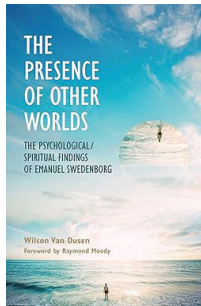


BOOK REVIEW

The Presence of Other Worlds: The Psychological/Spiritual Findings of Emanuel Swedenborg

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This retrospective review marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Presence of Other Worlds* (1974, Harper & Row). Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian who spent the first part of his adult life understanding and explaining the natural world and the second part of his adult life understanding and explaining other worlds, that is, the spiritual realm. The 1991 reissue of this biography contains (as does the present printing) a foreword by Raymond Moody. Moody states that Swedenborg “scrupulously documented his observations during the otherworldly voyages and produced a virtual atlas and travelers’ guidebook of the other side. Many of the details of his reports check out quite well with today’s familiar accounts of out-of-body trips and near-death experiences.” (p. x) Moody also suggests that the experience of photism—seeing in one’s mind a flash of light when what one is thinking meets with inward approval—is more common than people believe. Swedenborg and Moody experienced it, and he predicts that “a systematic investigation would uncover many more examples of this fascinating and anomalous talent.” (p. xiii) In the introduction to the 2004 edition of his book, Van Dusen writes that he also “experienced a series of religious visions.” (p. xv)

For context, I begin with a brief look at the life of the author. Wilson Van Dusen (1923-2005) earned a PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Ottawa. He worked as a clinical psychologist at Mendocino State Hospital in Ukiah, California, for sixteen years. (p. 135) He went on to serve as an associate professor in psychology at J.F. Kennedy University in California and as Associate Director of the Awareness House Training Center in Berkeley, California. Van Dusen was well-published, authoring eleven books and approximately 375 articles in his field. (p. 251) The topics of his scholarly articles range from the narrowly clinical to the philosophical and religious: reporting the results of an experimental treatment for alcoholism, nonmedical unit administration; a central dynamism in chronic schizophrenia; existential analytic psychotherapy; and LSD in relation to Zen. So, what motivated this well-established chief of clinical psychology to write a book about an eighteenth-century mystic? Van Dusen offers us an explicit answer: “My purpose in writing this work is simple: to bring Swedenborg within the reach of many.” (p. xvii)

Before reviewing the contents of each chapter, let me comment on some general features of the volume. The book is well composed, with a good balance of quotations from Swedenborg’s works along with Van Dusen’s commentary, all woven together with a consistent psychological thread. (Indeed, out of ten other biographies of Swedenborg in English, this is the most psychological of them.¹) This threading includes an examination of Swedenborg’s mental states along with Van Dusen’s own special psychological experiences in dialogue with both a few clinical cases and well-known psychologists



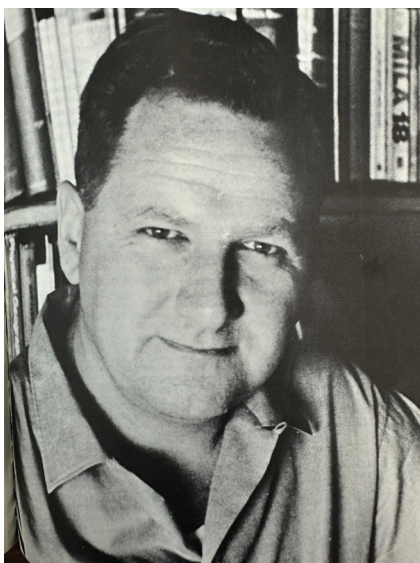


Figure 1. Wilson Van Dusen. *New-Church Messenger*

such as Carl Jung. Importantly, the tone throughout the book is open, respectful, calm, warm, and learned but approachable and personable. As a confessional Swedenborgian and associate professor of philosophy at a Swedenborgian college, I can affirm that Van Dusen's portrayal of Swedenborg is accurate and even-handed. Lastly, the book contains a bibliography of Swedenborg's theological works, although, somewhat regrettably, it lacks an index.

The first three chapters of the book introduce the reader to Swedenborg, the man. Chapter one includes a list of sixty-one of Swedenborg's scientific works and inventions. This gives the reader a sense of his areas of expertise and interest. These areas range from subjects associated with his work as an assessor for the Board of Mines (a very important industry in Sweden), such as iron, copper, tin, hydrostatics, blast furnaces, commerce and manufacturing, to algebra, theoretical physics, the infinite and final cause of creation, and a series of books on the human body (muscles, blood, nerves, senses, brain) and mind (empirical and rational psychology). In chapters two and three, Van Dusen examines the psycho-spiritual processes by which Swedenborg went from being an explorer of the external world in search of the truth about natural reality to an explorer of the internal world in search of the truth about humanity and God. Here, the author deftly draws on both his professional expertise and his personal experience to explain the hypnogogic state, dreams, trances, meditation, autosymbolism, automatic writing, and spiritual experiences and how these differ from psychoses and hallucinations.

Chapters four and five present Swedenborg's findings regarding the presence of other worlds, which worlds include the heavens, hells, and the intermediary state

between them known as the world of spirits, together with his views on human nature. The two chapters form a nice set because, as Van Dusen writes later, "*The spiritual worlds beyond this one are the essential nature and potentiality of human experience.*" (p. 227; emphasis in original) This doesn't mean that the spiritual worlds are projections of an individual's consciousness. Instead, it means that our affective and cognitive experiences are already heavenly or hellish. Van Dusen explains Swedenborg's view of consciousness as spiritually transcendent, noting that: "we are transcended by our own inner nature" and "our conscious experience is a transcendence coming to earth in our lives..." (p. 119). When it comes to the "production" view of brain/mind correlations in contrast to the "filter" or "transmission" view, Swedenborg and Van Dusen hold the latter position. A person's consciousness is part of a symbiotic system that spans both natural and spiritual worlds. Just as the term "holobiont" has been introduced to better capture the reality of natural organisms, so Swedenborg describes our spiritual associations to better capture the reality of our psychological ecology.

Chapters six and seven are likely to be of most interest to readers of the *JSE*. In chapter six, "The Presence of Spirits in Madness," Van Dusen explains how an "accidental discovery in 1964" allowed him to gain "a much more detailed and accurate picture of psychotic hallucinations than had previously been possible." (p. 135) He examined thousands of mentally ill persons and "gradually noticed similarities between patients' reports and Swedenborg's description of the relationships of the human being to spirits." (p. 135) Van Dusen uses quotations from Swedenborg's theological works and *Spiritual Diary* to support his claim about the similarities. The primary benefits of using a Swedenborgian approach are that it "accounts for otherwise quite puzzling aspects of hallucinations," it enables the collection of more data to analyze, and it helped Van Dusen understand and relate to his patients. (p. 136ff) This chapter also includes a brief consideration of whether Swedenborg himself was insane. Chapter seven, "Minor Miracles," relates what Swedenborg considered of little interest but what his contemporaries were astonished by, namely, his parapsychological powers as a mental medium. Van Dusen describes three examples of Swedenborg's extrasensory perception, two incidents of precognition, and three events involving communication with the dead. Throughout the chapter, the author provides quotations from primary source material and, toward the end, offers an explanation of the phenomena using Swedenborgian metaphysics.

Chapters eight ("Existence as Symbolic") and nine ("Inner Meanings") form another natural pair as both explicate Swedenborg's concept of correspondence. Van

Dusen offers the following distillation of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences: "The kernel of the whole idea of correspondences is that Something is manifesting and showing itself in many ways." (p. 198) He then quotes from Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* (Secrets of Heaven) §3483: "[T]he whole visible universe is ... nothing else than a theater that is representative of the Lord's kingdom. And this in turn is a theater representative of the Lord Himself." In theological terms, all levels of creation bear the image and likeness of the Creator in some way; in philosophical terms, Ultimate Reality is expressed through a series of discrete and continuous degrees such that there are macrocosms and microcosms. The many layers of existence are not static, for there is a continual influx of life and a resulting response on the part of the receiving vessels, and the layers are organized to allow the transmission of meaning. Van Dusen illustrates correspondences through brief examinations of religious ceremonies, astrology, magic, myth, alchemy, projective psychological tests, psychosomatic medicine, dream interpretation, visions, the human body, and ancient languages. The section on the language of correspondence in chapter eight is a useful bridge to Van Dusen's explanation of Swedenborg's hermeneutics in chapter nine. Here the author helpfully portrays in side-by-side columns three excerpts from the Bible along with their corresponding spiritual sense. These show how the concept of correspondence, when applied to ancient texts from Genesis and Matthew, results in a systematic symbolism that speaks to human spiritual development, *not* the literal beginning or end of the world. Reflecting on Swedenborg's lofty endeavor, Van Dusen writes that "Knowledge of the language of the unconscious and an interest in biblical meaning seldom exist in one person; those interested in depth psychology are usually not interested in the Bible, and biblical scholars find the language of the unconscious merely a curiosity." (p. 200)

Chapter ten, "The One Present," touches upon several aspects of Swedenborg's theology, including salvation, ethics, metaphysics, and religious pluralism, but is primarily concerned with the nature of God. Van Dusen is especially moved by the sensitive way in which Swedenborg:

...gently put[s] his finger on where in all of varied existence the Lord is to be most intimately known: in the very inner connection of humanness to the Divine. There is the pulse of the relationship: 'God is the essential person, from whom we are human by virtue of our acceptance of love and wisdom.' *Divine Love and Wisdom* §289. (p. 229)

In addition to the more obvious use of this book as an introduction to Swedenborg, it also offers an interesting case study of a publicly recognized scientist whose quest to understand the human soul and life itself, led not only to a personal transformation, but also to the development of a detailed description of the life after death, situated within a philosophically and scientifically well-informed theology. This book also serves as a good introduction to a spiritual and theistic point of view regarding reality, consciousness, causality, knowledge, and human experience. Readers interested in the influences behind thinkers such as Immanuel Kant² and William James will also benefit from this book.³

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The ten biographies to which I refer are the following:
 - Benz, E. (2002). *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary savant in the age of reason*. Swedenborg Foundation. (Original work published 1948).
 - Bergquist, L. (2005). *Swedenborg's secret*. Swedenborg Society. (Original work published 1999).
 - Dole, G., & Kirven, R. H. (1997). *A scientist explores spirit: A biography of Emanuel Swedenborg with key concepts of his theology*. Chrysalis Books/Swedenborg Foundation.
 - Jonsson, I. (1999). *Visionary scientist: The effects of science and philosophy on Swedenborg's cosmology*. Swedenborg Foundation. (Original work published 1971).
 - Lamm, M. (2000). *Emanuel Swedenborg: The development of his thought* (T. Spiers & A. Hallengren, Trans.). Swedenborg Foundation. (Original work published 1915).
 - Rose, J., Shotwell, S., & Bertucci, M. L. (2005). *Scribe of heaven: Swedenborg's life, work, and impact*. Swedenborg Foundation.
 - Sigstedt, C. O. (1952). *The Swedenborg epic: The life and works of Emanuel Swedenborg*. Bookman Associates.
 - Toksvig, S. (1948). *Emanuel Swedenborg: Scientist and mystic*. Yale University Press.
 - Trobridge, G. (1992). *Emanuel Swedenborg: Life and teaching*. Swedenborg Foundation.
 - Williams-Hogan, J. K. (1988). Swedenborg: A biography. In E. J. Brock (Ed.), *Swedenborg and his influence* (pp. 3-28). The Academy of the New Church.
- ² See Gottlieb Florschütz's *Swedenborg's Hidden Influence on Kant*, trans. by J. Durban Odhner and Kurt P. Nemitz (Bryn Athyn, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 2014) and Gregory R. Johnson's *Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2005). Florschütz aims to show that in Kant's later works, he left room for occult phenomena of the kind that Swedenborg experienced.
- ³ The author wishes to thank his colleague, Dr. Marcy Latta, for her assistance with this review.