

Biography of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)

Emanuel Swedenborg was a Swedish scientist, mathematician, inventor, statesman, author, and mystic. He is credited with making significant discoveries in astronomy, anatomy, magnetism, mechanics, chemistry, and geology. He drew up plans for a one-person submarine and also invented a glider, after calculating the weight-to-size ratio required for a “machine to fly in the air.” He designed an improved ear-trumpet, an airtight stove, a machine gun, various mining machinery, and he contributed plans for Europe’s largest drydock in southern Sweden. Fluent in six languages and conversant in nine, including Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin, he was also an accomplished musician and horticulturist. From about 1720 to 1745, he served on the national board that oversaw Sweden’s mining industry and published studies on metallurgy. And, he was an active member of Sweden’s House of Nobles.

When Stanford University researchers attempted to calculate the IQ of history’s greatest minds by applying the Terman Standard Intelligence Test to a massive database of historical material, only three people scored above 200 – Swedenborg, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and John Stuart Mill. Below them were such luminaries as Pascal, Galileo, Descartes, Kant, Kovalevskaya, Darwin, and Mozart.

At the age of 55, Swedenborg had a series of clairvoyant visions, which, he said, gave him the ability to experience the spiritual dimensions. In one of his visions, he saw a temple with the words *Nunc Licet* over the door, which he interpreted to mean “Now it is permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith.” A year or so after these initial visions, Swedenborg abandoned all other pursuits and devoted his time to

spiritual meditation and mediumistic trances during which he explored the spirit world. He claimed to have conversed with biblical prophets, apostles, Aristotle, Socrates, and Caesar, as well as with numerous deceased friends and acquaintances and spirits from other planets.

“I must employ my remaining time in writing on higher subjects, and not on worldly things, which are far below...,” he wrote in a personal diary. “May God be so gracious as to enlighten me respecting my duty.”¹



Raised in the Lutheran Church, Swedenborg became interested in spiritual matters at an early age. In a letter to Dr. Barriell A. Beyer, written when he was 81, Swedenborg said that he had been engaged in thought upon God, salvation, and the spiritual diseases of men since his fourth year of life. “...several times I revealed things at which my father and mother wondered, saying that angels must be speaking through me. From my sixth to my twelfth year I used to delight in

conversing with clergymen about faith, saying that the life of faith is love, and that love which imparts life is love the neighbor..."²

Philosopher Immanuel Kant told the story of a fire in Stockholm which Swedenborg saw from 300 miles away in Göteborg. While dining with others at the home of Mr. William Castel in Göteborg, Swedenborg reported that a dangerous fire had just broken out in Stockholm and that it was spreading fast. He named a friend whose house had just burned and said that his own house was in danger. Two hours later, he said that the fire had been extinguished and extended to just two doors from his own house. All of the facts described by Swedenborg were later confirmed.

Another story attesting to Swedenborg's clairvoyance or clairaudience, involved Louis de Marteville, the Netherlands' ambassador to Sweden. Several months after Marteville's death in 1760, his widow could not locate a receipt verifying payment of some valuable silver for which payment was being demanded by a goldsmith. Having heard of Swedenborg's clairvoyant abilities, she asked him if he could communicate with her deceased husband and determine the whereabouts of the receipt. Three days later, Swedenborg called upon Madame Marteville, at a time when she had company at her house, and told her that he had spoken with her husband and that the receipt was in a bureau in the room upstairs. Madame Marteville responded by saying she had already searched that bureau. Swedenborg then told her of a secret compartment in the bureau as described by her late husband. Accompanied by Swedenborg and her guests, Madame Marteville went to the bureau, found the secret compartment, of which she had been unaware, and there, too, found the receipt.

Still another story involving Swedenborg's clairvoyance, or clairaudience in this case, was reported by the Queen Dowager of Sweden, who decided to test Swedenborg by asking him what the last words of her deceased brother, the Prince

Royal of Prussia, were to her. Some days later, Swedenborg returned, described the circumstances of the visit with her brother and then told her the exact words uttered by her brother.

In fact, Kant verified all three stories by talking personally with witnesses to them. Some years later, in 1770, Swedenborg was reportedly being honored at a dinner given by the manufacturer Bolander of Gothenburg. During the dinner, Swedenborg turned to Mr. Bolander and told him that he should go to his cloth mills right away. Bolander did so and upon arriving there found that a large piece of cloth had fallen near the furnace and was just beginning to burn. He concluded that if he had arrived just minutes later that his property would have been in ashes.

During the last 27 years of his life, Swedenborg produced 30 books, all in Latin, reporting on his explorations of the spirit world. Early in his first great work, *Arcana Caelestia*, he addressed the issue of life after death by writing: "That I might know that man lives after death, it has been granted me to speak and converse with several persons with whom I had been acquainted during their life in the body, and this not merely for a day or a week, but for months, and in some instances for nearly a year, as I had been used to do here on earth. They were greatly surprised that they themselves, during their life in the body, had lived, and that many others still live, in such a state of unbelief concerning a future life, when nevertheless there intervenes but the space of a few days between the decease of the body and their entrance into another world – for death is a continuation of life."³

Of the Adam and Eve story, Swedenborg reported that everything in the story is symbolic, Adam representing the intellectual side of man and Eve the emotional. The great Flood, he said, was not a physical deluge, but a flood of monstrous evils that overwhelmed the people in ancient times. Noah and his family represented those who had not succumbed to the immoralities of the time. Many other stories in the Old Testa-

ment, at least before Abraham, were similarly allegorical, Swedenborg was informed during his trances.

Perhaps the most significant discovery by Swedenborg was the “world of spirits,” an intermediate region between the heaven and hell of Protestant theology, but unlike the purgatory of Catholicism, which was much like hell. The conditions of the spirit world that Swedenborg explored were very similar to earth, so similar that many newly arrived souls had to be told that they were no longer on the earth plane. It was in this world of spirits that newly arrived souls found themselves.

“When the soul thus separates himself, he is received by good spirits, who likewise do him all kind offices whilst he is in consort with them,” he wrote. “If, however, his life in the world was such that he cannot remain associated with the good, he seeks to be disunited from them also, and this separation is repeated again and again, until he associates himself with those whose state entirely agrees with that of his former life in the world, among whom he finds, as it were, his own life. They then, wonderful to relate, live together a life of similar quality to that which had constituted their ruling delight when in the body...”⁴

Swedenborg, whose belief in the divinity of Christ remained steadfast, dismissed the atonement doctrine, saying there was no substitution of the innocent for the guilty. Man’s works, not his faith, governed his initial place in the spirit world. “The churchman today believes that anyone can be received into heaven and be eternally happy simply through [the Lord’s] mercy, no matter what his life has been like,” he wrote. “He thinks it is a simply a matter of admission. But he is wrong. No one is brought to heaven and admitted without spiritual life...”⁵

Although modern Spiritualism did not begin to unfold until 1848, Swedenborg is sometimes referred to as the first Spiritualist. However, unlike many Spiritualists, Swedenborg did not think it wise for the average person to commune with spirits because of the risks involved in being negatively influenced by low-level spirits.

“The only light that has ever been cast on the other life is in Swedenborg’s philosophy,” wrote Elizabeth Barrett Browning.⁶

Apparently, Swedenborg continued his work after his earthly death. William Stainton Moses, one of the best known mediums of the 19th Century, was informed by spirit communicators that Swedenborg and Benjamin Franklin, working together, figured out how to communicate with the earth realm by the taps, raps, and table tiltings that kicked off the Spiritualism epidemic in 1848. Also, Swedenborg is said to have appeared to Andrew Jackson Davis, known as the “Poughkeepsie Seer,” and to have contributed to his enlightenment and to have communicated with French researcher Allan Kardec. He further collaborated with Francis Bacon in communicating much about the afterlife through the mediumship of Dr. George T. Dexter during the early 1850s.

Swedenborg’s writings are said to have influenced Goethe, Balzac, Coleridge, Carlyle, Lincoln, Tennyson, Emerson, Henry James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Thoreau, both Brownings, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, George Macdonald, and Helen Keller to name just some.



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¹ *Swedenborg* (a pamphlet produced by the Swedenborg foundation, based on a book by J. Stuart Bogg).

² *Swedenborg: Life and Teaching*, by George Trobridge, Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1976, pp. 12-13.

³ _____, p. 163.

⁴ _____, p. 164.

⁵ *Death and After*, The Swedenborg Society, London (a booklet), 1984, p. 22.

⁶ *Arcana*, The Swedenborg Association, Charleston, SC, 2000, p. 26.