

Bryn Athyn College, Worldviews, and Globalization

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It is a privilege to speak with you tonight about Bryn Athyn College. It is a subject that I care very deeply about.

Last year I bought a book entitled *The Future of Religious Colleges* (in the U.S.) and immediately I began by reading the final chapter.¹ I wanted to know how it ended! What is the future of religious colleges? Of *our* religious college? Of course the book does not say; it does not predict the future. Yet we will write the ending, either consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and accidentally, either cooperating with the Lord's Providence or struggling upstream. In our report to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, we stated that Bryn Athyn College is at a threshold and the Commission agreed. Thus each year that passes is like a step beyond the threshold. The question is, are the steps leading down to a dark basement or are they leading up to a bright living room?

First a bit of history. The first school of the Academy was the theological school, the second was the college. Later, education for young boys and girls was started and grew into high schools when people moved from Philadelphia to Bryn Athyn.² Since the educational standard for many in North America at that time was high school, those schools of the Academy received much attention during the 20th century. As the educational standard was raised in the second half of the 20th century, the college as a largely two-year school with majors for teachers and ministers began its separation from the high schools and created its own campus in the 1960s. Subsequently, the educational standard for many in North America has been raised to that of a four year college, and Bryn Athyn College has also developed to meet that standard. But what was sufficient 30 years ago is not sufficient now and of course we have not yet fulfilled our founders' vision of a university. The era of high school education as the pinnacle of educational achievement is over, and the era of collegiate and university education for the many is well underway. I am concerned that if Bryn Athyn College remains at its present size that it will be squeezed out of the higher education market. So my central question for you tonight is this: do we see the use in continuing to develop Bryn Athyn College and if so, will we marshal the resources necessary to actually do it?

The 19th century philosopher Karl Marx famously said that the philosophers have only interpreted the world, when the point is to change it. What

Marx forgot is that a new interpretation of the world can often lead to change. Let me give you my interpretation of the world. Divide reality into two parts: the external environment and the internal environment. The internal environment includes the faculty, students, administration, board, church members (people), our worldview (Neo-Christian Theism), our assets (such as facilities), and our liabilities (such as the lack of a sign for the college on Huntingdon Pike). The external environment includes the government, the economy, competing institutions of higher education, and rival worldviews. Consider the external environment and globalization first.

Globalization is a controversial term and process. When people hear it, some automatically think of the exploitation of the world's poor by greedy multinational corporations. The contemporary philosopher Robert Solomon characterized Postmodern philosophy as the return of the oppressed, that is, people who, such as the Indians, some Asians and Africans, were colonized by Westerners.³ Some describe the Postmodern condition of globalization as the Coca-Colanization of the world. Others think of the United Nations becoming the governing body for the planet. For some "globalization" means new problems, such as global warming, that we face. Still others think the term synonymous with "baloney" (as in "globaloney").

I disagree with the last characterization and will state what I take to be globalization in as neutral and descriptive a way as possible. Globalization is the increased mobility of goods, services, labor, technology, capital, ideas, and people throughout the world. It is the tendency toward an interconnected marketplace, international competition, culture, and a political arena increasingly unhampered by time zones, national boundaries, and ancient traditions. Given this definition of the term, we can assert that globalization has been going on for 500 years. While there has always been some contact between various cultures upon the earth, it has only been within the past five centuries that the world's major civilizations have had a significantly increasing quantity of contact with one another. (The world's major civilizations I take to be the Asian, the Indic, the Russian, the sub-Saharan African, and the Western that is, European and North American.)

The New Church has also been part of globalization. If you don't believe me, look at back issues of *New Church Life* and the list of overseas ministers in the Bryn Athyn telephone directory. The college also reflects globalization. Here are some examples. When I was a student at the college in the 1980s I acquired friends from several different countries. Moreover, I met my wife, Lisa, who grew up in England, at the college. Last year the college had students from 12 countries. By teaching at the college I acquired a good friend from South Korea (Sung-won Paek) who has become my "brother". I acquired a "nephew" from Sri Lanka (Kanchana) and, oddly enough, when I was residence hall director of Childs Hall, a man from Ghana (Kwasi Darkwah) who is 20 years older than I am became my "son". To complete my New Church family all I need now is a 22 year-old great

aunt from Karachi! Is this strange? We certainly never did this sort of thing back in Ohio! Yet other Christians and the Writings themselves use this familial language. Consider the early Christian church's language. Charitable feasts "took place among such people as called themselves brothers in Christ" (TCR 434). Why? Because there was a spiritual brotherhood (Ibid.).

Although I could tell you some stories about my spiritual family, let me give you a couple of examples of globalization and change in the external economic environment. *The Economist* is a weekly British newsmagazine on politics and economics. A few months ago it ran an article on a study done by GoldmanSachs about the big economies of the future, namely Brazil, Russia, India, and especially China.⁴ Right now the Group of 7 economic powers includes Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Canada, and the U.S. The report from GoldmanSachs predicts that by mid century, the current G7 members are unlikely to be eligible to attend meetings. In 40 years the total output of BRIC will over take that of the G7. Of today's G7, only American and Japan would still be among the world's biggest economies. Like all forecasts, this one could be wrong in several ways, but it does make one think differently about the future, specifically about the locations of the wealth needed to fund the New Church.

It also makes one think about the global competition in higher education. As two researchers, Cynthia Ryans and William Shanklin, noted nearly 20 years ago, just as there are "shakeouts" underway in various industries, surely there is one in progress in higher education. "The shakeout is more evident", they write, "in the private school sector because state dollars have saved many public schools that would have otherwise folded."⁵ The decline in the number of two year colleges, the bankruptcy of some private colleges, and the merger of others, is mounting evidence to support the claim of Ryans and Shanklin. As schools compete for students and a listing in national rankings, this process will continue. With the advent of *international* rankings of colleges and universities, I believe this process will intensify.

Now consider global political change. Even though the last century was dominated by conflict revolving around totalitarian regimes, it was also a century of increasing democratization. At the beginning of the 20th century there were less than 20 democracies in the world and now, a century later, there are over 100. Due to the growth of democracy and capitalism, it won't be long before social ties and traditions are loosened enough that religious liberty advances. It looks as if more people will have more economic, political, philosophical, and religious choices in the future.⁶

Consider global changes in religion. You've no doubt noticed that Eastern thought and religion have been pouring into Western countries. From acupuncture to zen, philosophical ideas and healing practices are being imported almost as fast as plastic toys from China. But remember that Christian countries have been

exporting their religion for centuries, and that a different form of Christianity is taking hold. An evangelical form of Protestantism is spreading in south and central America. This is giving the Catholic church, which has been entrenched in south and central America for decades, stiff competition for members. There are even illegal “house churches” of evangelicals in China. Even if people in the West are tired of Christianity, people elsewhere are not and they are learning the Bible.

History of religion scholar Philip Jenkins states that “Christians are facing a shrinking population in the liberal West and a growing majority of the traditional Rest. During the past half century the critical centers of the Christian world have moved decisively to Africa, to Latin America, and to Asia. The balance will never shift back.”⁷ Jenkins says that, if present trends continue, “By 2025, 50% of the Christian population will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17% will be in Asia.”⁸ North America, probably, and Europe certainly, will no longer define what it means to be a Christian. This news is hard for some Christian Americans to take. Many Americans have traditionally thought of America as a Christian nation. In terms of many of our laws, our founding, our great social movements, and the religious majority of the population, the U.S. was and still is a Christian nation. So we might be tempted to see this growth elsewhere as threatening our status as the *only* city on a hill or shining beacon of liberty and Christian virtue.

Globalization often includes the loosening of traditional social ties and this produces chaos. But it also produces the opportunity to inquire after the truth, compare different worldviews and religions, and choose which one to adopt. Our own students study major worldviews, such as the Classical, Deism, New Age, Existentialism, and Eastern Pantheistic Monism. None of us can guarantee that our children will choose to attend Bryn Athyn College or join the General Church. Today they have a tremendous range of options. The Lord seems to be working to create the material and social conditions around the world to allow for a transition from an age of historical faith, to an age of rational faith. We are moving toward an era in which faith is based on the exercise of one’s rationality when faced with a choice between customary religion and new religions and worldviews.

Another part of our external environment is the dominant worldview. What is a worldview? A worldview is a philosophy of life. It is a set of fundamental assumptions that we hold either consciously or not, consistently or not, about reality, knowledge, human nature, morality, politics, beauty, and the meaning of life. The dominant worldview among some powerful culturally influential groups of the West is naturalism. (The groups I have in mind are some people in the mass media, academics in universities, some businesses, and certain government officials.)

What is naturalism? Naturalism is the belief that reality consists entirely of Nature, or that whatever exists is natural only. It is the belief that only natural

things are knowable and frequently that the methods for acquiring knowledge in the natural sciences are the only legitimate or rational methods. There are many conclusions that follow from such premises. For example, human beings have no transcendental or spiritual dimensions to them; instead, we are complex animals or soft machines. For naturalists there is no such thing as the God who is worshipped by Jews, Christians, and Muslims; instead naturalists assert either that there is no God at all, or that Nature is God, or some aspect of nature such as its laws or fundamental forces is God. Apart from passing on some genetic material through offspring or having one's good deeds memorialized in stone, there is no life after death according to naturalists. Morality and politics are products of evolution. What about the meaning of human life? The meaning of life is either determined by the forces of nature (such as genes or scarcity) and we have no choice in the matter, or it consists in the avoidance of pain and boredom while seeking the maximization of pleasure and the satisfaction of preferences. As one article in a weekly news magazine put it: "scientists are finding that, after all, love really is down to a chemical addiction between people".⁹ This might be shocking to some of you, but naturalism is *de rigueur* at meetings of the American Philosophical Association. In 1996 the president of the Pacific Division of the A.P.A. stated that most philosophers have been naturalists for the last century and that the question is not whether to be a naturalist or not, but rather what is to be included in one's concept of nature.¹⁰

Obviously naturalism is diametrically opposed to the New Christianity. Naturalists do not hide their contempt for such a fantastically supernatural, or supra-natural, worldview as the one contained in the Heavenly Doctrines. To a naturalist, a Swedenborgian appears as a simpleton, a dullard, or demented, as one deluded by fables of the priesthood, whose thoughts are fantasies, whose actions are ludicrous! And these are just the polite terms used in the Writings! (TCR 639, 178) On the other hand, Swedenborg reports that the angels were able to dish it out equally well, but with a charitable attitude of course, saying that naturalists are hellish, beastly, dead, insane, lustful bone-headed atheists! (TCR 639, 178, 77, DLW 357, HH 354)

Why is this important? The naturalism that began to flower in the mid-eighteenth century burst into full bloom in the 20th century and is our primary competitor when it comes to the hearts and minds of people everywhere, but especially those in the developed nations. Naturalism functions not only as a competing worldview, but as a form of pseudo-religion, what the Writings call a "religiosity". This claim is asserted not only by theologians and the Writings, but by philosophers and social scientists as well. For example, Communism has been called a "Christian heresy" and "the god that failed". It was one form of naturalism. Lest we Americans get smug though, we should remember Alexander Solzhenitsyn's warning in his Harvard University speech that there is a kind of naturalism among us too.¹¹ When he came to the U.S. he found that while religious citizens were not persecuted by the government as they were in the

Soviet Union, Americans were very materialistic. American naturalism is advertised and packaged in very seductive ways.

What's encouraging is that some Christians realize that naturalism is damaging to people and must be resisted. They are learning to not attack Darwin or the theory of evolution, but to attack naturalism. This awareness of naturalism and the willingness to publicly criticize it seems to be part of the phenomena that Prof. Alan Wolfe has dubbed "the opening of the evangelical mind".¹² Evangelical Christians have become increasingly engaged with the larger culture. They are no longer content to be privately spiritual. There are several indicators that point toward this. One is the spate of books from evangelical academics that take very seriously the harmonizing of Biblical Christianity with the academic disciplines without watering them down. The author of the philosophy of biology textbook that we are using in our philosophy of biology course this term is one step away from a New Church approach to religion and science. For example, he speaks of accepting the theory of evolution when it comes to the natural development of humans and reading Genesis in such a way that Adam is not literally the first human. Instead, God chose two people from an existing human population that could have been the outcome of evolution. Thus Adam is the "first *religious* head of the human race...."¹³ Is this not very close to the concept of Adam as a symbol for a church?

What do these changes mean? We used to see other Christians as our *foes*, but in a popular culture awash in the American version of naturalism, conservative Christians could be our best *friends*. Based upon what I've read, I think it is becoming increasingly likely that a small Christian college could become our competitor. True, the claims that Swedenborg makes are a lot to swallow for today's average Christian. But the possibility that they could accept the claims has improved. How would we feel if a Christian college of 4,000 students gradually embraced the ideas of the New Church and this other college already had many sports teams, residence halls, clubs, laboratories, and academic majors? Would we be happy for them and for the competition that would inspire us to grow stronger? Or would we feel disappointed in their success and give up? If this is a realistic possibility, it means that we have increased competition in what some thought was an exclusive unique niche. I raise this possibility because it helps us question our assumptions—something that is part of a philosopher's job—and it helps us not take the existence of the college for granted.

On the other hand, this shift in Christian thinking also means that if students are attracted to such religious colleges, the possibility that they could be attracted to our college has also increased. Consequently, we would have to re-think how we present ourselves to Christians. Due to a liberal mass media in the West, the sins of Christians past and fundamentalist Christians of the present, it is with understandable reluctance that we identify ourselves as Christian. But we either identify ourselves as Christians, or allow ourselves to be categorized and

labeled by other people—and the category and label might not be very accurate or complimentary.

Recent survey results about interest in spirituality and religion among teenagers in the U.S. show that they are more interested in these topics than was previously thought. The percentage of 12th graders who said that religion was a very important part of their life declined slightly from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. However, from the end of the 1980s to the late 1990s, the percentage of 12th graders who said religion was a very important part of their life actually increased from 25% to 33%.¹⁴

Not only that, but students are being starved for reflection upon these topics in the big universities and colleges. There is evidence of this in the Spirituality in College Students Preliminary Finding from a National Study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA in 2003. Here is just a sampling: While 78% of students discuss religion and spirituality with friends, only 58% have such discussions in class and only 8% report that their professors frequently encourage classroom discussions of religious or spiritual matters. 77% of students surveyed said that we are all spiritual beings and 58% rated integrating spirituality into my life as either essential or very important. Yet 62% report that their professors never encourage discussions of this nature in class.¹⁵ To me this information represents an opportunity for the college to reach out to these thirsty students.

Another change that reflects the intersection of naturalism and globalization is the important finding from religions scholar Philip Jenkins' work that people in non-Western countries are not afraid to believe in spiritual reality; they are not ashamed to be supernaturalists. Since the Heavenly Doctrines contain a super-supernaturalist worldview, this is good news for the long-term global growth of the New Church.

Out of all the institutions that are linked to the General Church, it is the college and theological school that are best positioned to take advantage of the opportunity provided by globalization and the growing flight from denominations and naturalism. In fact, they are the *only* institutions where young adults and future leaders of the General Church meet on a daily basis. The college and theological school provide the opportunity to learn about different cultures, about how to look first at the character of a person and the good of his or her soul, and look beyond the external differences in dress, personal habits, skin color, economic class and even style of worship. Both schools help bring the world to the New Church and help bring the New Church to the world.

What sort of opportunity does globalization present to Bryn Athyn College and the New Church? The developing countries lack infra-structure and are not yet self-sufficient. There is a lack of self-sufficiency in North American

congregations too. Rather than fight over a shrinking financial pie, I recommend that we form a partnership to enlarge the pie. We must teach people how to fish in the natural and spiritual worlds, so that New Church societies can become interdependent. How can we do this? One way is to teach people how to become good successful New Church business people who can generate wealth ethically. For example, we can offer a business and economics major at the college. We have the opportunity to take globalization from a process that is largely about money as an end and earthly power and add a spiritual dimension to it.

And what will Americans gain from this? A new generation of contributors, a more balanced and accurate perspective on life, and spiritual renewal through the joy of giving without thought of reward. For all of us it is an opportunity to serve the next degree of the neighbor. This is known as loving the Lord's kingdom. It is the highest degree of the neighbor. The Heavenly Doctrines state that the Lord's kingdom is the church throughout the whole world, what is called the communion of saints (TCR 416). If a person loves the Lord's kingdom, he or she loves everyone in the whole world who acknowledges the Lord, has faith in Him, and charity toward the neighbor (Ibid.). This love dwells at the highest level in a person and flows into what is lower, bringing it to life. This is why the Lord said "Seek first the kingdom of the heavens and its righteousness, then everything will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33) (Ibid.).

What has the college done to position itself and meet the needs of its students? We have supported an International Student Organization, we have added courses on the history of non-Western regions of the world, such as Asia and Africa, and we have changed our student orientation program. Students go to countries such as Australia and Ghana on internships and to the Bahamas for community service. I have also changed my philosophy courses. Philosophy 111, Introduction to Moral and Political Philosophy, illustrates my point: it now includes a brief look at globalization. Could we do more? Yes, of course. We could, for example, sponsor a symposium on how the idea of the Grand Man can be used as a model of complimentary strengths and coordinated yet differentiated opportunities for service. We could hire students from both U.S. and other countries to research the opportunities for the growth of the church in particular nations. This is both an educational and practical project that can help the church allocate its resources in the most useful way.

While these changes in the external environment are important, there are changes in the internal environment that are equally significant. From the point of view of a casual observer, one might conclude that Bryn Athyn College has not grown much. True, we have added majors in biology, English, and history, but over the last 25 years our enrollment has not increased nor has the size of faculty. There are *many* changes in the college that I could list, but the most important change of all is that the faculty, students, and administration have decided that it is time to reach out to other people interested in our mission. Faculty and students

are now eager for the rest of the internal environment to catch up with us and help us reflect this change in tangible ways.

What are the barriers to having a successful outreach effort? Well, I think that two major ones are fear and suspicion. It is a philosopher's job to raise questions that he does not have ready answers to and this is the case. So I offer these for our reflection. (This is the part that calls to mind Socrates and the last time he made a public speech!) Do Americans fear the growing power of non-Western New Church people or people who are new to the church? Do some suspect that people from developing countries or from America's inner cities will use that power to take over the church and/or drain the finances? Do African and South American New Church people fear the lack of commitment to the global New Church by North Americans and Europeans? Do they suspect that we will become increasingly corrupted by the naturalism in our culture and spend the church's money and other resources on ourselves?

A third barrier is ethnic Swededenborgianism: you know, having a familiar last name, such as ... Synnestvedt! Again, let me address this in the form of a question that I do not have the answer to. Will we move away from a natural concept of the neighbor and ethnic Swedenborgianism toward the spiritual concept of the neighbor (that is, good as the neighbor, especially good of the soul)? This is the concept of the neighbor that is openly and repeatedly taught in our revelation, but will we accept it and use it in our decision making?¹⁶

There are many ways that you can nurture Bryn Athyn College, let me mention three. First, you can continue to welcome international and domestic students into your homes and places of work. New Church people have a well-deserved reputation for being good hosts. Amongst our fellow Christians, this is known as the virtue of hospitality. The continuing cultivation of this virtue is vital to the success of the church and the college. Students and faculty welcome the gifts of your home, time, and talents in the service of New Church education.

Next, you can recommend good students to us, especially the ones that can be teaching and research assistants. Assisting a college professor will prepare our students for graduate school and leadership positions. Also, it will enable us to do the research that the church needs in this new century. It builds on our strength of genuine friendly relationships between faculty and students. In the long run, it will help ensure succession of good teachers and researchers at Bryn Athyn College and other colleges. Every powerful lasting cultural movement must have a consistent, coherent, and comprehensive worldview. The New Church provides the world's greatest philosophy of life. Now this does not mean that current New Church people are the best people in the world, for we have miles to go when it comes to applying the truth to life. Yet the new Christian worldview is comprehensive and should be expressed with a confidence born of personal experience. As Aristotle would say, confidence is the mean between two

extremes, namely, arrogance (too much confidence) and timidity (too little confidence).

Apocalypse Revealed talks about the challenges facing the New Church, but says that the New Church will prevail. Do you believe it? We feel excitement and some existential angst facing an uncertain global future. Based upon his monumental study of history, Arnold Toynbee concluded that a society without challenges, or very weak ones, withers. On the other hand, a society with tremendous challenges is overwhelmed and dies. But a society with just the right challenge actually grows stronger and improves by meeting the challenge. The challenge before us now is to continue to develop the college in such a way that we meet the problems of globalization and naturalism while taking advantage of the opportunities they afford.

My vision of the future is to make Bryn Athyn the magnet that attracts people who have an affection for our spiritual mission—the way that art lovers are attracted to Paris and outdoor enthusiasts to Machu Picchu. Bryn Athyn can be like a well for the thirsty from the parched regions of the world, a place to grow strong in a truly spiritual Christianity. People in the U.S. and around the world can associate Bryn Athyn with a beautiful and inspiring cathedral, an educational and culturally enriching museum, a community of good friendly people, and an institution of higher education that has a sound mind in a sound body. Let it be so!

The third thing we can do to nurture the college is pray for the development of the New Church on the earth and ask for the inspiration to love the Lord's kingdom which is the church throughout the whole world, for without Him, we can do nothing.

I am grateful to the people who helped me with this speech and I thank you for your attendance and attention.¹⁷

¹ *The Future of Religious Colleges*, edited by Paul J. Dovre, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

² See *Toward a New Church University* by Sanfrid Odhner, Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy of the New Church, pp.24-27.

³ "The Return of the Oppressed: Africa, Asia, and the Americas" in *A Short History of Philosophy* by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, New York: Oxford, 1996, pp.292-99.

⁴ "Follow the Yellow BRIC Road" in *The Economist*, Oct.9, 2003.

⁵ *Strategic Planning, Marketing & Public Relations, and Fund-raising in Higher Education*, edited by Cynthia Ryans and William Shanklin, Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1986, p.viii.

⁶ I base this speculative assertion on statements made in the Writings (LJ 73-74, CLJ 11-12, 30) about the increasing amount of light from the spiritual world and freedom of thought after the Second Advent, not upon Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*.

⁷ Philip Jenkins, "The Next Christianity" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Oct. 2002, p.55.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "I Get a Kick Out of You", Science and Technology section of *The Economist*, Feb.14, 2004, p.73.

¹⁰ Barry Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA*, 70:2, Nov. 1996, pp.43-45.

¹¹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart: Commencement Address Delivered at Harvard University, June 8, 1978*, New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

¹² Alan Wolfe, "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Oct. 2002, www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/10/wolfe.htm

¹³ *Biology Through the Eyes of Faith*, revised edition, by Richard T. Wright, San Francisco: Harper, 2003, p.164.

¹⁴ John M. Wallace, Tyrone A. Forman, et al, "Religion and U.S. Secondary School Students" in *Youth and Society*, Vol. 35, No. 1 Sept. 2003, p.111.

¹⁵ "Spirituality in College Students: Preliminary Findings from a National Study" from the web site for Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose, Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin Co-Principal Investigators, www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/spirituality.html

¹⁶ See especially *Charity*, passages 42-89.

¹⁷ For their help in a variety of ways, I must thank Dr. Jane Williams-Hogan, Dr. Charles H. Ebert, Rev. Dr. Andrew M.T. Dibb, Dr. Charles W. Lindsay, Asst. Prof. Brian Henderson, Asst. Prof. Suzanne Bernhardt, and our International Student Advisor, Brenna Synnestvedt. I am also indebted to the international students at ANC Theological School for their discussion of globalization.