

## ***Is Bryn Athyn College important to the New Church?***

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Each generation of New Church men and women need to ask the following fundamental question. Are we, as a church, putting our resources and time into those endeavors that will help the Church grow in geographical, numerical, intellectual, and spiritual strength? One of those important endeavors is Bryn Athyn College of the New Church. And therefore we need to ask how our College promotes a better Church.

From its inception, the membership of the General Church has held to the importance of distinctive New Church education for its progeny. New Church education has been seen as a “fruitful field for evangelization” – especially in regard to the offspring of the church members.

In our elementary schools, we present the wonders of the Lord’s creation, both spiritual and natural, as a unity. We attempt to integrate all the various parts of the curriculum into one seamless garment of spiritual and natural truth. Teachers are helping their young charges to understand the world around them and arrange that reality in some sort of primitive schema whereby the child can make sense of what he or she experiences. Our elementary schools also serve to protect states of innocence in an increasingly morally ambivalent world. Thus we build remains while preserving tender states.

New Church education at the secondary level must deal more closely with the trends and fashions of current society. The secular curricular subjects are more complex. Relations between boys and girls becomes a prominent feature as the young people struggle to make the transition from childhood to the beginnings of adulthood. All the while we try to preserve the freedom of the students by helping them to abide in states from which they can make good choices for their natural and spiritual development. The state of the secondary school student is sometimes referred to as the ‘New Testament’ state. In other words, the thrust of New Church secondary education is a moral education, indeed a Christian education in the very best sense of the term.

Perhaps simplistically, I am going to suggest that the fundamental difference between New Church elementary and secondary education, and the education found at other religious schools, is the philosophical background of the faculties. Most religious schools endeavor to preserve innocence, create an understanding of the spiritual life, and build moral character in their students. However, by virtue of their knowledge of the Heavenly doctrines, particularly about Remains and Conjugal Love, New Church faculty members are able to have more insight into the states of students, and more clarity of vision in the description of the life of the spirit. Thus, in New Church elementary and secondary education, we do

what other religious schools do, but we have significant tools (the Writings) to do it better.

At the college level New Church Education has the opportunity to seek a larger goal.

Let us consider the nature of revelation. Revelation is given by God to man in the context of a certain period of history, a certain culture. Thus, while each revelation contains eternal truths, those truths are presented or clothed in the language and the context of the times in which they are given. While the eternal truths of a given revelation can be corrupted, as at the Council of Nicea in 325AD, we also recognize that subsequent generations can have deeper insights and see further applications of these truths than their forebears, such as evidenced in modern ecumenism. Yet there are limitations to understanding, and if a Church reaches those limitations, a new revelation, such as given in the Second Coming, is indicated. A new revelation provides a discretely larger spiritual data base from which to make spiritual progress.

The revelation given through Swedenborg – the Writings – was given to humanity at a certain time in history – the eighteenth century. This was a time of enormous growth in religious freedom, economic expansion, and scientific development. It was the beginning of the modern scientific age. Furthermore, the revelator was himself a scientist who wrote in what at that time was a modern voice. We often say that the Writings are a “rational” revelation. And it is the ‘rational’ nature of this revelation that provides the connection with the college state.

The central fact is that in the late teenage years the responsible rational mind starts to open. (TCR 106, 525, AC 2280) The frantic uncertainties and emotional roller-coaster states of the teenage years gradually give way to a more considered approach to life. Students are now ready to understand the structures and processes of creation in a way that goes well beyond mere calculation or lip service to the well-known and fundamental Divinely revealed duality of good and truth.

Thus, the college student, with a newly developing rational mind, is now in a new position to connect with the rational revelation given to the New Church.

The college years are therefore the time when students can, in various stages, gain a rational worldview of natural and spiritual life. They are able to contemplate the Lord’s plan for their eventual salvation, understand the structure of natural creation and its correspondence with the spiritual world, see the universality of this structure on all levels, and sense the marvelous preservation of freedom that is built into the whole. And all of this can happen while the student is in a state of idealism, unfettered by significant practical concerns of family and employment. Intellectually and practically, the college years provide a golden opportunity to lay a rational, high-level foundation for the rest of this life and the eternal life

beyond. This is an opportunity to create rational, knowledgeable citizens of the Lord's New Church.

Bryn Athyn College of the New Church exists for the realization of this goal. In the first two years, the college provides the opportunity for a broad education in the liberal arts. Through introductory courses in various secular fields and religion, the college outlines a structure on which the student can build a philosophy of life. Contemporary ideas are tested against the Heavenly Doctrines. Questions are raised, ideas discussed. "The pursuit of truth is pre-eminent," says Dr. Dan Synnestvedt, professor of philosophy. The general plan of creation, of the relationships between God, man, and nature begin to appear. The study of science provides another language, beyond the spoken and written languages of conventional revelation, in which God can speak to man. Not only does the Lord provide for the structure and processes of nature, He also provides that these things can be evident to us. "Protein structure and function can reveal God's intentions operating," says Dr. Allen Bedford, professor of chemistry.

And in student life, Bryn Athyn College seeks to promote what New Church education at all levels strives for; the preservation of students' freedom to make choices that lead to responsibility, use, and spirituality. This is especially important at the college level where students give serious thought to life issues and relationships. In their conversations with fellow students and faculty advisors, the students of Bryn Athyn College are encouraged to explore these issues from a vantage point that includes both spiritual and natural dimensions. Students who join us for one or two years derive significant foundational strengths from these academic and life experiences.

As students move into the upper years of college two new features emerge.

First, the rational mind that started to open and be stimulated in the early college years is functioning at a much higher level. A recollection of our own experiences of college days provides verification. Thoughts turn to the choice of an academic major, a profession, and, possibly, a conjugal partner. Life becomes more serious, we think more deeply; we see consequences beyond our college days. The student in the upper years of college is more rational, more serious, and more involved in the future.

Second, the upper years of college are a time of concentration in a particular area of study. The introductory ideas and broad knowledge presented in the earlier years are now examined in detail and in depth. For example, for the biology major introductory courses in physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics give way to deeper studies in, for example, organic chemistry, biochemistry, genetics, quantum chemistry, molecular biology, environmental simulation, population modeling, and so forth. We sometimes say that 'God is in the details' and the study of these fields provides plenty of illustration. Understanding of the

intricacies of these areas gives the student, with a positive vision of the Divine, multiple exemplars of the order and wonder of creation.

Thus, not only is the student a stronger thinker in the upper years, he or she is also exposed to the kinds of knowledges that give a deeper reality and certainty to the general concepts and plan that came before. At this writing, students may explore this deeper reality at the College in its six baccalaureate programs, Biology, Education, English, History, Interdisciplinary studies, and Religion. Graduates of these majors carry to graduate school or careers an extra strength of purpose, an enhanced sense of the unity and meaning of human existence.

Whether a student attends Bryn Athyn College for one year, two years, or four years, the College always has progressively more to offer. No matter what their time with us, students take with them the framework of a strong beginning for their adult life. In time these gifts may be carried back to their individual church societies in the form of commitment to church uses, in intellectual understanding of the Doctrines, and in intelligent application of charity toward the neighbor.

Finally, we note that the college years provide an exceptional opportunity for those who are not traditional New Church students to learn about the truths of the Second Coming in a structured and sympathetic way. Bryn Athyn College is committed to encouraging seekers to become students and join in the process of understanding the Lord and his creation as revealed in the Heavenly doctrines. The college state is an ideal one for evangelization.

We come to our faith in the New Christianity in variety of ways: providential discovery of the Writings, by birth and cultural assimilation in the Church, by private reading and contemplation. But how marvelous it is to have the opportunity to develop a strong doctrinal framework and scholarly understanding in discussion with New Church professors who are active and knowledgeable in their fields. These are the gifts that Bryn Athyn College offers the New Church, gifts that the Church can use to grow in numbers and in depth. These are the gifts that our college offers – ultimately – to all of humanity.