

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Our religious principles can inform how we vote and choose our leaders



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Can our religious traditions help us in voting? In America, we are accustomed to separation of church and state. In response to the question of paying taxes to a secular government, Jesus' famous response was, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

Of course voting was not a consideration in his day, nor was that the case in the early days of most religions. And yet, nearly every religious tradition says something about what we should look for in our leaders and in our relationship to government. I inquired of my friends and persons involved in our interfaith understanding work to learn more about what their traditions teach.

In the early Hindu tradition, most societies were autocratic, but as early as the fifth century B.C.E. there were republics established with representative assemblies. A prayer was recited by members gathered: "We pray for a spirit of unity; may we discuss and resolve all issues amicably. May we reflect on all matters (of state) without rancor. May we distribute all resources to all stakeholders equitably. May we accept our share with humility." (Rig Veda X.19.12) Modern India is the world's largest democracy, with a 67% voter turnout.

The Buddha, living in roughly the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., witnessed rulers who governed unfairly and unjustly, oppressing, persecuting and putting themselves and their personal desires above the people they ruled. This troubled the Buddha deeply. In the Jataka text, the Buddha offered a teaching on the "Ten Duties of a King" that in modern terms would be duties of the government or president. With these 10 qualities, the Buddha describes what one who leads a people should embody:

- 1. Generosity.
- 2. A high moral character.
- 3. Willingness to sacrifice everything for the good of the people.
- 4. Honesty and integrity.
- 5. Kindness and gentleness.
- 6. Austerity in habits.
- 7. Freedom from hatred, ill-will, enmity.
- 8. Commitment to non-violence.
- 9. Patience.
- 10. Non-obstruction of the will of the people.

The Jewish Talmud records one of the rabbis saying, "One should not appoint a leader for a community without consulting the community." Even when God tells Moses whom he should appoint for a task in building the temple, according to this rabbi, God responds, "Even so, go and ask the people." From this, one can conclude that voting is a religious obligation, a commandment that we participate in selecting our leaders.

The story is told of the Orthodox rabbi Rav Avraham Karelitz, who was born in Belarus and lived his final 20 years in Israel. On election day, he is said to have asked a man if he had voted yet. The man replied that he hadn't because he didn't have the money for the voting tax. The rabbi asked him if he had a pair of tefillin — the black leather boxes containing verses from the Torah that are to be worn by Orthodox men when they do their morning prayers. The man responded "Of course." Rav Kare-

litz then said, "Go sell your tefillin to pay the tax and vote," adding that he could borrow the tefillin to pray but the voting could only be done by that man on that day.

For Islam, the Qur'an directs that decisions should be conducted by mutual consultation and that honesty is required in all that one does. It is one's duty not only to do what is right, but also to stand up and correct leaders if they are not doing or saying what is right.

The Baha'i community emphasizes the unity of mankind and of religion. Candidates should be evaluated based on the reputations of their service to humanity, their honesty, their integrity, their promotion of the equality of women and men, their promotion of universal education for all, and finally their promotion of the elimination of racism and other prejudices.

Jews and Christians share the scriptures known as the Tanakh or Old Testament. In it are many passages related to what one should look for in a leader.

Even when the Israelites were taken captive in Babylon, the Lord spoke to them through the words of the prophet Jeremiah, saying "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7) Referring to this passage, Bishop Craig Alan Satterlee of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America wrote:

"If God would have Israel pray for Babylon, where they were exiled, how much more would God have us pray for the United States of America, where we are privileged to live? The separation of church and state is a doctrine aimed at protecting religion from government interference. It is not an excuse that relieves people of faith from fulfilling our responsibility as citizens. So, as we approach Election Day ... I ask you to do two things in addition to praying for the welfare of your city, our state and our nation.

"First, to seek the welfare of the city, state and nation, vote. Make your plan. Vote in a way that is best for you. But vote.

"Second, to seek the welfare of the city, sacrifice." He continued by reflecting on a documentary that he viewed on what was happening on the homefront during World War II, and noted the way Americans sacrificed for the sake of our nation. He continued, "We refuse to wear masks and keep social distance. We complain that we can't get into our church buildings, sing songs and drink coffee. ... We are unwilling or unable to sacrifice."

He concluded with the reminder from Jeremiah and this charge: "Seek the welfare of the city, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Pray. Vote. Stay home. Keep social distance. Wear a mask. Sacrifice. Please."

We enjoy in our country this wonderful privilege of choosing our leaders. Whatever our religious background and position on the issues, we can reflect, pray, and act in ways that are true to those principles and vote. It is our sacred duty.

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