

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Death in Swedenborgian and Mormon Eschatology

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Anticipation of a final curtain in the drama of existence, an "end" toward which history moves, has been a critical and persistent concept in Christian thought. Millennial expectations have flourished since the days of the Apostles, especially in times of unrest. In America, the first generation of Puritans were certain that history had entered its last phase. By the early eighteenth century New England divines were predicting that their listeners would live to hear the seventh trumpet announcing the start of the millennium. The once scholarly exercise of linking contemporaneous events with the forecasts of scripture was in time undertaken by an array of amateur exegetes, and during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a popular conviction that the "last days" were at hand became more widespread than at any other period in American history.

The old political order had been overthrown by the Revolution. A challenge to inherited ideas of place in geophysical and social terms was being mounted by the opening of the frontier and the rise of the common man. Surely it was no accident that a burgeoning interest in millennialism appeared coterminously with the westward trek of wagon trains and the growth of populistic egalitarian democracy.

"Amid the anxieties and evangelical enthusiasm of antebellum America," Sidney Ahlstrom writes, arose "a distinctly new kind of concern for Christ's Second Advent."¹ John Thomas preached the Lord's imminent return, and William Miller calculated the date of His appearance. For American Shakers, a group which experienced its greatest vitality during this period of millennial fever, the Second Coming was a *fait accompli* inasmuch as members of

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the sect believed it was consummated in and through Ann Lee, the Manchester factory girl they viewed as the feminine incarnation of the Divine Principle. Indeed, it was on the grounds that the Kingdom was come that the Shakers considered procreation unnecessary and enforced a rule of celibacy.

Differing markedly from these sects in their view of history are two other millennial groups—the Mormons and the Swedenborgians. They are essentially products of the same period, and it is their concepts of postmortem existence which are the focus of this article. In a sharp break with traditional Christian theology, Mormons and Swedenborgians took a dynamic view of the afterlife.² They not only challenged the Biblical idea of death as sleep, when an inactive body and soul simply await the common hour of salvation, but they posited a concept of human existence as an ever-ongoing process.

I would draw attention to the possibility that Joseph Smith's picture of the realms of glory is derived indirectly from Emanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, a work originally published in London in 1758, but widely distributed in America from 1815 through the Philadelphia-based American Society for Disseminating the Doctrines of the New Jerusalem.³ To stress the parallels between Swedenborgian and Mormon beliefs is neither to deny Smith's vision experiences nor to confirm those of the Swedish baron.⁴ But even dreams are culture bound, and the two sects have strikingly similar ideas about the geosocial characteristics of heaven.

Death for Swedenborg was a passage, and he said that when a man dies, "he takes with him all things belonging to him as a man except his earthly body."⁵ Given the immediacy of the process he calls resuscitation or resurrection, however, human beings do not perceive themselves as different from what they were in the world. As soon as the heart stops beating, the seer reported, the Lord draws forth the spirit from the body. Nowhere in his Writings does he suggest that the two aspects of being are reunited, but on the basis of years of observation, he asserted that the form of the spirit is a human form. "A man's spirit enjoys every sense, both outer and inner, that he enjoyed in the world," Swedenborg declared. "He sees as before, he hears and speaks as before, smells and tastes, and when touched, he feels the touch as before; he also longs, desires, craves, thinks, reflects, is stirred, loves, wills as before."⁶ Memory is retained, and spirits can recall everything seen, heard, read, learned, felt or thought throughout their mortal existence!

Reunions with relatives, friends and acquaintances take place during the first stage after death. It lasts from a few days to as long as a year, depending on the degree of harmony between an individual's external and internal nature, but at length his ruling loves are revealed, all appearances are shed and he passes into a second phase of spiritual life. A person's true character now is manifested in countenance and form, all superficial ties are severed, and he associates only with kindred spirits. It is at this point, according to Swedenborg's account, that the wicked cast themselves into hell in search of congenial company, while the regenerate are received into the highest realm of the intermediate state, where they are made ready for heaven. Instruction in doctrine drawn from the word is given them by the Lord through the

instrumentality of angels, and when their preparation is complete, angelic societies receive the newcomers with joy.

An ostensibly more traditional view of the resurrection was taught by Joseph Smith. "Restoration shall come to all," according to the Book of Mormon, "both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous."⁷ What the Mormon prophet meant by "restoration" was the reunion of body and soul separated at death, but it was not a vague prospect in an unimaginably distant future. Belief in an imminent Second Coming was a central element in nineteenth-century Mormon thought, and the Saints believed that at the end of the millennium "all must come forth from the grave . . . in the selfsame tabernacles that they possessed while living on the earth. Bone will come to its bone and flesh and sinew will cover the skeleton," President John Taylor said, "and at the Lord's bidding breath will enter the body and we shall appear, many of us, a marvel to ourselves."⁸ Meanwhile the incorporeal nature of those who died before Christ's return was not perceived by the Saints as a bar to activity. Quite the contrary: the spirit world is repeatedly portrayed as a place where decisions are made and spirits continue to perfect their knowledge of the great law of development.

The vision experiences reported by Emanuel Swedenborg and Joseph Smith are notable for their detailed descriptions of the landscape of heaven. Throughout the Writings, the Swedish seer uses physiological analogies in explaining points of theology, and a kind of methodological crescendo is reached in his delineation of the abode of spirits. It is where God dwells, and in aggregate, Swedenborg declared, heaven reflects a single man, which he called *Maximus Homo* or Grand Man. The concept is an inversion of the Judeo-Christian idea that God created man in his own image, but in anatomical detail the philosopher goes far beyond the correspondence Paul suggested between the Church and the body of Christ.

Swedenborg taught that uses performed by innumerable societies which comprise heaven correspond to the functions of the human body. "In general," he wrote, "the highest or first heaven forms the head down to the neck; the middle or second heaven forms the breast down to the loins and knees; the lowest or third heaven forms the feet down to the soles, also the arms to the fingers."⁹

The tripartite division reflects a more general separation into celestial and spiritual realms, the former consisting of angels who have internalized divine emanations, and consequently are more closely conjoined to the Lord than the spiritual angels. The two kingdoms constitute the highest and middle heavens. In the lowest heaven are angels who receive influxes from both celestial and spiritual realms, but in contrast to their inhabitants, who admit truths more or less quickly into their wills, the angels of the lowest heaven simply live morally and believe in God without having any interest in further instruction. Swedenborg observed that there was no social intercourse between the three heavens, and that furthermore each was divided into societies according to the angels' interior affections. "All who form the same

angelic society resemble each other in countenance in a general way," he said, "but not in particulars."¹⁰ The garments of angels correspond to their intelligences, as their dwellings correspond to their rank; thus it seems that the heaven of one spirit is never identical with that of another.

The Saints, too, conceive of a spirit world divided into three parts. The majority of the earth's inhabitants, according to Mormon doctrine, are destined for the lowest realm of glory known as the telestial kingdom. Its inhabitants will include those who refuse to receive the gospel of Christ but still do not deny the Holy Ghost through the ministrations of other spirits. In this category Smith puts "liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers."¹¹ They will be blessed neither with the presence of the Father nor the Son; still the glory of their kingdom will surpass all understanding.

The inhabitants of the middle or terrestrial kingdom are described as those who "died without the law;" those who "received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it;" and "honorable men of earth blinded by the craftiness" of others. These spirits are destined to receive the presence of the Son but not the fullness of the Father.

The highest kingdom, or the celestial, is located on a sanctified and crystallized earth where God and Jesus will dwell forever. Minimum requirements for this realm are faith, repentance, baptism by immersion and reception of the Holy Ghost by the laying of hands. Consigned to the lower celestial estate will be Latter-day Saints who have not entered into the covenant of marriage on earth, although presumably they can raise their heavenly status by acceding to "sealings" or proxy unions arranged by their descendants in temple ceremonies. The highest degree of glory is reserved for those Mormons who marry for time and eternity. They will bear children without pain,¹² and more:

. . . the creative principle, the mechanical work which was performed by our Father and God in constructing creations, and in redeeming and glorifying them; the great principle of knowledge from which our Father and God can call forth from a shapeless mass of dust an immortal tabernacle, into which enters an immortal spirit, all these principles of wisdom, knowledge and power will be given to his children, and will enable them to organize elements, form creations, and call forth from the dust intelligent beings, who will be under their charge and control.¹³

The high status enjoyed by the married in the heaven of Mormon imagining was prefigured in Swedenborg's Writings. A bachelor, the philosopher conceived of marriage as the central human relationship in this world and the next. But according to him, marriage in heaven was not necessarily between men and women who were earthly consorts. Partners generally meet after death and live together for a time, he said, but only "if their inclinations are concordant and sympathetic" do "they continue their conjugal life."¹⁴

Swedenborg taught that the basis of a true marital relationship is a mutual love of the Lord and a united endeavor in all relationships in life to shun evils as sins against him. When genuine spiritual union does not exist between those who contract marriage on earth, as in the case of partners who desire dominion over each other, belong to different religions, or engage in polygamous relationships, then, the Lord provides suitable spouses, as he does for those who remain single in the world.

Good people who truly prefer perpetual celibacy are escorted to the side of heaven because for Swedenborg the center belongs to married partners. He believed that such profound psychological differences exist between men and women, the former acting from reason, the latter from affection, that neither can attain his or her potential for perfection outside of complimentary union. Indeed, in the relationship between husband and wife he finds an analogy for the relationship between love and wisdom in God.

But whether Swedenborg believed that the physical aspects of earthly marriages are incorporated in celestial ones is unclear. He described the latter in *Heaven and Hell* as "conjunctions of minds" while a decade later in *Conjugal Love* he wrote that he overheard an angel tell curious newcomers that although heavenly unions were similar to those on earth even to "the ultimate delights," they were "much more blessed because angelic perception and sensation is much more exquisite than human."¹⁵ In any case, the seer firmly declared that in heaven the fruits of marriage are not offspring, whose procreation is among the chief ends of earthly unions, but goodness and truth. As they return in appearance and vigor to the springtime of their youth, celestial couples advance in blessedness. With the help of their evils, which they are permitted to reexperience from time to time so that they may take more intense delight in divine influx, angels make constant spiritual progress; but the process is never completed, for regeneration continues to eternity.

As I have noted elsewhere, in Western thought, the word death "has signified the end of man's ability to make decisions—to render actual what was previously a mere possibility."¹⁶ In religious terms, this means that at death man loses the ability to act in his own behalf in securing salvation or avoiding damnation. Death brings him, as a moral person, to a kind of consummation—that is, to a position where, as Karl Rahner has said, the decisions for or against God, which he has made during his earthly existence, become final and unalterable.¹⁷

Mormons and Swedenborgians, however, view death as a mere progression along the path of eternal development. The similarity of their eschatological beliefs suggests that a group's theology of death is a key to sect differentiation. Forty years ago Elmer T. Clark constructed a sect typology which included the Latter-day Saints among the groups he described as charismatic or pentacostal and the Swedenborgians among those he called esoteric and mystic.¹⁸

Neither label is satisfactory, and subsequent sociologists of religion have not attempted to classify either Mormons or readers of the Swedish baron.

One might place them here and there in the elaborate schema devised for categorizing a broad range of religious communities.¹⁹ But it is their eschatology which serves as the chief ordering device of their thoughts. By examining their views of death, one sees at once patterns of life determined by their concept of an active, ever protean postmortem existence whose details are not obscure but clearly sketched by leaders whose vision experiences formed the basis of doctrine.

Marriage is a paramount value among both Mormons and Swedenborgians. Viewing it as necessary, if insufficient, for the attainment of heavenly bliss, they hold the nuptial estate sacred. Extramarital sex is forbidden in both communities. Divorce is disapproved and discouraged, and birth control is officially proscribed. Neither group, of course, has remained wholly isolated from the prevailing mores of the larger society, but in both the state of Utah and the borough of Bryn Athyn large families are the norm and broken marriages uncommon. A complex variety of social organizations function in the two enclaves to strengthen family solidarity.

Both communities share an esteem for labor. The ethic of work as a sign of grace is transformed into a doctrine of accomplishment with work viewed as preparatory, and each advancement is a step along a road which continues on the other side of death. Gates passed in this world need not be renegotiated in the next, where men and women will go about their appointed tasks using skills acquired during an earthly apprenticeship.

Finally, the view of death characteristic of both Mormon and Swedenborgian thought produces a transcendent optimism. Setting them apart psychologically from the millennial sects whose forbearance in the face of poverty and injustice is grounded in the conviction that in the world to come tables will be turned is their belief in sure and steady progress. Zion, the New Jerusalem let down from heaven as a dwelling place of saints, exists in time and space. But it is not nirvana; rather it is a port, from which at death believers debark on a new though not a foreign adventure.

NOTES

¹⁹Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 478f. See also Elmer T. Clark, *Small Sects in America* (New York: Abington-Cokesburg Press, 1937), p. 331.

²Throughout the history of the Christian Church, Origen, alone among major theologians, rejected the idea that when the soul is separated from the body at death it becomes inactive. He taught that after its release from corporeal being the soul continues its journey of purification, moving by stages toward God. Some 500 years later, an American, Cotton Mather, also advanced the concept of the departed soul as one in motion. There is no evidence that the Puritan divine was influenced by the Greek father; rather, his sources appear to have been Joseph Mede and Pierre Jurieu.

³In 1822, the year before young Joseph was first visited by the heavenly messenger, Holland Weeks, a missionary dispatched by the five-year old General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America, reportedly drew crowds of 1,200 to 1,500 people at evangelical meetings held on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario about 90 miles from the Smith's Palmyra, New York, farm—and about the same distance from Fayette, where he finished the Book of Mormon. It seems improbable that a keen-witted lad would have been wholly ignorant of the

tales of the hereafter recounted by Weeks, but the Mormons' principal beliefs about man's final state are drawn from a vision Joseph received in Hiram, Ohio, in 1832. Although the village is in the northeast and Swedenborgian centers were concentrated along the southern tier, evangels on horseback spread the Word throughout the state in a major missionary effort. By this time, moreover, a commanding place in the hierarchy of the Saints had been achieved by Sidney Rigdon, a native of Pittsburgh where Swedenborgians were active as early as 1790.

⁴Swedenborg's detailed account of the celestial landscape is purportedly based on firsthand observations. He claimed to have been, not occasionally nor intermittently, but constantly in touch with the spiritual world for more than a quarter of a century, all the while maintaining full possession of his rational faculties. "In company with spirits and angels, hearing them converse with each other, and conversing with them," he was allowed to glimpse "things in another life which," he said, had "never before come to the knowledge of any man, nor entered into his imagination" (*Arcana Coelestia*: 5).

⁵*Heaven and Hell*: 461. The most popular of Swedenborg's numerous theological treatises, *Heaven and Hell* is a description of the spiritual world based on the visions the Swedish philosopher experienced between 1744 and 1757. References to this and all the philosopher's work are similar to LDS references in that they indicate not page number but passages.

⁶*Idem*.

⁷*Alma* 11:44.

⁸Sermon delivered at the funeral of Ann Tenora and George Callister; published in the *Deseret News*, 26 (March 21, 1877).

⁹*Heaven and Hell*: 65.

¹⁰*Heaven and Hell*: 47.

¹¹Doctrine and Covenants 76:103.

¹²See Orson Pratt, "The Three Glories" (1873) in *The Vision, or, The Degrees of Glory*, ed. Ned B. Lundwall (Independence, Mo.: Zion Printing and Publishing, 1945), p. 36ff.

¹³Pratt, "The Increased Powers and Capacities of Man in the Future Estate" (n.d.) in Lundwall, p. 82.

¹⁴*Conjugal Love*: 47. The word "conjugal" as opposed to the usual "conjugal" is peculiar to Swedenborg and the New Church.

¹⁵Cf. *Heaven and Hell*: 382 and *Conjugal Love*: 44.

¹⁶Mary Ann Meyers, "Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice" in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 132.

¹⁷Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), p. 36.

¹⁸See Clark, pp. 130f and 235.

¹⁹In Peter Berger's typology of religious movements, Mormonism and Swedenborgianism might be classified as "Gnostic" sects with secrets to be divulged which, in both cases, are dualistic ontologies. Acknowledgment of the *Book of Mormon* and the Writings as having divine authority places them, moreover, in a cluster of sects which A. Leland Jamison describes as groups which add to the Bible a supplementary source of revelation. In terms of typologies which differentiate movements in relation to their conception of the ingredients of salvation, Brian Wilson's category of "introversionist" sects is applicable to the Mormons and to the general church. In his phrase, both much of the state of Utah and the borough of Bryn Athyn are "gathered" communities with a strong sense of their own sacredness. See Peter L. Berger, "The Sociological Study of Sectarianism," *Social Research*, vol. 21 (1954), p. 478, A. Leland Jamison, "Religions on the Christian Perimeter," from *The Shaping of American Religions*, ed. James Wart Smith and Jamison, vol. 1 in *Religion in American Life* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 181, and Brian Wilson, *Religious Sects* (New York: World University Library, 1973) p. 28.