, the Bible and science. They did not see the necessity, and nor did their prophet and seer, to express their beliefs in a new ecclesiastical order. The formation of a Swedenborgian denomination, the New Jerusalem Church, was in fact a peculiar product of English partisanship for Swedenborg in the later eighteenth century. The formation of the sect is thus an indication in one specific case of some of the historical and social factors which play a part in the formation of sects. The unstable early history of the New Jerusalem Church is indeed a classic example of the social context of sectarianism, its patterns of leadership, ideological debate, recruitment of membership and difficulties of retaining it, and reacting to threats from competing sects.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For full analysis see P.J. Lineham, 'The English Swedenborgians, 1770-1840: A Study in the Social Dimensions of Religious Sectarianism' (University of Sussex D.Phil. thesis, 1978). This article represents fresh thoughts on the thesis, in the light of further evidence. See also C. Garrett, 'Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in late Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xlv (1984), 67-81; W.R. Ward, 'Swedenborgianism: Heresy,

Emanuel Swedenborg was an eighteenth-century Swedish theologian, who developed in a distinctive way the familiar mystical concept of 'correspondences' between the spiritual and the natural. He was also a visionary. He reported in his 'spiritual relations' that he had been empowered to leave the natural realm and enter the spiritual realm, and there to perceive that it was passing through a great crisis and into a new age. Swedenborg taught that a new age had begun in which influxes from the spiritual were renewing the natural sphere. This new age was the inner and spiritual coming of Christ, which had commenced in 1757. This spiritual coming had led to the inauguration of the New Church of Christ, which was New Jerusalem descended from heaven to earth. As one early disciple wrote: 'Look henceforward to an Internal Millennium'.<sup>2</sup>

The early followers of Swedenborg had a background of interest in mystical and millennial theology. Many of them had been devotees of the German theosophist, Jakob Boehme, whose writings were popular among many sectarians of the seventeenth century. Others were high church or Nonjuror Anglican readers of mystical theology, foremost among them William Law.<sup>3</sup> The most prominent early readers of Swedenborg included three Anglican clergy and one Quaker. The Quaker was William Cookworthy of Plymouth, a dispensing chemist, who discovered china clay in Cornwall. Like many Quakers, he was inclined to mystical divinity, and his reading of Swedenborg seemed an extension of this interest. The clergy include Thomas Hartley, who was a protégé of the Countess of Huntingdon, although his later writings on the millennium and on mystical theology troubled her.<sup>4</sup> Hartley was a friend of Quakers, Moravians, and all lovers of mystical theology. He made no attempt to divide people over Swedenborg. Another clerical sympathizer was John Clowes, the well-born rector of St John's, Deansgate, Manchester, whose sympathy for Swedenborg led him to itinerate among weavers in north Lancashire, helping them to read Swedenborg's writings. As a result he was cautioned by his diocesan bishop, Beilby Porteous, but Clowes abominated the thought of secession from the Church of England. In a letter to those who had followed his urging to read Swedenborg, Clowes urged them to avoid 'a sectarian spirit'. 'Take heed', wrote

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Schism or Religious Protest', *Schism, Heresy, and Religious Protest*, ed. D. Baker, *Studies in Church History*, ix (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for Ecclesiastical History Society, 1972), 303-9. The standard history of the sect, which suffers from a curious bias, is R. Hindmarsh, *Rise and Progress of the New Jerusalem Church in England, America and other Parts*, ed. E. Madeley (London: Hodson & Son, 1861).

<sup>2</sup> Historic Society of Pennsylvania Archives, Duché Letters, J. Duché to M. Hopkinson, 5 May 1785.

<sup>3</sup> See *Selected Mystical Writings of William Law*, ed. S. Hobhouse (London: Rockliff, 1948), 355-82; N. Thune, *The Behmenists and the Philadelphians: A Contribution to the Study of English Mysticism in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Uppsala: Amsqvist & Wiksells, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> Westminster College, Cambridge, Cheshunt Papers, F1/0089, T Hartley to the Countess of Huntingdon, 7 April 1770.

Clowes, 'lest the Prejudices and Contradictions of Unbelievers should betray you into Uncharitableness towards them'.<sup>5</sup> Bishop Porteous was not inclined to persecute a clergyman like Clowes who was conciliatory if unorthodox. The third prominent clerical sympathizer of Swedenborg, Jacob Duché, was a vicar in Philadelphia with a sympathy with mystical theology, who had begun to read the writings of Swedenborg when in exile in England, after the American revolutionary war. 'It is Mr Duché's opinion that no man could have written as he [Swedenborg] has done, without being divinely inspired', wrote his wife.<sup>6</sup> Duché held the position of Chaplain of the Asylum for Female Orphans in St George's Fields, Lambeth, where his Sunday preaching was compatible with, but never explicitly affirmed, the Swedenborgian theosophy. Around him gathered a Swedenborgian study group which was firmly opposed to secession from the Church. Nevertheless Duché by 1789 retired from the Anglican ministry, upset by its lack of sympathy to a truly spiritual ministry.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest readers of Swedenborg did not seek to organize groups of readers. But it is noticeable that the Anglican supporters did so, no doubt copying the pattern of Woodward's Religious Societies, and John Wesley's vision of classes of persons within the Church of England who had gathered for the conversion of their souls.<sup>8</sup> Wesley's groups ended in being excluded from the Church. But it was not in this way that the Swedenborgian sect came into existence. The earliest groups of Swedenborgians were week-night study groups. In the years after the seer's death they joined a widespread effort to preserve, publish and translate the scattered manuscripts of Swedenborg. Benedict Chastanier, an émigré Huguenot, who had become a disciple of Swedenborg after a vision of his own, collected Swedenborgian manuscripts from the mid-1770s, and, because of his poverty, he apparently gathered the first such group in 1776 to assist him in this task.<sup>9</sup> Then in Manchester, a Society of Gentlemen within his parish in 1782 provided John Clowes with the finance to publish one of Swedenborg's works. In 1784 they were formally organized as the

<sup>5</sup> J.C., *A Letter of Exhortation and Admonition to Such as cordially receive the Testimony of Emanuel Swedenborg* (Manchester: C. Wheeler, [1783]), 7, 8, 10. T. Compton, *The Life and Correspondence of the Reverend John Clowes*, third edition (London: James Speirs), 47. For the complaint against Clowes see Lambeth Palace Library, FP 110 C 11., C. Baldwin to B. Porteous, 20 August 1783.

<sup>6</sup> Duché Papers, E. Duché to M. Hopkinson, February 1785. See C. Garrett, 'The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché', *American Philosophical Society Proceedings*, cxix (1975), 143–55.

<sup>7</sup> See *Autobiographical Narrations of the Conviction and Other Religious Experiences of Samuel Crisp, Elizabeth Webb, Evan Bevan, Margaret Lucas, and Frederick Smith* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1848), 232–5; *New Jerusalem Journal*, i (1792), 43.

<sup>8</sup> See J. Walsh, 'Religious Societies: Methodist and Evangelical, 1738–1800', *Voluntary Religion*, ed. W.J. Sheils and D. Wood, *Studies in Church History*, xxiii (Oxford: Blackwell for Ecclesiastical History Society, 1986), 279–302.

<sup>9</sup> *Proposals for printing Emanuel Swedenborg's Spiritual Diary* (1791), issued as a supplement to *New Jerusalem Magazine*, i (1791), 2.

‘Society for printing, publishing and circulating the Writings of the Hon. Emanuel Swedenborg’.<sup>10</sup>

There were several attempts to organize support in London, including a proposed association of Freemasons. But the first body, which was called ‘the Theosophical Society’, began in December 1783.<sup>11</sup> The members of the Theosophical Society were, as the name implies, dabblers in the occult, alchemy and animal magnetism. One of their most colourful members was Lieutenant-General Rainsford, the governor of Gibraltar and a well-known speculator in animal magnetism, alchemy and astrology. The Society met on Thursdays to translate passages from the writings of Swedenborg and to discuss their significance. They advertised their aim as ‘to acquire further knowledge concerning the eternal world and state we are all born to inherit’. No thought of religious sectarianism entered their minds. They insisted that they were ‘by no means subversive of any of the present establishments, nor . . . tending to discountenance any religious sect or party whatsoever’.<sup>12</sup> Yet they became more committed to their favourite author and more embarrassed by the ‘pagan’ connotations of theosophy, and in August 1785 under the influence of a visiting French reader, the Marquis du Thomé, the Society was renamed ‘the Society for promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church designated by the New Jerusalem in the Revelation of St John’.<sup>13</sup> The London and Manchester societies aroused considerable interest in the writings of Swedenborg, for it was a decade very receptive to neo-platonic theories. Moreover, they acted as hosts for many European devotees of the seer, who were attracted to England by invitations from émigré readers of Swedenborg like Benedict Chastanier and the artist, Philippe de Louthembourg, and also by the opportunity of publishing manuscripts of the seer which they had collected.

These foreign supporters played a critical role in the development of Swedenborgian sectarianism. They had a significant influence on the English supporters of the seer. The foreign readers seemed more devoted to the seer and more knowledgeable about him. Their interest in the formation of an English religious sect was slight, but their view

<sup>10</sup> See D. McCallum, *New Church House and its Origins, 1782–1982* (Manchester: North of England New Church House, 1982), 1–10.

<sup>11</sup> Hindmarsh, *Rise and Progress*, 14–15 refers to the formation of the Theosophical Society, but the existence of a separate society of émigrés is evident from S. Sandel, *An Eulogium on the Late Deceased Emanuel Swedenborg* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1784), 36. The MS note in the copy of this book in the archives of the Swedenborg Society, London, A/8, is significant. See also C.F. Nordenskjöld to J.F.I. Tafel, 3 May 1822, reprinted in Tafel’s *Sammlung von Urfunden . . . das Leben den Character Emanuel Swedenborg* (Tübingen: Verlam, 1839–45), iv. 293–4.

<sup>12</sup> Hindmarsh, *Rise and Progress*, 27, citing documents of the society.

<sup>13</sup> New Church General Conference Library and Archives, London, Minute Book of the Society for promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem Church Eastcheap, [hereinafter cited as ‘Eastcheap Minutebook’], 7 May 1787. Swedenborg Society Archives, London, K/144, Thomé to C.F. Nordenskjöld, 1786; B. Chastanier to P.F. Gosse, cited in P.F. Gosse, *Portfeuille d’un Ancien Typographe ou Recueil de Lettres sur divers Sujets* (La Haye: P.F. Gosse, 1824), 3.

of the universal significance of Swedenborg inspired many English readers. French and German interest in Swedenborg had arisen mostly among speculative Freemasons and students of the occult. Consequently, sober English readers were rather bewildered by these foreign visitors. The first visitors were the brothers Augustus and Carl Fredrik Nordenskjöld, who had become ardent supporters of Swedenborg in the late 1770s. Each in turn visited London to arrange for the publication of manuscripts of Swedenborg's works some of which had been borrowed from the Swedish Royal Academy. C.F. Nordenskjöld was attracted by news of the society in Manchester, and arrived in London soon after the formation of the Theosophical Society. His brother Augustus visited in the late 1780s, along with another Swede, C.B. Wadström, with whom he had been exploring Sierra Leone as a possible setting for a millenarian Swedenborgian colony.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, General Rainsford and (to a lesser extent) Chastanier maintained links with continental speculative Freemasonry. Both were present at the Congrès du Philalèthes, which was organized by the French speculative lodge of the Amis Réunis in 1784–85, and was repeated in 1787. These meetings, like the Convent of Wilhelmsbad in 1782, were attempts to unite continental Freemasons, and to harmonize the sundry doctrines which convulsed lodges in the 1780s. At the 1784 meeting Swedenborgians from several parts of Europe met each other and explained their beliefs to continental Freemasons. The consequence was that the London Theosophical Society was soon host to a further range of exotic visitors, among them the ardent Swedenborgian, the Marquis du Thomé, Count Cagliostro, the founder of an extraordinary French lodge devoted to 'Reformed Egyptian Freemasonry' and victim of Queen Marie Antoinette's diamond necklace scandal, and Count Tadeusz Grabianka, a member of Perneti's notorious 'Illuminati' society, which has been blamed for the French Revolution and a great deal else beside, and who had been informed about Swedenborgianism by C.F. Nordenskjöld.

Such visitors must have intensified the apocalyptic fervour of the Theosophical Society. A visitor to its meetings in 1786 described Grabianka and Chastanier among the thirty people present at the meeting, and noted that the Society 'had reasons out of the common order of things to think these times would produce might[y] changes, that would end in the establishment of human happiness'.<sup>15</sup> Grabianka left England for Avignon in November 1786, but on 12 February 1787 he wrote a letter to the Theosophical Society at the suggestion of other members of the Illuminati, urging that they 'form one and the same Soul with us, to praise, to bless and to adore the Lord . . . and to

<sup>14</sup> See C.B. Wadström, A. Nordenskjöld, C. Barrell and G. Simpson, *Plan for a Free Community upon the Coast of Africa* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1789).

<sup>15</sup> F. Dobbs, *A Concise View from History and Prophecy of the Great Predictions in the Sacred Writings* (London: for the author, 1800), 249.

prepare the way for his new people'.<sup>16</sup> The letter was never answered, but, on the other hand, when the sect was formed in May 1787, among the honorary members elected were not only the single-minded Swedenborgians du Thomé and Nordenskjold but also Count Grabianka. A heightened sense of millennial expectation just before the French Revolution was one factor in the sectarian development of the English Swedenborgians. The role of foreigners in the development of Swedenborgian self-confidence was a significant factor. External support plays an important role in the shaping of many sects, and without it the New Jerusalem Church might never have commenced.

But another factor must be added to the forces contributing to the sectarian pressure within Swedenborgianism before the formation of the sect is described. This was an attempt from 1787 to 1789 by two preachers to copy Wesley's preachers and itinerate the country preaching Swedenborgianism. These two preachers were both well-used to Methodist itinerancy, for both had been Methodists. Ralph Mather had been an independent Methodist revivalist whose contact with the Society of Friends and ardent enthusiasm for the mystical writers had led him into a perfectionism which deeply troubled John Wesley in the 1770s.<sup>17</sup> His companion, Salmon, was a well-reputed local preacher in the Methodist circuit of Shropshire and south Cheshire, who had read Swedenborg's writings at the suggestion of Wesley's friend, John Fletcher. He and Mather preached about their new light in familiar Methodist haunts including the Moorfields in London, Bristol, Salisbury, Norwich and the northern industrial towns. They made only a few converts, but these included a prominent General Baptist preacher in Norwich, Joseph Proud, and the tour stung John Wesley into publishing a sharp criticism of Swedenborgianism.<sup>18</sup> The character of this tour bore striking parallels to the early proclamation of Methodism. Preaching and seeking converts to Swedenborg among the common people inevitably branded the doctrines as heretical in the eyes of some observers. The tour did not presuppose the formation of a sect any more than it did for Methodism. Like the early Methodists at least one of these preachers (Salmon) had no firm intention of seceding from the church. Yet when the sect was formed in London, it conferred honorary membership upon Salmon and Mather, for their preaching was the first attempt to make Swedenborgianism known among the poor.<sup>19</sup>

In view of these pressures, the beginning of Swedenborgian

<sup>16</sup> *Copy of a Letter from a Society in France to the Society for promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem Church in London* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1787), 3, 4, 7.

<sup>17</sup> J. Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. N. Curnock (London: C.H. Kelly, 1901-13), v.223, 525; vi. 10, 11, 227-8. There is a good deal about Mather in the collection of Henry Brooke's Letters in Dr Williams's Library, London.

<sup>18</sup> *Arminian Magazine*, xi (1788), 218.

<sup>19</sup> See J. Wright, *A Revealed Knowledge of Some Things that will speedily be fulfilled in the World* (London: private publication, 1794), 3; Eastcheap Minutebook, 7 May 1787, 1 December 1788.

religious services comes as no surprise. Yet it was a complex and hesitant development, perhaps because fear of accusations of heresy was very real to most of the early Swedenborgians. The group who established a sectarian congregation had been Dissenters, and were therefore accustomed to the formation of separate congregations and denominations because of doctrinal differences. Yet they were cautious about the final break. They were pushed to it by young members of the Theosophical Society and by the intense millennial expectation in that Society. The precise details of the schism are difficult to reconstruct, but they began with a schism in the Theosophical Society in April 1787. The cause of this schism is unclear. The records of the new society indicate that a poll of members of the old society had 'determined to change the mode of conducting the Society', and that consequently their president (the Quaker, Thomas Wright), secretary (Robert Hindmarsh), and treasurer (Henry Peckitt) refused to surrender the lease of the Society's room in the Middle Temple to the majority party, and began a new series of meetings which they saw as continuing the former pattern of the old society's activities. The names of the members, and particularly the honorary members elected *in absentia* to the new society, indicate that this society wanted to maintain close contact with the more extreme foreign supporters of Swedenborg. So, whatever the actual cause of this schism (possibly it was no more than a personality dispute), the re-formed Society for Propagating the Doctrines of the New Jerusalem took a high view of the importance and status of Swedenborg's writings. The new society must have been rather more exclusive in its basis of membership than its predecessor, for it welcomed only 'Readers of the said writings [of Swedenborg] and Believers in the Doctrines contained therein, and who declared themselves as such' who had been nominated and elected by the unanimous vote of existing members.<sup>20</sup>

The new society, like the old, was not a sect. Yet some of its members were already meeting on Sunday evenings to exhort one another. Many Anglican Swedenborgians attended Duché's services at the Orphan's Asylum, but a number of Dissenting and Methodist receivers of the doctrines were reluctant to attend these services, even though they were much less likely to be offended there than in any of the Nonconformist chapels of the city. So a cluster of Swedenborgians began meeting on Sundays in the home of Isaac Hawkins in Bunhill Row, Moorfields. One of those present at these meetings was another Methodist, James Hindmarsh, who had served as schoolmaster of Kingswood School from 1765 to 1771, and then became one of Mr Wesley's Assistant Preachers. He had developed Swedenborgian interests, after his retirement in 1783, from his son Robert, who had

<sup>20</sup> See Eastcheap Minutebook, 7 May 1787, 2 July 1787. Hindmarsh, *Rise and Progress*, 66, needs to be treated with care, since the documents he quotes do not show the sectarianism he claims about these events.

learnt them while apprenticed to a Quaker printer. Another attender was Manoah Sibly, the occult bookseller. Wesley had expelled Isaac Hawkins from the Methodists for his adherence to the doctrines, so there must have been a strong sectarian tendency among this group. However, it was not this company who took the decisive step but a smaller meeting of thirteen enthusiasts, including Robert Hindmarsh. He and his friends met at the home of Thomas Wright on Sunday, 29 July 1787 to hear a lecture by James Glen, an honorary member of the New Jerusalem Society, who had just returned from Demarara, and was infused with a sense of the millennial significance of Swedenborgianism. Glen argued that the New Jerusalem only encompassed those who had been baptized into union with its truths, thus declaring their 'earnest and hearty Rejection of the Doctrines of the Old Church'. Those who took this step would experience 'the full Reception of the influx of Wisdom and Love from the Divine Humanity' and 'conjunction with the Lord, and Consociation with the Angels' at the sacrament of Holy Communion.<sup>21</sup>

It was a compelling argument, and many members of the Society shared Glen's belief in Swedenborg's inspiration. The suggestion was eagerly discussed, and two days later, on Tuesday, 31 July, those who had heard Glen's address reassembled, along with a number of others including James Hindmarsh, Samuel Hands of Birmingham, and George Wright. They had not waited to discuss the issue at the Thursday meeting of the New Jerusalem Society, and most of the new Society must have known nothing about the event. Those present at the Tuesday meeting did not all belong to the Society, and their ceremony went well beyond anything contemplated by the Society at this stage. They drew lots to decide who was to officiate at the ceremony, and James Hindmarsh, the former Methodist preacher, was selected (possibly because his son drew the straws). Samuel Hands, George Wright, Robert Hindmarsh, James Rayner and Isaac Brand, all of them young and zealous advocates of the Swedenborgian revelation, were sprinkled by the old man in the name of the New Jerusalem, and another eleven people present shared in the communion.<sup>22</sup>

This event indicates the demand for sectarianism among the supporters of the New Jerusalem. In fact, although the historian of the New Church, Robert Hindmarsh, described it as the birth of the New Church, it was a false start, rejected by other members of the Society. But circumstances soon pushed the Society towards sectarianism of a different and less sacramental kind. They began holding Sunday meetings at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. in their room in the Middle Temple in

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 58; see also London, General Conference of the New Church, M. Sibly, 'A Brief outline or historical sketch of the preparation by the Lord for the birth of his New Church', fo. 55.



September 1787, but on 5 November they were evicted from their room in the Middle Temple, and were forced to use the home of one of their members for meetings. Sunday meetings of the Society no doubt included religious services, but they as yet made no attempt to proclaim the doctrines of the New Jerusalem publicly as Salmon and Mather had done. A change was forced on them when new accommodation was found by their zealous secretary Robert Hindmarsh and two friends in a chapel in Maidenhead Lane, off Great Eastcheap (now Cannon Street) in St Clement's in the City. It was the same chapel which Dr Gill, the famous hyper-Calvinist Baptist had preached in from 1729 to 1756. The use of a chapel for society meetings implied that it viewed itself as a religious sect. And indeed a licence to use the chapel for Nonconformist services was obtained from the Bishop of London, and services began on 27 January 1788.

The new chapel was initially quite successful in making Swedenborgianism known to a new range of people from poorer backgrounds. As in Methodist chapels, different preachers alternated in its pulpits, among them James Hindmarsh, another former Methodist, Robert Brand, and Manoah Sibly. The new society's Thursday meetings were a kind of 'class meeting' of the society. In the 1780s John Wesley only just held back pressures from his followers to secede from the Anglican community. The developments in the Swedenborgian society reflected the pressures which its leaders had felt when they had been Methodists. In May 1788 the society changed its name to 'the New Church signified by New Jerusalem in the Revelation'. On Sunday, 10 May it elected James Hindmarsh and another former Methodist itinerant, Samuel Smith, as its ministers. Many Methodist assistants longed for this status, but Wesley had refused to ordain any Methodist ministers in Britain. A rapid ecclesiastical development then took place. On 10 May the newly-elected clergy were called ministers. On 25 May the two ministers, in order to strengthen their status, baptized each other and 'publicly renounced the faith of the old church and embraced that of the New Church', and on 1 June they were called 'Ministers and Priests', and their ordination was justified in somewhat sacramental terms:

Priests are to teach men the way to Heaven, and likewise to lead them therein; they are to teach them according to the Doctrines of their Church derived from the Word. . . . Dignity and honour ought to be paid unto Priests on account of the sanctity of their office.

This was not a collapse into Catholicism; other clauses of the same charter insisted that 'Priests ought not to claim to themselves any power over the Souls of Men . . . much less ought they to claim the power of opening and shutting the Kingdom of Heaven', and 'they ought not in Matters of Faith, or on any Account, to use compulsion; inasmuch as no One can be compelled to believe . . . Every person

ought to be allowed the peaceable Enjoyment of his religious Opinions, howsoever they may differ from those of the Priests'.<sup>23</sup> There were already vestiges of Anglican forms in the Eastcheap society, including also the use of a printed liturgy, and the interests of the New Church clergy lay in this direction. Yet although it was agreed that future ordinations would require the laying on of hands by the first priests, since there was no-one to ordain the first priests, twelve members of the Eastcheap society were chosen by lot to lay hands on the priests, while Robert Hindmarsh was chosen (by lot, he said) to read the service over his father and Samuel Smith. The choice of Smith must have been on account of his competence as a minister in the 'old church' and the boldness of his baptismal renunciation of the old church, since he never formally became a member of the society. Church ordinances had evidently taken priority over society niceties. On 8 June the priests initiated baptisms of members, their spouses and children. However, nearly half of the members failed to take this step that year. It is possible that they took a Quaker view of the sacraments, but it is more likely that their attitude to the old church still fell short of complete sectarianism, and they viewed their existing baptism as adequate.

Swedenborgians did not slip into sectarianism unwittingly. On the contrary, the significance of their step was realized by the members of Great Eastcheap. Other Swedenborgians reinforced this awareness, for they hastily expressed their horror at the events, viewing them as a false understanding of the New Jerusalem. John Clowes, as the senior receiver of the doctrines in England and an Anglican rector as well, hastened to London, probably early in November 1787 (presumably reacting to the beginning of Sunday meetings, since public services had not begun at this point). On his return the Manchester readers sent a letter to the society, but it was received just after they had been evicted from the Middle Temple and may have encouraged sectarian pressures. Yet no reply was sent to this letter for a full year, so perhaps there was an initial anxiety about defying the leaders of the Swedenborgian world. The reply finally sent late in 1788 was not unlike any justification of Dissent to Anglicans. Seventy-seven members and friends of the Eastcheap society signed the open letter to the Manchester society, and one of their justifications was their rights as citizens of a tolerant country. 'We are only exercising that Liberty of Conscience which the Lord . . . has favoured us with, and which as Members of the New Church and subjects of a free land we have a most undoubted Right to'.<sup>24</sup> Would they have seceded if the climate had been less conducive to sectarian behaviour? They also strongly criticized

<sup>23</sup> Eastcheap Minutebook, 25 May 1788, 1 June 1788.

<sup>24</sup> Members of the New Jerusalem Church who assemble in Great Eastcheap, London, *Reasons for Separating from the Old Church. In Answer to a Letter received from certain Persons in Manchester* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1788), 6.

receivers of the doctrines who remained in the old church. The open letter insisted 'that man is only regenerated, as his External is reduced to a conformity with his Internal' and that 'the Doctrines of the Old Church and New Church do not agree together, NO NOT IN ONE SINGLE POINT OR INSTANCE, however minute'.<sup>25</sup> A circular invitation to a conference at Great Eastcheap issued on the same day as the letter to Manchester included a series of resolutions adopted by the Eastcheap society. It proclaimed 'that the Faith and Imputation of the New Church cannot abide together with the Faith and Imputation of the Old Church, and in case they abide together, such a collision and conflict will ensue, as will prove fatal to everything that relates to the Church in man.' It continued: 'That external Forms of Worship agreeable to the doctrines of the New Church are necessary, in order that the members of the New Church may worship God in One Person, according to the dictates of their own consciences . . . and thus their own external man act in unity with their internal'.<sup>26</sup>

A further attempt to confirm and give institutional coherence to the Swedenborgian sect came when that General Conference of separatist receivers was held at Easter in 1789. The intention of the conference was to encourage a national movement of separation from the old church and the formation of other sectarian congregations. Participants in the conference were required to affirm that 'the Doctrines are genuine truths, revealed from Heaven, and that the New Jerusalem Church ought to be established, distinct and separate from the Old Church'.<sup>27</sup> This declaration excluded any who doubted the propriety of Eastcheap's step. The names of seventy-seven who attended the conference were recorded in the minutes, and these included the names of William and Catherine Blake. Most of these seventy-seven were ordinary members of the congregation. Fourteen names were printed as signatories of the published conference proceedings; these included Wadström, Augustus Nordenskjold and Benedict Chastanier, and several provincial receivers. This was hardly a large attendance of people not in the Eastcheap congregation. The conference resolutions were a thinly disguised attempt at self-defence by Eastcheap, for they included calls for receivers to abandon communion with other churches and to be baptized into the New Church. The form of liturgy used at Eastcheap was revised and authorized by the conference. In a blunt resolution the dissenting ideal was spelled out:

The establishment of the New Church will be effected by a gradual Separation from the Old Church, in Consequence of a rational Conviction wrought in the Minds of

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. This part of the letter was not reprinted by Hindmarsh in his *Rise and Progress*.

<sup>26</sup> Circular, headed 'New Jerusalem Church, Great Eastcheap, December 7, 1788'. There is a copy in Porteous's papers, Lambeth Palace Library, FP 110 C 7, and it is cited in Hindmarsh, *Rise and Progress*, 80-3.

<sup>27</sup> Eastcheap Minutebook, 13 April 1789, Account of the General Conference.

those, who are in search of Truth, for the sake of the Truth, and who are determined to judge for themselves in spiritual Things, without any regard for the Influence or Authority of the Clergy of the Old Church, or the hopes of Preferment either in Church or State.<sup>28</sup>

The conference formalized the separation which had taken place, and it attempted to define an orthodox interpretation of Swedenborg. This was a natural step for separatists, but it obviously appealed to many uncertain readers of the seer's writings. And the events of 1789 certainly strengthened the sect. Duché's services at the Orphans' Asylum came to an end about this time, for he had lost confidence in his direction. One of his former strong supporters, François Barthelimon attended the conference and later joined the sect. The non-separatists seemed an aging and inactive group in the face of the zeal of the separatists. It is precisely the power of extremism which often strengthens the moral prestige of sectarians.

Over the next few years the development of the Swedenborgian sect slowed down. In the era of the French Revolution popular interest was transferred to the millennialism of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott. The millennial optimism of Swedenborgianism was replaced by apocalypticism with a greater sense of outward crisis. The preaching of Salmon and Mather led to the formation of small Swedenborgian congregations in Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Chester, the Isle of Wight and (to Clowes' sorrow) in Manchester. But despite protestations of loyalty to the King, the Birmingham congregation only just escaped violence from the Church and King mob which destroyed Priestley's chapel in 1792, and thereafter popular campaigns were curtailed. The Eastcheap congregation suffered a serious schism over the interpretation and implementation of some of the more obscure teachings of Swedenborg at this time. The seer's doctrine of 'conjugal [*sic*] love' and of true marriages as marriages made in heaven led some of the Swedish receivers, notably the precocious Augustus Nordenskjold, to advocate the right of Swedenborgians to identify their true spiritual wife and take her as a concubine. This doctrine was supported by at least six members of the Eastcheap society including the secretary, Robert Hindmarsh, and these people were expelled by the majority of the society. This no doubt explains a curious hiatus in the society's records between 4 May 1789 and 1 April 1790. This little group, dominated by the Swedes, Wadström and Nordenskjold, formed a tiny new separatist society, and saw themselves as the only truly dedicated members of the New Jerusalem. They published a fascinating magazine in defence of their stand, the *New Jerusalem Magazine*. The tendency for further schisms in a sectarian group on account of disputes over interpretation is not unfamiliar in other groups.

<sup>28</sup> *Minutes of a General Conference of Members of the New Church* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1789), 35.

The result of this confusion was a sifting within the sect, and one of its early ministers, Samuel Smith, left to become an associate of another group on the fringes of the evangelical renewal, that of William Huntington S.S. The New Church itself slowly stabilized by adopting a congregational polity, in which congregations covenanted together in fellowship but were independent of all other congregations, and the power of the former priests (now styled clergy) was sharply reduced. The loyalty of members to the constitution of the country was constantly protested. At the 1792 conference a sharp controversy over the form of church government exploded in consequence, and James Hindmarsh proposed that 'the Doctrines . . . are clearly and decidedly more congenial to the Episcopal Form, or that which admits of one visible Head, with a subordination of Ministers under him, than with those of Presbyterians and Dissenters . . . in which . . . all Things are determined by Majorities'.<sup>29</sup> Another schism now burst on the society, for James Hindmarsh felt that the majority which voted against this resolution was influenced by 'Infidelity and Democracy', whereas most members were not prepared to fall for this excuse to re-introduce priesthood. James Hindmarsh and his followers managed to seize control of the Eastcheap society, but the majority of members recognized Manoah Sibly as minister, and moved to a series of rented premises in the north of the city. Some curious realignments subsequently took place, but the two congregations remained separate, although the 'High Church' congregation of Hindmarsh declined and was succeeded by Joseph Proud, whose emphasis was colourful vestments rather than high Tory doctrines.

The formation of the Swedenborgian sect may thus be seen as the consequence of two sorts of forces. Sectarianism is a phenomenon meaningful in certain settings. Heterodox groups within the world of Protestant Nonconformity were strongly inclined to secede from their churches. The leaders of the Swedenborgians were familiar with the world of Nonconformity; they had been made unwelcome by other Nonconformist churches because of their beliefs. The view that a church should be gathered around a particular doctrinal focus came naturally to them. Their sectarian denunciation of all other groups was a natural consequence of their elevation of their new source of authority. The structures and forms of the sect reflect the influence of Nonconformist models. This background also explains something of the social tone of the sect; why it was a much more popular body than the old society, and yet became uncomfortable with too populist a role; why the role of women was curiously conventional in contrast to their role in the millennial movements of the period.

Another cluster of forces also influenced the Swedenborgian drift

<sup>29</sup> *Minutes of a General Conference of Members of the New Church held in Great East Cheap, London in Easter Week, 1792-36* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1792), 4. There is also an official version of the minutes.

into sectarianism. They were the circumstances of the late eighteenth-century religious and social world, both within England and beyond. The role of foreign readers influenced by speculative Freemasonry must not be discounted. These people had an authority and a radicalism about them which deeply impressed English readers. Even more than English readers, the French supporters of Swedenborgianism were living through times of revolutionary intellectual change. The collapse of the old regime was very apparent, and religious radicalism appealed in such circumstances. This certainly increased the apocalyptic elements in Swedenborgianism. Such apocalyptic elements heightened the willingness of Swedenborgian believers to take radical steps in renouncing the old church. In the context there is a striking parallel between Swedenborgian developments and those in the Methodist Connexion, in which so many Swedenborgians had once been involved. Swedenborgianism was once described as 'Methodism Spiritually Reformed'.<sup>30</sup> Swedenborgian separatism drew in clusters of Methodists at exactly that moment when Methodism seemed prevented by its leader from moving in the direction in which many of its members wanted it to develop.

There is a paradox here. For Swedenborgianism was anything but a popular belief of English people; it was millenarian, theosophical, anti-enlightened and foreign. However true this may be, it does not mean that the emergence of this or any sect did not reflect the historical moment of its formation. The New Jerusalem Church took the Swedenborgian philosophy and gave it an external authenticating structure which enabled it to attract and retain English followers. It represented an inevitable 'anglicization' of the Swedenborgian theosophy. Blake's visionary mysticism was in some senses much closer to the spirit of Swedenborg than the sect's doctrinal propositions. No wonder that Blake was quickly disenchanted with the sect. 'Is it not false then, that love receives influx thro' the understanding, as was asserted in the society', he scrawled in his copy of Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*. But, if the sect distorted Swedenborg, Blake was soon disenchanted with Swedenborg himself: 'Now hear a plain fact: Swedenborg has not written one new truth. Now hear another: He has written all the old falsehoods'.<sup>31</sup> Originality, of course, is highly prized when a sect begins, but it is at a discount thereafter. Conformity to an authorized vision has to be demanded by the sect. The visions of the New Jerusalem had to be routinized, and the loss of a few independent followers was no great loss if control of the New Jerusalem was to remain in sectarian hands.

<sup>30</sup> J.J. Thornton, 'The New Church in Liverpool', *New Church Magazine*, xc (1971), 94.

<sup>31</sup> W. Blake, *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes, revised edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 96, 157. The latter reference is from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.