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Jérôme Grosclaude

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‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t’: John Wesley and Emanuel Swedenborg¹

This article proposes to discuss the several references to the life and works of Baron Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) which appeared in *The Arminian Magazine* between January 1781 and October 1785. Occasional references will be made to John Wesley’s *Journal* and *Letters*. I will deal here with the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, John Wesley’s dismissal of Swedenborg as belonging to the category of ‘madmen’² and ‘lunatics’³, and, on the other hand, the pains he took to refute his thinking. As will be seen, the pages John Wesley wrote on Emanuel Swedenborg and his works may indicate that the founder of Methodism saw the Swedish nobleman as a threat to the evangelical movement.

Swedenborgianism, a movement contemporary of John Wesley

John Wesley briefly mentioned Swedenborg and his doctrines (which are usually called Swedenborgianism, although its founder never used that term) in a letter in 1779 and in his *Journal*. He however discussed them at length later in *The Arminian Magazine*: before dealing with these, we will first study Swedenborg’s system and the account John Wesley gave of it in these places. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1957) rightly notes that ‘Swedenborg’s combination of pantheistic and theosophic doctrines does not admit of brief summary’.⁴ Indeed, Swedenborg’s most comprehensive work alone, *Arcana Coelestia* (1749-56, first English translation 1783-1806) amounts to twelve volumes and 8,246 pages in its latest edition in English.⁵ The *Catholic Encyclopedia* also features a short presentation of basic Swedenborgian beliefs.⁶ Suffice to say for the present article that Swedenborg’s beliefs contradicted common Christian beliefs on such important questions as the Trinity⁷ or the Last Judgment (which had allegedly already taken place four times; the last being in 1757, in Swedenborg’s presence).⁸ The Swedish aristocrat also asserted that human beings could be found on Mercury and Jupiter⁹; he claimed to have met them and noted that the inhabitants of

¹ I wish to thank the Oxford Center for Methodism and Church History (Oxford Brookes University), and in particular Dr Peter Forsaith and Prof. William Gibson, who gave me the opportunity to make extensive research for this article as part of my 2017-2018 Visiting Research Fellowship at the OCMCH.

² 28 February 1770 in, *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 22: The Bicentennial Edition. Journal and Diaries V*, edited by W. Reginald Ward & Richard P. Heintzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 216.

³ 8 December 1771, in *WJW, vol. 22*, p. 301.

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F. L. Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 1309-10.

⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* (1749-1756, transl. 1783-1806) (12 vols: West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 1998).

⁶ Nicholas Weber, ‘Swedenborgians’, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* vol. 14 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).

⁷ The Son being the human/incarnate aspect of God (of which the Father would be the divine aspect); the Holy Spirit being the result of the Son’s incarnation. See Emanuel Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion, containing the Universal theology foretold by the Lord* (1771, transl. 1781), (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1867), § 81-82 & 138.

⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Treatise Concerning the Last Judgment, And the Destruction of Babylon, Shewing that All the Predictions Contained in the Revelation are at this Day Fulfilled* (1758, transl. 1788) (London: R[obert] Hindmarsh, 1788), p. 134.

⁹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Concerning the Earths in Our Solar System, which are Called Planets: And Concerning the Earths in the Starry Heavens: Together with an Account of Their Inhabitants, and*

the ‘other Earths’ were all either idolaters or Christians.¹⁰ Despite these rather unorthodox views, Wesley seems to have been genuinely perplexed by Swedenborg, not knowing quite what to make of him.

Swedenborg is mentioned once in passing in a letter by John Wesley to Elizabeth Ritchie,¹¹ and three times in the space of nine years (28 February 1770, 8 December 1771 and 22 April 1779) in John Wesley’s *Journal*.¹² The first two references are rather short and do not even add up to 200 words when taken together. The third one is more substantial and runs to a little over 400 words: as in the first two instances, the entry is occasioned by John Wesley’s reading of a book by Swedenborg (in this case, his *Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell*)¹³ however, in this entry, Wesley was more specific in his condemnation; he quoted the book and summed up some of the ideas it contained in order to rebut Swedenborg. As in the other three instances mentioned above, Wesley observes that the Swedish author had his mind deranged by a fever in the 1740s, which explained what Wesley called ‘the dreams of a disordered imagination’,¹⁴ despite being a gifted man and writer. It should be noted that the men never met, even though Swedenborg may have expressed the desire at the end of his life that they should,¹⁵ and at any rate sent his latest book to Wesley.¹⁶

Wesley’s remarks on Swedenborg bring to one’s mind Polonius’s words when he observes: ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t’.¹⁷ But who was Baron Emanuel Swedenborg on whom John Wesley could speak both highly and severely in the same breath? Born in 1688, which made him twenty-one years older than Wesley, Emanuel Swedenborg¹⁸ was the son of Jesper Swedenborg (1653-1735), later professor of Theology at Uppsala University, and then (Lutheran) Bishop of Skara.¹⁹ After completing his studies at Uppsala in 1710, Swedenborg embarked on a four-year ‘Grand Tour’ of Europe which led him to France, Holland, Germany and Britain where he became acquainted with the thought of both Locke and Newton. After his return to Sweden, Charles XII appointed him to the Board of Mines in 1716 of which he was to remain a member until his resignation in 1747. The future

Also of the Spirits and Angels There (1758, transl. 1787) (Boston, MA: Otis Clapp, 1839), pp. 13 & 42.

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ ‘To Elizabeth Ritchie (12 February 1779)’, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, edited by John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), p. 340.

¹² These entries pre-date the articles in *The Arminian Magazine*, but John Wesley published the nineteenth volume of his *Journal*, featuring the last entry, only in 1783.

¹³ Originally published in Latin in 1750 as *De Coelo et ejus mirabilibus et de Inferno*, the book was translated into English in 1778. In the first entry, Wesley does not explicitly refer to which book he read; in the second, he writes having read ‘*Theologia Coelestis*’, by which he may have meant *Arcana Coelestia*. James G. Donat makes the same guess in his ‘Wesley, Swedenborg, and the accusation of madness’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* vol. XLII-2 (Fall 2007), 84.

¹⁴ 22 April 1779, in *WJW*, vol. 23, p. 126.

¹⁵ Donat, ‘Wesley, Swedenborg, and the accusation of madness’, 84. See also H. J. Foster, ‘Two Apocryphal Stories of Wesley: (1) Wesley Shipwrecked in the Solent (2) Wesley and Swedenborg’, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* vol. 5 (March 1908), 87-89.

¹⁶ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), 439.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, 2, 1. 200, in *The Complete Works: Modern Critical Edition*, edited by Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus & Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2030.

¹⁸ The family’s name was originally Swedberg, which was changed to Swedenborg in 1719 to mark the family’s ennoblement on this year. See Weber, ‘Swedenborgians’.

¹⁹ The following biographical elements are taken from Weber, ‘Swedenborgians’ and ‘Swedenborg, Emanuel’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Cross & Livingstone, 3rd edition (2005), p. 1574.

looked bright for the young Baron who had wide scientific interests including anatomy, geology²⁰ and religion. However, from 1745 he claimed he had received a divine revelation and that an angel had appeared to him to reveal him the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures hitherto hidden from men. From then on, Swedenborg devoted his life to expounding his religious views through an impressive number of books written and published in Latin. He claimed being unwilling to create a new confession, but expected the existing ones to gradually accept the truth of his claims and make them their own. He then travelled extensively in Britain and on the Continent to disseminate his views. It befell to his disciples to found a distinct denomination after Swedenborg died in London in 1772: the New Jerusalem Church was inaugurated at Great Eastcheap, in the City of London, in 1787 and services were held there from the following year. The movement was later to spread, particularly to North America, Continental Europe (notably the Netherlands) and the South of Africa, but such extension is beyond the scope of the present article

Emanuel Swedenborg in *The Arminian Magazine*: between madness and sanctity

John Wesley dealt at length with Swedenborg and his theological beliefs in the pages of *The Arminian Magazine* and was keen to emphasize how much they diverged from the Scriptures. After poring over Swedenborg's books, Wesley's conclusion was inescapable: the Swede was a madman.

The first mention of Swedenborg in *The Arminian Magazine* occurred in January 1781. This is the story, dated 1743, of the 'fever' he fell into of which he came out claiming he had received divine revelation and asking his lodger, a Mr Brockmer of London, to be his own John the Baptist. Albeit presented as the 'authentic account of a very great man',²¹ the story clearly depicts Swedenborg as an illuminato:²² after living as a recluse for two days in his room, Swedenborg came out 'look[ing] very frightful': 'his hair stood upright, and he foamed a little at the mouth',²³ and then announced to a stunned Mr Brockmer 'that he was the Messiah: that he was come to be crucified for the Jews'.²⁴ The Baron then asked his lodger to be his mouthpiece at the local synagogue the next day and informed him that, to back his prophecy, an angel would appear to him early the following morning. '[F]rightened' by the speech, Mr Brockmer suggested the following bargain to his guest: if an angel did appear to him, he would obey the creature, but if he did not, Swedenborg would accept to follow him to the doctor; to this the Swede agreed. The next morning, as soon as Mr Brockmer was up, Swedenborg, 'a night-cap half on and half off'²⁵ ran to him and was obviously bitterly disappointed when told that no angel had come to visit his lodger. Crying and foaming, Swedenborg started to speak unintelligibly before finally sitting down dejected and refusing to go to the doctor, asserting that a spirit was telling him Brockmer was 'good for nothing'.²⁶ Mr Brockmer went for the doctor himself but, in his absence, Swedenborg left the house to

²⁰ His two-volume *Oeconomia regni animalis* was published in 1740-1 and *Opera philosophica et mineralia* in 1743. They were translated into English respectively as *The Introduction to an anatomical, physical, and philosophical investigation of the economy of the animal kingdom* (1861) and *The Principia; or, the First Principles of natural things, being new attempts towards a philosophical explanation of the elementary world* (1845-6).

²¹ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. IV-1 (January 1781), 46.

²² As a matter of fact, John Wesley himself called Swedenborg 'this highly illuminated author'. *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-12 (December 1783), 676.

²³ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. IV-1 (January 1781), 47.

²⁴ *ibid*, 47. It was obvious by 1781 that, whatever else may one say about Swedenborg, this last part of the prophecy had been unfulfilled.

²⁵ *ibid*, 47-48.

²⁶ *ibid*, 48.

see the Swedish Envoy:²⁷ upon being told he was not to be seen, the Baron left and then stripped naked and rolled himself in the mud while throwing away his money to the passers-by: rescued by employees of the Swedish Embassy, he was brought back to Mr Brockmer who arranged for him to be accommodated next to his doctor, from where he then fled. The relation ends with the mention that Mr Brockmer ‘now and then met him [Swedenborg] in the streets and found that he still held to his point’.²⁸

It is safe to say that any reader of *The Arminian Magazine* would conclude that this Baron Swedenborg was mentally deranged – and potentially dangerous, since Mr Brockmer notes that he feared Swedenborg might become violent upon learning no angel had visited him²⁹ – so we can imagine that this first mention of the Baron in the would have done enough to discredit him before the Methodists.³⁰

The Arminian Magazine was again to deal with Swedenborg less than three years later. The August 1783 issue indeed saw the first installment of ‘Thoughts on the Writings of Baron Swedenborg’. Although unsigned, it was clearly the work of John Wesley.³¹ The five-part examination of Swedenborg’s life and thought ran to 32 pages and was spread over five successive monthly issues, from August to December 1783: *The Arminian Magazine* readers were thus treated every month to extensive quotations from, and accompanying criticism of, the Baron’s thought over important topics, to wit Charity, Faith, the Trinity and Heaven, (September), Christ and Redemption (October), the Holy Spirit, Justification, the world of Spirits and the Creation (November), and finally the Afterlife (December). As one might expect, Wesley compared Swedenborg’s assertions to the New Testament and invariably showed that the latter sharply disagreed with the former, despite Swedenborg’s copious references to the Bible. The lexical fields of absurdity (the words ‘absurd’ and ‘extraordinary’ recur throughout the five pieces) and madness are used prominently by the author.

The first installment opens with a very short autobiographical sketch ostensibly taken from a journal by Swedenborg.³² Wesley followed this with a brief reminder of Mr Brockmer’s narration. The events of 1743 are explicitly and directly linked to Swedenborg’s alleged madness, Wesley noting that ‘from this time we are undoubtedly to date that peculiar species of insanity which attended him, with scarce any intermission, to the day of his

²⁷ Britain and Sweden being then on opposite sides in the War of the Austrian Succession, they had withdrawn their respective ambassadors from each other’s capitals.

²⁸ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. IV-1 (January 1781), 49.

²⁹ ‘[He] thought he might have concealed a penknife or some other dangerous instrument’. *ibid*, 48.

³⁰ A group of Swedenborg followers investigated the facts related by Wesley. They notably interviewed John Paul Brockmer and noted some discrepancies between the two versions. Their conclusions seemed to point towards distortion of the facts, motivated by Wesley and/or Brockmer’s pre-existing hostility to Swedenborg. Swedenborg’s alleged incoherent behaviour could also have been symptoms of epilepsy or of some neurosis. Dr Murray Brown observes that John Wesley’s hostility to Swedenborg and his followers may have been common knowledge among each man’s followers even before John Wesley wrote about it. Donat, ‘Wesley, Swedenborg and the accusation of madness’, 88-95; Murray L. Brown, ‘Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg’s *A Midsummer’s Afternoon with a Methodist Preacher*: Wesley, Swedenborg, and the Gospel According to Luke’, *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, vol. 8 (2003), p. 125.

³¹ Even if one does not take into account the style which seems to me characteristic of Wesley, the author uses the same quotation from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Bk II, l. 305) to describe Swedenborg’s style (‘majestic, though in ruin’) as John Wesley in his already-quoted letter to Elizabeth Ritchie. Finally, the last part is dated ‘Wakefield, 9 May 1782’ and John Wesley’s *Journal* records that he was there on this day. See *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), 439; *WJW*, vol. 23, p. 239.

³² I have not been able to trace the source of Wesley’s quotation: the extract being in English, it prompts the question of its source and possible translator since Swedenborg’s published works were all originally written in Latin.

death'.³³ John Wesley went on to note that he took care to read the English translation of the first volume of the Baron's *True Christian Religion*³⁴ in order to have a faithful idea of what Swedenborg preached. Wesley denounced as 'extraordinary' and 'absurd' 'his manner of expounding the Holy Scriptures',³⁵ and took particular exception to Swedenborg's claim to have received knowledge of a hidden 'celestial' meaning of the Bible, an example of which he supplied through quotes from Swedenborg's exposition of the Decalogue.³⁶ 'The celestial meaning of the sixth Commandment is, Thou shalt not hate God',³⁷ 'Stealing in the celestial sense is, the taking away divine power from the Lord'.³⁸ John Wesley concludes this first installment with the rhetorical questions: 'Can any person of common understanding defend any of these expositions?', and 'Are they not so utterly absurd, so far removed from any shadow of reason, that . . . we cannot but judge them to be whims of a distempered imagination?'.³⁹

In the second installment⁴⁰, John Wesley dealt with Swedenborg's conception of Salvation and the Trinity and confronted extracts from the first chapter of *The True Christian Religion* to passages from the New Testament (Hebrews 11, 1 and 1 John 5, 7). Wesley reproduced a large extract of one of the numerous visions with which Swedenborg usually backed up his theological assertions: in this one, he claimed having witnessed 'a spirit as lightning falling from heaven', cast down because '[he] believed, that God the Father and God the Son are two persons. All the angels believe they are but one person. And every word that contradicts this, causes in them the same pain as if they should snuff up some pungent powder . . .'.⁴¹ Wesley concluded by noting: 'But notwithstanding all his new revelations, I believe, according to the old one, *There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit: and these three are one* [1 John 5, 7]'.⁴²

The third installment⁴³ discussed the Baron's own view of the Trinity. Swedenborg asserted that 'the Humanity whereby God sent himself into the world was the Son of God',⁴⁴ and that the crucifixion 'was the means of the glorification of his [the Lord]'s humanity: that is, of its union with the Divinity of the Father'.⁴⁵ To this, Wesley observed that no such thing was warranted by the Bible.⁴⁶ He then went on to discuss the Swedish author's conception of redemption, which, according to Swedenborg, was not accomplished through Christ's death

³³ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), 438.

³⁴ First published in 1771, *Vera Christiana religio* had been translated into English by John Clowes in 1781.

³⁵ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), pp. 440-41.

³⁶ Here, as in many other instances in the installments under study, Wesley's avowed quotes are reworded, but do not change the actual meaning expressed by Swedenborg.

³⁷ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), p. 440. We are here confronted with one of the rewordings I mentioned in a previous note: the original in *The True Christian Religion* actually reads: 'In the CELESTIAL SENSE, to commit murder, signifies to indulge hasty resentment against the Lord, to bear hatred towards him'. See Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 311.

³⁸ *ibid*, 440. See also Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 319.

³⁹ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), 441.

⁴⁰ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-9 (September 1783), 495-8.

⁴¹ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-9 (September 1783), 497-8. See also Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 110.

⁴² *ibid*. The KJV actually reads: 'the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost'.

⁴³ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-10 (October 1783), 550-2.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 550. See also Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 81.

⁴⁵ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-10 (October 1783), 550. This is an almost verbatim quote from the original (which however reads 'of the union' instead of 'its union'). See Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 114.

⁴⁶ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-10 (October 1783), 550.

on the cross. In fact, according to Swedenborg: ‘The Lord⁴⁷ is now accomplishing Redemption, that is subduing the hells, and bringing the heavens into order, which was begun in the year 1757⁴⁸, together with the last judgment executed at the same time’⁴⁹. Wesley caustically remarked: ‘What heaps of absurdity are here! Only fit to have a place in Orlando Furioso’.⁵⁰

The fourth installment⁵¹ deals with the Baron’s conception of the Holy Spirit, which to him is ‘not God himself but the operation of God’.⁵² Wesley then remarked that ‘another grand truth which the Baron flatly denies is *Justification by Faith*’.⁵³ The latter actually announcing that the believers in ‘Justification by Faith alone’ are sent to the bottomless pit mentioned by Revelation 9:2 until they come out of their error.⁵⁴ After noting that Swedenborg’s theology contradicted the Scriptures while also contradicting itself,⁵⁵ Wesley laid out his ‘grand objection to the Baron’s whole system relative to the invisible world: that is it not only quite unconnected with Scripture, but quite inconsistent with it. It strikes at the very foundation of Scripture. If this stands, the Bible must fall’.⁵⁶ Wesley concluded with a two-page quotation of the ‘odd, whimsical account’ of the spiritual world to which Swedenborg allegedly travelled and in which, (among others) stupid people are bald,⁵⁷ angels ‘have preaching in their temples’,⁵⁸ and ‘[t]he Word, kept in the temples of the spiritual world, shines like a star of the first magnitude’.⁵⁹

In the fifth and final installment,⁶⁰ Wesley turned to another work by Swedenborg, namely *Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell*.⁶¹ This last part is the longest (twelve pages) of the five and consists of long quotations from the book, interspersed with Wesley’s own comments. As in many occurrences in the previous installments, Wesley has harsh words for the Swedish writer’s description of heaven and hell, which, for example, denies there is hell-

⁴⁷ The reader will have noticed that this title indifferently refers either to the Son or the Father, since they are only the two sides of the same divine coin, according to Swedenborg.

⁴⁸ The reference to 1757 as the year of ‘the last judgment’ occurs no less than eight times in *The True Christian Religion*.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p. 551. Wesley conflates two separate sentences from Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 115, without altering the meaning.

⁵⁰ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-10 (October 1783), 551.

⁵¹ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-11 (November 1783), 607-14.

⁵² *ibid*, p. 607. The original is much less explicit: having previously described the ‘virtues . . . which the Lord operates in those who believe on him and accommodate and prepare themselves for his reception and abode’, the author then notes that ‘the operation of these virtues is the Holy Spirit, which the Lord sends to those who believe in him and prepare themselves to receive him’, Emanuel Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 142-3.

⁵³ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-11 (November 1783), 608.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 608 & Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 162.

⁵⁵ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-11 (November 1783), 610.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 611.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p. 612; Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 74.

⁵⁸ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-11 (November 1783), 612; Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 240.

⁵⁹ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-11 (November 1783), 613. Wesley’s quotation departs from the original, which reads: ‘In the sacred repository where the copy of the Word is kept, the light is bright and flaming, exceeding every degree of light that shines in the other parts of heaven’. Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 242.

⁶⁰ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-12 (December 1783), 669-80.

⁶¹ See above: the book was already the subject of the 22 April 1779 *Journal* entry.

fire⁶² or asserts that dead people (who, as spirits, inhabit the spiritual world between heaven and hell)⁶³ are frequently unaware for some days that they *are* dead.⁶⁴ Wesley was particularly incensed at Swedenborg's claim that, in hell, the sinner, having done his work, is 'led into the inner part of the cavern, where there are harlots, and he is permitted to take one for himself'.⁶⁵ One can almost hear Wesley's outrage as he writes: 'Amazing! So the Christian Koran exceeds even the Mahometan! Mahomet allowed such to be in paradise,⁶⁶ but he never thought of placing them in hell!'⁶⁷ Wesley also noted how 'trifling', 'puerile', 'so far beneath the importance of the subject',⁶⁸ 'poor, low, gross'⁶⁹ Swedenborg's accounts actually were.

The text concluded with a strong condemnation of Swedenborg's system. Wesley paraphrased Matthew 6: 23 by asserting that '*the light which was in them was darkness*',⁷⁰ and begged the reader not to follow 'that *filthy dreamer* in particular, who takes care to provide harlots, instead of fire and brimstone, for the devils and damned spirits in hell!'⁷¹ The text concluded with the following appeal: 'O my brethren! Let none of you that fear God, recommend such a writer any more! . . . If the preceding extracts are from God, then the Bible is only a fable. But if *all scriptures are given by inspiration of God* [2 Timothy 3: 16-17],⁷² then let these dreams sink into the pit from thence they came'.⁷³

The final mention of Swedenborg in *The Arminian Magazine* was occasioned by a three-page letter from Francis Okely⁷⁴ to John Wesley dated December 1772, but published

⁶² *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-12 (December 1783), 675. Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell, and of the wonderful things therein* (1750, transl. 1778) (second edition, London: R. Hindmarsh, 1784), § 13.

⁶³ *ibid.*, § 428 & 600.

⁶⁴ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-12 (December 1783), 676. The passage here quoted by Wesley comes not from *A Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell* but from *The True Christian Religion*, § 281.

⁶⁵ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-12 (December 1783), 678. Here again, Wesley actually quoted from *The True Christian Religion*, § 281; for once, Wesley's quote is misleading, since he left out the critical end of the sentence (emphasis added): 'He is then led into an inner part of the cavern, where there are harlots, and he is permitted to take one to himself, **and call her his woman; but he is forbidden under severe penalties to indulge in promiscuous connections**'. Swedenborg would later inform the reader that the office of damned judges is 'to prepare vermilion, and mix it up into a paint, to bedaub the faces of harlots, and give them the outward appearance of beauty'. Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, § 332.

⁶⁶ Wesley is referring here to the houris mentioned in the Koran, sura LVI, verses 22-24.

⁶⁷ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-12 (December 1783), 678.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 676.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 677.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 678. The original reads (emphasis added): 'But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. **If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness**, how great is that darkness!'

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 678.

⁷² In the original, *KJV* quote, 'Scripture' is in the singular.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 678.

⁷⁴ Referred to as 'the Rev. F. Okely' in *The Arminian Magazine*, Francis Okely or Okeley (1719-94) was the son of a former mayor of Bedford. From 1736 to 1765, his allegiance fluctuated between the Moravians, the Baptists, the Methodists and the Church of England. By 1772, he was ministering to a Moravian congregation in Northampton. John Wesley wrote of him on 31 August 1770 that there were not in England 'many more sensible men than Mr Gambold and Mr Okely' (*JWJ*, vol. 22, p. 246). Francis Okely had been offered the position of Master of Trefeca (or Trevecka) College at an unspecified date. Peter James Lineham, 'John Fletcher's Links with Mystical Methodists and Swedenborgians', in *Religion, Gender, and Industry: Exploring Church and Methodism in a Local Setting*, edited by Geordan Hammond and Peter S. Forsaith (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), p. 82.

in 1785.⁷⁵ Okely's letter obviously answered a previous communication from Wesley who may have accused him of interpreting the Revelation in an unorthodox way, since Okely protests:

I also assure you, with the utmost sincerity, that the Bible is my choicest book; and that too in practice, more than in profession. I am not conscious of having any meaning of a single text, but what I believe the Holy Ghost intended by it; and for that purpose I read and pray daily for the true meaning of it.⁷⁶

Having thus established his credentials as an evangelical (or should one say Protestant?), Okely mentioned Swedenborg in non-committal terms, no doubt aiming at mollifying Wesley:

Baron Swedenborg is to me a riddle. Certainly, as you say, he speaks many great and important truths; and as certainly seems to me to contradict scripture in other places. But, as he told me, I could not understand his *Vera Religio Christiana*, without a divine illumination; and I am obliged to confess, that I have not yet a sufficiency of it for that purpose⁷⁷.

Okely concluded his letter on an irenical note, by observing:

Love is the fulfilling of the law⁷⁸ [:]if He and His Apostles were again on earth, and all we, the different awakened professors of his Religion, were to be addressed by Him and Them; they would say, Dear souls! Love one another: bear with, and forbear one another, till you can all be made perfect in One.⁷⁹

Through his cautious words, we may assume that Okely had been drawn to Swedenborg,⁸⁰ and that Wesley had reproached him for it. It is doubtful to what extent such a vague answer may have reassured Wesley. We may however wonder why Wesley chose to reproduce this letter: he may have had in mind to exhort others drawn to Swedenborg to have in mind the urgency of brotherly love.

The paradoxes that one may notice in the pages devoted to Swedenborg in *The Arminian Magazine* – depicting the Swedish nobleman as a madman while at the same time acknowledging his talent and his intelligence, and finally featuring Okely's mollifying plea for brotherly love – may be taken as indications of Wesley's possible dismay at seeing Christians attracted to Swedenborg's religious thinking in the 1770s and 1780s.

⁷⁵ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VIII-10 (October 1785), 552-4. Okely referred to a letter Wesley sent to him on 5 December 1772, but it is not included in Telford's collection.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 552.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 553.

⁷⁸ See Romans 13:10.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 554.

⁸⁰ Peter James Lineham mentions that Okely was 'fascinated by Swedenborg' The *ODNB* does not mention such an association although it does mention Okely's association with Jakob Böhme or Boehme, a XVIIth-century theosophic author from Silesia who is said to have influenced Swedenborg. Lineham, 'John Fletcher's Links with Mystical Methodists and Swedenborgians', p. 91; 'Okely, Francis', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Swedenborgianism: a threat to Methodism?

Behind John Wesley's harsh condemnation of Swedenborg as a lunatic and a heretic, one may discern his fear that the Swedish author could lure honourable people from Christian orthodoxy; but it may also be seen as revealing Wesley's attitude to some of the challenges faced by eighteenth-century evangelicalism.

As a self-confessed 'homo unius libri',⁸¹ Wesley obviously knew that 'every city or house divided against itself shall not stand' (Matthew 12:25). As the reader may have guessed from the previous references to Francis Okely, Wesley was very probably aware that Swedenborg's religious views, coupled with what seems to have been a commanding personality, had an undeniable appeal to some of his followers. The rationale behind Wesley's pains in exposing Swedenborg's errors can be found in the last words of the last entry he devoted to the Swedish aristocrat in his *Journal*, on 22 April 1779: 'I wish those pious men, Mr Clowes and [Cookworthy], would calmly consider these things before they usher into the world any more of this madman's dreams'.⁸² He returned to the point in the August 1783 issue of *The Arminian Magazine* where he notes that 'the newness of the subject [Swedenborg's thought] contributed much to the pleasure, which those pious men, Mr. C[ookworthy]⁸³, Mr. Ha[rtley] and Mr Cl[owe]s have received from his writings'.⁸⁴

Indeed, from the 1760s, the three men took it upon themselves to translate Swedenborg's works into English: William Cookworthy (1705-1780), a porcelain manufacturer and Quaker minister,⁸⁵ was the first to do so in 1763 with *The Doctrine of Life*,⁸⁶ the first of Swedenborg's works to appear in English. He collaborated with Thomas Hartley (1708/9-84) in the translation of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* (1778),⁸⁷ and accompanied him on a visit to the Swedish author the same year. However, he does not appear to have particularly cast his lot in with the Swedenborgians.

An ordained clergyman of the Church of England⁸⁸ with links to the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, Thomas Hartley was more involved in spreading Swedenborg's words throughout the land – although, like Cookworthy, he 'remained outside the organized society for propagating the doctrines of Swedenborg, started in 1783 by Robert Hindmarsh'.⁸⁹ Hartley corresponded with Swedenborg from at least 1769 and translated two of his works into English: *A Theosophical Lucubration on the Nature of Influx* (1770)⁹⁰ and *Nine Queries* (published in 1786, after Hartley's death).⁹¹

The last man mentioned by Wesley, John Clowes (1743-1831), had been ordained a priest by Bishop Richard Terrick of London in 1767. Through Thomas Hartley, he became

⁸¹ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777) (New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), p. 19.

⁸² *JWJ*, vol. 23, p. 128.

⁸³ Originally Cl[oteworthy], a mistake for Cookworthy. The same mistake was made by Wesley. *JWJ*, vol. 23, p. 128.

⁸⁴ *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI-8 (August 1783), 439.

⁸⁵ 'Cookworthy, William (1705–1780)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁸⁶ Originally published the same year in Latin as *Doctrina novae Hierosolymae: De vita secundum praecepta Decalogi* (1763).

⁸⁷ 'Cookworthy, William (1705–1780)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁸⁸ He had been ordained on 24 September 1732 by Edmund Gibson. <http://db.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/DisplayOrdination.jsp?CDBOrdRedID=73539>.

⁸⁹ 'Hartley, Thomas (1708/9-84)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁹⁰ Originally published in Latin as *De commercio animae et corporis* (1769).

⁹¹ Originally and posthumously published in Latin as *Quaestiones novem de Trinitate, &c. ad Emanuelem Swedenborg propositae, tum illius response* (1785).

acquainted with Swedenborgianism in 1773, and from this date became an avowed supporter of Swedenborg's doctrines while remaining a parish priest at Saint John's, Manchester.⁹² He translated five books by Swedenborg, beginning with *The True Christian Religion* in 1781. In 1782 he founded The Society of Gentlemen (later called the Manchester Printing Society) in order to print and circulate writings by Swedenborg as well as tracts on his teaching.⁹³ His beliefs did not prevent him from being offered a bishopric (which he declined) by William Pitt the Younger in 1804.⁹⁴ To his death, he maintained this double allegiance to the Church of England and Swedenborgianism.⁹⁵

After these brief biographies of the three men mentioned by Wesley, it may be wondered what exactly he feared. Indeed, they do not seem to have been particularly prominent (Pitt's offer of a bishopric to Clowes came thirteen years after Wesley's death), and their possible loss to Swedenborgianism would not have been a catastrophe for Methodism especially since it does not appear they had anything more than anecdotal links with Wesleyan Methodism.⁹⁶ Wesley may have been more worried by Francis Okely's attitude, since he was closer to him: a member of the Fetter Lane Society, Okely had travelled with Wesley in Ireland in 1758 but never formally joined the Methodists.⁹⁷

In my opinion, Wesley may have been struck by the fact that pious men, and even clergymen like himself, could be seduced by this doctrine.⁹⁸ If even Cambridge graduates like Okely, Hartley and Clowes had come to profess such 'poor, low, gross' doctrine, what could be expected from other, less well-educated people? This is a possibility, especially since Wesley was well aware of the Gospel's warning against 'offend[ing] one of these little ones which believe in [God]' (Matthew 18:6).⁹⁹ According to James G. Donat, at least five other Methodist preachers were said to be actively promoting Swedenborgian doctrines.¹⁰⁰ However, a more complex reason may have been at work, maybe unconsciously so.

Swedenborgianism: a symptom of challenges faced by Evangelicalism

⁹² Although reported to his bishop in 1783, Clowes was allowed to keep proclaiming his unorthodox views after receiving a 'friendly caution' from Dr Beilby Porteus, the then bishop of Chester. 'Clowes, John (1743–1831)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Ward and Heintzenrater simply note that Cookworthy was 'on friendly terms with his Methodist excise-man and preacher at Port Isaac' (*JWJ*, vol. 23, p. 128). He and Clowes are only mentioned in the 22 April 1779 entry quoted above. Hartley is not mentioned at all in the *JWJ*.

⁹⁷ *JWJ*, vol. 21, p. 136.

⁹⁸ Lineham raises the possibility that John Fletcher would have been drawn to Swedenborg's ideas: however, he concludes that, although Fletcher was more open to the Mystics than Wesley, 'Fletcher's interest in Swedenborg seems to . . . be not a late aberration in his thought but an adjunct – although never more than an adjunct – to his broader interest in mystical theology'. Lineham, 'John Fletcher's Links with Mystical Methodists and Swedenborgians', p. 81. John Wesley's *Journal* abundantly testifies to his mistrust of Mysticism: see for example the 5 June 1742 entry ('O that ye knew how much God is wiser than man! Then would you drop quietists and mystics together, and at all hazard keep the plain, practical, written Word of God' (*JWJ*, vol. 19, p. 273)) or the 5 February 1764 ('I must still object (1) to their *sentiments* (...). I object to their (2) *spirit* (...). I object (3) to their whole *phraseology*.' (*JWJ*, vol. 21, p. 443)).

⁹⁹ In the KJV: 'But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and [that] he were drowned in the depth of the sea.'

¹⁰⁰ Donat, 'Wesley, Swedenborg, and the accusation of madness', p. 86. The five men were James Hindmarsh, Isaac Hawkins, R. Jackson, Thomas (?) Parker & Joseph Whittingham Salmon: about the last of which John Wesley noted in 1788: 'What a lovely simplicity! What pity that such a spirit as his should fall among thieves!' (*JWJ*, vol. 23, p. 123).

In an article published in 1972, W. R. Ward offered another explanation to Wesley's ambiguous appreciations of Swedenborg.¹⁰¹ According to him, Wesley's dismay at such incongruous combination of intelligence and heterodoxy reflected the then difficulties of English evangelicals:

Like the Evangelicals in other ways, Swedenborg witnessed to the apologetic difficulties in which the eighteenth-century churches had been placed, and to the anxieties which were abroad that neither the old orthodoxies nor the old mechanisms of religious establishment were reproducing the faith from generation to generation at a popular level.¹⁰²

Wesley's mention of educated people being misled by Swedenborg's rhetoric must not be misunderstood: well aware of his responsibility as an ordained clergyman (whose world was his parish) towards the children of God, it is reasonable to argue that Wesley was very probably horrified that less educated people could follow Swedenborg and his unbiblical assertions.¹⁰³

According to Lineham, one could see Swedenborg's writings as 'a search for a new theosophy in the face of the growth of rationalism'.¹⁰⁴ Wesley was certainly open to the presence of the supernatural in everyday life, although not when it flew in the face of the Revelation contained in the Scriptures. Could we interpret his vehement denunciation of Swedenborg's beliefs as a reminder that, if angels and spirits did exist, 'though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed' (Galatians 1: 8)? There is at least a possibility that Wesley saw Swedenborg's works as proof of the vital importance for Christians to be both open to the work of the Spirit and to base their faith on solid Scriptural grounds.

I have argued in this article that, by examining Baron Emanuel Swedenborg's writings – especially *True Christian Religion* and *A Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell* – and by comparing them to the Bible, Wesley endeavoured to show how far from Christian and Scriptural orthodoxies the Swedish aristocrat had strayed. His conclusion was inescapable: despite being a very gifted man, Swedenborg was a lunatic whose claims flatly contradicted the basic tenets of Christianity, not to speak of common sense itself. Seeing educated men, and even parsons, follow Swedenborg probably gave more urgency to Wesley's rebuttal of such books as *True Christian Religion* and *A Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell*.

However, Wesley had nothing really to fear: even though in 1793 a Manchester congregation tore away from the Church of England, led by their Swedenborgian clergyman, William Cowherd (a former curate of Clowes),¹⁰⁵ it remained an exception. The Peter Street congregation, which called itself 'Bible Christians' (no relation with the Methodist confession), survived for more than fifty years and was very active in education from the 1810s.¹⁰⁶ There can be no doubt that, had Wesley lived to see this, he would have been

¹⁰¹ W. R. Ward, 'Swedenborgianism: Heresy, Schism or Religious Protest?', in *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest*, edited by Derek Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 303-9.

¹⁰² Ward, 'Swedenborgianism', p. 304.

¹⁰³ Samuel J. Rogal echoes this opinion in 'Swedenborg and the Wesleyans: Opposition or Outgrowth?', in *Swedenborg and his Influence*, edited by Erland J. Brock, E. Bruce Glenn, Carroll C. Odhner *et al.* (Bryn Athyn, PA: The Academy of the New Church, 1988), pp. 300, 304.

¹⁰⁴ Lineham, 'John Fletcher's Links with Mystical Methodists and Swedenborgians', p. 77.

¹⁰⁵ Ward, 'Swedenborgianism', pp. 306-7.

¹⁰⁶ W. R. Ward, 'Swedenborgianism...', p. 307.

appalled, especially since the faithful were mainly silk weavers, these 'little ones' so close to his heart.

Jerome Grosclaude (Clermont Auvergne University)