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KEY CONCEPTS IN SWEDENBORG'S THEOLOGY

Excerpted from: Robert H. Kirven and George F. Dole, *A Scientist Explores Spirit* (Swedenborg Foundation, 1996)

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In paragraph 172 of his last published work, *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 stillborn infant." Yet beginning at paragraph 55 of an earlier work, *The Doctrine of the Lord*, he had written "that the import of the Athanasian faith is an 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 between scorn for Nicene "tritheism" and acceptance of a truth behind the formulation may serve to suggest the subtlety of the difference between Swedenborg's theology and traditional Christian theology: and the contrast may also serve to introduce two of his key concepts as underlying the others.

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. Theology could not be reduced to a tidy system of dry, precisely defined terms. It had to be explored and loved and lived.

Two broad key concepts may help define the subtlety. The first is 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 actuality. In precisely similar fashion, Swedenborg held that love, wisdom, and action can usefully be distinguished from each other, but cannot be separated from each other in actuality. 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.

The second underlying key concept that 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 marvelously acute senses, experiencing themselves and their environment as solid. By comparison, the physical world is cloudy, ambiguous, and sluggish.

With these basic concepts in mind, then--distinguishable oneness and the reality of spirit--we may look at some more specific concepts.

SECTIONS:

- God
- Our Humanity
- Love
- Human Process
- Revelation
- Correspondence
- Immortality
- Maximus Homo
- Incarnation
- Radical Claim
- A Vision

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 everywhere, as indeed science assumes, either intuitively or of necessity.

To help us grasp the nature of that infinite oneness, we may distinguish the primary feature of infinite love, wisdom, and power--love being 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 counseling another. This is a qualitative monotheism, not simply a numerical one.

Love is intrinsically personal, and God is therefore the essential and only person, the definition of the human person. 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"); we are recipients of being rather than beings. We differ from each other not in the presence of the Divine within us, but in our acceptance of or receptivity to the Divine.

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OUR HUMANITY

Most of the time, however, we do not experience ourselves primarily as receptors of the Divine. We feel self-contained and self-sustaining. This appearance is God's intentional gift of freedom and rationality, which are designed to enable us to accept the Divine willingly and which therefore are 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 wisdom and thereby set ourselves against the fundamental nature of reality itself. This rejection 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.

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LOVE

Swedenborg sees love as the fundamental energy and substance of all human beings, with wisdom as its means. Ultimately, we will believe what we want ("love") to believe and understand what we want to understand. Our purposes, rather than our knowledge, determine our character--we are our love.

Swedenborg distinguishes a hierarchy of loves: love of God as the Lord, love of others, love of the world, and love of self. All are necessary, and when they are in this order of priority, all are 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 calls us to care for our own well-being, and values all moments of genuine joy, whether physical or spiritual.

This affirmative stance is particularly clear in his treatment of marriage. He sees 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 by either of the other. As the two become more and more one, each becomes more perfectly defined--the husband more a man, the wife more a woman.

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HUMAN PROCESS

From birth, we have moments of spontaneous empathy, but the more dominant mode of our sensitivity seems to be self-sensitivity. This entails a radically distorted view of reality, giving each individual the impression of being the only one with live feelings and thoughts. Our egocentricity has an Achilles' heel that is specifically vulnerable to rationality because the thought that one is the only such being is rationally absurd.

A further consequence of this is that our feeling and our thought--our "love" and our "wisdom"--unlike God's, are often in conflict. Sometimes, for example, we can see mentally what is good even when we do not feel it, and we have the freedom to follow that sight rather than the 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 requires an active life in the world. The primary agent of change is constructive activity; and the disciplines of private study, self-examination, or meditation are 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 an entire level of being.

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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. In Swedenborg's thought, rationality is a primary agent in this change, revelation is a primary form of divine aid, and the Bible is the central revelation. He finds the Bible 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 Scripture.

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 under "Human Process" 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 kingdom of God. 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 childhood "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.

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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 that 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 are seen as results and therefore images of spiritual ones. The effort toward 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.

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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 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 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. The only "judgement" we experience is our own—our free choice to care for each other, which is heaven, or to care only for ourselves, which is hell.

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MAXIMUS HOMO

Because the trinity of love, wisdom, and power is characteristic of the Divine, it is characteristic of all reality; and because 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. Further, any group of people united by mutual love and understanding will act as a collective individual, and will therefore have a functional human form (distinguishable from "human shape"). He even 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. The collective person needs to perceive and act, to ingest and incorporate, just as the individual does, and therefore needs the "organs" which perform these functions.

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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 parent 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 an infinite capacity for the acceptance of the Divine. Without the first, Jesus' life would have been irrelevant to ours; without the second, it would have failed in its purpose.

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 fulfillment of Scripture. The passion on the cross was not a sacrificial appeasement but a final trial, a final self-giving. By refusing to use miraculous means to override our rejection of him, Jesus took the last step into perfect, loving wholeness; and because that wholeness was complete, the resurrection included even his physical body.

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RADICAL CLAIM

A central point of difference between Swedenborg's theology and traditional Christian thought, supported by hardly foretold by the concepts of his system, is his announcement that biblical prophecies of a Last Judgment and a Second Coming of the Lord had been fulfilled in his lifetime. He claims knowledge of these events on the authority of his having witnessed the judgment in the spiritual world, and interprets traditional concepts in their light. With the Last Judgment in 1757, as he sees it, the era symbolized by the "old" Christian Church came to an end. The Second Coming—the return of the Lord after his resurrection and glorification described in the Gospels—ushers in a new Christianity and the establishment in 1770 of a new church in the spiritual world. He stated at one point that the church in the outward world would go on much as before, at least for a while, and he neither tried to found a new organization nor speculated on the form one might take. He expected instead that a new freedom of thought in spiritual matters would counter the dogmatism of traditional Christianity.

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A VISION

Swedenborg's theology is not just "brain faith," but a kind of program for the healing of individuals and of human society. It calls for the fullest development of the individual emotionally, intellectually, and behaviorally. 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, and sees the source of this "distinguishable oneness" as the wisdom and love of the one Creator.

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ABOUT EMANUEL SWEDENBORG

An Introduction to His Life and Writings

Excerpted from the Introduction to *A Thoughtful Soul: Reflections from Swedenborg*, ed. and trans. by George F. Dole (Swedenborg Foundation, 1995).



To understand Emanuel Swedenborg's life as he lived it, we must try to move out of our retrospective view, to be aware of what was

present, past, and future to him as his story progresses. In his later years, Swedenborg believed that everything before 1744-1745 was preparation for his mission as a revelator, but this view cannot be retrojected into the "preparation" itself. Perhaps insidiously, those who find his thought relevant to the twentieth century may forget that Swedenborg was addressing his own eighteenth-century readers and may neglect their own responsibility to distinguish the timeless from the timebound.

To provide a focus for this introduction, I would highlight, first of all, Swedenborg's extraordinary intellect and, second, his intense devotion to two causes—the religion of his upbringing and the science of his university education. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Lutheran orthodoxy and Cartesian science were parting company. This was a painful process, with clerics seeing the authority of the church undermined and scientists seeing the church as the primary obstacle to freedom of inquiry. It was a process that Swedenborg internalized.

In his own home, religion was the dominant theme. His father, Jesper Swedberg, was a Lutheran clergyman with a good deal of evangelical fire (Queen Ulrica Eleonora ennobled the Swedeberg family in 1719, changing the family name to "Swedenborg"). Eventually, Jesper would become a bishop, in and out of hot water with the church for his efforts to revise the hymnal along more pietistic and less orthodox lines. Theology was apparently standard conversational fare at the dinner table. It is also significant, however, that the family had substantial interests in the mining industry, mining being the mainstay of the Swedish economy. We may suspect that the family properties were a persistent minor theme.

Jesper was on the faculty at Uppsala University when his son matriculated there at the age of eleven (not all that unusual an event); but, shortly thereafter, he was made bishop of Skara and moved to his new charge. At this time, Emanuel moved in with his older sister and her new husband, Erik Benzellus, who felt himself to be at the forefront of the Cartesian revolution and who, as university librarian, was very much aware of the latest scientific publishing.

In one sense, it was a period of truce for science and religion. Charles XI had decreed just a decade earlier that science was not to make

pronouncements on matters of doctrine and that the church was not to restrict scientific inquiry. It was perhaps only this rudimentary compartmentalization that enabled Swedenborg to pursue a scientific rather than a theological course of study without causing a serious rift with his father.

Swedenborg was graduated from Uppsala University in 1709, and the following year he set out on an extended trip abroad. At this time, England, France, and Germany were centers of scientific progress, but Sweden was relatively behind the times. In London, Swedenborg studied the work of Sir Isaac Newton, worked with the astronomer John Flamsteed, and investigated Robert Boyle's chemical experiments. Next, he traveled to the continent, making diplomatic contacts and focusing to some extent on mathematics. When he returned home, it was with a portfolio of mechanical inventions including a submarine, an airplane, and a stove, and with dreams of founding an observatory that would give Sweden a prominent place in the field of astronomy. In addition, on his trips abroad, he made a practice of lodging with artisans and picking up their skills, which came to include lens grinding, bookbinding, and cartography. Indeed, throughout his long life, even though he eventually settled into a comfortable house in Stockholm and enjoyed his garden, he spent a good deal of time abroad. In regard to his later publications, it was far easier for him to publish in Amsterdam and London, where the presses were not subject to ecclesiastical censorship, than in Stockholm. He wrote in Latin in order to reach out beyond the confines of Sweden, so language was no problem. He also published his larger scientific works in Dresden and Leipzig, both because of the superior quality of the presses there and because this gave his works access to the larger learned world of the continent.

Unfortunately, Swedenborg returned at a low point in Sweden's history. The charismatic Charles XII had made a spectacular attempt to extend the Swedish empire by conquest and had met disaster at the hands of Peter the Great. The cost of Charles' campaigns had been ruinous, and Sweden's economy was in a shambles. There was no realistic chance of Swedenborg's realizing his dream of an observatory. Ultimately, he found work as assistant to Sweden's foremost inventor, Christopher Polhem, and became what we would now call a civil engineer.

With the support of the king, he then was appointed to a non-salaried position on the College of Mines—roughly the equivalent of the Department of the Interior. He toured the mining and smelting industries of Europe and published what turned out to be a definitive work on metallurgy. There were separate volumes on iron and copper, with an introductory volume laying philosophical foundations for physics and chemistry. This first volume, known most briefly as *The Principia*, included both a carefully worked out nebular hypothesis and a theory of matter as composed of patterned energy.

His life seemed pretty much on course at this point. He was profoundly disappointed to be still a bachelor after two courtships that had not worked out, but he was an accepted member of the government at the cabinet level with an international reputation in the field of metallurgy.

The next major turn of events in Swedenborg's life came shortly after his father's death when he began to use his spare time "in search of the soul." This was not an uncommon pursuit, but his approach was distinctive. Rather than theorize, he chose to undertake a very thorough study of human anatomy. If the body was indeed the kingdom of the soul, he reasoned, then that is surely where we should look. He spent time in

dissection rooms in Paris but eventually decided to rely more on the published results of other researchers so that he might not be biased by his own first-hand discoveries.

The result of this study was two substantial volumes that included such substantial discoveries as the functions of the ductless glands and the localization of certain motor functions in the cortex of the brain. At the end, though, he had to rely more on doctrine than on the scalpel for his conclusions about the soul, and he regarded the whole massive work as having failed in its primary purpose. Characteristically, he decided that he simply had not been thorough enough and set out to do it right the second time. He now projected eleven volumes, of which he actually published two, with substantial parts of others left in draft.

He apparently began on this massive project in 1741, at the age of fifty-three. As he worked, he started to have experiences of "photism," mentally visible flashes of light or flame that, he came to realize, signalled his having arrived at some particularly significant insight. He began his "prologue" to the first volume of the new series by describing a kind of inborn rational instinct for the truth, an assertion potentially at odds with the strict empiricism he had previously insisted on.

Swedenborg was on the verge of an immense and traumatic change. As he proceeded with the project, the conviction grew that it simply was not going to succeed. He began at about this time to record his dreams and to speculate on the guidance they offered. In his record of these dreams, we see a man struggling with his intellectual pride, with his alienation from his feelings, and with his distance from his childhood faith. On Easter weekend of 1744, this crisis issued in a mystical Christ vision of uncommon power. After a year of further struggle, a second vision, again at Easter time, left him with the conviction that he had been called to a new career.

The event is worth sketching. The vision took place in a London Inn where he was having dinner and began with the appearance of a shadowy figure in the corner who told him emphatically not to eat so much. Later that night, he was awakened by the same figure, who identified himself as the Lord Jesus Christ and informed him that he was being commissioned to disclose the inner, spiritual meaning of the Bible. After this, Swedenborg reported, heaven and hell were opened to him. From that time until the closing days of his life, Swedenborg had almost daily "waking visions" of the spiritual world, including extended conversations with angels and spirits.

Swedenborg took his commission seriously, reviewing his university Hebrew and Greek and drafting his own extensive index of Bible passages. He began writing a Bible commentary, posthumously published in nine volumes as *The Word Explained*, but left it incomplete. From 1749 to 1756, he published a multi-volume work known as *Arcana Coelestia*, whose full title might be translated "A Disclosure of the Heavenly Depths in Sacred Scripture or the Word of the Lord." This work proceeds verse by verse and often word by word through the books of Genesis and Exodus, interpreting the narrative as a kind of parable with levels of meaning dealing with the spiritual history of humanity, the issues and course of the individual's spiritual pilgrimage, and deepest of all, the story of the interaction between the divine and the human sides of Jesus.

While he had begun with the explicit intent of covering the whole Bible, he changed course after finishing his exegesis of Exodus and published, in 1758, five works of a very different nature. One was a very slender work, little more than a pamphlet, on the inhabitants of the planets. Another,

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine, was a survey of the main points of his theology organized in brief discussions of its commonest terms. A third—perhaps the most startling—was a small work called *The Last Judgment*, in which he described having witnessed this event in the spiritual world. A fourth, again more booklet than book, made his case for the existence of deeper meaning in scripture; and the fifth, *Heaven and Hell*, presented the nature of the spiritual world as he had experienced it. It seems clear that he was trying to put his theology in the most accessible form possible; and, in fact, *Heaven and Hell* has been the most popular of his works.

On completion of these 1758 works, he returned to the task of Scripture commentary and drafted most of a commentary on the last book of the Bible, Revelation. Knowing now that he would not be writing separate works on much of the rest of Scripture, he did a great deal of gathering of related passages and sketching their interpretation. The resulting work, *The Apocalypse Explained*, was never finished and was published only after his death.

In 1763 and 1764, he published another cluster of separate works. Four of these were on specific theological topics: *The Doctrine of the Lord*, *The Doctrine of Sacred Scripture*, *The Doctrine of Life*, and *The Doctrine of Faith*. One was a kind of sequel to his little work *The Last Judgment*, and two were companion volumes entitled *Divine Love and Wisdom* and *Divine Providence*, respectively. *Divine Love and Wisdom* presented his metaphysics in its broadest and least sectarian form, while *Divine Providence* brought this "down to earth," in a sense, in an effort to reconcile his experience of the beauty of the divine nature with his experience of a world full of violence and injustice. He then returned to the book of Revelation and published a relatively concise commentary, *The Apocalypse Revealed*.

His next project was a departure from previous policies in another direction and resulted in his most controversial work, whose title has been variously translated as *Marital Love*, *Conjugal Love*, *Marriage Love*, *Love in Marriage*, and, most recently, *Married Love*. It is intriguing to see him talking about the inner differences between the sexes on the basis of his encounters with them in the spiritual world and also to see a combination of a highly idealistic view of marital fidelity and devotion on the one hand and a remarkably nonjudgmental attitude toward deviations from this ideal on the other.

The work on marriage was published in 1768, by which time Swedenborg was eighty years old. He was to publish just three more works. One was a booklet under the title *The Intercourse between the Soul and the Body*; one, a small and quite polemical critique of traditional Christian theology called *A Brief Exposition of the Teaching of the New Church*; and the third, the work that has been seen as his final summary, *True Christian Religion*.

It has been my own contention, though, that this final work is less a summary than an effort to demonstrate that this theology is truly Christian. Two of his earliest followers, both clergymen, had been accused of heresy, and the ecclesiastical inquiry had shifted focus from what these men themselves had written to the works of Swedenborg himself. Perhaps there was a bit of his father's evangelical fire left in the old man, for he entered into the fray with a will.

Swedenborg died in 1772 in London. His had been a life remarkable for its energy and productivity but even more remarkable for its evolution. In retrospect, he seems never to have rested content with his achievements

or his understanding but always to have pressed deeper. Through years of experience that have caused later generations to question his sanity, he remained both gracious and grounded. He was socially accessible and "low key" and remained a very effective member of the Swedish Parliament to the end of his life.

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