

Politics and the Church?

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The New Church has had an unusual history of Political engagement. Many church members have been very civically engaged, but as a church the General Church seems to have adopted a tradition of not getting into politics. This has been adopted perhaps from the commonly stated maxim of “separation of church and state.” Without going into the misunderstandings of this concept from US history, we are going to see if this is a valid spiritual principle.

We do have strong teachings about the importance of spiritual or religious freedom, which is one of the “Laws of Divine Providence”. But this law is not universally applicable to natural freedoms, although it is related (*Divine Providence* 71). In contrast however from teachings such as *Heaven and Hell* 528, we are encouraged to engage in moral and civil life as a means of being spiritual, rather than “renouncing the world” or trying to live a spiritual life separate from the natural life. That is because that would be a species of faith alone, which is one of the big problems the church needs to avoid. So we must beware of thinking that there should be a big separation of spiritual life and civil life. In fact we could say there should be a clear flow between spiritual, moral and civil realms of life. *True Christian Religion* 55 lays out a healthy relationship of spiritual and civil realms.

- *Who does not see that there cannot be found an empire, kingdom, dukedom, republic, state, or household, that is not established by laws which constitute its order and thus the form of its government? In each one of them the laws of justice are in the highest place, political laws in the second, and economical laws in the third; or in comparison with a man, the laws of justice constitute the head, political laws the body, and economic laws the garments; and thus these last, like garments, may be changed.*

It is not so obvious in this context, but the laws of justice mean the rules of the Ten Commandments, which are spiritual rules and yet also natural at the same time.

- *All in the entire world are saved who acknowledge God and live according to civil laws of justice as a matter of religion. By civil laws of justice we mean such injunctions as are found in the Ten Commandments, namely, not to commit murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness. These injunctions are civil laws of justice in all countries of the earth, for without them no state would survive. (Conjugal Love 351.)*

When we look at the state of public discourse today we can see that some spiritual charity and wisdom, could go a long way in improving how people treat each other and view the goals of political interaction.

Taking these two passages together, we can see how politics should flow from spiritual principles in an orderly society. A country that abandons the spiritual principles that the Lord gives to us will not be serving the welfare of its citizens and will also probably not last long as a country.

The passage from True Christian Religion also tells us that there are priorities in how a government should function. First in importance are the spiritual rules drawn from the Ten Commandments, particularly the ones on how to treat the neighbour. In second place are the political laws which involve the government and officials abiding within the framework and right functions of government. And lastly are the economic laws, which can be most easily and most appropriately changed. This seems like it would involve tax rates, imports, and interest rates. In the first case, they are simply spiritual laws that should also be guarded in civil society. The second laws can have more flexibility but should be changed with care as to not unsettle the stability of the nation. The economic laws are most free to revision and update. There are spiritual principles that can also be applied to economics, but there is a lot of room for different application depending on different circumstances. There has to be some taxation, not too little or too much, but exactly where can be a matter of freedom and judgement to decide.

When we engage in the civic realm we can keep these different levels of priority in mind and hopefully that help us keep things in perspective. When we find ourselves in discussion with other people we can try to find where we have common ground on the higher levels before getting caught up in the lower level disagreements. In the following months we will also look at ways to have constructive conversations when there are disagreements on topics that really matter.

The earth shall be filled with knowing the glory of Jehovah, as the waters cover the sea.
Habbakuk 2:14