ForeWord Reviews

RELIGION

A Swedenborg Sampler: Selections from Heaven and Hell, Divine Love and Wisdom, Divine Providence, True Christianity, Secrets of Heaven
Emanuel Swedenborg
George Dole, translator
Jonathan Rose, translator
Lisa Hyatt Cooper, translator
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Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was an eighteenth-century Swedish theologian whose writings formed the basis for a fascinating offshoot of the Christian church. His interpretations go against fundamentalist doctrine and literal acceptance of the Bible. Esoteric and intellectual, his religion is based on visions he experienced, which he believed were direct communication with the spirit world.

A Swedenborg Sampler is a compilation of the best of his writings in translation. This book contains selections from five of his works the translators have deemed appropriate for a mainstream audience.

Heaven and Hell, the most popular essay, describes the process of crossing over into a realm of human angels and the instructional role they play in the afterlife. *Divine Love and Wisdom* is a philosophical definition of God and heaven. According to Swedenborg, God exists outside time and space, an infinite source of love and wisdom. He discusses levels of creation and the meaning of life itself. This section is for scholars rather than theologians. *Divine Providence* is a dissertation on five spiritual laws: free will, rejection of evil, faith, guidance, and acknowledgement of a godly presence. *True Christianity*, the last book he published only a year before his death, presents a new type of Christianity based on rebellious convictions, a revised version of Lutheran theology. Censored in Sweden because it went against the state church, Swedenborg released this title anonymously and abroad. *Secrets of Heaven*, an eight-volume work written at the beginning of his career, between 1749 and 1756, is known as his magnum opus—the excerpt included is on Creation. This may be the most important of his books, since it establishes the basis for his religious mysticism.

In the following excerpt from *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg talks about the out-of-body

experience described by many spiritualists: “We are brought into a particular state that is halfway between sleep and waking. When we are in this state, it seems exactly as though we were awake; all our senses are as alert as they are when we are fully awake physically—sight, hearing, and strange to say, touch. These senses are more perfect than they can ever be during physical wakefulness. This is the state in which people have seen spirits and angels most vividly, even hearing them and, strange to say, touching them, with hardly anything physical interfering.”

Though known as a visionary, Emanuel Swedenborg was also a scientist who graduated from the University of Uppsala. He traveled through Europe and studied with his contemporaries. This new translation is easy to read, written in everyday language accessible to the uninitiated. The meticulous presentation is informative and mesmerizing.

Julia Ann Charpentier