

# Key Concepts in the Theology of Emanuel Swedenborg

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IN paragraph 172 of his *True Christian Religion*, Swedenborg wrote, 'Anyone who reads the Athanasian Creed with open eyes can see that nothing less than a trinity of gods was understood by the participants in the Council of Nicea, who brought forth that creed like a still born infant.' Yet beginning at paragraph 55 of *The Doctrine of the Lord*, he had written a section to demonstrate 'that the import of the Athanasian faith is in accord with the truth, if only we understand the "trinity of persons" to mean the trinity of person that exists in the Lord'. This contrast may serve to suggest the subtlety of the difference between Swedenborg's theology and traditional Christian theology; and it may also serve to introduce one of his underlying concepts.

In regard to the subtlety, Swedenborg was well aware of the limitations of language. If his expositions sometimes seem to proceed at a snail's pace by reason of repetitiveness, this may be ascribed to a sense of need to carry his context with him. It bears witness also to his strong sense of the relatedness of all his concepts, to his love of detail, and to his insistence on looking at everything from all sides.

The underlying concept it introduces is one of two which may help define the subtlety, namely the concept of 'distinguishable oneness'. For example, while the form and the substance of an object can usefully be distinguished from each other, they cannot be separated from each other in fact. In precisely similar fashion, he held that love, wisdom, and action can usefully be distinguished from each other, but cannot be separated from each other in fact. This principle he extended to all of reality insisting that nothing exists in isolation, and particularly that the divine is essentially one in the special sense that it is wholly present everywhere and always, in an infinite number of distinguishable forms.

A second underlying concept which may help define the subtlety is that of the reality of spirit. For Swedenborg, there is nothing vague or amorphous about spirit. It is substantial, crisp and clear, and potent. Angels are in human form, with marvellously acute senses including touch, experiencing themselves and their environment as solid. By comparison, the physical world is cloudy, ambiguous, and sluggish.

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With these most basic premises in mind, then, we may look at some more specific concepts.

### God

God is the absolute 'distinguishable one', both within and transcending all space and all time, by nature incapable of being less than wholly present. The fundamental nature of the universe is therefore coherent at all times and in all places: the same fundamental laws apply, as indeed science, either intuitively or of necessity, assumes.

To grasp the nature of that infinite oneness, we may distinguish the primary features of infinite love, wisdom, and power, love being wholly ineffective without wisdom, wisdom inert without love, and power the wholly natural result of their oneness. God is one in the essential sense that there is no conflict within the divine—love does not bid one course of action, with wisdom counselling another.

Love is intrinsically personal, and God is therefore the essential and only person, the definition of 'human'. There is no other source of life, which is in its essence love. We have been created not 'out of nothing,' but quite literally 'out of love', since love is by nature self-giving and self-expressive. We are in that sense differentiated from the divine but never separated (again 'distinguishably one'), recipients of being rather than beings. We differ from each other not in the presence of the divine within us, but in our acceptance or receptivity of the divine.

### Our Humanity

This is not, however, the way we experience ourselves most of the time.

We are apparently self-contained and self-sustaining, characterized essentially by particular purposes and particular ways of understanding ourselves and our world. This appearance is God's intentional gift of freedom and rationality which are designed to enable us to accept the divine willingly and which are therefore capable of being used to reject it.

The physical world is the arena in which we choose to accept or to reject. Its ambiguity is essential to this purpose, enabling us to convince ourselves that we are self-sustaining in fact, to focus on our distinguishability to the exclusion of our oneness. If we so choose, we voluntarily forfeit the unitive power of love and thereby set ourselves against the fundamental nature of reality.

This manifests itself in isolation and hostility, both internal and external. That is, we develop a delight in conflict with others, and our own loves and thoughts are in conflict with each other. Our satisfaction comes only at the expense of others, which is inherently unworkable.

By contrast, if we choose to accept the divine, we necessarily recognize its presence in others. We are drawn into relationships which combine a sense of oneness and a sense of individuality, relationships which are inherently workable because they are mutually fulfilling. For Swedenborg, then, evil is not evil simply because it violates arbitrary laws, but because it is intrinsically and inevitably self-defeating.

### Love

Swedenborg sees love as the fundamental energy and substance of human beings, with wisdom as its means.

Ultimately, we will believe what we want to believe and understand what we want to understand. Our purposes, rather than our knowledge, determine our character.

He distinguishes a hierarchy of loves: love of the Lord, love of others, love of the world, and love of self. When these are in this order of priority, all are necessary and good. Love of self or of the world becomes harmful only when it dominates the higher loves rather than serving them. In practical terms, this means that Swedenborgian theology provides no warrant for asceticism or 'renunciation of the world,' but rather values all moments of genuine joy.

This affirmative stance is particularly clear in his treatment of marriage as offering an opportunity for the most complete uniting of love and wisdom, so that the fully married couple is 'distinguishably one' with no hint of domination on either side.

### Human Process

From birth, the dominant mode of our sensitivity seems to be self-sensitivity, with relatively rare moments of spontaneous empathy. This entails a radically distorted view of reality, giving each individual the impression of being the only one with live feelings and thoughts. This is rationally indefensible, and for this reason our egocentricity has an Achilles' heel which is specifically vulnerable to rationality.

The further consequence of this is that our feelings and our thoughts, our 'love' and our 'wisdom', unlike God's, are often in conflict. We can see mentally what we do not feel, and we have the freedom to follow that sight rather than our feelings. To the extent that we do so, we gradually become conscious of our latent 'other-

sensitivity'. In one of Swedenborg's images, we open the way for the Lord's presence within us to flow through into our consciousness. This results in increasing oneness within us as well as with others.

It must be stressed that this process of growth is seen to require an active life in the world. The primary agent of change is constructive activity, with disciplines of private study, self-examination, or meditation effective only as they focus on such activity. Again, this is consistent with Swedenborg's emphasis on wholeness—the individual is not fulfilled by neglecting a whole level of being.

### Revelation

It is axiomatic for Swedenborg that we cannot lift ourselves by our own bootstraps. If it seems that we can, it is because God is constantly providing us with the resources for change. Granting the premise that rationality is a primary agent in this change, revelation emerges as a primary form of divine aid; and in Swedenborg's thought, the Bible is the central revelation. He finds it to be essentially a parable, a literal story embodying a spiritual one. This conviction was so strong that he regarded the heart of his mission as the disclosing of the spiritual meaning of the Word.

He came to see the Bible not as a compendium of theological propositions or proof-texts, but as a coherent story. The process of growth noted in the preceding section involves a lifelong task, which proceeds in an orderly fashion from more physical interests to more spiritual ones. The underlying order of that process is reflected in the Biblical story under the primary image of the

establishment of the Lord's kingdom. The literal story moves from an initial vague promise through many vicissitudes to the successful founding of an earthly empire. When this proves inadequate, the incarnation translates the hope into one of a spiritual kingdom, the 'kingdom of heaven', which is at last prophetically realized in the descent of the Holy City.

In precisely analogous fashion, we can progress from our first vague 'dreams of glory' through experience to the establishment of self-identity, can realize the inadequacy of that outward appearance, and can become conscious participants in the vibrant world of spiritual love, wisdom, and activity.

It may be added that just as the ambiguity of the physical world supports our freedom, the ambiguities of the Bible leave us free to interpret it in many ways. This, for Swedenborg, is not at all a liability, but a loving and wise provision of its ultimate author.

### **Correspondence**

In the process of spiritual realization, the ambiguities of the world and of the Bible become increasingly resolved. The central concept in that resolution is the concept of 'correspondence' or responsiveness'. The divine, as the source of all, works most directly through the spiritual realm into the physical, and while the divine nature is progressively obscured by the growing unresponsiveness of these successive realms, it is never obliterated.

Swedenborg therefore sees the physical world as the result of spiritual causes, a result which reflects those causes, albeit dimly at times. The growth of deeper consciousness brings an understanding of this relationship. Laws of nature are seen

as reflections of spiritual laws, physical entities and events as results and therefore images of spiritual ones. The effort towards establishing an earthly kingdom is an appropriate prelude to the establishment of a heavenly one because the underlying principles are the same in each case. The instances are 'distinguishable' in level, one being internal to the other, and 'one' in principle.

### **Universality**

To return for a moment to the first paragraph of this treatment, there is one respect in which the difference between Swedenborgian and traditional Christian theology emerges with no subtlety whatever. Swedenborg insists that the Lord is effectively present in all religions, with the result that 'the good' of all religions are saved. He speaks far more affirmatively, in fact, about Gentiles than about Christians. For him, a god who did not provide at least the means of salvation to everyone must be unloving, unwise, or ineffective.

Yet there is no hesitation in his insistence that the incarnation was the turning point of all history, and that genuine Christianity is therefore the most perfect of religions. Perhaps the most straightforward way to explain this apparent paradox is to state that in Christianity we most clearly see the God who is active everywhere. It is a distortion of that religion itself to claim that salvation is for Christians alone.

### **Immortality**

Seeing spirit as substantial and structured, Swedenborg sees people as essentially spiritual beings, whose bodies are primarily means of usefulness in a

physical environment. For him, it is in fact preoccupation with the physical that blinds us to the reality of the spirit. So on the one hand, progress toward oneness entails growing spiritual awareness, and on the other, death results primarily in a shift in the level of consciousness.

The spiritual world is, by comparison with the physical, unambiguous. This provides the essential mechanism of judgement—disclosure, or the loss of the ability to dissemble. Swedenborg's heaven is simply the voluntary community of people who care about each other, and his hell is simply the voluntary association of people who care only about themselves. God enables all individuals to associate with their likes; and the only torments of hell are the inevitable results of the utter impracticality of evil.

The choice after death is not necessarily instantaneous. Swedenborg describes a 'World of Spirits' between heaven and hell, where the newly deceased gradually lose their ability to dissemble and resolve any remaining indecisions.

### **Maximus Homo**

Since the trinity of love, wisdom, and power is characteristic of the divine, it is characteristic of all reality; and since that trinity is intensely personal, the human form is pervasive. Swedenborg sees it as the form of the individual almost as a matter of course. He also sees it as the form of any group of people united by mutual love and understanding. He therefore refers to heaven in its entirety as the *maximus homo*, the 'greatest person' or 'universal human', and goes into some detail about the spiritual functions corresponding to the various members and organs of the human body.

### **Incarnation**

As noted, Swedenborg regards the incarnation as the central event of human history. In his view, the human race declined from a primal state of innocence, becoming progressively more materialistic, until the only way it could be reached was through the physical presence of deity. In the Christ, Swedenborg sees God as assuming our own fallen nature and transforming it by the process of conflict between the divine best and the human worst within him. This experience precisely parallels our own inner conflicts, and his life is therefore the model for our own.

The virgin birth, in this understanding, is essential for two reasons. First, there must be a physical mother to transmit the fallen nature—for Swedenborg, an 'immaculate conception', conception by a *sinless* mother would have been quite pointless and ineffective. Second, there needed to be within that fallen nature a capacity for the infinite acceptance of the divine. Without the first, Jesus' life is irrelevant to ours; without the second, it is ineffective.

Jesus is then seen as having grown as we do, knowing doubt, selfishness, and all the distortions of humanity we can experience in ourselves. His life is the perfect exemplar of the process of transformation which is our own hope, and which, as already noted, is imaged in the Biblical story. He was in a very special sense 'the Word made flesh' and the fulfilment of Scripture. The passion of the cross was not a propitiation, but a final trial, a final self-giving. By refusing to override human anger by miraculous means, Jesus took the last step into perfect, loving wholeness; and because

that wholeness was complete, the resurrection included even his physical body.

### Conclusions

Swedenborg's theology calls for the fullest development of the individual emotionally, intellectually, and behaviourally. It values open and profound

love, clear and free thinking, and faithful activity. It relates these qualities directly to the nature of reality, thereby avoiding any system of arbitrary rewards and punishments. Above all, it points toward an individual and collective oneness in which differences are not divisive, but consistently enrich the whole. □

Existence, by nothing bred,  
Breeds everything.  
Parent of the universe,  
It smooths rough edges,  
Unites hard knots,  
Tempers the sharp sun,  
Lays blowing dust,  
Its image in the wellspring never fails.  
But how was it conceived?—this image  
Of no other image sire.

*The Way of Life, Lao Tzu*