

Spiritual living involves making a journey away from a world view dominated by the self-serving 'I, me, mine' approach to life, which separates us from others and indeed from God, to a state where we see the world in terms of 'you and yours' and begin to find ourselves closer to others and to God.

And yes, there is a risk in undertaking this journey whilst immersed in the material world and being subject to all its problems and pressures. But it is a risk worth taking because it is in coping with all that life throws at us whilst seeking to serve others more than ourselves that we rise above the material world and develop that inner spiritual life that leads to God.

I have mentioned all this to let it be known that the life that leads to heaven is not one of withdrawal from the world but a life in the world, and that a life of piety apart from a life of thoughtfulness (which is possible only in the world) does not lead to heaven at all. Rather, it is a life of thoughtfulness, a life of behaving honestly and fairly in every duty, every affair, every task, from our deeper nature and therefore from a heavenly source. The source of this life is within us when we act honestly and fairly because doing so is in accord with divine laws. This life is not hard, but a life of piety apart from a life of thoughtfulness is hard. Still, this latter life leads away from heaven as surely as people believe it leads to heaven.

Emanuel Swedenborg in Heaven and Hell 535

Living in the material world



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Living in the material world

Throughout history people have had an intuitive feeling that there is something beyond the very physical and material world in which they live – a spiritual dimension to life in which our deepest feelings and thoughts have a very real existence. Is this spiritual dimension something that is only made real to us on the death of our physical bodies or is it something that can be experienced in day to day life?

For centuries, people from all religious backgrounds have sought to experience the spiritual dimension by living the life of an ascetic and withdrawing from the world. In giving up the material world and its sensual pleasures they lived austere and minimal lifestyles so that they could concentrate on a path of enlightenment and come closer to God, the Divine Source of all life.

This approach to spiritual enlightenment and spiritual growth can be found in Hinduism, for example in the life of the Sadhus, good and holy men, who have sought to achieve liberation through meditation and contemplation. And ascetic ways of life can also be found in Buddhism and of course Christianity with famous ascetics such as Francis of Assisi and the religious order of the Franciscans that followed his lifestyle.

In the gospels there is an account of a rich ruler who came to see Jesus to ask what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus acknowledges that the man has kept all the commandments but tells him - *“One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* [Luke 18:22] This passage certainly seems to suggest that we need to dispose of our material possessions to stand a chance of inheriting the kingdom of God.

But the fundamental question remains – can a spiritual life, a life closer to God, only be achieved by separating ourselves from the world or can it be achieved whilst still living in the material world?

Emanuel Swedenborg was led to see an answer to this difficult question. In paragraph 535 of Heaven and Hell he writes:

I have been allowed to talk with some people in the other life who had distanced themselves from the affairs of the world in order to live in devotions and sanctity, and also with some who had mortified themselves in various ways because they thought this was renouncing the world and taming the desires of the flesh. However, most of them had wound up with a gloomy kind of life from this and had distanced themselves from that life of active thoughtfulness that can be led only in the world, so they could not associate with angels. The life of angels is cheerful and blessed. It consists of worthwhile activities that are deeds of thoughtfulness.

For Swedenborg a truly spiritual life is to be developed by focusing on the needs of others and being actively thoughtful about them whilst participating fully in everyday life. In this way we can both be living in the material world and at the same time rising above it.

But is it as simple as that? One of the perceived advantages of the idea of separating ourselves from the world in order to develop the spiritual life is that we can then avoid all the distractions and attractions that the world has to offer – all the material things that could easily lead us astray.

On the other hand if we are to pursue the spiritual life whilst living in the material world, which Swedenborg suggests is the only way, we will need to be very aware of the dangers involved. And these include the obvious ones of seeking excessive wealth, power and status and pursuing our ambitions to the detriment of others. But perhaps the most dangerous aspect of fully living in the material world is the risk that we will be seduced into imagining that there is nothing more than the material world. And if we reach that stage then our pursuit of what is spiritual will have come to dead end.