

Little-known Swedenborg gets fresh look in new book

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Luther King Jr. and even Helen Keller all found something to like in Emanuel Swedenborg. Emanuel who?

A new book, "Swedenborg," by author and former Blondie bassist Gary Lachman attempts to uncover the little-known Swedish scientist, philosopher and theologian.

While researching for one of his other 13 books, Lachman repeatedly stumbled upon Swedenborg's name and asked himself how someone who was so influential for so many could still be so unknown.

"How could it be that hardly anyone knows about him now?" he said in an interview from his home in London.

Swedenborg, born in 1688 as Emanuel Swedberg, began his life as a scientist but experienced a "spiritual awakening" in the second part of his life, starting one Easter weekend when he began to have dreams and visions.

He documented his spiritual encounters -- including visits to heaven and hell and encounters with the dead -- in several diaries and journals.

According to Lachman, Jesus revealed himself to the Swedish thinker in one mystical experience and basically told him to "drop the science" and focus on other realms.

Swedenborg never belonged to a particular church, but his ideas encompassed a variety of spiritual ideologies and traditions.

"He has a very down-home kind of ethos with this idea ... of 'do the good that you know,'" said Lachman, who grew up Catholic. "It's very Buddhist."

Lachman said "open-minded Christians" and anyone of a "spiritual alternative" might be interested in how Swedenborg interprets Scripture.

The Swedish thinker, according to Lachman, rejected both the Catholic Church and the Protestants saying he thought they "didn't have a clue" what religion was really about.

Swedenborg also believed God was not remote and abstract but "very close" to humans and he read the Bible in a "very symbolic, metaphorical kind of way," Lachman said.

Swedenborg believed everything on Earth, the physical world, had a correspondence with something in the spiritual realm in heaven, according to the author.

As The New York Times put it: "Many people considered Swedenborg's claims to have traveled to heaven and hell blasphemous. But he was writing during a tremendously exciting time for science -- he was a bit younger than Isaac Newton -- as well as pseudoscience, like alchemy. Actual physical exploration of the spirit realm thus seemed, to some, a realizable ambition, given the pace of human progress."

He died on March 29, 1772 after allegedly predicting his exact death in a letter to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.

Lachman, a musician-turned-writer who as Gary Valentine co-founded the New Wave band Blondie (he left the band in 1977), decided to write the book so people could have "access to the basics" about the Swedish scholar.

Even though many haven't heard of Swedenborg, the ones who know him best are members of the small Swedenborgian Church, which formed out of the basis of his teachings.

Malcolm Peck has been a member of the church since the 1980s and he currently attends the Church of the Holy City in Washington, D.C., where famous Swedenborgian Helen Keller frequently spoke.

Peck said he has stayed a part of the church because Swedenborgians "have tolerance for other faiths" and he hopes to see Swedenborg's influence spread.

"The fact that an author is interested enough to write about him is exciting."