



At the very end of his mammoth theosophical output that runs to thirty thick volumes in the most widely used English edition,[i] Swedenborg elected to add a codicil to his concluding summa, *True Christianity*, with details concerning the state of several groups of souls in the afterlife that includes a significant section on Muslims.[ii] Given the rise of pluralism in contemporary liberal religion that coincides with a rise in Islamophobia, and given the striking role that Swedenborgian theology played in shaping the world's first interfaith conference,[iii] and given the lack of careful study of Swedenborg's comments on Islam and Muslims, a succinct analysis exploring Swedenborg's commentary regarding the world's second largest faith tradition fills a gap in studies of Swedenborg's works.

Universalism is a theological concept that been accepted by a number of liberal Christian denominations who have faith that the divine will not condemn anyone to hell, but will save all people's regardless of race, creed, or ideological belief. Some of the theological writings that discuss universal salvation do not give specific details as to what the afterlife will be like; instead we are left with an emotionally satisfying belief. Swedenborg stands out as a unique theologian in the history of religion for his specific details on matters he claimed to have witnessed in the spiritual world. These detailed descriptions informed Swedenborg's theological positions on multiple topics. One topic in particular is his position on salvation and the populations of the spiritual world, specifically Muslims. By analyzing *True Christianity* §828-834, along with supporting passages from his other major works, we can see three types of statements made by Swedenborg on the topic of Muslims and Islam: 1) statements which appear to be accurate, 2) statements that appear to be inaccurate in light of what the text of Islam teaches, and 3) statements that defy theological collaboration, but when viewed from a psychological and historical understanding of the Muslim views of their own religion may illuminate a deeper understanding. It is to the analysis of the passages contained in *True Christianity* that we now turn.

Muslims in Heaven

At the end of *True Christianity* Swedenborg describes the various groups of people who will populate heaven. Each group regardless of their religious identity make up some portion of the heavenly community based on their theological ideas and how they lived their lives while living on earth. Swedenborg begins his section on Muslims by stating "...they (the Muslims) acknowledge our Lord as the greatest prophet, and the wisest of people, who was sent into the world to teach people; some even acknowledge him as the Son of God." [iv] This passage by Swedenborg is one that would fall into the category of inaccurate. To say that Jesus Christ was the greatest prophet and other statements that characterize Muslims as viewing him as superior to other prophets would be to ignore such statements from the Qur'an as Surah 3:84, which depict all of the prophets as equal without distinction. We also arrive at the statement that some Muslims even believe him to be the Son of God. This again is contradicted by Surah 9:30, which

charges Christians with a curse due to blasphemy for promoting the idea that the Messiah is the Son of God.

The next two passages, §829-830, give us our first example of passages that may or may not be accurate, but do offer potential insight into Muslim psychology regarding the personhood of the prophet Muhammad. Swedenborg explains that religious ideas are constantly in our minds, and this results in Muslims always seeing Muhammad since he is always on their minds. In describing Muhammad, Swedenborg states: “This is not, however, Muhammad himself who wrote down the Qur’an, but someone else who plays the role of Muhammad. It is not always the same person either; it changes.”[v] After describing specific details on the different people who play Muhammad, Swedenborg avers: “The real Muhammad, who wrote the Qur’an, is not seen in public these days. I have been told that in the beginning he was in charge of the Muslim population in the spiritual world, but because he wanted to exercise control over every aspect of their religious life as if he himself were God, he was removed from his home...”[vi] These two passages cause us to consider the psychological truth behind Swedenborg’s spiritual experiences. The prophet status and image of Muhammad is very important to Islam’s theology.

Muhammad’s Sunnah (his life example which Muslims are taught to follow) is contained in the hadith (Muslim traditions), which help explain theology and external religious practices. The historical data scholars have for Muhammad is contained in the hadiths and the Sirah (biographical material). The idea that Muhammad is played by multiple people may seem blasphemous by certain Muslim believers. Yet, if we take a psychological look at what these various people might mean, we get an insight into the mental process behind the historical development of the depictions of Muhammad. According to the Muslim scholars Khalidi and Safi, Muslims throughout history have focused on specific aspect of Muhammad’s life, and have ignored other aspects, based on their particular religious persuasion and identity as Muslims. Safi writes, “There was only one Abraham, one Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, one Moses, one Jesus, and one Muhammad. Yet if these world-altering historical personages were singular, there have been almost as many imaginings of them as there have been faithful folks who have attached themselves to their memory.”[vii] Safi’s analysis of the various images and memories of Muhammad stem from the different historical accounts and depictions contained in many Muslim groups. Safi illustrates that different Muslims viewed Muhammad as everything from a warrior to a mystic. If this Muslim understanding of Muhammad is accurate, that there are as many images of Muhammad as people who have believed in him, then we can see the value behind Swedenborg’s statements regarding the different people portraying Muhammad in the spiritual world.

The Muslim scholar Khalidi can see this notion of differing ideas about Muhammad. The author refers to two major styles of biography—humanistic (meaning a full picture of the subject, the good and bad,) and nationalistic-heroic (only the positive ideas documented). Khalidi also notes two early Muslim genres: the Sirah (biography of Muhammad) and the *tabaqat* (reflections of Muhammad’s companions).[viii] Khalidi doesn’t stop there, but also includes the various Muslim groups, such as the Sunni, Shia, and Sufi sects and their understanding/focus on Muhammad. He compares the Qur’anic passages that mention Muhammad, the earliest biographies, the hadith collections, the medieval depictions of Muhammad, and the modern Muslim understanding of him as a person. We can see that Swedenborg’s observation of

different “images” of Muhammad having special significance for Muslims in the next life do not fall into the category of being factually incorrect, rather they are confirmed by Muslim scholars who have a wide understanding of the psychology behind the relationship between the individual Muslim and the prophet Muhammad. With this we shift from the Prophet Muhammad to the realm of comparative theology.

Islam on Christianity

Swedenborg claims: “The main reason why Muslims are averse to Christians is that Christians believe in three divine Persons and therefore worship three gods, three creators.”[ix] This passage, and its subsequent statements, can be considered accurate. There are numerous passages in the Qur’an that serve as a theological critique of the main tenets of orthodox Christianity: the trinity, divinity of Christ, and the death and resurrection. One example of a critique of the trinity, which would confirm Swedenborg’s statements, can be found in Surah 4:171, which reads: “O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word, which he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not “Three.” Refrain! It is better for you. God is only one God...”.[x] The Qur’anic theology regarding Jesus is clear: he is a human messenger, there is no Trinity, and the Messiah did not die for sins. Swedenborg continues his observations about Muslims by sharing that Muslims have their own heavenly community, if they live a good life and practice their faith. He goes on to share that Muslims are divided into two heavens. One belonging to those “who lived honorable lives with multiple wives...” and the other by “...those who give up a plurality of wives and acknowledge our Lord and Savior and his authority over heaven and hell.”.[xi] Swedenborg observes that Muslims in heaven find it hard to view Jesus and the Father as one, and yet, they can accept that Jesus rules over the spiritual world because he is the Son of God the Father. Interesting enough, this statement falls into two categories, both accurate and perhaps psychologically insightful. As stated above, the idea that Muslims accept that Jesus is the Son of God, is not accurate, at least what we know about Muslim theology. However, we can allow Swedenborg’s observation to speak for itself, it would appear that specific Muslims in the next life actually end up accepting this theological idea, which secures their entry into a higher heaven.

Section §833 covers the topics of salvation beyond the Christian Church in addition to sacred history. Swedenborg makes it clear that divine providence allows for people of all religions to be saved and that the rise of Islam in the history of religions is due to this same divine providence. Swedenborg claims that this interaction with God and history is a result of “Islam recognizes the Lord as the greatest prophet, the wisest of all people, and even as the Son of God.”[xii] This is an example of an accurate statement in conjunction with an idea that cannot be totally verified by a study of theology. The idea that Muslims reject Jesus as the Son of God has already been demonstrated. However, we shall see that Swedenborg’s understanding of the rise of Islam in history is in line with how Muslims understand their own sacred history.

Swedenborg continues his thoughts in §833 by stating that “Muslims limit their sacred literature to the Qur’an, and therefore Muhammad, who wrote it, often occupies their thoughts.”[xiii] Muslims do not believe that Muhammad wrote the Qur’an, rather he merely recited its content, and others wrote it down for him. This is evident by a verse in the Qur’an,

Surah 42:52, which Muslims understand as referencing Muhammad's illiteracy. There are numerous hadiths found in the collections of Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, which also indicate that Muhammad recited the Qur'an, and some of his companions wrote down the verses. It is true, as Swedenborg observes, that Muhammad is very often on the minds of Muslims. The hadith collections, which enshrine his example, make up the corpus of the Sunnah. The Sunnah, along with the Qur'an and scholarly jurisprudence, are the important foundations to Sharia Law, which describe the path that Muslims should follow in all aspects of their lives. It is inaccurate to say that Muslims limit their scripture to the Qur'an. As already noted, the hadiths are considered to be sacred text in Islam, some hadiths even being considered divinely inspired.[xiv] This proves that Swedenborg's assertion that Muslims limit their holy scripture to only the Qur'an is inaccurate.

Sacred History

The remaining parts of §833 is devoted to the discussion of sacred history and the reason God allowed Islam as a religion to being and spread all over the world. Swedenborg views history as being divided into eras or churches. During the period of time of the Most Ancient Church there was an emphasis on correspondences, a system of symbolism, which stood for metaphysical, spiritual, and psychological truths and concepts. People could look at nature and the world around them and see these ideas expressed. Further in history, with the invention of writing, symbolism became part of the everyday speech. This time period also saw the rise of idol making, which according to Swedenborg, was not the worship of physical idols, but the use of the images to convey spiritual principles. Idolatry and polytheism began due to the taking of the images as literal deities, which challenges the notion of monotheism. Islam, according to Swedenborg, was used by divine providence to wipe out the paganism that had spread in the Middle East and other geographic locations. It should be noted that Islam's own sacred history confirms this theological idea, specifically that there was monotheism in ancient history, but that people began to practice the worshipping of idols, which led to Allah sending the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad.[xv]

The use of symbolism, or correspondences, was lost during the period of idolatry, but Islam helped to "uproot" the paganism and restore monotheism to the region. Islam as a religion has a history of symbolic reading of scripture. The three major branches of Islam: Sunni, Shia, and Sufism each have their own style of hermeneutics. A study of comparing Sufi metaphysics with Swedenborg, and the Shia symbolic reading of the Qur'an with a symbolic reading of the Bible has already been conducted.[xvi] In this paper I wish to include a close look at the Sunni symbolic understanding of the Qur'an. Two major translations that were both written in the 20th century by modern scholars approached the Qur'an from a symbolic point of view. Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad's translations used the foundations of historic Muslim symbolic hermeneutics to introduce the English-speaking world to the study of Islam's holy text. Abdullah Yusuf Ali stated: "Indeed all stories or narrations are referred to in the Qur'an as Parables, for their spiritual meaning. Heated controversies or dogmatic assertions as to precise dates, personalities, or localities, seem to me to be out of place,"[xvii] Muhammad Asad used a number of sources for his translation and scholarly commentary on the Qur'an. The three primary Muslim groups he utilized were the Zahiri School of fiqh, Sufism, and Mu'tazalia school of theology. What this produced for Asad was a uniquely modern and symbolic reading of the Qur'an. The Zahari studied the literal reading of the Qur'an and close attention to comparing

themes that were spread out amongst the whole corpus of the text. One example given by Asad is the use of violence in the Qur'an. Asad tells his readers that one cannot simply look at one passage on this topic, but must pull all the relevant passages together to get the full picture of what the Qur'an is saying on the subject. The Sufi understanding to metaphysics is highlighted in the appendix to Asad's translation. Asad discusses the imagery invoked in the Qur'an regarding heaven and hell. He also discusses the notion of Jinn (beings made of fire that have free will like humans, but are different from angels) as being topics that cannot be understood as literal metaphysical facts, but need to be understood spiritually or psychologically. Lastly, it should be noted, that Asad utilizes the Mu'tazalia School of theology's rational approach to reading the text. Rationale, for Asad, means not taking something literal from the Qur'an that goes against what we know about the natural world. Reality has particular laws, which even God will not ignore, which means that anytime the Qur'an mentions prophets doing miracles or supernatural situations, they are parables, symbolic in nature, and are not to be understood as literal history. This attitude towards the Qur'an while coming from the Sunni milieu is at odds with the more orthodox Sunni understanding of the Qur'anic text and the message it is conveying.[xviii]

Sexuality and Culture

Swedenborg continues with this discussion of Muslims by observing that the Qur'an and the religion of Islam needed to be suited to "the Middle Eastern way of thinking," or else the faith would not have been successful in time and space. Swedenborg again repeats the inaccurate statement that Islam teaches that Jesus Christ is the best prophet and the Son of God. He also makes the error that Islam was named after Muhammad. Swedenborg does make the accurate observation that the Qur'an contains "material from both the Old and New Testaments of the Word." [xix] While this might seem controversial to faithful Muslims, it can be ignored that much of the material from the Qur'an, although with some differences, are parallel to the Bible in the context of stories regarding the prophets. Most faithful Muslims would argue that the Qur'an is not borrowed from the Bible, but this debate must be examined in a different essay.

The section on Muslims in heaven concludes with a discussion on culture and sexuality.

Swedenborg shares that Islam needed to allow polygamy, or else the Muslim would have fallen into adultery. Swedenborg conveys information that is in the category of being neither factually correct nor incorrect, and yet it might provide us a window into Muslim psychology.

Swedenborg describes the experience of polygamous love. Swedenborg describes it as "...heat from some of these places felt and smelled like a bathhouse after people have bathed; from others it was like a kitchen where someone is boiling meat...from others, like brothels and whorehouses..." [xx] Swedenborg concludes with observing that the polygamous style of love is one filled with jealousy, and that the Christian heavens are the exact opposite in terms of feeling, sights, and smells. While it may be true that some Muslims do feel the burning love described by Swedenborg in the context of polygamous marriages, and yet we see Swedenborg comparing this style of love with the Christian style of marriage. This love, the polygamous, is apparently lesser than the monogamous Christian version, and yet permitted to avoid greater relationship issues and sins. Modern sexology and psychology has added to our understanding of human sexuality and relationships.

The sexologists and psychologists Ryan and Jetha contributed to sexuality by using research based in evolutionary theory. By analyzing the evolutionary sexual practices of chimps and Bonobos, the researchers determined that Homo sapiens share common sexual qualities. These

qualities not only help us understand emotions but sexual behavior and relationship formation. According to Ryan and Jetha, strict monogamy is not natural to all members of our species. While it is true that the common chimp does practice monogamy and polygamy, the Bonobo chimps of the Congo, with whom we share a large percentage of DNA, practice an open system of polyamory.[xxi]

Ryan and Jetha have determined that the modern day epidemic of divorce and unfaithfulness in human society is due to the active suppression of a more open form of romantic and sexual relationships. Strict monogamy runs against how most humans operate. This suppression has resulted in the dissolving of many happy unions.[xxii]With this new data in mind, we can see how Swedenborg's somewhat negative attitude towards polygamy is biased at best. We must keep in mind that Swedenborg's writings must be viewed through a critical lens. Studying Swedenborg's writings demands a command of comparative religion and psychology. These two disciplines combined with an understanding of historical study, allows researchers a full grasp of the material presented in this essay.

Beyond *True Christianity*

With the conclusion of the analysis of the relevant passages found in *True Christianity* we will now turn to a comparison of other specific passages in Swedenborg's other works. By using Potts's *Concordance of Swedenborg's Works* one can see that Swedenborg mentions Muslims and Islam on a number of occasions throughout his writings. Most of the content of these other passages are summarized and even repeated verbatim in the passages analyzed above. In *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg describes Muslims who enter into their own heaven because of the goodness of their religion, while others are converted to Christianity after being taught by Christians in the World of Spirits. There is an interesting and apparent contradictory passage found in *Conjugal Love* §341. In this passage Swedenborg declares that Muhammad taught that Jesus is the Son of God and the Greatest Prophet, but not divine, and yet later in the passage he states: "Therefore the followers of Muhammad could not acknowledge our Lord as any God from eternity, but only as a perfect natural man...because they declare Muhammad also to be the Greatest Prophet; and do not know what the Lord has taught." [xxiii]

Analyzing this passage from *Conjugal Love* yields two different sets of information. The first half falls into the category of inaccurate information and yet the latter half is accurate. Muslims do consider Muhammad to be the Greatest Prophet and it is accurate to suggest that the Qur'an does not quote Jesus Christ's statements, as found in the gospels, in any of its passages. In the context of Swedenborg discussing Muslims in Heaven, it is possible that he might have confused what Muslims believe in this life, in light of the accurate statements, and yet the inaccurate statements might be pertaining to Muslims in the afterlife. This one passage can be seen as an example of this confusion.

The next passages that will be analyze come from Swedenborg's posthumously published *Spiritual Diary*. It should be noted that Swedenborg wrote many of these passages prior to his major works and that these diaries were not included amongst his published works. Most of the passages, while unique in specific instances, are overall similar in content to the published writings. However, there are some passages that are unique to Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary*. In passage §5666a, Swedenborg states that Muhammad was buried at Mecca. This is

factually incorrect as Muhammad was buried in Medina. In §5559a Swedenborg states: “They (Muslims) also acknowledge Moses as a great prophet, but less than the Lord; but about Moses they think nothing further.”[xxiv] This is inaccurate. As mentioned above, the Qur’an depicts all prophets as equal in comparison to each other. Moses is one of the most frequently mentioned prophets in the Qur’an. The story of The Exodus and other stories mentioning Moses, are found throughout the corpus. In passage §5809 Swedenborg shares that Muslims have a book “in which some pages have been written in correspondences.”[xxv] It is hard to know what book Swedenborg is referring to, but since he mentions the Qur’an specifically in other passages, this other book is unique. This statement falls into the third category, something that is beyond textual corroboration.

Passage §5952 depicts Swedenborg discussing theology with Muslims in the spiritual world. Swedenborg observed that Muslims reject the notion that God is three persons, but appeared to accept the alternative view that the three names are aspects of one God. Swedenborg states: “They said that they too have the Word; but read it little. They believe that our Lord is the Greatest Prophet.” Swedenborg goes on to tell the Muslims that Jesus was not just the son of Joseph, but “was born of God,” and cites the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The Muslims deny knowing this information. This passage might be seen as accurate. It is clear that the many elements found in the gospels are not present in the Qur’an. The story of the life of Jesus is simplified and does not contain the details found in the New Testament. In Swedenborg’s 1758 work *The Last Judgment* we find another inaccurate statement. Swedenborg shares that he discussed the orthodox Christian understanding of the doctrine of the resurrection. Swedenborg states that the Muslims reject this idea. This is inaccurate, as the Qur’an is filled with the idea of a bodily resurrection of the dead, which then leads to a judgment, and finally a placement in either heaven or hell.[xxvi]

The final two passages from Pott’s *Concordance* reveal factually correct information from Swedenborg regarding Islam and Muslims. In *De Athanasii Symbolo* §167 Swedenborg states: “The Muslims have not acknowledged three Persons, but one God: they have therefore denied the Divinity of the Lord, and have acknowledged the Father alone as God.”[xxvii] The next passage is from *Apocalypse Explained* §1180. While Swedenborg again repeats the inaccurate idea that Muslims believe Jesus to be the Son of God, he does accurately point out that Islam teaches that “all is good from God...there is a heaven and hell, that there is a life after death; and that the evils which are in the precepts of the Decalogue are to be shunned. If he does these things, he also believes them, and is saved.”[xxviii] Swedenborg is not only accurate in this passage but also emphasizes his inclusive theological idea of salvation and life after death. The Qur’an itself shares this inclusive attitude in Surah 2:62 and 5:69.

This study has attempted to demonstrate that Swedenborg made three types of statements regarding Islam and Muslims: 1) statements that are accurate, 2) statements which are inaccurate as demonstrated by the text of Islam, and 3) statements that are beyond the accurate/inaccurate binary, and which deserve special attention. Swedenborg and his theology stand out in the study of comparative religion in that they provide an inclusive picture of the afterlife. In a world where religious division and sectarianism appears to be the norm, Swedenborg comes from the 18th century and reminds us that the divine has room for everyone who follows the goodness of their religion. Not everyone need be Christian or Muslim to be part of the New Church, rather the

New Church is something collective, a spiritual community in this period of the second coming, the new age. It is hoped that this essay will encourage others to take a more serious look at comparative study between Swedenborgian and Muslim theology.

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Footnotes

- [i] The American Standard Edition published by the Swedenborg Foundation.
- [ii] Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, trans. Jonathan Rose (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2012), §828-34.
- [iii] The 1893 World Parliament of Religion was the brainchild of Swedenborgian attorney Charles Carroll Bonney, who believed a thorough basis for pluralism as the superior framework had been effectively framed in Swedenborg's spiritual philosophy. See George F. Dole, *With Absolute Respect: The Swedenborgian Theology of Charles Carroll Bonney* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1993), which also includes two essays by Bonney.
- [iv] Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* v.2, trans. Jonathan Rose (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2006), §828.
- [v] *Ibid.*, §829.
- [vi] *Ibid.*, §830.
- [vii] Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2010), 35.
- [viii] Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009), 15.
- [ix] Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, §831.
- [x] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran: a new translation and commentary*. (New York, NY: Harper One, 2015), 268.
- [xi] Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, §832.
- [xii] *Ibid.*
- [xiii] *Ibid.*
- [xiv] Reima Youssif Shakeir, ed. *A Compilation of Knowledge and Wisdom & A Selection of Authentic Qudsi (Sacred) Hadiths*, v. 2, rev. ed., trans. Yaseen Ibrahim al-Sheikh and Muhammad M Abdul-Fatah (El-Mansoura, Egypt: Dar Al-Manarah, 2004), 227-30.
- [xv] Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90-102.
- [xvi] Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Press, 1999), 35-149.
- [xvii] Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Mumbai: Darul Quran, 2006), 738.
- [xviii] Muhammad Asad, trans., *The message of the Qur'an*, (Bristol, England: Book Foundation, 2008), 1129-36.
- [xix] Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, §833.
- [xx] *Ibid.*, §834.
- [xxi] Christopher Ryan & Jethá Cacilda. *Sex at dawn: how we mate, why we stray, and what it means for modern relationships*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 2012).
- [xxii] *Ibid.*

[xxiii] Emanuel Swedenborg. *The delights of wisdom pertaining to conjugal love: after which follow the pleasures of insanity pertaining to promiscuous love*, trans Samuel M. Warren, rev by Louis H. Tafel,(West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998) § 341.

[xxiv] Emanuel Swedenborg. *The spiritual diary of Emanuel Swedenborg; being the record during twenty years of his supernatural experience*, trans. George Bush, (London: James Speirs, 1883), §5666a.

[xxv] Ibid., §5559a.

[xxvi] John Faulkner Potts. *Swedenborg concordance. a complete work of reference to the theological*, (London: Swedenborg Society, 1888), 721.

[xxvii] Ibid., §722.

[xxviii] Ibid., §723.

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