Correspondences:
Swedenborg's influence on D.T. Suzuki's articulation of Zen

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Introduction

Kiyoto Furuno, a Japanese sociologist of religion, once wrote:

> I read *Suedenborugu* written by Suzuki, and I have an impression from it that Suzuki was a Swedenborgian. It is quite true that Zen Buddhism was first introduced around the world by Suzuki, but it is also true that Swedenborg was first introduced to Japan by him…. I have a conjecture that [Suzuki's] basic thought was more or less influenced by Swedenborg. It seems to me that Suzuki was able to translate Zen Buddhism into English with such insight and clarity because Suzuki's brain had previously been trained by Swedenborg's mysticism in his younger years. (Nagashima 1996: xi)

This paper aims to explore Suzuki's writings in light of this claim and to gauge to what extent it rings true. I will ultimately argue that although Suzuki was a product of a complex genealogy that included many thinkers, he did find common cause with Swedenborg to the extent that many of the most basic tropes and manners of expression he used to translate and explain Zen to the West can be reasonably traced to Swedenborg's writings.

Suzuki and Swedenborg

D. T. Suzuki translated four major works of Swedenborg into Japanese during the period 1910 to 1914: 天界と地獄 (1969b) (Heaven and Hell)

in 1910, 新エルサレムとその教説 (1969c) (The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine) in 1914 and 神智と神愛 (1970) (Divine Love and Wisdom) in 1914, and 神慮論 (1969c) (Divine Providence) in 1915. He also wrote about Swedenborg in two short texts, スエデンボルグ (1969c) in 1913 and スエデンボルグ　その天界と他力観 (1969a) in 1924. In both texts he expresses his admiration and affiliation with Swedenborg. As Bernstein (1996) points out, after these writings Suzuki then neglected to mention or refer to Swedenborg in any significant way over the next few highly prolific decades of his life. However, Suzuki never rejected Swedenborg's ideas, and in fact, in one isolated incident when the subject of Swedenborg did come up during a 1954 meeting with Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade, he expressed his affinity with Swedenborg by calling him "your Buddha of the North" (Bernstein 1996: xv). As Okajima (2009: 181) argues, "it is hard to see the influence of Swedenborg's thought on Suzuki as something transitory" [my translation], something I hope will become evident in the discussion below.

Shared ideas

—Science and Religion—

One important point in common between both Suzuki and Swedenborg is their belief in the fundamental compatibility of science and religion. Suzuki felt from early on that one was impoverished without the other and before translating Swedenborg had already written in an earlier work, 『宗教論集』(1969b), about how religion needed to embrace the advances of science and to find respectability and acceptance within the discourses of modern rationality. Swedenborg, presenting as he did a creed that was based on personal experiential evidence of the spiritual, devoid of the claims of religious office or the prescriptions of ritual, was very much in keeping with the pragmatist view that religion is an actual experience to be justified phenomenologically rather than something to be asserted dogmatically. Suzuki, who was emerging after many years from under the pragmatist Paul Carus's wing, very much espoused such a view. He would go on to argue over the next few decades that Zen Buddhism was something to be done, not

something to be believed—a religion of individual self-authenticated insights. In a sense, just as what Swedenborg himself may have experienced.

—Heaven here and now—

Both Suzuki and Swedenborg shared a belief in the lack of a permanent categorical distinction between the spiritual and the material. For both, there is a willingness to appreciate the embodied nature of the spiritual, to see the eternal in the material. When Suzuki was asked about Swedenborg at the 1954 meeting with Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade as mentioned above, he "suddenly brandished a spoon and declared, 'This spoon now exists in Paradise … we are now in Heaven.'" (Bernstein 1996: xv) This very much echoes Suzuki's admiration for the *myokojin*, devout Pure Land followers, who also saw the spiritual in the materialist now (鈴木 1976).

What is being asserted by Suzuki in such exclamations of heavenly ascension as something that has already happened is a rejection of an eschatology of the 'end of time'. Suzuki notes how Swedenborg does not necessarily see Heaven as the realm of reality in the future but as something that is imminent and with us now. In this rejection of a Kingdom to Come for a Kingdom here now, Suzuki is making Swedenborg's heaven into the Zen Nirvana that exists for us already. This is a reversal of the manner in which early Christian interpreters of Buddhism often projected Nirvana onto the Christian concept of heaven, as in the place we all go to after we die.

Shared motifs

—Wisdom and love—

A major connection between Swedenborgian language and the Buddhist terminology of Suzuki is that of the Swedenborgian concepts of "Divine Love" and "Divine Wisdom" and the Buddhist Sanskrit concepts of Prajñā and Karunā. The centrality of Prajñā and Karunā in Buddhism is clear for Suzuki as shown in the following quote from a 1938 text.

What is it which constitutes the essential teaching of Buddhism? This

> is Prajñā and Karunā. Prajñā and Karunā are Sanskrit terms. Prajñā may be translated as “transcendental wisdom,” and Karunā “love” or “compassion”. (1938/2007: 12)

The same point is stated in a latter book, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* from 1957:

> He [Buddha] is omniscient as well as omnipotent. His experience has something noetic and at the same time something conative or affective, reflecting the nature of Reality itself which consists in prajñā and karunā. As regards prajñā, which is sometimes translated as ‘transcendental wisdom’ I have written about it elsewhere. Therefore I shall speak here about karunā. Karunā corresponds to love. (Suzuki 1957: 62)

That Suzuki saw this pair of concepts reflected in Swedenborg’s terminology is demonstrated in remarks he made at a talk given to the Buddhist Society in London in May 1958:

> Swedenborg talks about Divine Wisdom and Divine Love. If wisdom corresponds to Prajna and love to Karuna we can say that Christianity and Buddhism agree in this respect. We cannot have just one without the other. Buddhism talks about Sunyata, and Sunyata is emptiness, the object of Prajna; Karuna corresponds to this world of multitudes. So Prajna is the oneness of things and Karuna is the many-ness of things. (Suzuki 1980: 38)

Here we see how Swedenborg has offered Suzuki a way to link terminologically Buddhism and Christianity. It is interesting to note that in a much earlier book *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* published in 1907 before his encounters with Swedenborg’s writing, Suzuki writes:

> Prajñā corresponds in some respects to wisdom, meaning the foundation of all reasonings and experiences. It may also be considered an equivalent

> for Greek Sophia. Bodhi, on the other hand, has a decidedly religious and moral significance. Besides being Prajñā itself, it is also love (karunâ): for, according to Buddhism, these two, prajñâ and karunâ, constitute the essence of Bodhi. May Bodhi be considered in some respects synonymous with the divine wisdom as understood by Christian dogmatists? But there is something in the Buddhist notion of Bodhi that cannot properly be expressed by wisdom or intelligence. This seems to be due to the difference of philosophical interpretation by Buddhists and Christians of the conception of God." (Suzuki 1907/2007: 83)

The quote suggests that until he encountered Swedenborg, Suzuki was hesitant to apply non-Buddhist specific interpolations to these concepts. Translating Swedenborg perhaps gave him confidence that there could be common "philosophical interpretation" between Buddhism and Christianity.

Being able to link "wisdom" and "love" to Prajñā and Karunā gave Suzuki the conceptual tools to express in English a conceptualization of Zen consciousness that was at once detached from the world of duality through the power of wisdom but engaged with that world through the power of love. The emptied mind of Zen does not happen in an empty world. A further example of his deployment of these concepts occurs in his seminal talk on Zen and psychoanalysis at a conference organized by Eric Fromm in the late 50s. Here Suzuki is discussing the Zen view of consciousness. He believes that Zen penetrates to layers of consciousness below those to which psychoanalysis, both Freudian and Jungian, can reach. When the final layer *ālaya-vijñāna* is "broken through", "prajñā-intuition" is achieved. Suzuki then explains that the "primary will out of which all beings come is not blind or unconscious" but only appears to us as such through our "ignorance (avidyā)". This "will", which seems here to be the ultimate principle of existence, the existence of which occludes any atheistic, naturalistic philosophies, is then defined as follows: "The will is prajñā plus karunā, wisdom plus love." (Suzuki 1960: 58) And so the hypernym "Bodhi" to include Prajñā and Karunā, as seen in the 1907 text above, seems to have been replaced by "will", perhaps as would suit, in *upaya*-style, the rhetorical goals of an address to an audience

of psychoanalysts. Either way, it seems that when Suzuki combines Prajñā with Karunā to mean wisdom and love, the twin concepts expressed by Swedenborg, he feels confident that he is articulating in English a universal truth beyond terminologies specific to Buddhism.

It is very telling, then, that a few pages after defining Prajñā this way, in another section of his talk, when employing once more the term Prajñā he writes:

> Pranja: There is no corresponding English word, in fact, no European word, for it, for European people have no experience specifically equivalent to prajna. Prajna is the experience a man has when he feels in it most fundamental sense the infinite totality of things, that is, psychologically speaking, when the finite ego, breaking its hard crust, refers itself to the infinite which envelops everything that is finite and limited and therefore transitory. (Suzuki et. al. 1960: 74)

Why has he now declared the word to be untranslatable? A clue may lie in the fact that in this passage Prajñā is not being linked to Karunā, but instead is part of a list of six pāramitās (“cardinal virtues of the bodhisattva or Zen-man” (Suzuki et. al. 1960: 72)). As such, the word may have slipped its secondary Swedenborgian connotations to become purely Buddhist for which, Suzuki in an inadvertent translator Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) reveals himself unable to find a translation. The inconsistency in his translation strategies for the concept Prajñā reflects the ambiguous and conflicted relationship Suzuki had with the West. In the company of Swedenborg he was a comfortable pluralist, at home in the universal transcendent essence of all (Prajñā and Karunā: love and wisdom). Without this Swedenborgian support, he would revert to a sectarian and suspicious view of the West (Prajñā the untranslatable).

—Mirrored God—

Another powerful motif in Suzuki’s writings that can be linked with Swedenborg, is the metaphor of mirroring and self-reflection. The link is revealed through Swedenborg’s idea of “correspondences” about which

Suzuki writes: “I believe the principle of correspondence originally comes from the idea in the Bible that “God created man in his own image” [Genesis 1:27]” (1996: 79) For Suzuki, the doctrine of correspondence implies the interpenetration of all phenomena in the world which can coalesce in an individual human consciousness. However, whilst correspondence emphasizes unity it also asserts differentiations, allowing for the heavenly as much as the hellish. The abiding image of correspondence is one of God being resembled through His universe, that is, the universe is separate from God but ultimately shaped by Him. The concept of reflection, then, offers a useful metaphor for expressing non-duality but without the pantheism.

We can see an example of Swedenborg’s employment of the mirror and reflection motif in the following extract from *Divine Love and Wisdom.*

> But though the Divine is in each and all things of the created universe there is in their *esse* nothing of the Divine in itself; for the created universe is not God, but is from God; and since it is from God, there is in it an image of Him like the image of a man in a mirror, wherein indeed the man appears, but still there is nothing of the man in it. (Swedenborg 1763/1890: Par. 59)

This passage seems to adumbrate the following remarks Suzuki made to the Buddhist Society in London in 1953:

> So God desired to see himself, and when that thought awakened in him, from that moment a mirror was created and that mirror was a mirror of consciousness. God saw himself in the mirror, and that reflection of himself in a mirror was not God. By making himself not God, by reflecting himself in the mirror, God, by making himself not God, made himself God. When we understand this we understand the essence of all religions, however different the interpretations or explanations, or the languages used, may be.” (Suzuki 1980: 49)

The remark is, in my opinion, a masterful piece of rhetoric, the product of a

moment of well-articulated clarity of vision. It exemplifies Suzuki's eclectic background wherein God and the consciousness embodied in His creation could be described through Swedenborgian imagery to explain Buddhism to an English-speaking audience.

We can see another example of how the concept of mirroring helps Suzuki link Buddhism to other thought systems if we return to the quote from *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* above. Suzuki remarks:

> The will is prajñā plus karunā, wisdom plus love. On the relative, limited, finite plane, the will is seen as revealed fragmentally; that is to say, we are apt to take it as something separated from our mind-activities. But when it reveals itself in the mirror of ādarśanajñāna, it is "God as he is." In him prajñā is not differentiated from karunā. When one is mentioned, the other inevitably comes along. (Suzuki 1960: 58)

The key term ādarśanajñāna, means mirror-consciousness, mirror (ādarśa) being a traditional motif in Indian thought. However, here Suzuki has linked this mirroring to God ("as he is"), a view that sits comfortably with Swedenborgian correspondence.

Conclusion

To return to Furuno's assertion quoted at the beginning that Suzuki's prior immersion in Swedenborg's works shaped his mystical views and enabled him to articulate Zen to the West, I hope I have shown that this is true to the extent that exposure to Swedenborg may be said to have encouraged Suzuki to be bolder in his descriptions and declarations of Zen universality in later works, and to the extent that Swedenborg offered Suzuki valuable concepts for his religious rhetoric, namely *divine love* and *wisdom*, and the cosmological self-reflectivity implied in *correspondences*.

However, it is probably more accurate to state that Swedenborg was one of many influences internalized by the impressively eclectic Suzuki. The eventual emergence of Eckhart in place of Swedenborg as Suzuki's favorite

Western would-be Buddhist demonstrates that, although he never rejected Swedenborg and always considered him a kindred spirit, he was probably not of central importance to the extent that Furuno suggested he might have been.

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