

Spiritual Consequences of the Presidential Election

BY JENNY CAUGHMAN



People have long said that if you want to avoid problematic discussions, don't talk about politics and religion. These are deeply personal convictions

around which people typically have a very low tolerance for disagreement. Following one of the ugliest, lowest political rivalries in US history, this may in fact be changing. The 2016 presidential election has shown us that while people still hold fast to their convictions, their tolerance for disagreement has become higher, which results in a very negatively charged atmosphere. I have found that adopting a spiritual understanding of our political climate has led me to a better, more positive perspective regarding this negativity. In addition, I have been forced to look at the ramifications of this election on my spiritual formation.

The Relation of Our Inner and Outer Selves

We all know that we have two parts of ourselves, our inner self and our outer self. We typically think of this in terms of the inner referring to our thoughts and feelings and the outer referring to our body and our words and actions. And while this is true, Swedenborg explains that this is the most surface understanding and thus is somewhat limited. In the course of trying to better understand ourselves, our purpose here on earth, and how we can live more loving and peaceful lives, it is important to take this inner/outer concept to a deeper level:

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It is recognized in the world that we have an earthly self and a spiritual self, or an outer and an inner self. It is not recognized that the earthly self becomes spiritual by the opening of a higher level within, and that this opening is accomplished by a spiritual life, a life in accord with divine precepts, and that unless we live by these precepts, we remain centered on the physical world (Divine Love and Wisdom §248).

Our truly inner self is much deeper than simply our thoughts and feelings; in fact, it governs our thoughts and feelings. Our inner self is our spiritual self—that part of us that is open to the Divine and that will survive after our physical body dies. The process of spiritual growth involves first acknowledging the existence of this inner, spiritual self and then choosing to let it grow by opening ourselves up to the inflow of divine love and wisdom. As we grow spiritually, this spiritual self becomes more real to us and gradually moves to the deep center from which we make choices; it comes to govern our thoughts and behaviors. Through this regeneration process, we move away from being concerned primarily with ourselves and our physical, ego-centered comforts, and we move toward greater love of God and neighbor, which is exhibited in

how we live our lives and treat other people.

Throughout our lives, we are faced with choices that are grounded in what is most important to us. We protect and care for our earthly selves—be that our physical well-being, our reputations, our pride, etc.—but we can also act in a way that is based on a love of God, choosing to strive to care for others, which is an expression of our spiritual selves. If we are motivated strictly out of love for our earthly selves, we close off to our spiritual selves and to God's influence. In the process, we open ourselves up for misery, for this can be a hellish existence.

This movement toward love of self is, I believe, what we are predominantly seeing in the political arena right now, and it is dragging most of us along. We are in the midst of a political climate that is unabashedly mean-spirited and self-serving, one that has lost sight of the bigger picture: the importance of morality, integrity, and civic duty—of the greater good.

This moves us from being simply concerned about ourselves to caring about the good and importance of civic and moral truths and behavior.

False (Spiritual) Assumptions

When discussing our inner and outer selves in his book *New Jerusalem*, Swedenborg describes some false beliefs that are common among people whose sole focus on their earthly selves to the detriment of their inner, spiritual selves prevents them from receiving the truths that come from heaven:

Faith from false belief is when the Word is believed and loved, and so is the teaching of the church, not for the sake of truth, and living in accordance with it, but when the ends in view are gain, [honors,] and a reputation for learning. For this reason those who have that faith look not to the Lord and to heaven, but to themselves and the world.

Those in the world with lofty ambitions and great desires are more the victims of the false belief that truth is what the church teaches, than those without lofty ambitions and great desires. This is because for them the teaching of the church is only a means to their own ends; and the more the ends are desired, the more the means are loved and believed in (*The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* §117). Too often during this political season, I have seen evidence of this. Some of these false beliefs that are perhaps subtly shaping our political discussions include the following:

- The soul is simply something that is barely alive, that is purely ethereal, and of which we can have no concept. *Our soul is that which loves. What are we seeing loved in politics right now: God and neighbor or self and power?*
- It is only the body that feels, sees, and hears. *How much attention is being given to our higher self, that which is concerned about the well-being of all people?*
- We are just like animals except that we can say what we are thinking. *The ability to rise above our base, selfish desires and be open to wisdom, which embodies love of God and neighbor, is what distinguishes us from animals. We don't seem to be seeing much of this in our political debates.*
- Nature is all there is—it came first and is the source of everything. Spiritual reality does not exist; or if it does exist, it is just a purer aspect of and dependent upon earthly reality. *These two beliefs deny the existence of God, the value and*

- *influence of God's love, and the higher importance of caring for others. By doing so, they rationalize the exploitation of the earth and other people.*

- It would be impossible for us to enjoy any sense of blessedness if we were deprived of the gratifications that come from loving glory, high rank, and profit.

This is what we believe when we focus on external, cultural norms. It is these norms that are creating such an unpleasant, dangerous political climate. In reality, blessedness is found in loving others.

- Conscience is nothing but a feeling of distress caused by physical weakness or lack of success. *Our conscience is one of the places where our inner and outer selves converge. It is to our benefit to listen to our conscience.*
- God has no influence in the world; everything depends on our own prudence (our personal influence) and intelligence. *As all that is good and true comes from God, the way to improve the world is to work in partnership with God. The world would benefit from our opening up to receive some of God's wisdom and compassion.*

Transcending the Ugly Fray

Swedenborg tells us that as we grow from being self-absorbed to opening ourselves up to the inflow of divine love and wisdom, we grow spiritually:

When we do abstain from our evils by the Lord's agency, then, our love for evil and its warmth are put aside and a love for what is good,

with its warmth, is brought in in its place, enabling a higher level to be opened. The Lord actually flows in from above and opens it and unites the love or spiritual warmth with wisdom or spiritual light. As a result of this union we begin to blossom spiritually like a tree in springtime (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §246).

This moves us from being simply concerned about ourselves to caring about the good and importance of civic and moral truths and behavior. Ideally, our politicians would not be motivated by the desire for power and reputation but instead by the opportunity to help others. But God has given us freedom, so all of us, each and every day, have a choice to either turn toward God, which is expressed in our willingness to serve the good of our neighbor, or away from God, which is expressed in the quest for power and control grounded in love of self. We seem to be primarily seeing the latter:

Rank and money may be either blessings or curses. Everyday experience bears witness to the fact that reverent and irreverent people, just and unjust people—good and evil people, that is—may have eminence and wealth. Yet no one can deny that irreverent and unjust people, evil people, go to hell while reverent and just people, good people, go to heaven. Since this is so, it follows that eminence and wealth, or rank and money, may be either blessings or curses, and that they are blessings for the good and curses for the evil. . . . If we give the matter only a little rational thought, we can see what makes eminence and wealth blessings and what makes them curses. Specifically, they are blessings for people who do not set their heart on them and curses for people who do. To set one's heart on them is to love oneself in them, and not to set one's heart on them is to love the service they can perform and not make.

Do we join in the ugly fray, or do we strive for something better? We are seeing the dangers that come from abandoning our spiritual self, but can we avoid the temptation to do the same?

Perhaps we each can ask ourselves a few important questions:

- Through our thoughts, attitudes, and interactions, how are we acting from a base of false beliefs and thus contributing to the atmosphere of mean-spirited ill will?
- What can we do instead to open our hearts and minds to the knowledge and love of God in order to help move our country and our world in a wiser, more loving direction?
- What must we do not to get swept into this ugly fray that is born out of fear and in the process not abandon our spiritual selves?
Swedenborg insists that all that is good and all that is true comes from God:

My friend, abstain from evil, and do what is good, and believe in the Lord with your whole heart and your whole soul; and the Lord will love you and give you love for what you do and faith in what you believe. Then you will do what is good because of love and you will believe because you have faith, which is confidence. And if you persevere like this, a reciprocal partnership [with the Lord] will develop and become permanent. This is salvation itself and eternal life (*True Christianity* §484:2).

Clearly, to move in a more positive and loving direction, we must repeatedly choose to be led by God.

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