

**THE SECRET OF SWEDENBORG:
BEING AN ELUCIDATION
OF HIS DOCTRINE OF THE
DIVINE NATURAL HUMANITY**

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The secret of Swedenborg: being an elucidation of his doctrine of the divine natural humanity by
Henry James

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HENRY JAMES

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By the same Author:

SUBSTANCE AND SHADOW;

OR,

MORALITY AND RELIGION IN THEIR RELATION TO LIFE.

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THE following essay comprises an article which appeared in the *North American Review* for July 1867, and a large amount of additional matter. I had not space in the *Review* to do more than enter upon a theme previously so unwrought, and I am afraid I have done it only scant justice since. The subject is one however which invites and will well reward any amount of rehandling; and I cannot, just now at all events, afford the time to treat it more exhaustively. I am content to have outlined it in so conscientious a manner as that any one interested may easily work out the necessary details for himself; so I leave it for the present.

While deism as an intellectual tradition continues doubtless to survive, it seems at the same time to be losing all hold upon the living thought of men, being trampled under foot by the advance of a scientific naturalism. Paganism and science are indeed plainly incompatible terms. The conception of a private or unemployed divine force in the world — the conception of a deity unimplicated in the nature, the progress, and the destiny of man — is utterly repugnant to human thought; and if such a conception were the true

logical alternative of atheism, science would ere long everywhere, as she is now doing in Germany, confess herself atheistic. But the true battle-field is not nearly so narrow as this. The rational alternative of atheism is not deism, but christianity, and science accordingly would be atheistic at a very cheap if not wholly gratuitous rate, should it become so only to avoid the deistic hypothesis of creation. The deistic hypothesis then is effectually dead and buried for scientific purposes. That it is rapidly becoming so even for the needs of the religious instinct also, we have a lively augury furnished us in the current popularity of two very naive and amiable religious books, which unconsciously put a new face upon the atheistic controversy by attempting to give revelation itself a strictly rational aspect, and so bring it within the legitimate domain of science. One of these books is named *Ecce Homo*, the other *Ecce Deus*. They are both of them interesting in themselves, but much more so, I think, as indicating a certain progress in religious thought, which tends to the disowning of any deity out of strictly human proportions, out of the proportions of our own nature; or, what is the same thing, tends to disallow all personal and admit only a spiritual infinitude, which is the infinitude of character. I for my own part rejoice extremely in this brightening of our intellectual skies. I hope the day is now no longer so distant as once it seemed, when the idle, pampered, and mischievous force which men have everywhere superstitiously worshipped as divine, and sought to placate by all manner of cruel, slavish, and mercenary observances, may be utterly effaced in the

resurrection lineaments of that spotless unfriended youth, who in the world's darkest hour allied his own godward hopes with the fortunes only of the most defiled, the most diseased, the most disowned of human kind, and so for the first and only time on earth avouched a breadth in the meanest human bosom every way fit to house and domesticate the infinite divine love. Long before Christ, the lover had freely bled for his mistress, the friend for his friend, the parent for his child, the patriot for his country. History shows no record however of any but him steadfastly choosing death at the hands of fanatical self-seeking men, lest *by simply consenting to live* he should become the object of their filthy and fulsome devotion. In other words, many a man had previously illustrated the creative benignity in every form of *passionate* self-surrender and self-sacrifice. He alone, in the teeth of every passionate impulse known to the human heart — that is to say, in sheer despite of every tie of familiarity, of friendship, of country, of religion, that ordinarily makes life sweet and sacred — surrendered himself to death in clear, unforced, spontaneous homage to universal love.

But then it must be frankly admitted on the other hand that a certain adverse omen declares itself in the religious arena; not however among the positive or doctrinal orthodox sort, so much as among those of a negative or sentimental unitarian hue. It is fast growing a fashion, for example, among our so-called "radical" religious contemporaries, vehemently to patronize Christ's humanity, by way of more effectually discour-

tenancing his conventional divine repute. I too dislike the altogether musty and incoherent divinity ascribed to Christ by the church — a divinity which is intensely accidental and no way incidental to his ineffably tempted, suffering, and yet victorious spiritual manhood. But it is notoriously bad policy to confirm one's self in a mere negative attitude of mind, especially on questions of such intellectual pith and moment as this, and I therefore caution the movers of the new crusade to bethink themselves in time, whether, after all, the only divinity which is capable of permanent recognition at men's hands must not necessarily wear their own form? I find myself incapable, for my own part, of honoring the pretension of any deity to my allegiance, who insists upon standing eternally aloof from my own nature, and by that fact confesses himself personally incommensurate and unsympathetic with my basest, most sensuous, and controlling personal necessities. It is an easy enough thing to find a holiday God who is all too selfish to be touched with the infirmities of his own creatures — a God, for example, who has naught to do but receive assiduous court for a work of creation done myriads of ages ago, and which is reputed to have cost him in the doing neither pains nor patience, neither affection nor thought, but simply the utterance of a dramatic word; and who is willing, accordingly, to accept our decorous sunday homage in ample quit-tance of obligations so unconsciously incurred on our part, so lightly rendered and so penuriously sanctioned on his. Every sect, every nation, every family almost, offers some pet idol of this description to your worship.