

# A Swedenborgian View on Climate Change

BY DAVID J. FEKETE



*Below is the text of a presentation I gave at the May Climate and Conflict study group of the National Council of Churches. It was well and enthusiastically received. After a lively discussion, I was asked about Swedenborg and*

*our church by members of the study group. A report of the meeting will appear in a future issue of the Messenger.*

The members of the Swedenborgian Church know that climate is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. The difficulty is understanding climate as a religious issue. There are several reasons why a Swedenborgian might have trouble understanding the environment as a religious issue, and several equally good reasons why a Swedenborgian can understand climate change as a religious issue.

## World View and Cosmology:

Emanuel Swedenborg has been understood as influenced by Platonic/Cartesian dualism. In Plato and Descartes, spirit and matter are sharply divided. In places, Swedenborg has called the physical world “dead matter.”

Swedenborgians and poets, philosophers, theologians, and other readers of Swedenborg know of his profound veneration of nature as symbolic of spirit. Emerson was much taken with this doctrine, as he states in “The American Scholar,”

There is one man of genius who has done much for this philosophy of life, whose literary value has never yet been rightly estimated;—I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. . . . He saw and showed the connection between nature and the affections of the human soul. He pierced the emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world (Emerson in Spiller 1954: 57).<sup>1</sup>

Emerson read deeply in Swedenborg and cites him in his essay, “Swedenborg; or the Mystic.”

In our doctrine of Representations and Correspondences we shall treat of both these symbolical and typical resemblances, and of the astonishing things which occur, I will not say in the living body only, but throughout nature, and which correspond so entirely to supreme and spiritual things that one would swear that the physical world was purely symbolical of the spiritual world. . . .<sup>2</sup>

But Swedenborg’s ideas about nature go beyond symbolism. In a difficult nature mysticism, Swedenborg asserts that the “dead matter” of the material world is infused with spirit. It can be said that nature is animated by spirit. Nature can be conceived as a container of spirit. Nature is alive not from itself, but by influx from spirit.

First, I need to state what correspondence is. The whole natural world is responsive to the spiritual world—the natural world not just in general, but in detail. It needs to be realized that the natural world arises from and is sustained in being by the spiritual world, exactly the way an effect relates to its efficient cause (*Heaven and Hell*, §89).

In Swedenborg’s visionary conception of the spiritual world, God is seen as a living sun comprised of love and wisdom from which spiritual heat and light shine forth. From love and wisdom, all of the spiritual world is formed, and the love and wisdom of God flows down through the spiritual world even into this world’s creation:

There is a continual influx from the spiritual world into the natural world. . . . It is something spiritu-

al, something which takes its origin from the sun where the Lord is and descends to the outmost elements of nature, which produces the forms of plants and animals and creates the marvels that exist in both. . . . (*Divine Love and Wisdom*, §340).

Paul has expressed an equally mystical and difficult doctrine in Colossians 1:15-23. There, nature was created and subsists in Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

While it may be clear that Jesus created all things, I’m not sure that the church has properly understood that, “in him all things hold together,” nor the words that Jesus has reconciled, “all things, whether in heaven and earth.”

<sup>1</sup> An Oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, MA, August 31, 1837

<sup>2</sup> *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* 2009: 13

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Also, Paul asserts that the gospel has been proclaimed, “to every creature under heaven.” We have tended to read the Bible anthropocentrically, as if it all pertained to humans and human salvation only.

These doctrines give nature a sanctity as a form of thinly veiled spiritual reality, and even more emphatically, as in Colossians, an aspect of Christ’s body, “in him all things hold together.” From this point of view, what we do to nature, we are doing to Jesus.

**Bible:** Following the doctrines of the Swedish Lutheran Church in which he was raised, Swedenborg affirms the principle of *sola scriptura*; he grounds his theology in scripture. For Swedenborg, both Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are God’s Word. Thus scripture passages that support eco-justice can be used as bases for a Swedenborgian theology of the planet. I am in the process of researching Bible passages that speak to issues of climate and eco-justice. Randy Haluza-Delay, a sociologist at King’s University in Edmonton has provided me the following excellent passages. Some of them are familiar, but have been read from an anthropocentric perspective. Read afresh from a cosmocentric perspective; they argue forcefully for climate justice.

John 3:17: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world (*kosmon*) to condemn the world (*kosmon*), but in order that the world (*kosmos*) might be saved through him.

Romans 8:18–24: I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself

will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Colossians 1:15–23: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Isaiah 24:4–7: The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed

laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh.

Hosea 4:1–3: Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.

God’s shalom includes humanity’s right relationship with God, peace in the political sphere, and fecundity and flourishing of the whole of creation. When God’s shalom reigns, all creation is in order.

Isaiah 55:2: For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 32:15–18: The Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

So doing injustice to creation is an affront to God’s order; it is violence, a disruption of peace, of shalom.

**Ethics:** Swedenborg’s emphasis is on reforming the soul. Accordingly,

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Swedenborg's ethics would be considered virtue ethics. His theology speaks of the soul's purification as it merges with God—a doctrine much like that

of Orthodox *theosis*, or Protestant doctrines of sanctifying grace. Historically, Swedenborgians have been concerned with transformation of the heart and mind. The world would then be transformed as individuals in it become regenerate. A principal Swedenborgian tenet is that in order to be saved, a person needs to repent of sin, which allows good to flow in from God (influx). By turning from sin, a person's heart is filled with the Spirit and all one's works then become works of love. So in order to make issues of climate theologically relevant in the context of Swedenborgian ethics, they would need to be articulated in terms of personal morality. A quote central to the Swedenborgian faith is, "All religion relates to life, and the religious life is doing good" (*Doctrine of Life* §1). I believe that climate change can be understood in terms of personal morality.

**Articulating Climate Issues in Terms of Sin:** If environmental injustice can be articulated as sin, then it is especially relevant for Swedenborgians. I believe that pollution is the result of excessive consumption and production. In the Western drive for bigger; better; more; and more exclusive and prestigious, more, better, and greater material possessions can be seen in the light of the medieval Seven Deadly Sins. I believe that Western patterns of excessive consumption and production can be seen as vanity, pride, and greed. These would be sins that individuals, and society collectively, would need to repent of. In turn, individually and collectively, people in the West need to embrace the virtues of moderation and frugality, as James A. Nash suggests:

Another way of viewing the issue is in the light of love for the neighbor. Polluting harms others (obviously). We do violence to near or distant neighbors by polluting the environment. Making air unfit to breathe or water unpotable or food inedible is doing violence to the neighbor.

More generally speaking, as theologians are now beginning to say (including Pope Francis), harming the environment is doing violence to God's sacred canopy. If polluting can be seen as the product of a violent disposition, it is sin of which to repent.

**Other Spiritual Traditions—Indigenous:** Finally, for Swedenborg, faith is truth. Faith is the complex of truths that a person acquires from various sources—the Bible and church doctrine first, but also philosophy, literature, experience, dialogue, science, and whatever systems of knowing confirm God's kingdom. Also, Swedenborg is ecumenical about non-Christian faiths—a remarkable stance for his time (eighteenth century). So as a Swedenborgian, I can accept truth wherever I find it, even in other traditions than Christianity, so long as they do not conflict with Christianity.

From the very little I know about Indigenous ways of life, I have found a profound veneration of nature among Indigenous articulations of spirituality. Discovering a world-view that is not constructed in a dualistic model may go a long way in making climate justice a religious issue. While Platonism found its way into Christianity early on, I do not believe that it is necessarily Biblical, nor a necessary orthodox Christian world view.

As I continue to learn about Indigenous spiritualities, I have encountered two works that have been instructive and which I commend to the general bibliography we are compiling:

Randy S. Woodley. *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision—creation care from an Indigenous perspective by a Bible scholar.*

David Young, Grant Ingram, and Lise Swartz. *Cry of the Eagle: Encounters with a Cree Healer—Study of an individual Cree healer describing a non-Cartesian world-view.*

### Conclusion

The world-view put forth by Swedenborg, with matter being held together by spirit, makes nature more than simple matter. It is a symbol of God; it is spiritual reality thinly veiled by material substances. In Paul, nature is held together by Jesus, and so can be considered part of the body of Christ. Doing damage to nature is doing damage to Jesus.

Polluting is caused by the sins of vanity, pride, and greed. Individually and collectively, persons and society need to repent of these sins and turn to the virtues of frugality and moderation. Environmental injustice is also doing violence to the neighbor, and directly harms others. Polluting can also be conceived as a form of violence—violence to God's sacred canopy. Violence stands as a sin opposing neighborly love, and especially love for God. All forms of violence are to be shunned in Swedenborg's theology, and I presume for all Christians.

The Bible itself is a source denouncing environmental injustice. It affirms harmony with nature as shalom. There are passages that say pollution is the result of humanity's broken covenant with God.

For Swedenborg, faith consists of truth, wherever it is found. Perhaps truths from Indigenous Peoples can inform our understanding of nature and the way the cosmos is formed and related to humans.

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