NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Neither Obama nor Romney? Some Christians vote for 'None of the Above'

David Gibson Religion News Service | Oct. 24, 2012

Is it a sin not to vote? Or perhaps a virtue?

The question may seem surprising, especially in a nail-biter of an election in which every vote will count and both sides argue that the future of the nation is at stake.

But in columns and blog posts in recent months, a number of mainstream Christians on both sides of the aisle -- particularly evangelicals and Catholics -- have been advocating and agonizing over the merits of boycotting the ballot box Nov. 6.

Many are disappointed with their usual candidate but can't bring themselves to vote for the opposition, while others are just fed up with the entire system and feel they have no choice but to abstain.

"Although political disengagement may not be a'moral option,' I have decided I won't vote next month," Jen Pollack Michel wrote Monday in a blog post at Christianity Today, the leading evangelical magazine.

Politically speaking, Michel said she had always been a classic evangelical: white, middle class, reliably Republican. But she traced her growing disillusionment with the GOP to a range of issues, especially the party's health care policies. And yet she said she can't pull the lever for President Barack Obama, either.

Other evangelicals say they will also opt out, though they have cited varying religious justifications.

Dwight McKissic Sr., a prominent black Southern Baptist who leads the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, shocked many followers by declaring that he couldn't vote for Obama because of the president's stance on gay marriage and abortion. But he said he also couldn't vote for Gov. Mitt Romney because of what he contends are "racist teachings" in Mormon scriptures.

"When faced with the choice of two evils, my philosophy is to choose neither," McKissic wrote in the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* in September. McKissic said he is considering a write-in vote for Jesus Christ instead.

At Catholic websites with a progressive bent, on the other hand, theologians and writers who in the past supported the president have been wondering for months whether to vote or not.

Julia Smucker, a contributor to the Vox Nova blog who identifies as a "Mennonite Catholic," wrote in July that Obama had disappointed her so much she may not vote for anyone. Meanwhile her colleague Kyle Cupp said he found both campaigns so vacuous that he has "almost reached the point of not caring."

Similarly, Jana Bennett, a professor of theological ethics at the University of Dayton in battleground Ohio, wrote a column at the Catholic Moral Theology blog saying she is considering voting for a third-party candidate or not at all because neither party adequately represents her beliefs.

"Something has tipped for me this election and it's the way I think I'm being asked to rip myself in half, figuratively speaking, by one party or the other, or both," Bennett wrote in early October, lamenting "the stupidity of the apparent choice with which I am faced in the election."

"The stark disparity between the two party's platforms indicates to me that regardless of who 'wins' in November, the net result will be that nothing will continue to get done," she said. "In a two party system, we seem to have only one choice, even if that choice splits us down the middle."

Bennett's colleague at the University of Dayton, Kelly Johnson, also advocated not voting, though she framed the decision as a fast in which believers should "abstain from some good for the sake of orienting our desires toward a higher good."

"Abstaining from voting for now would recognize that in this setting and for us, elections can be an occasion of sin and a site for scandal," Johnson wrote last spring. "Paul abstained from meat sacrificed to idols for the sake of other Christians; Catholics could abstain from U.S. party politics, for the sake of all of us, Catholics and non-Catholics, who are misled by such efforts."

Historically, only the pacifist Anabaptist movements, like the Mennonites, have been known for rejecting any involvement in politics or the machinery of state. Their suspicion of church-state alliances stems, in part, from their persecution at the hands of both Protestants and Catholics in 16th-century Europe.

Yet even as the Anabaptist community in the U.S. has tilted toward deeper political engagement in recent years, in 2004, Goshen College history professor John D. Roth stirred controversy with a passionate five-point exhortation about why he would not vote in the presidential election -- and why his coreligionists shouldn't either.

But if not voting is a somewhat familiar stance for Anabaptists, evangelicals and Catholics have traditionally viewed political activity as almost a sacred duty.

"Voting is a civic sacrament," Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, former president of Notre Dame, once put it. The official Catholic catechism echoes that view, saying it is "morally obligatory to ... exercise the right to vote," citing scriptural injunctions to obey the proper authorities to make its case.

For U.S. Catholics, political participation was also important for an immigrant community that was trying to be seen as fully American. Evangelicals emerging from their Bible Belt isolation in the 1970s saw politics as crucial to stanching what they saw as the moral deterioration of American society. Both groups also hold to mainstream Christian theology that allows for a "moral realism" when it comes to waging a just war, for example, or taking other steps that might not be exactly what Jesus would do.

In recent years, however, some influential voices have called for a radically different approach that focuses not just on separating oneself from politics as much as on protesting -- and perhaps changing -- the entire political culture by abstaining.

In 2004, philosopher and ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre -- a convert to Catholicism -- wrote a widely circulated essay in Notre Dame magazine in which he argued that neither party presented an acceptable alternative for a believing Christian. "The only vote worth casting in November," he said, "is a vote that no one will be able to

cast, a vote against a system." As a result, he said the only option was to not vote at all.

MacIntyre's essay struck a chord then, and versions of his proposal seem to be proliferating in this election cycle.

Which is not to say that sitting out the election is going to sit well with most Christian leaders, liberal or conservative.

"Christians who boycott voting are opting out of civic responsibility and neighbor love," said Russell D. Moore, dean of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Moore said abstaining on Election Day is "more akin to Pontius Pilate washing his hands rather than John the Baptist taking on the powers-that-be" -- a form of utopianism, he said, "in which Christians find no candidate pure enough to be trusted."

"In any election, we are not voting for a Mayor of the heavenly New Jerusalem; that office is occupied. We are entrusting a group of fallen sinners -- as we all are -- to lead us in navigating the common good."

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