

## **The Imagination**

**Jeff Munnis  
Swedenborgian Church  
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First Reading:

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Second Reading:

Genesis 2: 1-7, 18-23

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them and whatever the man called each living creature that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,  
"This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called 'woman,'  
for she was taken out of man."

From the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg:

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There is also given another state of active or living imagination, which should in particular be called the vision of the prophets, when single spiritual objects are represented by such things as are contained in the letter or the literal sense of the Prophets. ...That the ancients, especially the sons of the Ancient Church, were in that state, and they thus perceived various representations of spirits and angels, can be concluded and known for certain from very many indications...

On the list of words that cause problems for human beings is the word image. A company I know has the advertising tag line "we create image." An advertiser that communicates a widely understood and valued image has a very powerful message. The word, "image," in some respects has diminished in meaning for us, perhaps because of its connotation of shallow appearance, perhaps in response to the ascendance of the word "archetype." The word "form" as used by Plato is understood as a philosophical term, perhaps better than the word image. "Image" is a word that is sometimes treated as a leftover when it comes to theological considerations. The first tier of theological terms are words like God, Being, truth, love, faith; it is likely that if you were to ask a theologian to name the twenty most important theological words, I wonder if the word "image" would even come up. Yet, it is one of the central clues to knowing ourselves as human beings.

Emanuel Swedenborg says there are seven stages of regeneration, represented by the seven days of creation, and the rarely achieved 7<sup>th</sup> stage, the fully regenerated human

being is in the “image” of God. Also, it is worth saying something about the combination of male and female aspects of the two creation stories in Genesis. I’m not saying anything new when I say that Genesis was written using patriarchal language from the perspective of a patriarchal form of religion. From my point of view the masculine and the feminine are included in the Godhead, so the “image” of God, contains both, as I believe the first creation story suggests with its use of plural language forms for God and the human being. I’ll come back to the second reading a little later and suggest a different way of reading that part of the creation story.

This idea of being created in the image of God, however undefined in Genesis, trickles down to the first of the Ten Commandments:

"You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

Some versions of the Bible use language that also says not to worship idols, which can also be translated as graven images (engraved images). But there are a number of other ways to look at the original Hebrew, which used two different words for image. One version, translated as “likeness,” is a term that indicates something concrete or physical. The other word, which is used in the more philosophic/theologic contexts, has been interpreted as “resemblance,” “identity,” “shadow picture,” “mental image,” “immortal.” The list of proposed synonyms can go on for quite a while and the theological speculation goes even further.

That process of “making for yourself an image”, understood as imagination, in the context of the creation, seems particularly powerful. Later human beings get into trouble

with this capacity.

In Genesis 6:5, from the King James Version:

KJV: And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Some theologians feel the KJV use of imagination does not accurately translate the Hebrew, which they feel is better understood as “thoughts.” An older, obsolete use of the word imagination, in English, meant “plotting or devising evil.” Later translations use a different language:

NIV: The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

Watchtower (Jehovah’s Witnesses): Consequently Jehovah saw that the badness of man was abundant in the earth and every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only bad all the time.

JPS: The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.

Only the Jewish Publication Society version links thoughts with the mind. All the others use “thoughts of the heart.”

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes, “...Christ, who is the image of God” and in Hebrews (1:3) “Christ reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature.” which further complicates the issue. The Greek word often used in the New Testament is “icon” and perhaps follows the thought that the early Hebrew words denoted a “pictorial image.” But the Greek words used also can be translated as “prototype.” The consequence of this “new” understanding:

“Nothing could make clearer the tremendous impact of the revelation of God in Christ than the fact that it has almost completely obliterated the thought of man being in

the image of God and replaced it with the thought of Christ as being the image of God.”  
(Encyclopedia entry in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1980).

I have been doing a lot of reading of Henry Corbin the last few years. Corbin was a scholar of Middle Eastern philosophy and Mysticism. He wrote an article on comparative spiritual hermeneutics where he does an excellent job of summarizing Swedenborg’s theology in the *Arcana Coelestia* (159):

In the first celestial person (Adam), the internal person was so well differentiated from the external person that he perceived what belonged to the one (internal) and to the other (external), and he perceived how the Lord governs the external person by means of the internal person. His posterity (posterity of the 1<sup>st</sup> celestial person) however, experienced an increasing desire for the proprium that belongs to the external person; such a radical alteration ensued that people no longer perceived the difference between the internal person and the external person, but imagined that one was indistinguishable from the other. Herein is the origin of that yearning to possess a knowledge that gives possession (my underline) even of the inaccessible object—inaccessible to all knowledge other than a perception of the faith deriving from love. This yearning (to own) will be the death of the celestial person. (Corbin, p. 80)

In Swedenborg’s theology there are three levels of persons: 1) the celestial person who had a direct perception of heaven by way of direct relations with the Lord and the angels through revelations, visions and dreams; 2) the spiritual person who has conscience, understanding without perception; 3) the dead person, who may be alive in the physical sense, does not have conscience.

I am hoping that what I am about to say will make all of this a little more understandable:

The perception, the capacity of perception, of the celestial person is derived from the Divine within him. This celestial person is in the “image” of God. But what was not permitted was making these perceptions derive from his own person. By preferring the

external, the material world of the senses, understanding of the source of perception was lost. The “fallen” person got everything upside down. They thought knowledge came from outside of them. They believed they owned the garden (representative of the person). Perception became a shadow of its former capacity. Now we can see the reason for the first commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

Now, let’s go back to the second creation story in light of Corbin’s explanation of Swedenborg. We can re-read the story from an inner spiritual/psychological perspective. The human being, in a deep sleep, splits spiritually and psychologically. Think of it just as it is written for men, and think of the woman created from the rib as the feminine aspect of a man. If we were to use psychological terms we could use Jung’s concept of anima. If you are a woman, consider the woman to enter the deep sleep with the masculine aspect differentiated (animus).

How does the regenerated human being look? To quote William Blake, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” In Buddhism there are two forms of truth: conceptual truth, truth as the mind understands and the direct perception of truth. To quote the Dali Lama, the Buddha perceives the reality of all phenomena directly and has fully developed compassion.” And for Swedenborg: all perception is faith deriving from love.

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Well, that’s all fine on one level, but what does that have to do with the world today? Here we are nice and snug inside this small, and beautiful building in San Francisco while in Lebanon, Israel, and Iraq violence seems to reach new levels of

intensity, either in physical or psychological ways. Let's start with a quote from Gandhi, to paraphrase, "Those who believe God has nothing to do with politics don't know anything about politics and they don't know anything about God either." To put this into context we are going to use our imagination.

Close your eyes for a few moments and let's take a journey and imagine that you are in a room halfway around the world from here and although it is night there now we are going to imagine it is daytime. Instead of sitting on chairs you are sitting on the floor with a prayer mat. On one side of the room men are listening to the sermon. On the other side of a partition are women listening to the same sermon. In front of the two groups is a man in robes speaking and he just finishes his sermon. You realize that word for word, he has just delivered the same sermon to you that I have delivered so far here today. Now you can open your eyes.

Let me give you some perspective on our imaginary journey and the man I mentioned earlier, Henry Corbin. The imaginary journey: if you went 180 degrees of longitude around the earth's 360 degrees at the same latitude as San Francisco (122 degrees 26 minutes W, 36 degrees 6 minutes N) you would be within 200 miles of a major city. It is one of the largest cities in the world. Can anyone guess the city? Tehran, Iran (51 degrees 8 minutes E, 37 degrees 47 minutes N).

Henry Corbin was a professor, but I didn't quite give you complete information about him. He was a scholar of Middle Eastern philosophy and mysticism, but of a particular kind: Ismaili mysticism, more commonly known as Shi'ite Islamic mysticism. Most Iranians are Shi'ite Muslims, though I am not sure they would all be considered mystics. What is Corbin doing writing an essay about Swedenborg? Well, if you

substituted Ismaili theological concepts for Swedenborgian concepts, including Swedenborg's description of Heaven and Hell, you would find amazing similarities and parallels. In fact, I carefully worded my sermon today to reflect what an Ismaili mystic might say about the inner meaning of the book of Genesis and Christ.

Now we used our imagination for a relatively simple exercise that was probably not too hard to do, but you can use your imagination in very spiritual ways as well. Some mystics consider it to be like a spiritual organ, one that senses spiritual things. From the first chapter of the prophet Ezekiel:

“Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him.”(NIV)

Theophanies, visions of God like the one in the first chapter of Ezekiel, can be part of what Ibn Arabi described as the creative imagination. In Shi'ite Islam these visions, of a world that exists just like our own, form a recorded history just as meaningful as a chronological history of world events. Just as we need to recover the full meaning of being in the image of God, we need to find positive ways to use our imagination as an organ of perception, to help us find the place where the God part in us meets the eternal infinite God, a concept explained by Swedenborg who said it is the Divine in us that recognizes the Divine. Jacob Boehme, a German mystic said, “Through imagination, and an earnest serious desire, we become again impregnated with the Diety, and receive the new body in the old.” This active imagination sounds very much to me like the organ of perception of Swedenborg's celestial person.

I believe we have an invitation from God to return to being a celestial person, one

that perceives truth directly, one that understands we are the image of God in the fullest sense of the words and I believe mystics like Swedenborg are inviting us to use our imagination to discover the meaning of Christ. Perhaps because we share an understanding of the inner meaning of Genesis, perhaps because we share in Genesis the origin of our faith, we can use our imagination to find common political ground with Shi'ite Muslims.

I don't know the answers to the conflicts that exist in the world today, but if I could use spiritual perception, call on a voice like the prophetic voice described in today's reading by Swedenborg, I would say this:

To those who speak of freedom and tell us they defend freedom by going to war: If one of us is chained, or enslaved, none of us are free. If the price of our freedom is the subjugation or enslavement of another human being, either psychological, physical or economic, then our means of practicing freedom have been corrupted by evil, and we no longer understand or know freedom. The 9/11 Commission Report, for all of its supposed inaccuracies has at least one truth in it. The Commission said one of the failures of our security and intelligence systems was a "failure of the imagination." War is a failure of the imagination, a failure that sees limited alternatives and does not recognize opportunities.

At one point in a recent film, *Everything is Illuminated*, an old woman is laying in a field in Eastern Europe, dying, everyone around her dead or dying, martyrs of the Holocaust. She turns to the person next to her and says something that rings true today, "We live in Biblical times." Indeed. We need the living, active imagination of prophets in the true sense of the word, one who speaks on behalf of a higher power.

I would like to finish today with a short poem.

I dreamed of meeting God,  
the unrevealed one,  
and we complained to each other  
about the same things:  
lies about love and salvation,  
lies about the end of suffering,  
lies about knowledge and truth.  
And God promised me,  
“There is not a hidden purpose to life.”  
I asked, “What is most bothersome to you?”  
God replied,  
“The expectation of reward and revenge.”  
I was silent.  
God got up to leave and said,  
“No one dreams alone.”

(Jeff Munnis)