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Whatever Happened to Esoteric?

A Challenge to Swedenborgians
and Others from the Esoteric Tradition



THERE WAS A TIME, it seems to me, when the gods were real and you could talk to the spirit world. The myths and the fairytales were all *true*, because they had access to all that communication with the spirit world. As human beings became smarter in the sense that we use the word “smart”—thinking, clever, figuring, manipulating, knowing of power—we got less good at esoteric. You can date our getting smarter where you want, but to me that great divide occurs with the Greeks. Before the Greeks and after the Greeks we have two different worlds. Once they started thinking, everything changed. Of course, other events had tremendous impact as well. Obviously, the changes brought by the Buddha were important, as was the advent of Christianity. But surely the classical Greeks, at least in the Western world, form a major divide—maybe *the* divide. After the Greeks, the gods were somehow not there; at least, not the way they had been. What I now think really happened was that in the beginning of the culture they could see the gods and at the end of the culture they couldn't see the gods. That's not a bad way of understanding what happened with esoteric.

There was a time when esoteric was the home base, the normal kind of experience. Homer was esoteric. He wasn't just a poet talking about killing. He prowled in the underworld; he knew what the gods were about and was capable of bringing that into human consciousness. The story of Prometheus is also about bringing secrets from the gods to the people.

By the time we get to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and especially the Sophists, however, we've come to our kind of thinking. The Sophists are really our kind of people because they basically understand that knowledge is for arguments and power. As a result of the whole *humanization of knowledge*, which really happens in the process of Greek culture, what was esoteric then begins to be lost. Essential knowledge is no longer divine revelation; what we have instead is thinking.

Christianity comes about, and, of course, the Jewish track continues, and Islam emerges as a significant force. But in an interesting way, as I see it at least, *they don't actually change anything with respect to esoteric*. That is, they make



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the case for *fate*, and in the process they pretty much beat out the esoteric; so that esoteric is lost, really, with the Greeks. A little bit lingers through Pseudo Dionysus and a few remarkable early Christians. But the faith that you have with the Jewish, Christian; and Muslim traditions is not on the side of esoteric. And in an interesting way it's qualitatively different from Swedenborg, as I read him.

What happens when we get to the waning of Christian dominance, when the Christian view is still in charge but without the unquestioned authority that it had in the Middle Ages? By the end of the Renaissance it is permissible to speak about spiritual *knowledge* only by first granting that it's a *secret*, a mystery. By the time of the modern era—the sixteenth or seventeenth century—it's not only secret, but *because* it's secret, it's suspect. That is to say, it's not *scientific*.

We now have a situation in which we of the modern West not only are not in a position to *add* to esoteric knowledge very well—at least most people are not—but it's coming to be the case that *culturally* it is not permissible to claim that there *is* esoteric knowledge. For some individuals it might be all right, but culturally it is not.

By the eighteenth century and Swedenborg, spiritual, esoteric *knowing* occurs in a culture which is making a statement, building a case that is antithetical to anything esoteric. So you have this wonderful *missing*, like ships passing in the night, between Swedenborg and, let's say, Kant. Why doesn't Kant get it? The reason is that Kant has already put the ceiling on knowledge. He has already reintroduced a kind of Platonic cave. In the cave of Plato's *Republic* there's a powerful image that runs through the Christian medieval world as well: the world outside the cave, the *true* world that can be seen only by the unchained, is the world of esoteric spiritual knowledge.

In Plato, it is very clearly arranged that Socrates is freed of the chains that keep the rest of us in the cave. He comes up out of the cave and sees the sun of the true world; this is all very dangerous and complicated. Plato asks: What would happen if somebody saw the sun? The people who were not so privileged to see the true sun would kill him—and of course, they *did* kill Socrates.

Nevertheless, it is an essential meaning of the allegory that it is *possible* to get out of the cave and see the sun. Note that the sun is there to be seen, even if no one escapes to see it. Socrates, it would seem, *knew* at least that it was there. Plato not only knew that it was there but had some glimpses of it. The works of the later Plato, and of Aristotle, criticize the theory, but they don't say there's no sun. They poke at the *ability* to *know* the sun.

When we get to the time of Kant, we find him going much further than the later Plato or Aristotle. Kant is not coming from the world of the myths and direct spiritual knowing. He's coming from the world of a hundred or a hundred and fifty years of science. He's talking within the world articulated by Francis Bacon, in which knowledge is power, in which we put nature on the rack and squeeze until it reveals its secrets. That's a new kind of knowledge.

So when Kant has to consider the possibility of somebody, like Swedenborg, *knowing* something above the ceiling, outside the cave, he has to say that cannot be done. It can't be so because Kant already knows what *knowing* is. Knowing is a kind of proving, but according to Kant, there is no proving with respect to God, freedom, or immortality. *And these are the realities that Swedenborg claims to know.* So there's something inherently impossible about this claim by this remarkable man who claims to know what is outside the cave, or above the ceiling, or however you want to picture it.

In the nineteenth century we lived not only under the ceiling, but in a certain sense without much confidence of anybody *ever* making any sense of what is above. The prevailing view by mid-nineteenth century was that there is nothing up there; in fact, there is no "up there," at all.

By mid-nineteenth century Feuerbach had reduced all theology to anthro-

pology. As a result, most nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology is a combination of theology, psychology, anthropology, a little linguistics, but not *theology*—not the study of God, the divine, or the spiritual. Theology became the study of what people *think* about, *believe* in, dream about, pine for, get neurotic about, concerning God, but don't *know*.

By the end of the nineteenth century one can say that religion is really fiction. That's not to say that the religions have gone away. It is to say that they're not in charge any longer. The big thinkers seem to work mostly outside of religion. They may be interested in religion, but they're not speaking *within* religious knowledge—not Marx, not Freud, not Feuerbach, not Dostoyevsky, not Nietzsche, and one can go on saying “not” for most thinkers. Emerson, Kierkegaard, and Newman are among the very few really powerful, creative, religious figures of the nineteenth century. And there are some people in the twentieth century. But in general they are within a position that one twentieth-century philosopher refers to as having “died the death of a thousand qualifications.”

The Renaissance to the nineteenth century represents a development from *knowing* God to knowing *about* how God is beyond our knowledge. By the early twentieth century, it is all right to affirm that *maybe* God is, but it's sort of *as if* God is, or as if God were. You can make such a conditional statement, but these have to be seen as contrary-to-fact conditions.

By the end of the century, about 1885, Nietzsche's superman, Zarathustra, announced that God is dead. In the story, he comes in, and he's looking for God, and they all laugh. “Oh, God,” they say, “is he lost?” And Zarathustra says, “We have killed him.”

For the twentieth century, the death of God is a *cultural* fact. The culture no longer can sustain the idea, the thesis, the belief, the conviction, that God is alive. Some people can, but they're outside the dominant intellectual paradigm; religious believers are remnants, survivors, leftovers. Intellectually, philosophically, as seen by the culture, believers are the losers. The people who *know* recognize that God is dead. Therefore, anything is possible, and we build from there. So says the culture that is defined by philosophical, scientific thinking.

Where is the esoteric in all of this? Esoteric is a path, along with the artistic and the scientific, which influences philosophy. But in general the esoteric did not have sufficient *presence* or sufficient *resources* to influence the modern Western headlong race into agnostic, if not atheistic, materialism.

What happened in America? Here, we can see the same process of dilution of experience by the cultural ascendancy of materialistic thinking and so-called provable knowledge.

In America, Emerson was a high point in the nineteenth century. Everybody who was awake knew his essays on “Self Reliance” and “Nature.” Thinking people knew that Emerson was doing something very important, but Emerson’s Swedenborg is a very humanistic, reduced Swedenborg. He’s a Swedenborg that an American, an urbane literary person, can handle. Emerson doesn’t say anything about Swedenborg’s *disclosures* concerning a spiritual world; he recognizes Swedenborg the way that he recognizes Plato, as an extraordinary figure. But there isn’t any affirmation in a systematic, argumentative, expository way of Swedenborg’s esoteric disclosures.

In contrast to the main current of the nineteenth century which more or less reduced thinking and reality to the human and naturalistic plane, Emerson did see *into* things. He recognized Swedenborg as a *seer*. Emerson understands that it is possible to have one’s own thoughts which are somehow one’s own and universal at the same time.

What happens then when Emerson gets translated into the next generation of philosophers—who are really very good philosophers and much better than, in some respects, the European philosophers of the same period. William James and Josiah Royce are major, towering figures, imaginative, and interested in religion.

James’s entire career is characterized by an intense interest in religion and in psychical experience. But he himself admits to no esoteric experience or insight; he remains a reporter and analyst.

Similarly with Royce—a Christian philosopher capable of original, powerful, intuitive thinking. Royce does not treat the esoteric as such; there are fewer personal moments than in Emerson, just as in Emerson there are fewer revelations than in Swedenborg. Thinking is becoming more and more distant from esoteric sources.

But it gets much worse. At least James had a real understanding of religious experience—beautiful, rich, imaginative, even systematic. Royce had a wonderful sense of the incarnation, of Christianity as a dialogical and loyal community.

The next generation is dominated by John Dewey, who, in a certain sense, is a religious figure. Dewey comes down out of Vermont, steeped in Christian social gospel. He is an almost innately good person, as though his goodness were from a childhood illumined by moral and religious life. His was a wonderful, creative, generous, constructive life. In his philosophy itself, however, there is no room for any serious religious disclosure. We don’t even get ordinary religious philosophy, much less something esoteric. After Dewey, it continues to get worse, because Dewey at least has a commitment to the human community: freedom, democracy, the individual, shared knowledge.

By the end of the second World War, British philosophy, analytic philosophy—which is how to be smarter and smarter about less and less—had taken over ninety percent of philosophical education in America.

The ten percent that is left is a mix: part phenomenology, a technical philosophy from Europe; Marxism, which has always been marginal in America; Asian and comparative philosophy, also kept to the side.

In the last ten years within organized, professional philosophy, there has been a weakening of this dominance by analytic philosophy. Philosophers are paying more attention to some of the great figures of the history of philosophy, and even the great figures of American philosophy, especially James, Royce, Dewey, Whitehead, and Peirce, but, of course, not Emerson.

In the language of professional philosophy Emerson is “soft.” Professors of philosophy see “real” philosophy as hard, masculine, tough, pugilistic. In their view, philosophy should be like science. They see disciplines or subdisciplines, such as philosophy of literature, philosophy of imagination, philosophy of love, philosophy of relations as sort of embarrassing and ineffectual. To them, that’s the feminine stuff—soft. It can’t *prove* anything, so that’s not on the cutting edge. They have forgotten that philosophy was originally about *living* and love of wisdom.

It will be several generations before we convince the male philosophers that they have missed the perspective of all that falls within the concept of feminine.

Given all this, what are the possibilities for esotericism? I would suggest that the only chance of philosophers taking seriously anything within the esoteric tradition would be if the people in the esoteric tradition, that is to say the people making those claims, had experiences which were noetic and productive.

If we fail at knowledge, we fall back on belief. If an exponent of esoteric teachings, such as those of Swedenborg, asks the philosophical community, “Do you want to see our beliefs?”—and Swedenborgians can point to thirty volumes of them—such a question will be greeted by disinterest. Philosophy is expected to eschew beliefs. Faith and beliefs are thought to be left over from the Middle Ages.

Belief is what you do when you fall off or haven’t climbed the “high road.” The high road is for thinking; if you’re not on the high road of thinking and knowledge, you will not be effective in philosophic discussion.

Philosophy, in fact, is also full of unacknowledged beliefs, but we must know a lot about the philosopher’s *presumed* knowing to show that it is believing.

So it’s really uphill. You have to know Swedenborg, and then you have to know philosophy. In order to show that Swedenborg has a better philosophy

than what's out there you have to have *knowing* experiences which could be the envy of philosophy. That is very hard to do. I'd like to do that, too, along the lines laid down by Rudolf Steiner's *Knowing Higher Worlds*. We are all in this game together.



I want to close by commenting on how the "New Age" fits in. New Age is not a philosophical movement. It *may* have philosophical implications, but most of the people involved in new-age consciousness are not committed to thinking as such. Much of the New-Age exploration is seeking spiritual fast-food enlightenment.

On the positive side New-Age people do at least know the extent of damage wrought by modern Western thinking. They are already way ahead of people who want to continue the arms race, to perpetuate the incredible inequality around the globe, or those who don't notice that people are starving or oppressed. New-Age people are way ahead of everyone who is oblivious. Exponents of the New Age also know that no answers to problems of living are coming out of mainstream philosophy anymore. New Agers are highly experiential.

Young New-Age people seem to enjoy especially significant spiritual experiences. Often, after I have given a lecture, young people come up to me afterwards. They wait until a lot of people leave; it is usually the last two or three who say, "This is what happened to me." They are not trying to impress anybody. They have had an experience and want to know what it means—where to go from here. They want to know where to find a teacher, who can help them with their experience. They are not looking for a philosophy, but rather for a spiritually sensitive and effective way of dealing with their deep transformative experiences.

What we need to do, it seems to me, is to write philosophically able accounts of what the world or the universe must be like, such that these people can be having these experiences.

This would be very different from saying, "This is what Swedenborg said." We have to know what Swedenborg said and then say to a person having an experience, "I think I know something about the world—it's a little derivative, maybe, but at least I have done the kind of spiritual esoteric research which enables me to know something about your experience."

Does New-Age teaching include Swedenborg? I would say that it is probably more possible for a person of New-Age consciousness to make sense of Swedenborg than a person who's still running after goods and services or holding to one of the varieties of materialism. They see the possibility of knowing at another level. There is something to be seen outside the cave, and

it is possible to do so, though most exponents of the New Age probably do not see spiritually all that well, and maybe we don't either. But nevertheless there is that openness; perhaps not enough discipline, but there is at least this openness to more, to a deeper, to a higher, to another level of reality.

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