

IS THERE A 'CHRISTIAN' WAY TO VOTE?

The essence of this article, commissioned by some Christian friends of mine, has been compiled in the context of Sri Lanka's forthcoming Presidential election in November 2019. It is shared with a wider audience for various reasons. Religion dominates the front pages of news in many parts of the world, but almost always for wrong reasons – often to report on some conflict between religious groups. Closer to election time in this country, it is to report how various aspirants visit either religious leaders or places of religious assembly in order to canvass votes. What is often missing is a reflection on religious values and principles for deciding among such aspirants. This is an attempt at that. In this process, I do not wish to lump all religious teachings together to arrive at some broad universal principles – that could be of some value but runs the risk of missing very specific and potentially helpful insights from specific religions. I am also not competent to present views from all religions – that would constitute a level of scholarship beyond my competence. I confine myself therefore to Christianity, of which I am an adherent; but write, in the words of Michael Polanyi, "with universal intent". In other words, while the insights below are from a specific source, I share them because they can hopefully be accepted by all people of goodwill. I do not wish to be divisive in this process. I hope commentators from other religious persuasions (and from none) would write similarly to educate all of us. The sources I use are almost all from the Christian scriptures, commonly called the Bible, divided into what is called the Old Testament (before Christ) and the New Testament (during and after Christ).

Should we vote?

First, Christians must not think that voting is "of the world" or that politics does not concern us. The pages of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, tell us that God is concerned not only with rulers and their responsibilities, but also with our own participation in national life. Although voting did not take place in the time of the Bible, except perhaps in the choosing of deacons in Acts 6, we are asked in Jer. 29:7 to "*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.*" So, even if we think that we are 'exiles' in this world, we still need to seek its welfare; and exercising our vote is the least we can do in this regard.

This time around, there is a parallel question as to whether spoiling our vote could be a 'valid' way of seeking the welfare of our country. Deliberate spoiling of a vote is done in order to send a message to all aspirants that we are not happy with any of them. This perhaps is a little better than not voting at all. However, having a sober understanding of the world around us means that we recognize its 'fallen-ness'. The Bible recognizes that even (some might say 'especially') the church is not perfect; neither were the Old Testament leaders. It may be better, therefore, to use our votes to choose the best possible outcome.

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Should we vote for the best possible candidate or keep out the worst?

Many Sri Lankans have often been faced with a choice of this nature in the past, and perhaps even this time. The best possible candidate may have only a slim if any chance of winning; and a vote for such a person may increase the chances of the worst possible candidate to be elected. The alternative of voting for the best possible candidate (even though that person may not win) could however be seen as investing in the long-term political future of the country. Many democracies are dominated by two major parties, who often collude with each other on various issues – including that of (not) punishing miscreants. Breaking such two-party dominance could be something that Christians could endorse. For example, Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI; Pakistan Movement for Justice) party had a long wait from 1996 before they got the largest number of seats in 2018. For Christians, voting for the perceived best may constitute being *light* (i.e. voting in hope to see long term change), whereas voting to keep out the worst may represent being *salt* (i.e. voting in rearguard action to prevent imminent and irreversible decay and damage), in the context of Jesus’ salt and light metaphors (Mt. 5: 13-16).

Should the candidate be pro-church or pro-poor?

The entire tenor of the Bible conveys the idea that the church is an institution that looks after others before it seeks its own ends. Bishop David Sheppard (who also played test cricket for England) has written that God has a “bias to the poor.” So what the aspirants to office are likely to deliver to the weakest segments of our society is an important criterion for deciding on whom to vote for. “*He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the LORD*” (Jer. 22:16) is a description of the good king Josiah. Nowadays however, almost all candidates pledge their allegiance to the poor. However, one way to judge candidates could be from their promises regarding income tax – a candidate who promises to reduce the taxes of the rich may be suspect – because taxation is the way that modern states redistribute wealth to serve the needs of the poor. Others could argue that the way to uplift the poor is via economic growth. I have no quarrel with this – provided such growth does not leave anyone behind. It may also be easier to discriminate between candidates based on the support they have from oppressed minority communities, who are also often relatively weak and needy. Another way to frame this issue, in the words of philosopher Karl Popper, is to seek for “the least amount of avoidable suffering for all” rather than “the greatest happiness for the greatest number”.

It may also be pertinent to say that candidates who frequently visit religious leaders or places of religious assembly, especially when televised for publicity, are best shunned. It

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appears to me that the degree of public religiosity displayed by leaders (whether in the run-up to elections or when in office) is inversely proportional to the level of justice they tend to deliver. The Bible also puts it brilliantly, in the words of an Old Testament prophet conveying God's sentiments: *"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"* (Amos 5: 21-24).

How can we judge the track record of the aspirants?

Judging track record is a little difficult because there are a range of factors that need to be considered. Also, the performance of the incumbent candidate will be fresh in our minds, compared to that of a contender, who may not have held a similar position before (or whose performance has been forgotten). There is also the difficulty in deciding whether to judge based on evidence for positive or negative performance. When Deuteronomy 17:14-20 talks about the criteria for being a good king, it covers both the negative aspects (*"he must not multiply [for himself] horses... wives... silver and gold"*); and the positive aspects (*"learn to fear the LORD his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them"*). The main negative criterion, therefore, is whether the ruler has amassed wealth and power, which will also impoverish the poor. The main positive criterion is whether the ruler has submitted to the law (which in the Deuteronomy context is somewhat different to our own but has similarities nevertheless); rather than considering himself above the law or attempting to manipulate it, something that most rulers down the ages have been tempted to do. In this context, the track record for preserving an independent judiciary appears to be a very important criterion. Also, the behaviour of the aspirants during the election campaign itself, in terms of abiding by election laws and exercising moderation in spending, could perhaps be used to judge between them.

Another positive Biblical trait to look for is that of admitting one's faults in the past. Consider this passage in the Bible about a king's repentance in response to a critique by the prophet Jonah: *"When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust... When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."* (Jonah 3:6,10). It may be too idealistic to demand that candidates admit to their faults in these days – especially in an Asian country such as Sri Lanka, which is supposedly characterized by a shame culture where apologies are somewhat rare. They could, however, at least make public their asset declarations, if nothing else.

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How do we choose among stability, good governance and national security?

The Presidential election of 2015 was portrayed by many as a choice between stability and good governance. If this is the case, is one of them more desirable than the other from a Christian viewpoint? We have seen in Deuteronomy above that good governance is extremely important. How about stability? Paul does urge Timothy that *“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way”* (1 Tim. 2:1-2). At face value this appears to endorse a stable society. However, the over-riding concern for human affairs in both the Old and New Testaments is for justice. And stable regimes are often characterized by injustice. The reign of Solomon was probably the most stable time in Israel’s history – the economy was so good that silver lost its value, with gold being the only precious metal worth having (1 Kings 10:21). However, it appears that Solomon levied unjust taxes on his people in order to amass such wealth and beautify his capital city. And this resulted in Israel being split into two soon after his death, because the outlying tribes were not prepared to continue paying such taxes (1 Kings 12). So, stability can often mask a lot of structural injustice; and we must exercise extreme caution in espousing it, especially because some of us may be benefitting from that injustice too.

Into this mix of stability and good governance, is also thrown in ‘national security’, which appears to be increasingly important today for many countries worldwide. A generation or more ago, national security meant dealing with an external threat – say an inimical foreign country. Today, unfortunately, it has more connotations with respect to internal threats – *i.e.* those from groups of citizens within the country. This may be a reality in today’s multi-cultural societies. However, internal threats can be dealt with in two ways – one way could be to increase the amount of surveillance and security checks; whereas another way could be to build greater trust and harmony among differing groups of citizens towards forging common ground. Individuals can decide on which approach is more consistent with Biblical principles, and which candidates are promoting what. It should be also noted that while ‘strong regimes’ may be good at quelling insurrections, those very insurrections also tend to surface only during such strong regimes – with our own modern history too bearing this out!

In addition, the extent to which candidates promote identity politics – *i.e.* the promotion of racial or religious identities in order to secure votes – would put them at variance with Biblical teaching. Whatever the Jews thought of themselves in the Old Testament, with the advent of Jesus and the Christian Church in the New Testament, all identities were relativized in the realization of a common identity: *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal. 3:28). Of course, the history of the church is replete with examples of how this very Christian identity

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has been used to subjugate others, but the idea that our differing human identities need to be relativized (rather than glorified) is a key Christian concept.

Some cautions and suggestions

I have tried to be as objective as possible in presenting a Christian viewpoint regarding the choices we have at the forthcoming election. Although I have used a few verses of scripture, the better way to discover a Biblical worldview is to discern the thrust of the Bible as a whole – I have tried to do that too. I am aware however, that others may arrive at differing opinions about such a Christian viewpoint. I am not very familiar with secondary sources either – for example established Christian social teaching on this issue; although I suspect that there is not too much material on this topic of voting that I have tried to wrestle with. In addition, all of us have our own biases, and mine may be evident in this article. However, in spite of all these limitations, this article may nevertheless have something of value to even a very diverse readership.

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