

Religion Experts Column

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, May 01, 2011

Q : Does your faith impact your voting preference?

A : Politicians around the world continue to associate themselves with specific faiths or traditions of a dominant faith. This even includes those painting themselves as so thoroughly modern they only rely on the religions of science, rationality and modernity. Often, aspiring candidates wrap themselves, sometimes literally, in the costumes of as many faiths as possible, much to the annoyance of those faiths. On our side of the ballot box we stand, pencils in hand, wondering who, if any, speaks for us.

In North America there is a mythology that public life is strictly secular, the so-called division of church and state. At the administrative level, this appears true. However, many of our current political heavy-weights do not disguise their affiliation with one group or another, and still rely on religious themes to market their political vision. Speaking for myself as a Buddhist, before I make my "X", I will always reflect on which party or candidate most closely mirrors the religious values which I espouse. This does not require any candidate or leader to practice with me or use the language of Buddhism. What I look for will be intentions that speak to protection of the whole natural world, not just the advantage of some humans who claim

to own pieces of it. I look for the politics of caring, the acceptance of responsibility for the relief of suffering in our world. I look for those who truly erect a "big tent", as the jargon goes, rather than pitting special interests or regions against each other. The Bodhisattva values of compassion, honesty, sincerity, patience and attentiveness will matter. An acceptance of the importance of consistent long-term vision, over short-term strategic advantage will matter. That the constituency, be it local, provincial or federal, will be accepting and inclusive, rather than blaming and excluding matters.

What I look for, all too often in vain it seems, are the politics of a Mandela, a Dalai Lama or the best of First Nations culture, namely, the politics of reconciliation, not the politics of "my party obliterating all contrary ideas". Now, let me sharpen my pencil.

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