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The Four Horsemen

by *Revd Bruce Jarvis*

“To reduce our concept of life to a merely material level is to impoverish humanity, and take away hope and assurance about why we exist in the first place.”

Canny writers and publishers know the value of a catchy title. Dan Brown has written several international bestsellers, most notably *The Da Vinci Code*, and certainly has a knack for grabbing the reader’s imagination and attention with his fast moving plots. Three of his novels featuring a Harvard University “symbolist”, Professor Robert Langdon, have been made into films. His books have that “hard-to-put down” quality, and the endless twists and turns are almost exhausting for the reader. I was given *Origin* for Christmas this last year. Other books were “in the queue”, so this one waited its turn. Like many people, I often use an e-reader for convenience, but took great delight in holding a thick

paperback edition of *Origin* in my hands when I began to read it in early March.

Brown’s genre is apocalyptic, with end-of-the-world scenarios a commonplace. There is a race-against-time element, with some romance in the background. The Christian Church finds a leading place in *Origin*, as it does in some of Brown’s other books. The story is set in Spain, so the Roman Catholic Church is at the centre of the story, along with Spain’s royal family. Everything is under threat of destruction, with the question “What If...?” looming large. I’ll say no more about the plot, but leave you to find out for yourself if you are inclined.

As I was in the thick of reading *Origin*, I read a review of a book entitled *The Four Horsemen*, another attention-grabbing title, this time drawn from chapter 6 of the Book of Revelation. [The Greek title of this last book in the Bible is literally translated as *Apocalypse of John*.] Suffice to say, I was sufficiently interested by the review to buy a copy, and ended up reading the two

books side-by-side. *The Four Horsemen* is a slender volume of 131 pages compared with *Origin's* 541pp, and in some ways is an easier book to read in the sense that one is not trying to hang on to all the characters nor desperately holding on to all the gripping and unexpected developments in the plot.

Not a novel, *The Four Horsemen* is a transcript of a conversation recorded in 2007 in Washington DC. Published as a book this year, the conversation was between Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, four leading intellectuals and authors who share an atheistic approach to life. When I spent some time serving the New Church in Mauritius in 2007 I took Dawkins' *The God Delusion* with me as leisure reading(!), and was interested to get a better grip on how he and his fellow thinkers see things. While I part company with Dawkins on his conclusions, there are feelings of empathy over the reasons behind it.

The Four Horsemen begins with an introduction by Stephen Fry, and has short essays by Dawkins, Dennett and Harris preceding the transcript of their conversation (Hitchens died in 2011). All well-known figures in their world, the four became known as the four horsemen of the so-called new atheism, and their trenchant views do provide a challenge to those who take an opposing view.

In summary, their discussion in Hitchens' Washington apartment focuses on arguments against faith. Almost predictably, the bad record of religions, both in violent and controlling behaviour and in irrational, contradictory theologies - still sometimes malign influences in today's world - provides plenty of ammunition and reasons for opposing faith.

For me, the atheistic position, while apparently very logical and seemingly intellectually superior to "superstitious faith", inevitably fails to provide any satisfactory answers to the big questions. Inevitably, when you require logic and natural rationality to deal with the ultimate issues - where does life begin, where does it all come from, what is the purpose of life? - you bump up against mankind's incapacity to provide solutions, even at a natural level. Human finite minds can never enter into the infinite level: the two are ultimately distinct.

All the world's religions can be said to point to a higher or inner level of life and existence beyond this natural world which provides our home for the time being. Emanuel Swedenborg's theological writings, which contain the heavenly teachings for the New Church, go as far as it is possible to point us to the solutions and answers. To reduce our concept of life to a merely material level is to impoverish humanity, and take away hope and assurance about why we exist in the first place. Here is an extract from Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Wisdom* which points to the very purpose of creation:

The universal purpose or goal of all things of creation is that there may be an eternal conjunction of the Creator with the created universe, and that is not possible unless there are subjects in which His Divine can ... dwell and abide.

Divine Love and Wisdom 167

Of course, for a person to accept that statement as reasonable and sensible, there must be a belief and conviction, a faith and a trust, that there is something above and beyond the natural

level of life. If I take a materialistic view of creation and human life, then such a belief is likely to be seen as far-fetched, fanciful, without any foundation. Where is the proof, the evidence?

Well, life is full of never ending surprises, of the unexpected, of values which rise way above the material degree. There is so much that we value beyond price, which something within us knows and feels to be true without being provable or demonstrable. In *The True Christian Religion* Swedenborg writes that “there is a general feeling emanating from God and flowing into human souls that there is a God, and that he is one.” (para.6). Such a thought might well be dismissed as simply cultural indoctrination handed down from generation to generation. And, yet, the “evidence” is that such a belief is there in all nations and cultures right across our world, and has been for all time. Similarly with the universally held belief that life is eternal, and doesn’t end with the death of the material body. Easily rejected as sentimentalism. And, yet, it seems to be an intrinsic part of who we are.

I enjoyed my two books, both fascinating in their own, very different ways. For me the unshakeable beliefs in what the Lord has revealed to us, as He promised He would before He completed His earthly ministry, in the teachings of the New Church, provide the fulfilment of all the mysterious scripture in the Word of God. And that includes those four horsemen of the Apocalypse. I am eternally thankful that He has shown us that their significance relates to our individual inner growth, as they represent inner realities and cycles of development. What a wonderful prospect it is that we shall in due course enter even more fully into the mysteries of faith when we find our place in the spiritual world.

In the meantime, we have our battles, our choices, our delights, our miseries as we make our progress. So we can enjoy polemical discussions on controversial matters with the likes of Richard Dawkins and co. We can enjoy the fantasies of writers like Dan Brown. And we can dig down into the Scriptures and the Heavenly Doctrines to find heavenly, eternal food for our eternal souls.