

## What matters the most? – A Swedenborgian perspective

### 1. Is God real?

Since this is the very first one in the series of 10 special services, I might need to give you a little explanation on why and how it came into being. Just as many events in our life happen, it started with a simple request: can you incorporate more Swedenborgian theology in your Sunday messages?

As I was contemplating on it, I became curious to know what the most commonly asked religious and spiritual questions these days are. So, I did what we all do when we want to know about something: I googled it. And, I was positively surprised by my findings that many high school students and college students are asking serious and yet classical questions, such as who is God? what is salvation? what is heaven? and what does it mean to be religious? and etc. After reading a number of those lists, I chose ten topics, which are topics for the 10 special services.

To me, if I were to talk about “What matters to me the most?” the first topic has to be God because in experiencing and explaining who, what and how God is central to the reality that we as humans compose together. In here, the definition of God must not be limited to a particular religion or even form. Interchangeable words to God includes the Ultimate Reality, Supreme Being, the First Cause, the Being, Buddha and Dao. Therefore, it took me a long time to finalize in what format I might deliver this very message: A Swedenborgian perspective on the question – Is God real?

Such a big topic! If I were to tell you simply that I believe in God and God is real because I experience *my* God at every moment of my life. What would that mean to you? After all, it is yet another personal experience of God that is only real to another person.

The first option that I considered was to write rational and systematic statements borrowing insights from Karen Armstrong, especially from *The Case for God* and *A History of God*, and quoting many brilliantly written theological writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg. As I was re-reading these books and meditating upon the topic, one truth really dawned on to me: everything that I am reading about God is either written by means of another person’s intellectual capacity or experienced by another person in the vision and dreams or both. They are very well written statements of God who was real for them.

After another long consideration, I decided to simply share how and why I believe that God is real. This is yet another person’s experience, but at least it is my experience. How more authentic can I be than just telling you what is truly real to me? My life has been, so far, seeking, finding and relating to the

being and the concept of *God*. My journey includes a number of religions and philosophy: Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Christianity.

For a long time, I struggled with my findings that there always is a huge gap between the experiential God in my life and the conceptual God taught by the religious institutions, especially the Christian Church. It was only when I have encountered God of the Swedenborgian theology, I found peace and rest for my soul. Here, I met God who was and is indeed infinitely larger and wiser than my God who has been and still is real to me.

Today, I would like to share three stories from my life's journey that might highlight my journey of seeking, finding and relating to my God and three Swedenborgian perspectives that helped me to understand and accept my God to be truly real.

The first story happened when I was 7. At that time, I lived with my paternal grandparents. My parents were divorced when I was 3. Then, my mother took my sister and me with her. For 3 years, she took me to a couple of places, but never settled at any place. At last she sent me to her aunt who had two late teenage sons, one 19 and the other 17, who became the demons in my childhood nightmares for many years. I stayed with them for about 6 months, then was sent to live with the grandparents. At that time, I did not know why. After living with the grandparents for about a year, I became sick with a disease called mumps. After a few days of debate, my grandmother decided to take me to a hospital, which was about 5 miles away from our village. My grandparents were very frugal, so we walked to the hospital and walked back. That was 10 miles of walking for 7 years old boy who was sick.

In that night, I had a dream. In the dream, I was walking on the hill that was nearby my grandparents' field. Suddenly, I saw a tomb in the middle of the road. But, to my surprise, I was not shocked or afraid. Instead, I felt that I should get closer to the tomb. As I got closer to the tomb, suddenly it was torn apart in halves. Then, a being came out of it, and told me, "Don't worry, Junchol. I am your brother. I will take care of you from now on." Then, I woke up.

In the morning, I learned from grandmother that I had another half-brother who died at the age of 7 because of mumps, and was buried in some place in that hill! This was the very first time when I heard of him. Knowing that I actually had another half-brother who died when he was in my age, and now just contacted me somehow comforted me deeply. Strangely, I felt his presence around me afterwards wherever I went, and I was no longer afraid or lonely. The invisible and unknowable being was felt more real and reliable than real people, such as my parents and grandparents, who seemed always busy and occupied with issues of their own life.

My life at 7 was full of darkness and pains. I do not have a single good memory except the dream. I was asking questions like “why was I born?” or “Do I matter to anyone?” To understand why a seven years old boy might have felt like that you might need to know the background.

I told you that I did not know why my mother had to send me to the grandparents. Actually, she told me something, which I could not understand at that time, “you are too much of a burden to me.” That’s what told me. Later, grandmother told me the truth, which I never believed until I was forced to face it, that my mother wanted to marry a man, but in order to do so she should not have a son. My father was already re-married to a woman who even refuse to look at me, and now my mother abandoned me so that she could re-marry.

To make the situation even worse at that time grandmother was always very angry and negligent of eating. Thus, there were many days that I only ate one meal for the day. Later, I discovered that my grandmother’s anger was due to the fact that her husband was living with another woman in a different village. The only person who could take care of me was in depth of her own agony and vanity that she did not care much about living.

Plus, in that small village where there were only 20 houses or so, I was the city-boy who was different. You may understand what children do to the one who is different.

In the middle of this dense darkness and hopelessness, I had the dream. And, the being, who claimed to be my brother, felt much more real and reliable than any human in the world! To me, this was my first encounter with the Being, whom now I address as my God. It was a curse to be in such a situation at such an age, but at the same time it was an amazing blessing to experience the divine presence at such an age when and where my mind was not colored by any religious teaching at all.

In the next story I am 18. I was a senior in high school and living with my maternal grandmother, who never liked me at all. One summer morning, I opened my eyes and realized that I do not feel any strength in my body. All I felt was heaviness as if my body was sinking in to a bottomless hole. It took me about 5-10 minutes to move a single finger. About an hour or so later, I was able to get up. As it continued for a few days, I decided to tell my mother about it. Then, she took me to a hospital. After a long examination, the doctor told us that there is nothing wrong with my body. But, the problem continued. My mother took me to a few other doctors. But, the results were the same. At last, she heard about a very famous doctor of eastern medicine. One afternoon, we visited him. He knew that I am in trouble by simply looking at me. After the examination, what he told me shocked me and comforted me at

the same time. He said, "This is a rare illness that is caused by irregular movements of the heart. I treated another man with the same problem about 2 years, but he only lived about 6 months." I was comforted by the fact that there was a real problem in my body, but was shocked that I might have only 6 months to live. He prescribed a very special kind of medicine that included a kind of poison. He gave us very detailed and specific introductions on how to take the medicine.

When we arrived at home with two big bags of the medicine, my mother insisted that I should take one immediately. So, I took one. It was the bitterest thing that I have ever tasted in my life! The next day, mother took me to a strange place. She took me to a house, more specifically a room in the house. Inside the room was a woman who was treating people with acupuncture needles. Mother told me that the lady heals people, not by the medical method, but by faith. This was puzzling to me with a huge degree of uncertainty. I have been active in the church youth league since I was 14. But, I have never felt neither the realness of God or Jesus nor the presence of something special in the church. In a strange way, I often felt the presence of my God when I was not in the church. As a matter of fact, at that time I have concluded that God of the Christian Church is either dead as Nietzsche proclaimed or never even existed at all. I was deeply in to Buddhist meditation and Confucian philosophy. But, I went in to the room just to please my mother.

I sat before the lady when it was my turn. She looked at me and said, "If you believe, you will be healed. Do you believe?" "Yes," I replied without really knowing what I was saying, "I believe." She put the little needles on all over my upper body, and then told me to pray. First, I did not know to whom to pray because I realized that I did really believe in realness of Jesus or the Holy Spirit to whom I was taught to pray. I thought to myself, "How could I pray to the one whose presence I have never felt?" So, I decided just to pray. I do not recall, exactly what I said in prayer, but it started with something like, "If you truly exist and hear me, I believe that you could heal me..." I had 3 visions that day! One of which is the reason for sharing this long story with you:

In the vision, I was lifted up in high, perhaps even higher than the clouds. Then, suddenly an old man with white beard appeared right above my head. He was much bigger than me, almost infinitely bigger. Yet, his presence was not threatening at all. Rather it was very comforting. As I looked at his face, I saw a smile on his face. He did not say a word, but put his right hand on my head and gently nodded. Then, I knew that I am healed and will be fine.

As I opened my eyes, I noticed that the healing lady was looking at me. She smiled at me and said, "He visited you, right?" She told me and my mother, the one who visited me was the Holy Spirit about whom Jesus promised. I did not

disagree with her at that moment. But, I was not sure that the Being in my vision was indeed the Holy Spirit or Jesus or God the Father of the Old Testament. It took me a long time to understand the reason for my discomfort on identifying the Being whom I felt as to be the Holy Spirit or Jesus or God the Father: for many years I struggled with the name and concepts, the Holy Spirit, Jesus or God the Father, because there was something unfamiliar and foreign to me in these names and concept, but the Being whose presence I felt was deeply familiar, friendly and almost intrinsic. Many years later, I fully realized that the unfamiliar and foreign parts were the details developed and added by other humans based on their experience and understanding of their God. When we returned home, I threw away the eastern medicine, and prayed to my God.

The third story happened in the year 2006. 2006 was a very significant year in my spiritual journey. This was the year when I perceived the confirmation of my calling to a ministry. Also, this was the year when I decided to quit ministry, and pursue a career that would pay better. And, finally this was the year when I had the vision of my God for real, and heard the voice confirming that I am called for a ministry. Obviously, I cannot tell you all the detail, so here is the summary:

1. Right in the middle of the Easter Sunday service as I was walking toward the congregation to deliver the Easter message, I perceived that I saw this scene before. Then, I realized that this is exactly the same as the dream I had long time ago in 1993 back in Korea!
2. In June, I was in a hospital emergency room because Heejoung, my wife, was just admitted into it. As I looked outside the room, I saw the room where Roiy was in just a week ago. It was such a blessing that Cuyahoga County in Ohio had a wonderful medical care system for the low income families. But at the same time, whenever I need to use the medical facility, I am reminded of that I am a very poor man who can provide the medical need for my family only with the county's assistance. On top of that, at every three months I was required to meet an officer of the county to confirm that I am still very poor and need the county's assistance. After doing this for 2 and a half years, I felt, "This is it. I had enough of it." So, in my prayer I told my God, "God, I am truly sorry, but this is it. I need to find another career. It is not because I have become faithless, but because my need has increased with the family, wife and son." So, secretly, I confirmed that I am going to find another job in August.
3. In July, I was attending the annual gathering of Swedenborgians in US. It was in Holland, Michigan. For the first three days were usually the meeting of the Council of Ministers, which ends with a communion. On the third day, after I took the communion bread and wine, I sat down on my seat. As soon as I closed my eyes, I saw a dot of bright light, which grew or moved toward me

very fast. Soon, I was in the light. Then, I heard the voice of my God, “Junchol, you did not get it, did you?” I answered, “About what?” The voice asked me once again, “Junchol, you do not get it, do you?” Then, I saw as if seeing a movie, the scenes of both my son and my wife becoming ill and being in the hospital beds. Then, I said, “I get it, God.” Yet, I thought to myself, “What do I mean by that?” Then, it all came to me. In that moment of seconds, I fully realized and understood what was going on with me, why and what I was supposed to do! Then, God told me, “Junchol, they are my gifts to you. You do not take care of them, but I do. You do what you should do, then I will protect them from all harm.”

These are my experiences and the reason why I believe that my God is real. Why to emphasize to say my God, instead of saying God? From my own spiritual journey, and from reading Swedenborg, I am convinced that God who is experienced by each human is slightly different from one another, not because God is unstable or God is made of human experiences, but because the quality of receiving minds is different. It is like putting your hand in the Pacific Ocean. There is only one Pacific Ocean, but your experience of the ocean is not the same from one place to another. Let alone the fact that there is no single human who can experience the whole Pacific Ocean at once.

This is the first Swedenborgian perspective on the reality of God that I would like to point out today:

**The reality of God is personal and individual that is felt, perceived and experienced to each individual is compatible with what each individual feels, perceives and experiences to be real.**

To those who might think that “well then. I can make my own God in whatever way I want,” I must insist that the reality of God is not something that we forge and/or desire, but something that we discover and find. The Ultimate Reality of God as the Ground of All Being is infinite and limitless. We cannot grasp or comprehend the whole nature of God. And, that is fine. But, there must be the common ground on which our experiences of God could be aligned together. To Swedenborg, this common ground is nothing but love. This is how he insists in Divine Love and Wisdom:

Love is our life. For most people, the existence of love is a given, but the nature of love is a mystery (DLW #1)

Since life and love are one and the same, it follows that the Lord, being life itself, is love itself. (DLW #4)

Here comes the second Swedenborgian perspective on the reality of God that I would like to point out today:

**God is life itself and love itself, which is expressed and manifested by means of wisdom.**

In regard to what it means to love, this is what Swedenborg says:

Divine love and wisdom cannot fail to be and to be manifested in others that it has created. The hallmark of love is not loving ourselves but loving others and being united to them through love. The hallmark of love is also being loved by others because this is how we are united.

Truly, the essence of all love is to be found in union, in the life of love that we call joy, delight, pleasure, sweetness, blessedness, contentment, and happiness. The essence of love is that what is ours should belong to someone else. Feeling the joy of someone else as joy within ourselves—that is loving. Feeling our joy in others, though, and not theirs in ourselves is not loving. That is loving ourselves, while the former is loving our neighbor. DLW #47

The third Swedenborgian perspective on the reality of God that I would like to point out today is that:

**No one can be compelled to believe and love in matters of religion, but each should guide oneself and sometimes compel oneself.**

Swedenborg explains this in Divine Providence #129:

Everyone recognizes that none of us can be compelled to think what we do not want to think or to intend what we think we do not want to intend. So we cannot be compelled to believe what we do not believe, and certainly not anything that we do not want to believe; or to love what we do not love, and certainly not anything that we do not want to love. Our spirit or mind has complete freedom to think, intend, believe, and love. This freedom comes to us by an inflow from the spiritual world, which does not compel us. Our spirit or mind is actually in that world. The freedom does not flow in from the physical world, which accepts the inflow only when the two worlds are in unison.

[2] We can be compelled to say that we think and intend something or that we believe and love something, but unless this is or becomes a matter of our own desire and our consequent reasoning, it is not something that we really think, intend, believe, and love. We can also be compelled to speak in favor of religion and to act according to religion, but we cannot be compelled to think in its favor as a matter of our own faith and to intend it as a matter of our own love. In countries where justice and judgment are cherished, everyone is obliged not to speak against religion or to violate it in action, but still no one can be compelled to think and intend in its favor. This is because each of us has a freedom to think in sympathy with hell and to intend in its favor, or to think in sympathy with heaven and to intend in its favor.

Still, our reason tells us what the quality is of the one and of the other and what lot awaits the one and what lot awaits the other. Our ability to intend on the basis of reason is our capacity to choose and to decide.

These are my experiences and reasoning why my God is real to me. Yet, should this be the real that you should believe in God? I honestly do not believe so. As I have found my God in such a way that is real and understandable to me, I urge you all to seek and find your God who is real and understandable to you.

Let us remember one thing, though, your God and my God are simply parts of the true God whose essence is love.

Blessings,

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