

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

What can faith teach us about healing division?



Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

"To help our nation heal in the wake of the 2020 election, I think the most important thing we can do is to recognize that democracy is a sacred project."

So wrote Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core.

In a brief post-election reflection, Patel shared his experience of 20 years of interfaith training for emerging leaders of how religious commitment can profoundly impact our civic life. He discusses three ways this perspective can help us begin the healing process.

First, we must, as every major religion teaches, see "every human being as sacred."

In a democracy, every person has the right to vote and to be heard. It means welcoming the diverse contributions of all citizens. It is why Abraham Lincoln, addressing a divided nation in his first inaugural address, urged that we not see each other as enemies but as friends, and called all citizens to pursue the "better angels of our nature."

Second, Patel sees democracy, especially at this time, as sacred in the call for repentance. The bitterness and division that is so prevalent invites, no, requires a time of repentance.

He referred to the highly respected civil rights activist and congressman John Lewis. When segregationists like George Wallace sought his forgiveness, Lewis responded that as a Christian he was called to forgive.

The third impact, Patel writes, is "seeing democracy as a sacred project in that it generates processes for redemption and reconciliation." He recalls the response of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who did not talk of anger or revenge following the Montgomery bus boycott, but said "The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community."

Patel concludes his reflection urging "that as we move on from the advocacy for particular political sides during an election season, we have to shift to the idea of reconciliation."

The Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson is well-known in this area from his days as former head of the Reformed Church in America. In an article he wrote a couple of years ago in the journal *Oneing*, he also sees politics as a sacred project that must be seen through the eyes of faith. He wrote:

"Transformative change in politics depends so much on having a clear view of the desired end. ... For the person of

faith, that vision finds its roots in God's intended and preferred future for the world ... a world made whole, with people living in a beloved community, where no one is despised or forgotten, peace reigns, and the goodness of God's creation is treasured and protected as a gift."

He continues by pointing out that we often have it backwards and begin with politics, and then try to fit our religion into our political goals. He writes, "We start with the accepted parameters of political debate and, whether we find ourselves on the left or the right, we use religion to justify and bolster our existing commitments."

David French, a Harvard-educated lawyer, worked for many years defending religious liberty and free speech on campuses throughout the country. He was a staff writer for the conservative magazine *National Review*, and recently became a writer and senior editor of the conservative news outlet *The Dispatch*. As an evangelical Christian active in politics, he also writes and speaks from his faith commitment as he addresses political issues facing our country.

In a recent chapel talk at Biola University in California, he raised the warning that political identity is replacing faith in our current environment.

Honest concern about issues has been replaced with anger. The message, he warns, is "Be afraid, be angry," and it is coming from both sides. In such a polarized society, he urges that on whatever side you find yourself, seek out the reasonable voices on the other side, not necessarily the loudest or most extreme. In this way you have the opportunity to learn something rather than just accelerate the division. He also recommends modeling the values you affirm. If you want a civil society, then be civil to those with whom you disagree.

In the concluding chapter of his book "Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation," French quotes the prophet Micah from the Hebrew Bible: "What does the Lord require, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8) For French, putting his faith first, this call is an imperative for our political actions as well. He writes that "there is no solution to our national crisis absent those three cardinal virtues."

In our polarized battles, each side fights for what it believes is right and just. In fact, it is this conviction of the rightness of our position that often accelerates the division. But French argues that we must go beyond this justice commitment to the



People of different beliefs need to come together after the election, as at this 2017 interfaith memorial service organized by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Submitted, Douglas Kindschi

qualities of mercy and humility. He writes, "Mercy is the quality we display when we are, in fact, right and our opponents are wrong. We treat them not with contempt but with compassion. In the aftermath of political victory, we seek reconciliation." We remember Abraham Lincoln's words from his second inaugural address, "With malice towards none; with charity ... to bind up the nation's wounds."

Finally, humility is required to "remind us that we are not perfect. Indeed, we are often wrong and will ourselves need mercy." French reminds us of the apostle Paul, who recognized that we know the truth only in part and that "we see through a glass darkly."

In our interfaith efforts, we seek to begin with our faith commitments as we engage with those of other faith traditions who believe differently. We may not agree, just as we may not agree in the political arena, but we seek to understand and be respectful as we engage with others. This is in no way a dilution of our faith, but an acting out of that faith as we treat others with respect — even though, and especially when, we differ in our beliefs and even in our politics.

Let our faith and its teachings lead us as we seek to heal division.

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