



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Racism and Leadership

Some Doctrinal and Personal Reflections

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I write the following primarily from my perspective as a Swedenborgian scholar and priest, a perspective that cannot help being colored by my experience of being Black in an America still in recovery from the sickness of African slavery.

Lack of Leadership Sows Division

Growing up, I gathered the simple narrative that the Civil Rights movement was won on the martyrdom of Martin Luther King Jr. and that white nationalism was a thing of the past. Only, re-current events tell me time and time again that the story ain't that simple. The Civil Rights Movement certainly made the case for important legislation, but the prejudice that necessitated the movement still finds a home in the hearts of so many today. The murder of George Floyd is another reminder of this deadly reality in American society. It's bad enough to have regular everyday individuals with prejudiced perspectives leading to harmful actions, but right now in America we have at the very least inaction and at the very worst encouragement of division at the highest levels of government—from the Oval Office, even. This is cause for alarm.

President Trump's antagonistic responses to peaceful demonstrations and his clumsy conflation of looters and peaceful protesters in the wake of Floyd's death have me thinking back to the clash of white supremacists and their opponents from religious organizations and civil rights groups at the Charlottesville rally and riot in 2017. This contentious event, centered around the potential removal of a statue of General Robert E. Lee, ended with one dead of what would be later ruled a hate crime. The President, rather than taking a firm stand against white supremacy and domestic terrorism, declared that there were bad actors on "many sides" and even went on to say that there were "very fine people" on both sides.

Our President has encouraged rough treatment of dissident citizens in the past, from his talk of roughing up protesters at his rallies to his recent remarks on dominating protesters in the streets in the current demonstrations. His unthinking “I heard it somewhere” loot and shoot comments are just more of the same careless wielding of his power and influence over this nation. The President of the United States by default has a bully pulpit; it should be used carefully.

The Doctrines for the New Church speak to the power of the example of leadership in society with this illustration in *Divine Providence*:

“To the extent that we rationalize [our own evils] as permissible, we enlarge the court of our ruling love, our life’s love. Its “court” is made up of our compulsions, since they are like its servants and courtiers through which it governs the more outward activities that are its realm.

The nature of the ruler determines the nature of the servants and courtiers, and the nature of the whole realm as well. If the ruler is a devil, the ruler’s servants and courtiers will be forms of madness and the general populace will be all kinds of distortion. *The servants (who are called “wise” even though they are insane) use imaginary constructs and arguments based on illusions to make the distortions seem true and to be accepted as true.*

Is there any way to change the state of people like this except by banishing the evils from their outer self? This is how the compulsions that are inherent in our evils are banished. Otherwise, no exit is offered to the compulsions and they remain pent up like a city under siege or a sealed abscess.”¹

-Divine Providence §113

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

Love of Self is the Devil

To be clear, I am in no way calling our president the devil, nor am I laying all of our current problems at his feet—they are rooted in generations of inequality and exploitation and oppression. However, what is a devil? The Doctrines are clear that there is no one devil in charge of hell (*Heaven and Hell* §544). Instead, according to the Doctrines, we each can be and are devils when we allow our love of self to rule. And that's exactly what rests at the heart of racist rhetoric - it is the love of self. It is the comparing of all people to oneself rather than relating all people to God.

Jesus calls us to love one another as He has loved us (John 15:12). This invitation is higher than the Golden Rule which is to treat each other as we would like to be treated (Matt 7:12). The Doctrines for the New Church say that loving the neighbor consists of loving the good in the neighbor and therefore the Lord in the neighbor (*Divine Providence* §94). In fact, the Doctrines go so far as to say that goodness itself is our neighbor and we can only love this neighbor to the extent that we've accepted good in ourselves:

"Loving goodness in another person from goodness in ourselves is genuine love for our neighbor." -True Christianity §418

This is why *DP* §113 above talks about the need to banish evils in the outer self, so we can make space for the Lord to instill goodness within us so we can then go on to be truly loving to others. In order to do that, we must use the Lord as our metric and reference point. Racist thinking does not do this - it looks to and compares all else to that self, and then treats anything different or in discordant-variety (“*diversitas*” in Swedenborg’s lexicon) as an enemy.

The Doctrines spell out this dynamic:

*"The evils exhibited by those in a state of self-love are, generally speaking, contempt for others, envy, unfriendliness to those who do not favour them, resulting in hostility, various kinds of hatred, vindictiveness, tricks, deceit, lack of pity, and cruelty."*²

-*New Jerusalem* §75

*"[Love of self] strives to excel others in private life and in public life, to excel them in knowledge and doctrine, and to be promoted to positions of greater importance than others, and also to greater affluence than others.... [Someone in this love] despises others in comparison with himself, hates those who do not hold him in esteem and so to speak adore him, and therefore enjoys the feelings of hatred that are present in revenge and cruelty"*³

-*Arcana Coelestia* §3993.9

While deep and abiding systemic racism is the current problem on our national consciousness, it is not addressed as a prime evil in the Doctrines. Rather, the primary evils are love of the self and love of the world, and all else that is wicked and harmful stems from those two (*AC* §1691, et al.). Right now, we're seeing very real, potentially fatal troubles that are racist in presentation and that are selfish in essence.

When institutions work to cover their abuses rather than fix the systemic problems that led to them, it often is out of pride, fear, and ego connected with the love

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*. Translated by John Chadwick. London: Swedenborg Society, 1990.

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Elliott. London: Swedenborg Society, 1990.

of the self. So when, for example, a police force covers for their buddy because of the "fraternal order" (brotherhood) but forget the more-important "brotherhood of man" (old fashioned language, sorry), they are a lot like what the Doctrines present as a problem in the form of parents loving their children only because they see themselves in their children.

This is not true love of another but is love of oneself as found in another:

"...One who loves himself also loves the people who belong to him, in particular his children and grandchildren, and in general all who act in concert with him, and whom he calls his own. Loving these two groups of people is also loving oneself, for one looks upon them as if part of one, and oneself as part of them. Among those called his own are also included all who praise, honour and pay respect to him."

-New Jerusalem §67

These systemic issues that are endemic in society are macrocosms of the problems we see within individual people. What makes it so especially challenging right now is not that we have a new problem, but that we have no one speaking at the highest levels of our leadership in ways that set the national conscience. The American people currently have a President who easily peddles conspiracies and lies, but declared that he was inclined to wait for a "very full report" before he could comment on the prosecution of George Floyd's murderer-caught-on-film.

Necessity of Government

The Doctrines say that we need a government - without it the human race would "inevitably perish" (*NJHD* §312). The government ought to have governors who "note everything that happens according or contrary to order, rewarding those

who live orderly lives and punishing those who are disorderly" (ibid.). It is my opinion that we have a failing of government at a local level when it took a national media uproar to get the murderers of Ahmaud Arbery arrested...two months after the murder. We have a failing of government at a local level when undue force is used to manage nonviolent offenders and people are killed in cold blood by those charged to "protect and serve." We have a moral failing of leaders when party (what is one's own - see *NJHD* §67 above) becomes more important than morality and legality.

In addition to civil government, the Doctrines speak to the necessity of government of church - which is also to do the same things as the government of the state - reward and punish, guide and govern, and the way to do this for a priest is to "teach the truth and lead thereby to the good of life," a motto drawn from doctrine and drummed into priests. And yet I don't know what I'm supposed to do when the world burns. As a priest I am a governor of the church (*NJHD* §314). Sure, I politic and agitate for church issues behind the closed doors of clergy, but, until recently, I have refrained from speaking up more publicly when it comes to social issues. Like so many, I have been rattled from my silence.

Identification and Change

As noted, the Doctrines do not highlight racism as a primary problem of humanity - but they also neglect to address human chattel slavery - both of which were active issues during the life of Swedenborg. Both were also simply accepted. The reason racism stands out today is because we have repeatedly had the light shone on it. This is also how evil gets rooted out of an individual - you first have to highlight it, acknowledge that it's an evil, and then get to work (*NJHD* §160 ff.).

When a society identifies a problem, it then takes work to change it. This

inevitably means that some people will be upset. It makes me think of the Grand Human - the New Church concept that heaven is one body and all people in it are constituent members of that body (*HH* §59, et al.). This is why I included that Divine Providence quote above (no. 113) - not to trash President Trump, but instead to highlight a real problem: rooting out systemic racism and inequality is not on the executive agenda and as a result is a greater source of contention and division than it would be if it were considered a priority by the President. Despite this, the immune system of the United States is active; the white blood cells of activism and agitation are stirring and they are responding. They are making demands for social and racial health in the face of individual and institutional villainy. Hearts burn within protesters and the national fever rises.

The protests and riots are like when you start feeling funny before you make the mental connection that you have caught a cold. Your body starts fighting off the sickness before your intellectual mind has figured it out. But this is where it gets tricky - your rational mind can sabotage your immune system at times and make bad decisions that run counter to what your body is trying to do. You can go for a run when you really need to rest. You can convince yourself that you don't need your antibiotics anymore when really you are just on the cusp of health and abandoning them now will be your undoing. So much of the tension that we are experiencing in the United States is in part the result of a moral disconnect between the priorities of the national leadership and the priorities of many people on the ground.

Where is the Lord?

The Doctrines for the New Church are clear that the Lord looks beyond the moment and to eternity (*NJHD* §269). The Lord can't change us as individuals in an instant (*AC* §9587), and He can't change our collective society in an instant. The loves

of self and of the world aren't evil in and of themselves - we have to take care of ourselves and engage in the things of the world (*NJHD* §97). These loves become problematic when they become leading priorities. This is how it is for all people at their birth - we must grow out of it. We must as individuals learn to share and to be kind and not to stare at people just because they are different. We must learn to make sacrifices and learn to be okay with waiting. We must learn how to accept responsibility and acknowledge when we are wrong.

Our limited nature is why the Lord offered revelation for us - so we can learn (*AC* §10318). And this is part of why schooling takes so much of people's lives - education isn't something that happens in a moment. Speaking from my experience in the classroom, if I ever try to rush a lesson, I become the embodiment of haste making waste. This is why although the Lord looks beyond now, He works with us now, and nudges and inspires us now. Even though we might get frustrated with the time it takes for meaningful change to occur, the Lord doesn't get bogged down in the day to day inequalities.

This means that doing the work of governance, rewarding what is good, and punishing what is bad is left to us:

"When therefore they see wicked people promoted to honours, and gaining greater wealth than the good, when they see wicked people prosper more the craftier they are, they say in their hearts that this would not happen, if Divine Providence were concerned with every detail. But they fail to consider that Divine Providence pays no attention to what swiftly passes and comes to an end when a person's life in the world ceases, but rather to what lasts for ever, and so has no end. That which has no end is; that which has an end is comparatively non-existent. Anyone who can

ought to think, are a hundred thousand years anything compared to eternity? You will see that they are not. What then are the few years of life in the world?"

- New Jerusalem §269

Progress doesn't come easily, and it certainly hasn't always followed a straight line:

"To illustrate this by a comparison, if an archer or musketeer were to aim at a target and a straight line a mile long were drawn behind the target, then if the aim were off just a hair, at the end of that mile the arrow or ball would have strayed far from the line behind the target. That is what it would be like if the Lord did not have his eye on eternity at every moment, every least moment, in his foresight and provision for everyone's place after death. The Lord does this, though, because to him the whole future is present, and to him everything present is eternal."

- Divine Providence §333

If I am perfectly honest, I feel a wretched despair in the face of our current problems. I feel lost in the question of why racism and prejudice still have such a hold on so many people. I feel helpless. Even with everything that I know about the Lord and how He works with us, I feel like a useless member of a failing human society. Yet, I am encouraged by the protesters who have taken to the streets, and the writers who have picked up the pen, and the legislators who are casting a vision of a better world, and the citizens who are searching themselves to find if there is a better way. It is at these times of personal and social temptation and trial that the Lord is able to be closest to us (AC §1947). I just wish I could feel it and always believe that.

“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”⁴ -Mark 9:24



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⁴ *New King James Version* Bible ©. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.