

# THE RITE OF SWEDENBORG

## **The Rite of Swedenborg: A Historical Analysis**

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### **Introduction**

The Rite of Swedenborg refers to a complex masonic initiate system influenced by the mystical religious philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg was an 18th century Swedish scientist, philosopher and spiritual visionary whose voluminous theological writings inspired the development of a Swedenborgian masonic rite during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Swedenborg himself was not actually a Freemason nor did he directly participate in creating any Masonic degrees. However, his writings on topics like divine correspondences, spiritual enlightenment, and the esoteric symbolism of the ancients resonated with many contemporary Freemasons who sought to incorporate his ideas into fraternal ritual and teachings.

The Swedenborgian Rite appeared through the efforts of adherents across Europe and North America between the 1780s and early 1900s. It took diverse forms and lineages over this extended period, adapted by different masonic groups for symbolic resonance with Swedenborgian philosophy. Due to its basis more in personal spiritual reverence for Swedenborg than in documented masonic legacy, the rite has largely faded into obscurity in contemporary Freemasonry. However, reconstructing its history offers insights into how an influential mystic and visionary influenced ritual creativity on the esoteric fringes of Freemasonry during its peak era of ritual innovation.

This research paper will provide an in-depth historical analysis of the Swedenborgian Rite, tracing its origins, evolution and eventual decline over the course of a century of masonic activity in Europe and North America. Key developments, figures and lodges involved with the rite will be explored, and the relationship between Swedenborgian concepts and masonic ritual symbolism elucidated. The geographical scope encompasses the rite's manifestations in France, Britain, North America, Germany, and elsewhere. Primary sources such as lodge records, memoirs of historical Freemasons involved with the rite, and private correspondence will be utilized alongside secondary scholarly analysis. Overall, this paper will shed light on the long, but at times tenuous, career of this unorthodox masonic rite inspired by the alternative religious philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg.

## **The Life and Theology of Emanuel Swedenborg**

To fully understand the Swedenborgian Rite, it is essential to explore the biography and spiritual ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg (born Emanuel Swedberg). He was born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1688. His father, Jesper Swedberg, was a prominent Lutheran clergyman who served as Bishop of Skara.[1] Swedenborg received an elite classical education and showed an early aptitude for science and engineering. As a young man he studied physics, astronomy, mathematics, anatomy and mining sciences, and began working for the Swedish Board of Mines in 1716.[2] Swedenborg quickly gained renown across Europe for his contributions to fields like metallurgy, geology, and even early airplane and submarine designs. He published numerous scientific treatises and rubbed shoulders with the luminous intellectual figures of the era.

However, in 1743 at the age of 55, Swedenborg underwent a profound spiritual transformation. He claimed to have experienced a series of intense, prophetic visions where he traveled to the afterlife and spoke with angels, Jesus Christ, and even God. He came to view himself as a divinely appointed figure whose mission was to spiritually renew Christianity through new revelation. Swedenborg devoted the rest of his long life to theology, authoring over 30 volumes outlining his revelations.[3] This massive corpus makes Swedenborg one of the most prolific spiritual philosophers in history. Central elements of his theology included:

- The idea of “correspondences” – that natural objects and events in the material world correspond to, and provide a physical manifestation of, deeper spiritual truths. For instance, light corresponds to divine wisdom.
- A method of Biblical exegesis finding hidden inner meanings within the literal sense of scripture texts.
- Unorthodox views of the Trinity, the afterlife, and the New Jerusalem compared to traditional Lutheran doctrine.
- The belief that ancient peoples from the Near East and Egypt possessed secret mystical knowledge, passed down symbolically over the ages and reflected (often cryptically) in their mythologies and records.[4]

Swedenborg’s writings attracted a dedicated following across Northern Europe, who saw him as a prophet of the New Age who would bring spiritual enlightenment. His followers became known as Swedenborgians and, starting in the 1780s, organized themselves into a formal religious movement referred to as the New Church. This denomination promulgated his teachings and still exists today as the Swedenborgian Church. However, during Swedenborg’s own lifetime his ideas were viewed as highly controversial and outside of

mainstream Christianity. He was neither directly involved with Freemasonry during this era, nor did his theology overtly incorporate masonic concepts, despite some similarities.[5]

Nonetheless, in the generations after Swedenborg's death in 1772, a number of his adherents who were also Freemasons saw close correspondences between his writings and masonic symbolism and began developing rituals and degrees based on his theology. The question of why Swedenborg so strongly appealed to esoteric-minded Masons long after his passing is an interesting one. A 1958 masonic paper by Dr. E.E. Richards sheds some light:

“Swedenborg thought of God as the Great Architect of the Universe. To Freemasons, God is known as the Grand Architect of the Universe. Swedenborg wrote of building up both natural and spiritual ‘temples’ through righteous living. Freemasons build temples of stone as symbols of building righteous character. Swedenborg believed in finding the ‘lost knowledge’ of the ancient world. Freemasonry is a search for lost knowledge. Swedenborg studied sacred geometry. The symbology of Freemasonry is based on geometry.”[6]

These conceptual overlaps help explain the allure of Swedenborgian ideas to mystically-inclined Masons, even if he did not directly influence the Craft during his lifetime. This fascination led to rituals focused on Swedenborgian themes starting to emerge within a few decades of his death, as will now be explored.

### **Early Swedenborgian Influence in France**

The first known attempts to synthesize Swedenborg's theology with Freemasonry occurred in France. In the wake of his death, a number of Swedenborg's works were translated into French, finding an audience among mystically-minded intellectuals and aristocrats enthused by alternative spirituality. One was Dom Antoine Joseph Pernety (1716-1796), a Benedictine monk with esoteric interests. In 1784, after leaving his monastery, Pernety founded an initiate society called the Illuminés d'Avignon (“Illuminated Ones of Avignon”) in the city of Avignon. This group taught occult philosophies and meta-physical rituals drawing on hermeticism, alchemy, and Swedenborgian ideas.

The Illuminés likely served as a proto-Masonic body, initiating members through symbolic ceremonies in a lodge-like setting. Two English Swedenborgians who visited the Illuminés in 1789 reported being initiated through a dramatic ritual involving robed figures and symbolic imagery, although details are lacking. The group was supposedly organized into levels named after Swedenborg's theological volumes.[7] So while Swedenborg himself had no direct Masonic ties, Pernety represented an early adopter who recognized the confluence between his theology and fraternal ceremonialism.

The Illuminés did not survive the tumult of the French Revolution. However, Pernety and some of his members, like Benedict Chastanier, were active in Masonic lodges where they could further propagate Swedenborgian ideas.[8] The Illuminés thus represent one of the earliest attempts to blend Swedenborg's revelatory philosophy with quasi-masonic initiation and symbolism, laying groundwork for more extensive Swedenborgian Masonic rites to come. Even though short-lived, it helped plant the seeds of Swedenborg's appeal among esoteric Masonic circles.

### **Early Swedenborgian Masonry in Britain**

In Britain, organized Swedenborgian Masonry emerged primarily through Samuel Beswick (1822–1903), an English adherent of Swedenborg's New Church. Beswick had an eclectic career spanning engineering, ministry, and journalism. His masonic background was limited – he claimed initiation in an English lodge under the Grand Lodge of Sweden, and later affiliation with a Canadian lodge.[9] However, Beswick became fixated on propagating a Swedenborgian variant of Freemasonry.

In 1870, Beswick published a book titled *Swedenborg Rite and the Great Masonic Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*. This work argued that Swedenborg had been an active Freemason involved with the French Rite of Perfection – a problematic claim, since evidence of Swedenborg belonging to any masonic order remains lacking.[10] However, factual accuracy was secondary to Beswick's agenda of asserting Swedenborgianism's integral, if previously unrecognized, role in 18th century high degree Masonry.

Beswick went on to outline a Swedenborgian masonic rite that he claimed had been recently revived by American Masons in 1859 at a Temple called Menei Temple No. 1 in New York City. According to Beswick's colorful account, this Temple had originally operated in the mid-18th century but its activities were lost to history until rediscovered by himself and his contemporaries, representing a core element of the ancient Swedish Rite.[11] In reality, historians have been unable to verify the existence of Menei Temple or any American Swedenborgian Masonry prior to Beswick's book. Beswick was essentially concocting a fanciful lineage to lend authority to the rite he wished to propagate.

This rite consisted of three symbolic Lodge degrees drawing upon Biblical imagery and Swedenborgian concepts. It was supposedly linked to the ancient world's lost mystical secrets passed down in Masonry. Beswick provided few concrete details, and his Swedenborg–Masonic lineage claims lacked evidence and were dismissed by reviewers.[12] Yet starting in 1872, Beswick worked with Canadian Masons to organize a functioning Supreme Grand Lodge and Temple of the Swedenborgian Rite in Canada, which soon after spread to Britain as well.[13]

So while Beswick's historical narrative was imaginary, it did spark real institutional development. Through his fervent promotional efforts, the seeds of an actual Swedenborgian masonic system emerged. The rite's rituals and teachings would be expanded over subsequent decades. However, the essential outline of degrees linking Swedenborgian allegories and symbolism to an imagined ancient mystery tradition was present in Beswick's foundational account. Despite its doubtful lineage, the expanded rite this inspired would be actively practiced by esoteric Masons in the late 19th century seeking spiritual enlightenment.

### **Growth of the Swedenborgian Rite in Britain**

The years following Beswick's book saw gradual growth in Swedenborgian Masonry in Britain, centered around a network of symbolic lodges authorized by a Supreme Grand Lodge. The first lodge chartered in Britain was Emmanuel Lodge No. 3 in Manchester in 1876, soon followed by Egyptian Lodge No. 2 in Manchester and Swedish Lodge No. 4 in Havant in 1877.[14] Over a dozen additional Swedenborgian lodges appeared over the next two decades in cities like London, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Liverpool.

The Supreme Grand Lodge administering this system was based in Manchester and London. In its early years John Yarker served as Supreme Grand Master, but the driving figure behind its late 19th century growth was William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925) as Supreme Grand Secretary from 1887 onward. Westcott was a prominent esoteric Mason who co-founded the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and led the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia. His interest in mystical fraternal orders made him a natural leader of the budding Swedenborgian movement in Britain.

Westcott resided for a time in the former home of a Swedenborgian New Church minister, which may have fueled his affinity for the rite.[15] Under Westcott's guidance, the rite attracted a range of freethinking Masons interested in Swedenborgian mysticism and spiritual experimentation with elaborate symbolic rituals. Members included notable esotericists of the era like Theodor Reuss,[16] publisher of rare books on occultism and future head of the Ordo Templi Orientis, and Samuel Liddell McGregor Mathers, co-founder of the Golden Dawn.

Beyond Britain, Westcott chartered Swedenborgian lodges in Ireland, Germany, France and Romania, connecting the rite to Continental occult trends. Involvement with the rite became a bridge for Masons seeking exotic spiritual lore from outside orthodox Christianity. As scholarly research would later conclude, for those drawn to these pursuits, "Something about the ritual clearly caught the imagination...even as it remained obscure to

outsiders.”[17] So while unconventional, the Swedenborgian Rite flourished for decades among its niche following as a vehicle for ritual experimentation and mystical discovery.

### **Ritual Forms and Symbolism**

The mythology fabricated by Samuel Beswick gave a mystical aura to the Swedenborgian Rite, but its substance derived from the degree rituals utilizing Swedenborgian concepts and kabbalistic symbolism that evolved over time. In its final British form the rite consisted of seven numbered degrees. The first three degrees were symbolic Lodge rituals corresponding to the traditional Craft degrees. The higher degrees consisted of distinct Swedenborgian mythocycles.

The 4th through 7th degrees traced an allegorical journey through Biblical history, with the candidate playing a central role in events like the Fall, Flood, Exodus and building of Solomon’s Temple. This built on Swedenborg’s concept of uncovering hidden inner meaning beneath Bible stories.[18] Candidates donned the vestments of ephods, priests and masons in these events. The rituals allegorized personal stages of inner development using this imagery, echoing Swedenborg’s correspondential philosophy.

The second degree featured the Chamber of Reflection, linking to Swedenborgian ideas about confronting inner darkness to find spiritual illumination. The third degree focused on Kabbalah and alchemy, symbolic of moving from surface to inner truth. Masonic symbols like the pillars, arches and tetragrammaton appeared alongside natural imagery representing Swedenborgian cosmology. Use of intricate costumes, props and decorations enhanced the immersive quality.[19]

While lengthy and elaborate compared to Craft Masonry, the rite’s dramatic rituals appealed to esotericists seeking to experience Swedenborg’s concepts enacted ceremonially. Combining occult mystery with moral instruction, the rite reinvented Biblical history as an allegory for personal spiritual growth. Enacting this visionary mythology provided fulfillment for Swedenborgian Masons that everyday lodge meetings lacked. Even after its decline, those initiated recalled being deeply impacted by the rite’s transformative potentials.

### **Decline in the Early 20th Century**

After thriving for several decades in the late 19th century, the Swedenborgian Rite faded from prominence in regular Freemasonry during the early 1900s due to both internal and external factors. Internally, many of its initial leaders and organizers passed away or lost interest, draining the rite of direction. William Westcott resigned his leadership post around 1903, though he continued in a titular role until his death in 1925.[20] No equally dedicated

successor emerged to promote the rite, and more lodges closed than opened after 1900. Younger masons appeared less drawn to its complex, mystical focus compared to increasingly popular ‘side degrees’ like the Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine.[21]

Externally, the broader Masonic world grew increasingly hostile to esoteric variants due to controversies surrounding fringe rites. American Masonic authorities denounced quasi-Masonic bodies as “pernicious” and “irregular” in the late 19th century.[22] While initially tolerated, the Swedenborgian Rite’s mixture of occultism, unconventional theology and invented lineage sparked concerns. The final blow came in 1917-18, when the United Grand Lodge of England banned its members from belonging to esoteric Masonic orders like the Swedenborgian Rite as inconsistent with Masonic regularity.[23] Without new members, surviving lodges became shells maintained solely on paper.

A confluence of waning internal enthusiasm and external crackdowns eroded the Swedenborgian Rite’s vitality; regular Masons moved on to other venues for ritual fellowship and mystical insight. However, its initiates had succeeded in building a functioning neo-Masonic initiatory system creatively adapted to Swedenborgian theology. The rite survived long enough to demonstrate Swedenborg’s resonance with esoteric fraternalism, leaving its mark on masonic history. Even in decline, it highlighted the ongoing possibilities for reinventing Freemasonry’s mythic inner tradition through changing times and cultural influences.

## **Conclusion**

The eclectic history of the Swedenborgian Rite, spanning over a century of masonic activity across Europe and North America, illuminates lesser-known dimensions of how Freemasonry has continuously evolved. While virtually unknown today outside of scholarly circles, investigating its origins and operations in depth offers several insights. First, it shows how an influential philosopher and mystic like Emanuel Swedenborg, though not a Freemason himself, could inspire the creative development of masonic rituals and symbolic teachings based on his ideas. The “language” of Swedenborg’s theology resonated with Masons seeking deeper spiritual meaning in their fraternal activities during this era.

Second, its story reveals the role of inventor-entrepreneurs like Samuel Beswick in propagating new masonic rites through stirring origin myths (however ahistorical), vigorous promotion and recruitment, and crafting of dramatic rituals and regalia. The rite was sustained less by documented lineage than by its ability to fulfill its members’ desire for mystical-minded fraternal ritual. Third, it demonstrates Freemasonry’s ongoing ability to

reinvent itself through assimilating concepts outside of its core teachings, allowing the Craft to adapt to emerging spiritual and intellectual trends across the 18th and 19th centuries.

While short-lived in the vast span of masonic history, the Swedenborgian Rite represented a creative effort to fuse modern esoteric spirituality with traditional fraternal symbolism and initiation. Tracking its fortunes and fraternal activities sheds light on Masonry's role as an eclectic cultural phenomenon shaped by both mystical innovators and traditional institutions over the past three centuries. The Swedenborgian moment was fleeting, but worthy of deeper scholarly attention for what it reveals about Freemasonry's fluid and multivalent relationship to alternative spirituality across its long run.

**NOTE:**

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Piece of Architecture by Robert Burns Lodge Number 59,  
Masonic Lodge Located in Las Vegas, Nevada.  
Grand Lodge of F.:& A.:M.: of Nevada.