



Evolving Divinity: Swedenborgian Scriptural Exegesis in the 21st Century

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This morning we are meeting here at Hillside, like most Sundays, in a circle that includes an opened copy of the Bible. It's perhaps the one unifying Swedenborgian liturgical practice. We read from this text in reverence, and are deeply inspired by its narratives. The "Holy Bible". But what makes this collection of middle-eastern folk mythology "holy"?

In our community, and in our tradition, we value genuine critical exploration. Both spirituality and rationality. Swedenborgian theology invites us to question everything, to balance love and wisdom, spirituality and rationality, and generally, I find that we're pretty nuanced and open minded folks.

And there are big problems with the Bible, and as we all know, it's not exactly always used to expand people's spiritual perspective. Because it isn't like the stories and ideas contained in this book are all rosy and affirming of such a kind of a liberated, nuanced way of thinking. We all know this. I assume that most of have read this text we call "holy" before and been repulsed by its violence, judgment, and its all-too-human qualities. Scrambled to find something uplifting and non-gruesome or judgmental.

The literal text of the Bible condones all kinds of atrocities.

Samuel 15:

*"Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."*¹

But at least there's the Psalms:

Psalm 137:

*Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!*

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

*Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!*

So, there are obvious problems here. Viewing the Bible as a moral compass seems irreconcilable, for the most part, with a mature and nuanced understanding of morals and ethics. And more and more, our culture is distancing itself from these texts. And honestly, why not?

Perhaps one of the most provocative manifestations of increasing skepticism on this we see can be seen in the famous statement by New Atheist philosopher Richard Dawkins, in his best-seller *The God Delusion*:

*"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."*²

And the ugly truth is, he's not really wrong. These are all accurate statements, if one were to apply modern ethics, even the most simple idea of ethics, to the literal sense of the Bible. The God described in these texts is, for the most part, a complete jerk, reflective of the lowest of human expressions.

And this is by no means a problem limited to the "Old Testament" and its bloody and gruesome narratives. The History of Christianity, while there have been many wonderful and beautiful individuals and communities who truly internalized Christ consciousness, the history of Christianity is one of violence, crusades, conquest, colonialism, oppression and sexism. Not too long ago devout Christians in this country were using the New Testament to justify, and even demand the institution of slavery, one of humanity's most vile and objectively evil phenomena, which is condoned in both the old and new testaments:

1 Peter 2:18:

"Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the cruel."

² Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008. p. 51. Print.

In fact, much of Christianity explicitly or implicitly still teaches an image of God as an angry father who somehow loved or needed blood sacrifice so much that just like he had commanded Abraham, he slaughtered his own son on the cross to pay for our inherent “sinfulness”.

Now Swedenborg very strongly rejected the idea of God presented in the Christianity of his time. He presents a view of the divine that seems irreconcilable with the image of divinity painted throughout this text. Swedenborgian theology views God as the source and essence of everything. The closest we can come to identify the Divine is in the qualities of love and wisdom. Concerning a wrathful, judgmental, angry or punishing God, he is very clear in his assessments:

“God [cannot] condemn anyone, curse anyone, throw anyone into hell, predestine anyone’s soul to eternal death, avenge wrongs, or rage against creation or punish anyone [...] God cannot turn away from us or even look at us with a frown. To do any such thing would be against his essence, and what is against his essence is against himself”³

-Divine Love and Wisdom §56

Swedenborg reconciles the image of an angry God presented in the Bible with his belief in the absolute goodness of the divine by viewing the Bible as reflecting in its inner core, under its fantastical and gory shell of symbolic, imagery, our own spiritual makeup as humans relating to the divine within and around ourselves.

Just like he sees the narrative of Christ as a narrative of process, of inner struggle between the humanity and divinity, so the Bible is a story of struggle, pain, and often, ignorance. It’s a story of evolution.

The Human image of what God is has always been constantly changing. It’s been in constant process. Constant evolution. Swedenborg addresses this in his notion of spiritual aeons, or churches, which, in Near Eastern culture, were manifested by the internal meaning of what we know today as the Bible. The actual “Word”, in a Swedenborgian context, transcends the Bible, he mentions that the Word exists throughout the world in different forms, and even claimed that large chunks of the common canonical Bible did not qualify as being the Word.

From the standpoint of cultural anthropology, the notion of collective spiritual evolution is all very fascinating to me. Scholars agree that the first forms of religion, in the “hunter gatherer” period of human history tended to be animistic in nature. Everything was seen as being animated by spirits. People had rituals that were designed to engage, and often appease the streams, the plants and the animals.

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel, and Jonathan Rose (transl.). *True Christianity*. New Century Edition ed. Vol. I. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010. Print.

While this may sound awfully pagan to many traditional Christians, Swedenborg actually had a quite romanticised view of the earliest people, believing they were more deeply in touch with the divine, until they began worshipping materials, instead of the underlying natural divine unity symbolized by them. He calls this the “fall” from the most ancient to the ancient “church” [ecclesia] or aeon.

When agriculture became a thing, the predominant view of Divinity, in a religious sense, changed drastically once again. People started viewing God in relation to the soil and fertility their culture began depending on. God became predominantly associated with the feminine “Mother Earth”. Then, as communities became more and more settled and diverse, tribalism became huge. The predominant image of God shifted towards the masculine, identified with the chief of a tribe or clan, and a military leader. God is represented, both literally and figuratively, by strong, male, authoritarian military leaders and chiefs, who brought a sense of order to the community.

Another part of this tribalism is that different tribes and ethnic or cultural groups had their individual deity, which, of course, viewed *it's* people as superior to *other* tribes. The Bible is full of this. There is constant talk of competing peoples and their Gods. And of course the Hebrew version of God hates everyone that his “chosen people” hate. Egyptians, Canaanites, Babylonians, Philistines, and THEIR gods are all seen as fundamentally inferior. Of course, the competing tribes all had their own, more or less similar mythologies and rites...

At some point monotheism became prevalent, and there's different arguments on where the first examples are. But the basic tribal element of our God is right and your God is wrong is still, to this day, the norm in many regards.

Our concepts of the divine change constantly. They are in constant process. And so is our reading of the Bible.

Now, if there is this constant process, this constant movement, where does this put us today?

I believe that in Judeo Christian western culture, we are conditioned to look to the past for answers. “If only we could all be like the original Christians. They must have had it figured out. If only we could go back to ‘biblical’ times and ideas. And we all know that there are actually people promoting this notion. With spiritually devastating consequences.

If we, as Swedenborg suggests, view the Bible, and religious texts in general, as an archetypal reflection of both our inner and our outer journey, where does this put us on the timeline of this psycho-spiritual evolution?

One of the many things which immediately rang the heresy bells in the eyes of established Christian church of the time is Swedenborg's claim that what Bible imagery depicts as the

Second coming of Christ, the New Jerusalem, a new age of spiritual evolution, was already there and now, and all we have to do is realize it, live into it, and receive it into our hearts.

Part of this “new church”, this new state of consciousness, is that we are no longer bound to superstition or scriptural literalism. We are able to live the seeming paradox of rational spirituality. Swedenborg presents an image of the Divine that is our very essence, and the essence of everything good and true. Rather than looking back at previous ideas of God, we can live into the process of union with the divine, by embracing it where ever we see it. Being vessels and distributors of divine love and wisdom, and partaking in the new consciousness of the second Coming of Christ, the New Jerusalem.

The growing rejection of a “biblical” view of the Divine seems, to me, to be a consequence of something that is overall a positive and regenerative development: People are rejecting tribalist and patriarchal images of god, and this is part of this wonderful collective spiritual evolution we are experiencing. Obsolete and regressive ideas about how the world works are becoming exposed for what they are. Swedenborg talks in detail about how he conceptualized this process of radical collective and individual regeneration. Part of it is what he calls “vastation”, a breaking down of the old to make way for the new.

Yet, sometimes it seems like folks are throwing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. In rejection of the literal, we sometimes forget to double-check for a deeper level of significance. We lose sight of the profound psycho-spiritual meaning that underlies these archetypal mythological narratives.

The non-dualist spiritual teacher Adyashanti, in his book *Resurrecting Jesus: Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic*, he writes:

*“In Western culture, we have for the most part forgotten the power of story, the power of myth to carry and transmit truth. Myth is that which speaks to our souls. Myth is the language that connects with our unconscious and brings forth the sense of eternity, of radiance peering through the world of time and space. Myth, ultimately, is a way of talking about what can't be said, of conveying what can't be written about.”*⁴

Swedenborg believed that what made the Word sacred is that it is a story about us as humans, on a universal psycho-spiritual level. Let's appreciate it not as a set of rules and guidelines, but as a mirror of our own inner evolution. Our journey towards gnosis, towards union with that divine mystery. Eternal principles expressed in human words. Let's participate in this epic story, not by

⁴ Adyashanti. *Resurrecting Jesus: Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic*. Boulder: Sounds True, 2014. xiii. Print.

looking back, and becoming automatrons of people and ideas which are in the past, but by living in the NOW, in an embrace of love and wisdom.

There is this beautiful story about D. T. Suzuki, the great Zen Buddhist teacher and scholar who fell in love with Swedenborg and wrote what is now published as “Swedenborg: Buddha of the North”, when he had a meeting with other thinkers in 1954. When asked about what drew him to Swedenborg, he picked up a spoon from the table and said;

*“This spoon exists NOW in paradise... we are NOW in heaven.”*⁵

Amen.

⁵ Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro. *Swedenborg: Buddha of the North*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1996. Print.