

## Henry Maudsley on Swedenborg's Messianic Psychosis

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**Background.** Creativity, religiosity and madness have long been thought to be aetiologically interrelated.

**Method.** Henry Maudsley's little known pathography of the 17th century Swedish philosopher and polymath, Emanuel Swedenborg, was examined.

**Results.** Swedenborg developed a messianic psychosis in middle life, considered by Maudsley to be a monomania, possibly due to epilepsy. Many of Swedenborg's contemporaries thought of him, however, as a religious eccentric. Under criticism from Swedenborg's followers, Maudsley avoided further reference to Swedenborg, and the pathography was lost from view.

**Conclusions.** Renewed interest is deserved in the contentious issues of the nature of religiosity and its relationship to psychotic experience.

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Henry Maudsley (1869) wrote a controversial pathography of Swedenborg, proposing that his religious mystical experiences were psychotic in origin. This provoked violent criticism of himself and an angry response from Swedenborg's disciples. When a new edition of his *Pathology of Mind* appeared in 1895, all reference to Swedenborg's psychosis, present in the previous edition of 1879, had been omitted; Maudsley had presumably submitted to the pressures of Swedenborg's followers.

### Pathography

The pathography was based upon a biography of Swedenborg by White (1867). He did not express any opinions about Swedenborg's mental state, apart from the single statement "There is no denying that in 1743, when Swedenborg was introduced into the Spirit World, he was for a while insane".

Swedenborg was born in 1688 into a deeply religious family; his father, a Professor of Theology, later became Bishop of Skara. After completing his PhD at the University of Uppsala, Swedenborg toured European universities, writing treatises on a wide variety of topics from algebra to cosmology. He gained the popular reputation of the "Swedish Aristotle". In 1724 he declined the Chair of Mathematics at Uppsala, and spent the next 12 years writing his monumental *Principia*.

In 1744 there was a dramatic change in Swedenborg's life, which Maudsley saw as "a morbid development". He abandoned all scientific

interests and claimed that he had been admitted to the spirit world and had developed the power to talk with angels. Maudsley asserted that Swedenborg's subsequent history is that of a "learned and ingenious madman". Swedenborg wrote a diary of his dreams and ecstatic visions, and his spiritual interpretation of them. In 1744, while on a visit to London, he had an acute psychotic episode during which he proclaimed he was the Messiah and had come to be crucified for the Jews. He locked himself in his room for two days, finally emerging foaming around the mouth and stammering. Maudsley thought this was "a fit" and attributed it to epilepsy. Swedenborg feared he would be suffocated by spirits during sleep, and that alien influences would incite him to steal and commit suicide. He had hallucinations of taste and smell, and somatic hallucinations when he felt his hair was a multitude of snakes; he expressed a paranoid system of ideas about the Quakers and what he regarded as their obscene rites.

By July 1745, Swedenborg had devoted himself entirely to that

"sacred office to which the Lord himself has called me . . . his unworthy servant in a personal appearance in the year 1743; to converse with Spirits and Angels and to hear and see things in another life which are astonishing, which have never come to the knowledge of any man nor come into his imagination."

He maintained that the Lord Jesus Christ had made through him His second advent for the institution of the Church of the New Jerusalem, described in Revelations. From 1749 to 1771 he wrote thirty volumes in Latin, including his famous *Arcana Coelestia* (Heavenly Secrets).

Swedenborg lived a solitary life in Stockholm, and it was said he never washed or brushed his clothes, maintaining that no dirt would adhere to them. He attributed his persistent toothache to possession by "evil Spirits", insisting that the devil had entered his brain and was attempting to kill him; he could often be heard shouting at his accursed "evil Spirits" at night. At other times he was accessible and affable to visitors, but always refused to see women alone. In 1772, he visited London again, where he died at the age of 84. His body was eventually buried in Uppsala Cathedral in 1908. Swedenborg never

proselytised his beliefs, although his writings about his unique experiences in the spirit world were, after his death, responsible for the foundation of the Church of the New Jerusalem, which was established in London in 1780. His teachings have appealed to a distinguished group of followers, such as Blake, Balzac, Baudelaire, Emerson, Strindberg and Yeats. Nisbet (1891) concluded his study of Swedenborg in *The Insanity of Genius* by stating cynically that Swedenborg conversed with the inhabitants of all the planets, except Uranus and Neptune, which unfortunately for his pretensions, had not then been discovered.

### Discussion

Maudsley considered that Swedenborg suffered an attack of "acute mania" between 1743 and 1744, followed by "chronic mania". This persisted for the rest of his life, and he was dominated by revelatory experiences and the conviction that he was the Messiah and the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ. Messianic delusions of this type are common in acute schizophrenic psychoses, and were described by Jaspers (1959) under the heading of 'cosmic experiences'. Jaspers (1959), in common with Lewis (1961), was in no doubt that Swedenborg had a schizophrenic illness. Kleist (1928) considered revelatory psychoses under the heading of a marginal psychosis, in which autochthonous delusional ideas intrude into consciousness and are attributed by the patient directly to God, angels, or what Kleist termed the 'Weltgeist' (world spirit). He emphasised that such experiences could also be reactive to acute alcoholism and acute epileptic states.

Maudsley considered that several episodes of Swedenborg's "fits", accounts of which were taken from White's biography, were possibly epileptic in origin. Less than four years after Maudsley's pathography, Howden (1873) published five cases of intense religiosity occurring in epileptics, and included Swedenborg along with other epileptics, in particular Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker Movement, and the Islamic prophet, Mohammed. Maudsley later included Swedenborg in the section on "Epileptic Insanity" in *Pathology of Mind* (1879), and said

"Swedenborg, who professed to receive manifold holy revelations and to have habitual intercourse with the inhabitants of Heaven and Hell, suffered from seizures which were closely akin to if they were not epilepsy."

The hypothesis that Swedenborg suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy could be advanced. Dewhurst & Beard (1970) described five patients who had intense religious conversion experiences while suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy, but the evidence in Swedenborg's case is somewhat dubious.

Maudsley acknowledged Swedenborg's scientific and cosmological achievements, but aligned him with George Fox, founder of the Quakers. Maudsley was of the opinion that Fox would have been incarcerated in a lunatic asylum if he had lived in the 19th century, and that Quakerism would have been "blasted in its germ". He further compared Swedenborg to Benvenuto Cellini and Auguste Comte as other men of outstanding talent who had suffered psychotic illnesses. Maudsley was convinced that Swedenborg had become psychotic in 1743, and that his religious experiences were rooted in this. Whether Swedenborg's messianic psychosis was due to acute schizophrenia or an epileptic psychosis will remain a diagnostic enigma.

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