It is not easy to review this collection of essays devoted to Emanuel Swedenborg. The breadth of Swedenborg’s interests and his complex personality obviously require different disciplinary skills in order to assess the manifold aspects of his work. The volume is an important contribution, a companion to the New Century Edition of Swedenborg’s works, and aims at providing the reader with a guide that can help the scholar not only through his biography and thought, but also his legacy, both from a religious and a cultural point of view.

One of the foremost merits of this book is that it provides an up-to-date and substantially unitary picture of the broad range of problems showing in the endless amounts of literature devoted to Swedenborg. The volume offers the reader a sufficiently clear and balanced picture of Swedenborg’s experiences and works—with particular reference to his theological writings—and also of his extraordinary success. At the same time its content, while providing a useful starting point, calls for further reflection and research in several directions. In this respect one should mention both the thorough bibliography of secondary literature compiled by David B. Eller and the annotated bibliography of Swedenborg’s writings by Jonathan S. Rose, which includes a precise index system.

The volume is divided into several sections. The first one, edited by Richard Smoley, is devoted to Swedenborg’s biography; the second one, including the contributions of Jonathan S. Rose, George F. Dole and Frank S. Rose, deals with theological works; while the third one tackles the subject of the cultural impact of Swedenborg’s ideas in Scandinavia (Olle Hjern), continental Europe (Jean-François Mayer), and in the United States (Robert H. Kirven and David B. Eller). This is followed by a chapter devoted to the various institutions and organisations through which the Swedenborgian message was spread throughout the old and the new continent. This part is edited by Jane Williams-Hogan and David B. Eller, and deals with the Swedenborgian churches and related institutions in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. Williams-Hogan’s essay provides particularly interesting evidence of the worldwide dissemination of Swedenborgian ideas by focusing also on the African continent. In this case Swedenborgian teachings began to spread since the beginning of the twentieth century, due not only to the circulation of Swedenborg’s works, but also thanks to the initiative of a number of enthusiastic missionaries, particularly in South Africa and Nigeria. In this respect, one should note that, in the reception of Swedenborg’s teachings, a significant role is played by what William-Hogan
defines as the “charisma of the book”, which no doubt was stronger than that of the man himself (p. 319). Due to this peculiarity, and also because of its non-dogmatic nature, the influence of Swedenborg’s theological thought has been different from that of other religious movements. The existence of the New Church actually depends on the needs of individual readers, who were motivated by their interest in Swedenborg’s writings, to establish links with groups of followers that were already organised. As is well known, Swedenborg did not found his own Church. In Sweden, a movement inspired by his doctrines only managed to come to light in 1874, when it was officially recognised by the State. The New Church was founded in 1787 in London, and during the eighteenth century became an organisational framework for the thirty congregations that are still functioning in the United Kingdom today. On the other hand, the General Convention of the Church of the New Jerusalem took shape in America between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Today it represents around forty congregations. In 1897, due to a number of contrasts about the interpretation of Swedenborg’s writings and organizational principles, the General Church of the New Jerusalem broke away from the General Convention, adopting an episcopal form, which soon spread internationally in the other continents.

If the history of the foundation of the first Swedenborgian religious organisations in the West is closely linked to characters such as Gabriel Beyer, Robert Hindmarsh and Francis Bailey, we should not underestimate the importance of the translations of Swedenborg’s religious writings in the spreading of his thought. We may consider, for example, the translations made in the eighteenth century by J. Cookworthy, Thomas Hartley, A.J. Pernety, and Friederich Christoph Oetinger; followed by those of Johann Friederich I. Tafel and François-Etienne Le Boys des Guays. The enormous amount and continuous flow of these translations, genuine “silent missionaries”, as Jean-François Mayer calls them, have made Swedenborg’s texts, which were originally written in Latin, accessible to a larger number of persons, and have facilitated their circulation. Indeed the spirit underlying the Swedenborgian movement from the very beginning was never based on theological abstract formulations or on the call to new liturgical procedures, as is generally the case for new religious denominations. On the contrary, we are faced with a phenomenon that is strictly linked to the reading of Swedenborg’s texts, which were considered, at least by a number of his interpreters, as directly inspired by God, and thus representing a renewal of Christianity as a whole. The trait that distinguishes the Swedenborgian faith is that it does not lead to a schism. We are rather faced with a movement that aims at transforming the confessional Churches into the