

***Role of Gender in Marriage: a Swedenborgian View***

***The Role of Gender in Marriage, a Swedenborgian View, With Some Thoughts on the Swedenborgian Church's Pastoral, Sacramental and Liturgical Responses***

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Swedenborg defines gender by the form of the human soul. A female soul is inwardly wisdom and externally love. A male soul is inwardly love and externally wisdom. Swedenborg sees these opposites to be constantly seeking conjunction, or marriage with each other to find wholeness. Therefore, if we are to understand in Swedenborgian terms the role of gender in marriage, we must begin by studying, in Swedenborgian terms, the nature of the human soul.

Our second task is to discern the effects of Swedenborg's literary style and cultural biases on his theological writings. Swedenborg's style of writing may lead us to assume that he is advancing absolute principles ideas that are in truth general concepts. There are also indications that Swedenborg's writings contain an 18th century Eurocentric cultural bias that must be taken into account in attempting to understand the true meaning of his theology.

Our third task is to define marriage within a Swedenborgian context. Marriage to Swedenborg exists within creation at all levels, celestial, spiritual, and natural, and is a reflection or maybe better put, a continuation of the form and substance of the Lord. It exists for Swedenborg in all things. Swedenborg deals with the subject in philosophical and theological terms, and thankfully, by means of his "memorable relations," in very personal and practical terms.

Our final task is to explore pastorally, sacramentally, and liturgically how to put into action our understanding of the above. As a faith community, we need to define how best to respond to a person who struggles with and celebrations of his or her gender, sexuality, and most importantly his or her desire for conjunction or marriage with another person.

***Swedenborg's concept of the human soul***

***a. Gender identification within the human soul***

Swedenborg wrote:

The will and the understanding . . . Constitute man's spirit, for his wisdom and intelligence, his love and charity, and his life in general resides in them; the body is only their passive organ.

The will and the understanding constitute Swedenborg's two major divisions of the human soul. The will is the seat of human emotions, and the understanding is the seat of human thought. They receive respectively good and truth from the Lord and at the level of the mind (see below) these are transformed by the individual's unique self into individualized responses to the Lord's presence.

Gender differentiation comes from this individualization. Swedenborg wrote:

The difference [between male and female] consists essentially in the fact that inmost in the male is love, with wisdom for its envelopment, or, what is the same, the masculine is love cloaked in wisdom; while inmost in the female is that male wisdom, with love of it for its envelopment.

This implies that a human being's will and understanding, although each an integral part of his or her soul, must be either dominant or subordinate to the other. Swedenborg in the above passage seems to make this situation an absolute. He leaves little, if any, room for individuality. We may easily on first reading draw the conclusion that he is making a universal statement that applies in all cases. In truth, he is making a generalization which still allows for much individualization within the creation. Swedenborg believed that every soul is unique. He stated:

That everyone has his peculiar life, thus a life distinct from that of another, is known; for there is a perpetual variety and no one thing is the same as another. Each one therefore has what is his own. . . . If a man [person] had not his own life, just as he has his own mind and his own face, he would have no life after death distinct from that of another. Yea, neither would there be any heaven, for heaven consists of perpetually distinct individuals.

This perpetual variety that Swedenborg speaks of certainly allows for the possibility, within Divine order, of souls where the "male" wisdom and "female" love are more fully balanced or are perhaps even blended. This then leads to a broader interpretation of gender roles and sexual orientation. Swedenborg indeed wrote:

Conjugal love is of infinite variety. It is not alike in one as in any other. It appears indeed as if it were alike with many, but it appears so only by the judgment of the body, and by that judgment man [humankind] has little discernment of such things, because it is gross and dull. By the judgment of the body is meant the judgment of the mind from the external senses. But to those who see from the judgment of the spirit the differences appear; and more distinctly before them who can more highly elevate the sight of this judgment, which is done by withdrawing it from the senses and raising it into higher light . . . And yet no one can see the infinite varieties of that love in any light of the understanding, though elevated, unless he first knows what that love is in its very essence

and integrity; that is to say, what it was when together with life it was implanted in man by God.

The infinite variety of conjugal love is due to the infinite variety of individuals. Because no two people are alike, no two experiences of conjugal love are alike. Love of the sex is an expression of conjugal love and therefore is infinitely variable and this variation is according to Divine order.

*b. The soul's effect on the mind and the body*

Swedenborg stated that:

Every human being consists of soul, mind and body, the soul being the inmost, the mind his mediate, and the body his last. Everything that flows from the Lord into the human being flows into his inmost, the soul, and thence descends into his mediate, the mind, and by this into his last, which is the body.

The soul is the gateway to the Divine presence. Swedenborg believed in three levels of human existence: soul, mind, and body. He taught that the Divine flowed into the soul and from there to the mind and ultimately to the body. The body's life is therefore from its soul. Swedenborg taught that:

It appears as if love ascends from the body into the soul, because as soon as the body tastes allurements, the allurements pass through the eyes as doors into the mind, and thus by sight, as an entry, into the thoughts, and instantly into the love. But still it descends out of the mind, and acts in things lower according to the disposition of them.

and also that:

All things that are done by man in the body flow in from his spirit. For it is known that the mouth does not speak of itself but the thought of the mind by the mouth; and that the hands do not act nor the feet walk of themselves, but the will of the mind by them; consequently, that the mind speaks by its organ, and the mind acts by its organs in the body.

The form of the soul imparts to the body its own unique nature. An infinite variety exists in the form of individual souls, even if they all keep to a general pattern. This infinite variety leads unquestionably to an infinite variety in the expression of the Divine in human thought and action. Swedenborg himself writes:

. . . Between the good willing of different persons there is infinite diversity . . . This infinite diversity between the good-will of different persons originates in the end, intention, and consequent purpose; these are inwardly concealed in the will to do good, and from them is derived the quality of everyone's will. The will also searches the understanding for the modes of attaining its ends, which are effected, and in the understanding it comes into the light which enables it to see not only the reasons but also

the opportunities for determining itself to action in the proper time and manner, and thus producing its effects, which are works; and at the same time in the understanding it brings itself into the power to act.

The absolute form that Swedenborg seems to attribute to all human souls is thus actually infinitely varied. These variations lead to an infinite variety in the expression of love. It follows that we are not limited to a single form such as heterosexuality to express our experience of the conjugal love.

### ***Swedenborg's style of written expression***

Swedenborg's style of written expression bears significantly on our study of his views of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.

It is common for Swedenborg to make statements that imply unvarying categorical certainty, when a general tendency is all that he means. Note the following examples.

Every Christian knows from the Word that the life of each individual stays with him after death. For it is stated in many places that the person will be judged and rewarded according to his deeds and works.

The expression "every Christian knows" here must be understood as a general rather than an absolute statement. Swedenborg could not have known the limits of all individual Christian's knowledge. He could, however, know what was being taught by the churches of his time and therefore he could believe that the statement generally was true.

Here is another example of Swedenborg's use of generalization:

. . . In the world we call "south" the direction where the sun reaches its greatest height above the earth, "north" its opposite position below the horizon . . .

The expression "world" might mean "Swedenborg's world" or the northern hemisphere, but not the whole world. Swedenborg was more than adequately learned in science to realize this fact, but he seemed to be content with a general Eurocentric statement rather than an absolute statement.

Relating to gender Swedenborg also used generalization:

The man is actually born to be discerning, that is, to think from discernment; while the woman is born to be affectional, that is, to think from intention. This can be seen in the bent or inborn nature of each, and from their form as well. In the matter of inborn nature, a man thinks on the basis of reason, a woman on the basis of affection. In the matter of form, a man has a harder, less attractive face, a heavier voice, and a harder body; while a woman has a smoother, more attractive face, a gentler voice and a softer body.

Here again Swedenborg contents himself with a general statement that he expresses as an absolute statement. There are men with soft voices, attractive faces and soft bodies, and there are women with heavy voices, hard bodies and less attractive faces. There are certainly stunning varieties of body types in both men and women and Swedenborg as an anatomist would have been aware of this fact, even if the gender discrimination of his time and culture attempted to blur this obvious fact.

We may see from the above that it is best to exercise caution with any absolute-sounding statements that Swedenborg makes. What Swedenborg gives as an absolute statement may, in truth, be a general statement, and it may also contain a cultural bias.

We may be able to see clearly the general force that moves one person to join his or her life to another. However, just as there is an infinite variety of body types in both men and women, there is an infinite variety to their souls; this then leads to an infinite variety of attractions. This infinite variety in, or infinite individualization of, human souls accounts for differences in sexual orientation in human life.

### ***Thoughts from Swedenborg's concept of marriage***

Swedenborg described marriage as the joining of two minds and two souls into one. He wrote that:

. . . The souls and minds of men [people] are not in space as their bodies are; because . . . They are celestial and spiritual from their origin. And not being in space they can be conjoined as into one even if the bodies at the same time are not. This is realized especially between married partners who inmostly mutually love each other. . . . This adjunction may be called spiritual cohabitation, which there is with married partners who tenderly love each other, however distant they are in body. There are many evidences of experience that confirm this, even in the natural world. From this it is plain that conjugal love conjoins two souls and two minds.

Swedenborg also wrote on the origins of this union in humankind, describing the process as follows:

. . . A universal conjugal sphere proceeds from the Lord, and pervades the universe from its first things to its last, thus from angels even to worms. The reason such a sphere of the marriage of good and truth goes forth from the Lord is that it is the sphere also of propagation, that is, of proliferation and fructification; and this is the same as Divine providence for the conservation of the universe by successive generations. Now as this universal sphere, which is of the marriage of good and truth, flows into subjects according to the form of each, it follows that the male receives it according to his form, that is, in understanding, because he is in an intellectual form; and that the female receives it according to her form, thus in the will, because she is a volitional form from the intellectual of the man. And thus as this sphere is the sphere of proliferation, it follows that from this comes love of the sex.

The universal conjugal sphere flows from the Lord into the person and is received according to the form of the person's soul and from this comes love of the sex. The form of the soul, that is to say, the mixture of will and understanding interior and exterior of each other, decides sexual orientation. If the mixture is individualized then, by Divine providence, an infinite variety of possibilities exists, one of which is homosexuality. This form, as well as heterosexuality and bisexuality, provides a mode whereby the universal conjugal sphere from the Lord may find its way into human life and aid in regeneration.

### ***Thoughts on the church's liturgical, sacramental and pastoral response***

It is for the church to respond to the spiritual needs of people. To do this the church must always be ready to listen as well as to speak concerning the issues that confront humanity. The church must react with wisdom and compassion. This especially when a person come requesting our cooperation in his or her celebration of the discovery of a conjugal partner.

The issues here, are often complex and we are failing in our pastoral responsibilities if we celebrate weddings without attempting to learn something of the spiritual journey of the couple that has led them to request our liturgical and sacramental offices before we offer them. We have also, however, failed if we attempt to discern in a couple our own predetermined inflexible criterion of lifestyle or form of conjugal experience before we offer our liturgical and sacramental offices. These offices are after all a trust: Swedenborg wrote:

. . . Marriages are spiritual, and therefore holy. For they descend from the heavenly marriage of good and truth; and things conjugal correspond to the Divine marriage of the Lord and the church, and hence are from the Lord himself, and are according to the state of the church with those who enter into the contract. Now, because the ecclesiastical order administers on earth the things that are of the priesthood with the Lord, that is which are of his love, and thus those pertain to blessing, it is fitting that marriage should be consecrated by his ministers; and because at the same time they are also the chief of the witnesses, it is proper that the consent to the covenant too should be heard, accepted, confirmed, and thus established by them.

The ordained ministry of our church has a responsibility to counsel, but it also has a responsibility to celebrate the presence of the universal conjugal sphere in people's lives.

These excerpts from Swedenborg's writings may shed light on the proper response of the church:

A general judgment like this is allowable: "If in internals you are such as you appear in externals you are saved, or will be condemned." But particular judgments such as, "You are such in internals and therefore will be saved, or will be condemned," is not allowable.

. . . Who among men knows which one is a pander at heart? Or which a consort at heart? And yet the thoughts of the heart, which are the purpose of the will, judge every man.

Swedenborg suggests counsel, but leaves the judgment to the individual. The church through its pastors has a responsibility to inform couples as to its understanding of the nature of marriage. It

has an obligation to advise couples on relationship and how to grow in intimacy. Toward this ideal, Swedenborg wrote:

"Shepherds" in the Word signify those who teach the good of life and lead to it, which is done by means of truths.

The church also has an obligation to withhold the rite of marriage when it feels that the couple is entering matrimony for spurious reason, such as to obtain an immigration visa or otherwise to defraud. Swedenborg maintained that:

The Lord says: "Judge not, that ye be not condemned" (Matt. 7:1), by which can by no means be meant the judgment of the moral and civil life of anyone in the world, but the judgment as to his spiritual and celestial life. Who does not see that if one may not judge as to the moral life of those that dwell with him in the world, society would perish?

We must however, use caution in trying to discern the internal spiritual state of the people who come to us for sacramental and liturgical celebration. Can a homosexual couple be in conjugal love? Swedenborg tells us:

That not from the appearances of marriages, nor from the appearances of scortations, is it to be determined respecting anyone, whether he is in conjugal love or not. Wherefore, "Judge not, that ye be not condemned" (Matt. 7:1).

We cannot know the internal state of a homosexual couple any more than we can know the internal state of a heterosexual couple, but we can love a homosexual couple and serve them as we would a heterosexual couple in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.