

SEVEN ARE THE STEPS TO HEAVEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SWEDENBORG AND SIMNANI

Cassie Lipowitz*

Though Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and ‘Ala’ ad-dawla as-Simnani (1261–1336) lived in very different times and contexts, a close reader may observe many striking similarities present in their exegetical works on the Bible and the Qur’an. While a more thorough comparison of the two mystics’ ideas would undoubtedly prove valuable, such an endeavor would require extensive analysis, which falls beyond the scope of the present paper. As such, I will confine the present study to a comparison of Swedenborg’s exegesis of Genesis 1:1–2:3, in which he describes the stages of spiritual regeneration, with Simnani’s conception of seven spiritual stages, each of which corresponds with one of the Qur’anic prophets. In proceeding, two questions will be of particular interest. First, in a broader vein, how do Swedenborg and Simnani’s spiritual hermeneutics deviate from “normative” readings of their respective sacred texts? And second, to what extent do the stages described by Swedenborg and Simnani follow a corresponding pattern? Through a detailed analysis of Swedenborg’s states of regeneration and Simnani’s stages, I hope to demonstrate an analogous pattern of spiritual development as envisioned by both mystics; in addition, I will show that both Swedenborg and Simnani developed strikingly similar conceptions of spiritual hermeneutics, in which both the text and the individual seeker are perceived as “multilayered” entities. In this approach, I am indebted to the French scholar Henry Corbin (1903–1978), particularly his essay “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics” that was published posthumously in the collection *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*. Corbin’s work has much influenced my own thinking and comparative methodology in the present essay. Corbin also addressed the spiritual hermeneutics of ‘Ala’ ad-dawla as-Simnani, both in *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (cited extensively in the present paper), and his multivolume masterpiece, *En Islam Iranien*. In

* clipowitz@ses.gtu.edu

the present paper, I have endeavored to build upon Corbin's pathbreaking work by setting forth a comparison of the spiritual hermeneutics of Swedenborg and Simnani. While Swedenborg and Simnani have both received scholarly attention, no prior work has yet addressed a comparative approach to the two mystics' writings.

Before delving into Swedenborg's spiritual exegesis of the first chapter of Genesis, it will be helpful to provide a brief biographical sketch. Emanuel Swedenborg was born in 1688 in Stockholm to Jesper Swedberg and Sara Behm. Perhaps due to his father's religious vocation, Swedenborg describes his childhood as a time in which he "was constantly engaged in thoughts on God, salvation, and the spiritual sufferings of men."¹ The third eldest of nine children, Swedenborg began attending university at Uppsala (where his father had held a position as faculty of theology) at the age of twelve. Having successfully defended his dissertation in 1709, Swedenborg left the following year for England, to seek out opportunities for further scientific study.² In the following years, Swedenborg proved to be a remarkable thinker in the natural sciences, physiology, and optics, as well as astronomy and mathematics, and put his scientific knowledge to use in drawing up plans for various inventions, including a submarine, a drawbridge, and a flying carriage, amongst others. In addition, Swedenborg published various scientific works, treating subjects such as cosmology and mineralogy, as well as upholding his position and responsibilities within the Swedish House of Nobles and Sweden's Board of Mines.³

In spite of a brilliant career in the sciences, however, Swedenborg's life was to take a dramatic turn during his early 50's. In 1738, in his fiftieth year, Swedenborg set out to find the seat of the soul in the human body—a popular scientific venture in his day. The result of his efforts produced a multi-volume work called (as it was often translated into English) *Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (in the original Latin, *Oeconomia Regni Animalis*—"Dynamics of the Soul's Domain"). Yet, even after scrupulous and careful research, the answers he tirelessly sought remained elusive, and, perhaps in part due to this seemingly futile quest, Swedenborg gradually fell into a

¹ George F. Dole and Robert H. Kirven, *A Scientist Explores Spirit: A Biography of Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

cycle alternating between states of elation, depression, and intense self-criticism. In 1743–44, Swedenborg began to keep a dream journal, in which he recorded strange dreams, many of which reflected the internal, spiritual struggle and crisis that was building within.⁴ Stephen Larsen, in his introduction to the book *Emanuel Swedenborg: Universal Human and Soul Body Interaction*, posits an intriguing explanation for this crisis:

Swedenborg was truly a modern thinker in that he insisted that his inherited theistic concept of the universe be brought into relationship with empirical science. He may have been incapable of that cognitive segregation which allows many people to keep their commonsense knowledge and felt beliefs apart. But in the attempt to reconcile these opposing poles of power, he stepped into the field of the very Energy he sought to know, and underwent the ordeal of personal metamorphosis that often comes to those who do so.⁵

Swedenborg's spiritual crisis reached a crescendo on an April night in 1744, at which time he underwent an intense visionary experience of Christ. This vision, along with a second vision the following year, gifted him with a new commission: to "explain to men the spiritual meaning of Scripture."⁶ Throughout the remainder of his life, Swedenborg dedicated himself to this task, producing voluminous exegetical and theological works. His magnum opus, *Arcana Coelestia* ("Heavenly Mysteries"), an eight-volume spiritual commentary on Genesis and Exodus, was published in London between 1749–1756. It is in this work that Swedenborg addresses the spiritual states of humanity, and (though not as extensively) the spiritual states of growth (or "regeneration") that individuals undergo.⁷

In order to understand Swedenborg's exegesis of Genesis, it is necessary to first offer a brief outline of his doctrine of correspondences. After

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31–37.

⁵ George F. Dole, ed., *Emanuel Swedenborg: Universal Human and Soul and Body Interaction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 2.

⁶ Dole and Kirven, *A Scientist Explores Spirit*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

Swedenborg's visionary experiences, he turned his full attention to interpreting Scripture—not in order to elucidate its literal, historical meaning, but rather to decipher its esoteric, “inner sense.” Ernst Benz, in his biography *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason*, explains Swedenborg's approach:

He used the allegorical method to harmonize the content of his intuitive vision of the universe with the content of Scripture. This method stripped the words of Scripture of their historical, literal meaning and transformed all figures, persons, events, and images into “meanings” and “types,” containing a spiritual and metaphysical sense. This method was developed in his doctrine of correspondences.⁸

Swedenborg posited that there are three states or “realms” of being, each one successively further removed from God and the original divine understandings: the celestial (divine), the spiritual, and the natural. The law of correspondences states that there is a relationship between these three realms, such that it is possible to know what is celestial through properly looking at what exists within the natural world. Benz elaborates upon this idea:

The relationship between the divine, spiritual, and natural realms is the relationship between archetype, likeness, and shadow. Every natural object is a representation and the correspondence of a spiritual and divine thing. It does not only represent itself but is a shadow indicating its spiritual image. The spiritual image is in turn the representation of a divine archetype. All things in the lower world proclaim the higher world by reflecting the divine archetype in shadow form. Divine archetype, spiritual likeness, and earthly image relate to each other like a living face, mirror reflection, and silhouette.⁹

It is only in seeing echoes of the spiritual within the natural, and echoes of the divine within the spiritual, that one may progress.

⁸ Ernst Benz, *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2002), 352.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Indeed, it is in rightly understanding the relationship between these realms that one achieves spiritual growth and understanding. Whether one is reading Scripture, or the “book of nature,” Swedenborg seems to suggest, one must learn how to see these correspondences. As Benz further articulates,

Every speck of dust preaches the mysteries of heaven. Whoever possesses the key to the correspondences of things can learn the truth of heaven from the dust and be borne from the heavy earth to the realm of heavenly freedom and truth on the wings of vision. A divine mystery slumbers in every least thing. If one could only unlock it, then the stones would preach of God and the transient world would reveal the wonders of immortality.¹⁰

According to Swedenborg, the Bible contains the sacred Word—the divine truth that has descended from the highest realm into the natural world, where it is presented in a form that human beings may apprehend. However, the Scripture itself contains levels of meaning, with the literal sense acting as a “sentinel to the truth hidden within.”¹¹ As Martin Lamm notes in *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought*, Swedenborg identifies three levels of Scriptural meaning, which accord with the biblical trinity of body, soul, and mind.¹² True understanding—that is, understanding of the deeper levels of truth within Scripture—is only granted to those who understand the correspondences between these three levels.

It is, indeed, through an understanding of these correspondences that Swedenborg interprets the biblical stories. Turning now to Swedenborg’s exegesis of the six days of creation in his work *Arcana Coelestia*, we shall see that he draws correspondences between the outer events, characters, descriptions, etc., and their inner signification. According to Swedenborg, this account does not refer to the creation of the earth, but rather, the spiritual “regeneration” of the human being. As Lars Bergquist explains,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹² Martin Lamm, *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), 226.

each day of creation symbolizes a further step in the individual's spiritual journey: "The six days correspond to the same number of spiritual states on the way to life with God which results from receptivity to the divine love."¹³ Bergquist goes on to add that in *Arcana Coelestia*, as in all of Swedenborg's theological works, the Latin term for spiritual states (*status spiritualis*), is "...an essential concept in regard to human qualities and insights. Our experiences, feelings, and actions are affected by our spiritual state of mind."¹⁴ As each individual grows more receptive to the divine love, he or she progresses through the spiritual states, or "days of creation."

On the first day of creation, God creates heaven and earth. For Swedenborg, heaven symbolizes the internal man, while earth symbolizes the external man.¹⁵ In the beginning, there is thick darkness; a void and an "emptiness" that covers all. This represents a state of human ignorance, which, according to Swedenborg, precedes regeneration. An initial movement, however, also occurs on the first day: the spirit of God hovers over the waters. In addition, God creates light, and then separates the light from the darkness, calling them "day" and "night." Swedenborg sees this as the beginning of a separation of (and battle between) opposites—the two most basic of which are good and evil.¹⁶

On the second day, the battle between opposites intensifies as a "vault" is created to separate the waters above and the waters below. For Swedenborg, this signifies a further demarcation between the external and internal man: "The internal man is called an 'expanse'; the knowledges which are in the internal man are called 'the waters above the expanse'; and the memory-knowledges of the external man are called 'the waters beneath the expanse.'"¹⁷ Before regeneration, the individual is not even aware of the existence of this "internal" aspect within; only on the "second

¹³ Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Secret: The Meaning and Significance of the Word of God* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 2005), 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg trans. John Clowes, *Arcana Coelestia*, (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998), §16.

¹⁶ Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Secret*, 249.

¹⁷ Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, §24.1.

day” of regeneration does this become quite apparent. Regarding this problem, Bergquist writes,

He [the individual] has become aware of his dual nature: he consists of an outer man—the earth—where knowledge comes by means of his earthly senses; and at the same time he has an inner self—the firmament—with an awareness of and insight into the existence of divine good and truth. The waters under the firmament are the knowledge belonging to the old, outer man, while the waters above this canopy are the inner concepts of the new man, now being born.¹⁸

Thus, it is on the second day that what Swedenborg refers to as “remains” (knowledge of faith that exists within the internal man) begin to show themselves more fully within the individual’s field of awareness.

On the third day, dry lands are formed that produce vegetation. Swedenborg refers to these plants as “tender herbs,” from which, eventually, arise both the “herb bearing seed” and the “tree bearing fruit.” Swedenborg explicates the symbolism and signification more fully when he writes,

When the “earth,” or man, has been thus prepared to receive celestial seeds from the Lord, and to produce something of what is good and true, then the Lord first causes some tender thing to spring forth, which is called the “tender herb”; then something more useful, which again bears seed in itself, and is called the “herb yielding seed”; and at length something good which becomes fruitful, and is called the “tree bearing fruit, whose seed is in itself,” each according to its own kind.¹⁹

The “herb yielding seed” may be seen as the seed of true faith, which has begun to readily grow in the individual in this third state. This faith brings forth repentance in the seeker, as well as works of piety and devotion. As such, the third state marks an important turning point: now the individual understands “...that the higher, God-given knowledge about truth and

¹⁸ Bergquist, *Swedenborg’s Secret*, 250.

¹⁹ Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, §29.1.

good reaches him from the inner man. There is now a readiness to receive higher insights that root themselves in man and then grow."²⁰ However, Swedenborg notes that faith is not yet complete at this stage, for the individual still believes those insights arise from himself (an understanding that issues forth from the outer man), rather than from God. As such, the faith cultivated in the third state may be seen as a harbinger of a more complete faith, yet to be realized.

This faith is further perfected on the fourth day, at which time two lights, the sun and the moon, as well as the stars, are created. For Swedenborg, these celestial bodies represent divine love and faith; the sun corresponds with love and the celestial, which, in turn, illuminates the moon (faith). At this stage, it may be said that the individual's faith is exponentially deepened, since it is now illuminated by love. As such, this fourth state also marks an important departure from the previous three: now, the individual has begun to realize that all goodness, love, and faith, arise not from *himself*, but from God. This reorientation—insofar as it instills in the seeker a realization of the inseparability between wisdom (associated with knowledge and understanding) and good works (associated with the will and love)—is a crucial turning point.²¹

What was begun on the fourth day continues on the fifth day. The individual, illuminated by the "twin lights" of faith, is now truly "alive." As such, he or she becomes "animated"—a "living soul" in a deeply symbolic and meaningful sense. For Swedenborg, this new animation is symbolized by the creation of the birds of the air and the fish of the sea that arise on the fifth day: "Now that he is vivified by love and faith, and believes that the Lord works all the good that he does and all the truth that he speaks, he is compared first to the 'creeping things of the water,' and to the 'fowls which fly above the earth,' and also to 'beasts,' which are all animate things, and are called 'living souls.'"²² In this fifth state, the inner man comes to the fore, now dominating the outer, and thus, knowledge and wisdom flow much more freely through him. As Bergquist puts it, "He [the individual] no longer has himself as center, being in the state

²⁰ Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Secret*, 250.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

²² Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, §39.2.

where everything is directed to divine purposes. The biblical text speaks of the creation of fish and birds, commanded to be fruitful and multiply. God-given knowledge is endless; one thing known leads to another by inner, hidden connections."²³

On the sixth day, it is said that humanity—both the male and the female—are created in the image of God. This has a very deep significance for Swedenborg, insofar as it symbolizes a joining or “marriage” of two opposites: the male, representing understanding and wisdom, and the female, representing love and will. The union of these two, created in the divine image, thus signifies a “marriage” of the faculties within the individual who has reached the sixth stage. Bergquist eloquently explains the symbolic significance of this joining of male and female: “For the spiritual man [individual] the union of these two powers [wisdom and love] is a ‘marriage’ in which new insights are constantly born.”²⁴ Swedenborg further illuminates this idea by referencing the parable of the mustard seed in the Gospel of Matthew. As he interprets the inner meaning of the parable,

A “grain of mustard seed” is man’s good before he becomes spiritual, which is “the least of all seeds,” because he thinks that he does good of himself, and what is of himself is nothing but evil. But as he is in a state of regeneration, there is something of good in him, but it is the least of all. At length as faith is joined with love it grows larger, and becomes an “herb”; and lastly, when the conjunction is completed, it becomes a “tree,” and then the “birds of the heavens” (in this passage also denoting truths, or things intellectual) “build their nests in its branches,” which are memory-knowledges.²⁵

Thus, on the sixth day, the individual becomes a “spiritual” human being, and is well on the way to reaching the state of “celestial” human being which corresponds with the seventh day—the Sabbath or the day of rest.

²³ Bergquist, *Swedenborg’s Secret*, 252.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

²⁵ Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, §55.3–4.

On the seventh and final day, God rests, satisfied with the creation. This constitutes the highest state of perfection for the individual—a state in which there is complete union between his or her inner and outer selves. Furthermore, whereas in the sixth state, the individual is described by Swedenborg as an “image” of God, in the seventh state, he or she becomes a “likeness.” Now, completely aligned with God’s will, so as to be scarcely differentiated from it, the celestial human being finds rest and peace: “Such is the quality of the celestial man that he acts not according to his own desire, but according to the good pleasure of the Lord, which is his ‘desire.’ Thus he enjoys internal peace and happiness.”²⁶ Thus, the seventh day constitutes the pinnacle of the regenerative process, in which the individual, having undergone a complete transformation in the previous six stages, is now renewed in his or her celestial aspect.

Now that we have surveyed Swedenborg’s treatment of the stages of regeneration, we may turn our attention to a consideration of Simnani. As Jamal J. Elias recounts in his work *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Ala’ ad-dawla as-Simnani*, Simnani was born in 1261 in a small village near Simnan, in the Southwestern province of present-day Iran. He—somewhat like Swedenborg’s own background—descended from a wealthy aristocratic family and was groomed, from an early age, to fulfill a position within the Ilkhanid royal court. A Sunni Muslim, Simnani’s formative education consisted of lessons in the Islamic rational and traditional sciences, as well as preparation for bureaucratic life. Although not formally trained in the subtleties of Islamic mysticism as a child and adolescent, Elias conjectures that Simnani very likely encountered several Sufis during these years: Sayyid Ibrahim-i Simnani (himself a member of the Simnani family) as well as a number of wandering dervishes.²⁷

At fifteen, Simnani joined the royal court, but it was in his twenty-fourth year that he underwent an experience that would ultimately change the trajectory of his life and work: Simnani, participating in a battle, experienced a profound mystical encounter as he uttered the battle-cry, *Allahu akbar!* (“God is greater”). This mystical experience, along with two

²⁶ Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, §85.3.

²⁷ Jamal J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Ala’ ad-dawla as-Simnani* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 15–17.

others that followed soon after, provoked a profound change of heart in Simnani, and he abandoned his position at court for a more pious and ascetic lifestyle. During this period, Simnani turned more decisively to his religious education, studying both the legal sciences and the Islamic mystical tradition. In addition to his studies, Simnani adopted a very rigorous spiritual practice, praying as many as three hundred cycles (*rak'at*) of the *salat* (prayer) each day. The mystical experiences Simnani underwent impelled his search for spiritual guidance, and shortly thereafter he benefited from the presence and instruction of several Sufi teachers: first Sharaf ad-din al-Hanawayh, a wandering mystic, and later, al-Hanawayh's own teacher, Nur ad-din al-Isfara'ini.²⁸ Eventually, ten years after beginning his discipleship with al-Isfara'ini, Simnani himself was given permission to guide disciples of his own.²⁹ In addition to training spiritual disciples, Simnani, like Swedenborg, was also a prolific writer. Among his most highly regarded works are mystical treatises, and his commentary on the Qur'an. His writings and his role as a spiritual teacher should not be regarded in isolation, however; much of what he wrote served the very practical purpose of describing and outlining the stages of the spiritual path, as he himself had experienced it, in order to benefit his disciples.³⁰

To draw a brief sketch of the context within which Simnani envisions the seven stages of human perfection that constitute the path to God, we can see that he describes a very complex, Neo-Platonist vision of the cosmos consisting of a number of realms—from the Realm of Divinity, to the Realm of Essence, Omnipotence, Attributes, Sovereignty, Acts, Effects, and finally, the human realm.³¹ While the discussion of these various realms is quite intricate, Simnani's cosmological schema, at its more fundamental level, consists of two primary realms: a finite, earthly realm of manifestation and sense perception, which he refers to as *'alam al-afaq* or the "realm of horizons," and an infinite, spiritual realm called *'alam al-anfus* or the "realm of souls." Simnani's theology, like Swedenborg's,

²⁸ Ibid., 23–27.

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

³⁰ Ibid., 147.

³¹ For a more detailed explanation of these various realms and their attributes, see Elias' book, mentioned above.

emphasizes a system of correspondences between these two realms. As Elias summarizes, “His [Simnani’s] methodology is characterized by the construction of hierarchies and correspondences in the physical and the spiritual realms, and by emphasis upon the polarity and complementarity between these two realms.”³² For Simnani, the physical world of manifestation (the world of the senses) reflects the attributes of God, while the spiritual realm reflects the hidden (*batn*) aspects of the Divine.

Like many other Sufis, Simnani posits that the human being, while physically tied to the realm of horizons, also contains within his or her inner self the raw potential to ascend to spiritual perfection and esoteric understanding. As Elias writes, “. . . the human being is a composite of all the levels of divine manifestation in this world, and is therefore created in God’s image as mentioned in the canonical prophetic saying: ‘Indeed Allah, may He be exalted, created Adam in His image.’”³³ Yet, in contrast to most other Sufi cosmological and spiritual anthropological schemas, wherein the perfected human being (*insan-i kamil*) is seen as a microcosm of the spiritual realm, in Simnani’s schema, the spiritual realm, or the realm of souls, resides *within* the human being; indeed, it is depicted as a *macrocosm* of the physical world, the world of horizons. Thus, even though the physical world *appears* larger than the spiritual realm, on a metaphysical level, the former is smaller than the latter, and is, in truth, encompassed by the latter. In the same way, although the physical breast appears to encompass the heart, it is actually the heart (an aspect of the spiritual world) that contains the physical breast within itself.³⁴

For Simnani, the human body is the barrier between, but also the meeting place for the higher and lower forces present in the higher and lower levels of existence. The human body, containing within itself the potential for every level of divine manifestation, is composed of four elements: soul of earth, heart of water, inmost being of air, and spirit of fire. Simnani observes that when an individual is tied to the purely animalistic level of divine manifestation, he or she will incline toward the “animal” desires that correspond with these four elements and that exist

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid., 79.

³⁴ Ibid., 68–69.

purely on the level of sensual experience (this is the level in which many souls reside and remain during their natural lives). In other words, the soul will gravitate toward baseness and lethargy, the heart to worldly attachments, the inmost being to selfish, ego-driven love, and the spirit to arrogance and anger. Only when the individual begins to undergo the journey of spiritual maturity does he or she gradually acquire the spiritual light that ultimately illuminates these “animal” attributes and transforms them into true human characteristics.³⁵

According to Simnani, the transformative journey involves a maturation of the spiritual body—a process on the spiritual level that corresponds to the development of the physical body on the level of physical manifestation—through seven successive stages of development of the *lata'if*, the subtle substances. As Kristin Zahra Sands describes the *lata'if* in her book *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*, these subtle substances essentially constitute the spiritual faculties a human being may successively develop, but which remain latent until this “activation” process occurs. In Simnani’s system of correspondences, there is a direct correlation between the seven *lata'if* (subtle bodily substance, subtle soul substance, subtle heart substance, subtle innermost substance, subtle spirit substance, subtle mystery substance, and subtle reality substance) and seven of the Qur’anic prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad) whom Simnani refers to as the “prophets of your being.” Corbin, in his *History of Islamic Philosophy*, elucidates the inner significance of Simnani’s correspondences as follows:

Just as Schiller was to speak of “the stars of your destiny” which are within you, al-Simnani spoke of the “prophets of your being,” thereby relating each element which emanates from one of the prophets of the Biblical and Quranic tradition to one of the centres of the subtle physiology typified respectively by one of these prophets. The elements of prophethood must be read and understood on these levels of “inner history.”³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 80.

³⁶ Henry Corbin trans. *Liadain Sherrard*, with Phillip Sherrard, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993), 300.

In the same way that Swedenborg reads Scripture for its inner significations, Simnani suggests that it is in perceiving these correspondences and applying them to an esoteric (in contrast to an exoteric) reading of the Qur'an, that one progresses along the mystical path. As Sands articulates,

Knowledge and deeper understanding of the Qur'an, as well as the ability to benefit from it, requires the discovery of the connection between the horizons (*afaq*) and the souls (*anfus*), between the prophets and the subtle substances of man. Man has the potential to develop spiritually from a speaking animal to the bearer of the trust of God. At each level of his development, he becomes the possessor of a new subtle substance (*latifa*) . . .³⁷

According to Simnani, the traveler on the path should read the Qur'an with special attentiveness to the correspondences between the prophets and the *lata'if*, as this will reveal hidden levels of meaning, otherwise concealed:

Whenever you read a part of the Book [the Qur'an] addressing Adam, listen to it with your subtle bodily substance (*latifa qalabiyya*). Apply your bodily substance practically in what has been commanded and prohibited for it, and take heed in the similitudes struck for it (*bi-mal duriba mathal lahu*). Know with certainty that the inner sense (*batn*) of this Book is connected to you in [the realm of] souls (*anfus*) just as its external sense is connected to Adam in [the realm of] horizons (*afaq*), to enable you to benefit from the Speech of Truth and so that you may be one of those who read [the Qur'an] fresh and new.³⁸

As the subtle substances successively become active in a traveler on the path, he or she will gradually develop a deeper understanding of esoteric realities of the Qur'anic and, by means of this knowledge and experiential understanding, ascend toward the highest state of perfection possible for humanity.

³⁷ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The first stage, for Simnani, consists of the subtle bodily substance, and corresponds with the prophet Adam. The possessor of this subtle substance is identified as “man” or “humanity” (*insan*), but has not yet matured spiritually—he or she has not yet become “civilized” in a moral or religious sense. As such, the only aspect that separates this human being from animals is his or her ability to speak.³⁹ As Corbin articulates in his work *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, this first subtle substance, identified with the “Adam of your being,” is almost identical with the physical body insofar as it comprises the “embryonic mold” of the new, acquired subtle body. The “densest” of the subtle substances, the subtle bodily substance corresponds with the color black (or grey) and thus, darkness.⁴⁰

The second stage, comprised of the subtle substance of soul, corresponds with the prophet Noah. In this stage of development, the seeker matures into “civilized man” (*al-insan al-madani*), and the subtle perceptive faculty of soul is activated. The individual who reaches this stage of development resembles Noah, for just as Noah confronts his people over their iniquities, so too, the soul confronts the baser appetites that overruled it in the previous stage. Elias distinguishes the subtle soul substance from the appetitive soul (the *nafs-i ammara* or the soul that incites to evil).⁴¹ Rather, the subtle soul substance may perhaps be identified with the *nafs-i lawwama*, the soul that repents of its past deeds. Corbin identifies this stage as “. . . the testing ground for the spiritual seeker; in confronting his lower self, he is in the same situation as Noah facing the hostility of his people. When he has overcome it, this subtle organ is called the *Noah of your being*.” Interestingly, Corbin notes in his “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics” how Swedenborg and Qazi No‘man (a 10th century Isma‘ili Muslim writer) both deploy esoteric readings of Noah, based on the biblical and Qur’anic texts. For Swedenborg, Noah is associated with the *Antiqua Ecclesia*—or “ancient church”—which represents the period following humankind’s “fall” from a pure celestial state of knowing. Thus,

³⁹ Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God*, 81.

⁴⁰ Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (New Lebanon: Omega Publications, 1994), 124–126.

⁴¹ Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God*, 84.

the transition from Adam to Noah corresponds to the transition from “. . . the person of immediate spiritual perception (*Antiquissima Ecclesia*) to the person of conscience (*Antiqua Ecclesia*).”⁴² For Qazi No‘man, Noah is associated with the second day of the *hexameron*, which in Isma‘ili thought is the second period in the current cycle of prophecy that stretches from Adam to Muhammad. According to Isma‘ili thought, we are currently living in the “time” of Muhammad (corresponding to the sixth day) and will remain in such a state until the arrival of the Imam of the Resurrection (*Qa‘im al-Qiyamat*), which corresponds with the seventh day.⁴³

The third stage, wherein the subtle substance of heart becomes active, corresponds with the prophet Abraham. Simnani describes the subtle substance of heart as a shell within which a pearl forms—just as Abraham, ancestor and father of the three monotheistic traditions, is the “shell” from which Muhammad, the “pearl” or Seal of the Prophets, emerges. As Corbin eloquently explicates the symbolic significance of the heart substance, it is the subtle organ in which “. . . the embryo of mystical progeny is formed, as a pearl is formed in a shell. This pearl or offspring is none other than the subtle organ which will be the True Ego, the real, personal individuality (*latifa ana‘iya*).”⁴⁴ It is this True Ego, described by Corbin as “the child conceived in the mystic’s heart,” that is realized in the seventh stage. Furthermore, it is in the third stage that the seeker is cleansed of darkness, and begins to experience true faith. As such, the possessor of the heart substance is rightly called a muslim, or one who submits (to God).⁴⁵ This faith is a precursor for the more complete faith that will be realized in the fourth through seventh stages.

The fourth subtle substance, the innermost substance, constitutes a stage in which the seeker’s faith is further perfected. One who attains this substance is called *mu‘min*, “believer,” and he or she is decorated with the light of faith. The innermost subtle substance corresponds with the prophet Moses, for just as Moses conversed intimately with God, so too, the seeker in this stage is capable of intimate conversation (*monajat*) with God.

⁴² Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, translated by Leonard Fox (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), 87.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–112).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God*, 83.

In the fifth stage, the subtle substance of spirit becomes active. This subtle substance corresponds with the prophet David, and the one who enters this stage is known as a *wali*, a friend or an intimate of God. Just as David, in the Qur'an, is said to be the caliph of God on earth, so too the spirit is said to be the divine representative within the human body.⁴⁶

The subtle mystery substance, revealed within the seeker during the sixth stage, corresponds with Jesus. This stage is representative of the prophetic, and signals an internal shift within the seeker from the station of sainthood (*waliya*) to the station of the prophet (*nabi*). As Corbin describes it, this is a stage in which

Help and inspiration from the Holy Ghost are received by means of this organ [the substance of mystery] . . . it is the *Jesus of your being*; it is he who proclaims the Name to all the other subtle centers and to the 'people' in these faculties, because he is their Head and the Name he proclaims is the seal of your being, just as in the Qur'an (3:6) it is said that Jesus, as the prophet before the last of the prophets of our cycle, was the herald of the last prophet, i.e., of the advent of the Paraclete.⁴⁷

Thus, the sixth stage serves as a final preparation before the advent and fulfillment of the seventh and final stage, wherein the Muhammadan "pearl" is perfected within the "shell" of the preceding stages.

The seventh stage, in which the subtle reality substance is activated, constitutes the perfection of the human being. This subtle substance corresponds with the prophet Muhammad, who in Islam is considered the "Seal of the Prophets"—both insofar as he is the last of the prophets, and because he is considered to represent the perfection or completion of the prophetic cycle that begins with Adam. As another sufi, the great 12th century mystic Ibn al-'Arabi eloquently writes on this matter,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁷ Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, 125. As both Corbin and Elias note, the term *Paraclete* has a special and specific meaning in Islam, which differs from its sense in the Christian tradition. According to Islamic exegetical works, the word *Parakletos*, as it appears in the Gospel of John, is a distortion of the word *Peryklitos*. In Islam, Jesus is heralded as the one who announces the imminent arrival of the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad (see Qur'an 61:6, wherein the text reads: "And remember Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah to you, confirming the law before me, and giving glad tidings of a messenger to come after me whose name shall be Ahmad.'")

Every prophet, from Adam to the last of the prophets, derives what he has from the seal of the prophets, even though he comes last in his temporal, physical manifestation, for in [his] essential reality he has always existed. The Prophet said, "I was a prophet when Adam was between the water and the clay," while other prophets only became such when they were sent forth [on their missions].⁴⁸

Muhammad, as Seal of the Prophets, symbolizes the pinnacle of human perfection. As such, it is Muhammad who corresponds in Simnani's seventh stage with the subtle substance of reality, which, when activated within the mystic, is the "pearl" that had begun to form inside the Abrahamic "shell" during the third stage. Thus, in Simnani's thought, the Qur'anic passages that link Abraham and Muhammad esoterically symbolize the movement of the human spirit through the higher stages of one's being:

Every passage in the Qur'an which defines the relationship of Muhammad with Abraham then offers us an admirable example of the inward movement actualized by Semnani's hermeneutics, the transition from "horizontal time" to "the time of the soul." It ends by actualizing, in the person of the human microcosm, the truth of the meaning according to which the religion of Muhammad originates in the religion of Abraham, for "Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but a pure believer (*hanif*), a *Muslim* ([Qur'an] 3:60)," which is to say that the "Abraham of your being" is led through the subtle centers of higher consciousness and the *arcanum* (the Moses and Jesus of your being) until he reaches your True Ego, his spiritual progeny.⁴⁹

Ultimately, it is by progressing to this stage of the subtle reality substance that one acquires what Simnani calls the substance of "I-ness," which is the culmination of mystical perfection. This I-ness, veiled by the acquired subtle bodies in the same way that the subtle bodies are veiled by the mortal (physical) body, bursts forth from its shell, or—to use another

⁴⁸ Ibn al-'Arabi trans. R.W.J. Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 67.

⁴⁹ Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, 125.

of Simnani's metaphors—is illuminated once the mystic has passed through all seven levels of his or her being. Like a mirror, the substance of I-ness has the ability to reflect perfectly the very essence of God; yet it is only the mystic who has realized this substance, who becomes a worthy bearer of the sacred Trust, and a knower of the divine names.⁵⁰ As Elias explains, the substance of I-ness takes its place opposite the face of God and becomes a mirror that reflects God's attributes of grace and power, as well as his beauty and majesty. In the process, there is a (temporary) dissolution of the line separating the beholder (the mirror of the substance of I-ness manifest in the mystic) and the one beheld (God). In the moment of this encounter

It is no longer possible to differentiate God as He witnesses himself in the mirror from the mirror as it bears witness to God. They are like two bright lights reflecting back at each other. The beauty of God is reflected and witnessed by the mirror which reflects this beauty back to God Who witnesses the perfect reflection of His own beauty as identical to His beauty. In other words, God witnesses the same image of Himself in the mirror as the mirror witnesses in God.⁵¹

In this moment of encounter, the possessor of the substance of I-ness is finally able to see reality—to see things as they really are—and thus achieves a state of perfection.

Having provided this explication of Swedenborg's and Simnani's various conceptions of the states or stages, what parallels or correspondences might we draw between the two? If we consider the states and stages side by side in their respective order, we may notice some striking similarities. In the first stage, both Swedenborg and Simnani refer to a human state that precedes the awareness of divine mysteries or real faith. It is characterized by Swedenborg as a state of "emptiness" and "void," preceding the state of regeneration. Only later in the first day do we see the

⁵⁰ In the Qur'an, it is written: "Indeed, we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it." (33:72, Sahih International translation) The Trust (*al-Amana*) has been understood in various ways, but it is generally agreed that it is a gift that only humankind is capable of carrying, because of their unique status within the creation.

⁵¹ Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God*, 96.

beginning of a realization of divine presence, in the “spirit of God hovering over the waters,” as well as the separation between “night” and “day” or good and evil. For Simnani, the first stage is also characterized by darkness and ignorance—for although the seeker in this stage has acquired the first of the subtle substances (the bodily substance) this substance is hardly distinguishable from the dense physical body itself. Furthermore, the human being in this stage is considered “uncivilized;” he is still ruled by his *nafs-i ammara* (the soul that incites to evil) since he has not yet learned to differentiate between what comes from God, and what comes from his lower, appetitive self.

In the second stage, Swedenborg notes that the differentiation between the internal and external man becomes more pronounced. Now the seeker realizes, to a greater extent, the “inner” aspect within. As a result, he or she begins to experience a greater awareness of goodness and truth. Simnani describes a similar process occurring in the second stage: the seeker, now equated with the prophet Noah, begins to realize there are two aspects, or forces, dwelling within—one which incites him to that which is lower, and that which inspires him to ascend (metaphorically speaking) towards God. As such, the seeker in this stage begins to realize, like Noah, that he must wage “battle” with the people that surround him (or the *nafs-i ammara*, symbolizing those aspects within him that tie him down to appetitive desires and limited understanding).

The third stage, for both Swedenborg and Simnani, marks the beginning—or the promise—of faith. In Swedenborg’s conception, the vegetation produced by the earth (the human being) is called “tender herbs,” “herb bearing seeds,” and “tree bearing fruit.” For Swedenborg, plants generally symbolize knowledge and insight, and so it may be extrapolated that the seeker in this stage is gradually growing in his or her wisdom of divine mysteries, and likewise, in faith.⁵² As Swedenborg points out, however, this faith is not complete, for it has not yet been fully illuminated by love. For Simnani, the third stage corresponds with the prophet Abraham, who is described as the “shell” containing the promise of the Muhammadan pearl. This shell can be seen to correspond with the “tree

⁵² Benz, *Emanuel Swedenborg*, 358. Also see *Arcana Coelestia* §75, wherein shrubs and herbs of the ground watered by the mists correspond with the knowledge and rationality of the celestial man.

bearing fruit" which signals promise, or greater things to come. The seeker in this stage, in whom the subtle substance of heart is now active, begins to experience the birth of faith and true belief, but it is only a preliminary faith, not yet complete.

The fourth stage constitutes a marked turning point for Swedenborg and Simnani, in terms of the development of faith; indeed, it may be described as the stage in which faith is illuminated. Swedenborg interprets the two lights of sun and moon (and stars) as representing the divine lights of love and faith. These lights illuminate the seeker, and he or she begins to realize that all her good works are not truly from herself, but from God. Thus, it can be said, she begins to realize the workings of the divine within her. For Simnani, we see a similar description of this fourth stage: the seeker, like Moses, now experiences a more intimate connection with God, arising from within. This is implied by the use of the term *monajat*, "intimate conversations." The seeker in this stage is called a "believer" and is decorated by the light of faith.

In the fifth stage, Swedenborg speaks of an "animation" of the individual. Now illuminated by the "twin lights," the seeker's works are no longer inert, but arise more directly from his inner self. In this stage, he or she has realized that all comes from God; as such, there is an easier flow of understanding and wisdom from that divine source. These divine insights, Swedenborg suggests, are symbolized by the birds of the air and fish of the sea. Simnani, too, suggests that the fifth stage constitutes a more complete command of the inner self, as well as a closer relation with God: David, the prophet corresponding with the fifth stage, is called *wali*, or friend (of God), and is the caliph of God on earth, just as the spirit is the rightful ruler of the human being. That it is the subtle spirit substance which becomes active in the fifth stage, suggests that the "inner" aspect has finally gained full command of the individual; he or she is no longer overruled by the lower, appetitive self.

In the sixth stage, Swedenborg describes the creation of the male and female in the image of God as symbolic of the "marriage" of wisdom and love within oneself. This marriage represents a fuller movement towards wholeness, through which the individual becomes a "spiritual" human being. This is not the highest state, according to Swedenborg, but points towards the highest state—the celestial. For Simnani, the sixth stage corre-

sponds with Jesus, who, within Islam—and in particular, in the mystical tradition—symbolizes the Spirit (*ruh*) of God, which is, in many respects, beyond human conception.⁵³ As such, Jesus corresponds with the subtle mystery substance, which emanates from locus of the divine unity.⁵⁴ Jesus, as a forerunner for Muhammad, corresponds with the spiritual, or that which points to the celestial—that which is revealed in the seventh stage.⁵⁵

Finally, we come to the seventh stage. For both Swedenborg and Simnani, this stage symbolizes the culmination of the previous stages and the pinnacle of human perfection. Swedenborg describes it as a state of peace, in which the individual has come to “rest,” just as God rests on the Sabbath. At this stage, the seeker’s desire is one with the divine desire: now embodying the “archetype” of celestial humanity, his or her love and will are in attunement with God. Simnani describes a similar state, in which the seeker, having attained the subtle reality substance corresponding with Muhammad, discovers the substance of “I-ness” that lies concealed within the center of his or her being. This substance is like a mirror, capable of perfectly reflecting the divine countenance. In reflecting the face of God, there is a point at which distinctions between mirror and countenance fall away and there is perfect unity between the seeker’s inmost self (the substance of I-ness) and God.⁵⁶ In this sense, the final state

⁵³ See Qur’an 21:91, wherein the conception of Jesus is discussed: “And she [Mary] who was chaste, therefore We breathed into her (something) of Our Spirit and made her and her son [Jesus] a token for (all) peoples.” Trans. by Mohammad Picktall.

⁵⁴ Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God*, 83.

⁵⁵ For quite apparent reasons, this signals the most striking difference between Swedenborg’s and Simnani’s description of the stages: for Simnani, as a Muslim, Jesus is considered a prophet, as well as the spirit of God (Qur’an 21:91) and the Word of God (Qur’an 4:171)—but not God or the son of God. For Swedenborg, Jesus is Lord.

⁵⁶ Simnani’s imagery and metaphor here is similar, in certain respects, to Swedenborg’s description of the angels facing their Lord every which way they turn: “Angels turn their faces constantly to the Lord as a sun, because they are in the Lord, and the Lord in them; and the Lord interiorly leads their affections and thoughts, and turns them constantly to Himself” (*Divine Love and Wisdom*, § 130). As Swedenborg articulates, this constant turning to toward the Lord applies to human beings just as it does to angels, insofar as the human spirit is capable of the same “turning” or “encounter” with God. Swedenborg explicitly states this in the preceding section: “For man in respect to his mind is a spirit, and if he be in love and wisdom, is an angel; consequently, after death, when he has put off his externals, which he had derived from the natural world, he becomes a spirit or an angel. And because angels turn their faces constantly toward the sun in the east, thus toward the Lord, it is said also of any man who is in love and wisdom from the Lord, that ‘he sees God,’ that ‘he looks to God,’ that ‘he has God before his eyes,’ by which is meant that he lives as an angel does” (*Divine Love and Wisdom*, § 129).

for both Swedenborg and Simnani suggests a unifying experience between the mystic and God.

In the final analysis, both Swedenborg and Simnani approached their exegetical work in a very particular way. The Bible and Qur'an, respectively, were not perceived merely as historical texts—but living texts that, if read perceptively, would provide a set of “inner maps” to guide individuals toward a deeper experience of the divine. The works of exegesis, based on each man's experiential understanding of correspondences, thus served to revitalize the sacred texts by making them directly relevant to a reader's own inner experience. Additionally, in their exegetical works, they strove to illustrate how the inner experience of the individual is mirrored (and concealed) within textual symbols. Both Swedenborg and Simnani understood that human beings—like the sacred texts they interpreted—have multiple levels. They may also have understood, better than most, that if we, as individuals, remain inert on the lowest level, we remain “dead”—just as a literal reading of the sacred text renders it lifeless. Swedenborg reflects on this very issue in the outset of *Arcana Coelestia*, when he writes,

Without such a life, the Word as to the letter is dead. The case in this respect is the same as it is with man, who—as is known in the Christian world—is both internal and external. When separated from the internal man, the external man is the body, and is therefore dead; for it is the internal man that is alive and that causes the external man to be so, the internal man being the soul. So is it with the Word, which, in respect to the letter alone, is like the body without the soul.⁵⁷

Thus, it is only in traversing the levels of his or her inner landscape—alongside the inner levels of the text—that the individual may come, once more, into the illuminating light of the divine presence. □

⁵⁷ Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, §3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benz, Ernst. *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2002.
- Bergquist, Lars. *Swedenborg's Secret: The Meaning and Significance of the Word of God*. London: The Swedenborg Society, 2005.
- Corbin, Henry. Trans. *Liadain Sherrard*, with Phillip Sherrard. *History of Islamic Philosophy*. New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993.
- Corbin, Henry. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. New Lebanon: Omega Publications, 1994.
- _____. *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*. Trans. Leonard Fox. Westchester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995.
- Dole, George F. ed. *Emanuel Swedenborg: Universal Human and Soul and Body Interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1984.
- Dole, George F. and Robert H. Kirven *A Scientist Explores Spirit: A Biography of Emanuel Swedenborg*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997.
- Elias, Jamal J. *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of 'Ala' ad-dawla as-Simnani*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Ibn al-'Arabi trans. R.W.J. Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980.
- Lamm, Martin. *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000.
- Sands, Kristin Zahra. *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Swedenborg, Emanuel. Trans. John Clowes. *Arcana Coelestia*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998.
- _____. Trans. John C. Ager. *Divine Love and Wisdom*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995.