

Discussion Guide

Sacred Texts, Social Duty

A Documentary by EthicsDaily.com



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A Note About Viewing

"Sacred Texts, Social Duty" is a 58-minute documentary produced by EthicsDaily.com.

The documentary contains four main segments:

- Social Duty in the States
- Social Duty in the Sacred Traditions
- Social Duty in the Square
- Social Duty and the Pulpit

For your convenience, DVD "chapters" have been created to represent each segment.

The DVD also contains several deleted scenes. They are:

- "Social Justice"
- "Rally in Birmingham"
- "Tax Freedom"
- "Injustice in Arkansas"
- "Churches Will Not Do It"
- "Trickle Down"
- "Theistic Materialism"

One or more of these features may be of special interest to your viewing group.

Teaser / Introduction

The voiceover says: "For centuries, the faithful have said lots about death, little about faith and taxes. Taxes support our common life, but talk about the moral element of taxation has been mostly missing."

Do you agree that talk about the moral element of taxation has been mostly missing? Discuss why or why not.

When you talk about taxes or overhear others talk about taxes, what is the tenor of the comments? Positive? Negative? What accounts for what you say or hear?



Social Duty in the States (Segment One)

Virginia

The first state highlighted is Virginia, where we meet Doug Smith (Disciples of Christ) and Imad Damaj (Sunni Muslim).

Smith brings up the "Protestant work ethic" and the idea that only lazy people are poor or in need of public services. Damaj, himself an immigrant from Beirut, says the distasteful idea of paying taxes to support lazy people is found in the immigrant communities as well.

What are your own thoughts about tax dollars and whom they benefit?

In Virginia we next meet Ben Romer (Reform Jew) and Ammar Amonette (Sunni Muslim). The rabbi and imam discuss the idea that taxation should benefit the common good.

Do you think of taxes as supporting the common good? Why or why not?

Romer mentions that the Virginia state legislature has made massive cuts to education spending. Romer and Amonette then talk about how their faith traditions have valued education.

What do your scriptures or faith traditions say about education? Anything? What do they imply? What are the relationships between your faith, your education and public dollars?

Next we meet Tami Sober (Presbyterian) and Ali Faruk (Sunni Muslim). Sober goes through a brief list of some of things she encountered that morning that were paid for by tax dollars.

Make a similar list of services you have benefitted from that were paid for by tax dollars.

Now think of services paid for by tax dollars that you personally don't benefit from. Should you have no responsibility for helping pay for them? Discuss.



Alabama

Professor, author and minister Wayne Flynt (Baptist) accurately points out that the United States is the third-lowest-taxed of all industrialized nations and therefore if U.S. citizens think they're so heavily taxed, it "has something to do with the materialism that is at the root of American culture. That my life is defined by how much income I retain and how little I pay to the government."

What has been your perception about how much U.S. citizens are taxed vis-à-vis citizens of other countries? And what do you make of Flynt's claim that our materialist mindset may account for our griping about taxes?

In Alabama, we next meet Kimble Forrister (Church of Christ) and Pres Harris (Baptist/Pentecostal), who work for Alabama Arise. The voiceover speaks of their role in making the income-tax threshold in Alabama rise from \$4,600 to \$12,600. While an improvement, this means that a person still begins paying income tax while living well below the poverty level.

This issue is clearly about tax policy. To what extent is it also about moral treatment of the poor? If it is about moral treatment of the poor, what are the implications for church people's civic involvement given scriptural mandates?



Illinois

We meet Philip Blackwell (Methodist) at his church in Chicago. Blackwell says:

“If the public system of taxation as well as the delivery of services doesn’t reflect how it is that we are to care for one another, then it is the religious community’s responsibility not only to point that out, but to advocate and to organize in order to make sure that there is a kind of common care for people.”

Do you agree or disagree with his statement? What does “advocate and organize” mean specifically for people of faith? For houses of faith? Discuss.

We next meet Ralph Martire (Catholic) at the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability in Chicago. Martire says people like public services, but they don’t like paying for them.

Could that describe you? Someone you know? Does that attitude need changing?



Oregon

Mark Knutson (Lutheran) and Alcena Boozer (Episcopalian) are friends and ministers in Portland. Knutson says “our collective memory is short” regarding what people - even the west’s pioneers - have done in support of community. We tend to remember the rugged pioneers and forget the communal elements of their survival and well-being.

What is the relationship between individual and community?

Next we meet David Leslie (Presbyterian) and Daniel Isaak (Conservative Jew) in Portland. Leslie continues the theme of how we often idolize “self-made” people and ignore how they have benefited from society and community.

What are an individual’s obligations to community? What are a community’s obligations to an individual? What teachings, experiences, texts or prejudices account for your conclusions?



Social Duty in the Sacred Traditions (Segment Two)

Read the following texts and contexts from Torah:

- Exodus 30:13 (“half-shekel”)
- Leviticus 23:22 (“gleanings of the harvest”)
- Deuteronomy 16:20 (“justice, justice shall you pursue”)

Read the following texts and contexts from the New Testament:

- Mark 12:13-17 (paying taxes to Caesar)
- Luke 19:1-10 (the story of Zacchaeus)
- Romans 13:1-7 (submission to authorities)

Read the following texts and contexts from the Qur’an:

- 2:177 (what righteousness is)
- 3:92 (give out of what you cherish)
- 64:16 (be charitable)

How do you interpret these texts in light of a discussion about taxation?

Are there other texts from these traditions that deal with money and the common good?

Rabbi Ben Romer says: “The American government has the responsibility, as the government of the people, to provide for the needs of the people. And certainly the synagogue and the mosque and the church has a responsibility beyond the government, but not in place of the government.”

This idea is echoed by other interviewees, including Doug Smith, Wayne Flynt and Pres Harris.

Do you agree with their assertion that the government should provide for the needs of the people? Why or why not? How do houses of faith fit into the equation?

Wayne Flynt examines Matthew 25:31-46 (a gospel passage popularly known as “the sheep and the goats”) and says Jesus’ words can be interpreted as an argument for charity, or an argument for justice, or both.

How do you interpret Matthew 25? What are the implications of your interpretation for you personally? For your house of faith? For your government?

Wayne Flynt says: “What we’ve done is sever ethics from social morality and reduce ethics to personal morality. Also what we’ve done is to say that justice is about charity.”

Consider some of the sacred texts that interviewees have mentioned or that you have read. Consider both specific verses as well as larger themes from your sacred scriptures that deal with charity and justice. Now discuss personal and social morality, and include concepts of charity and justice in the discussion.



Social Duty in the Square (Segment Three)

The voiceover says: "Sacred texts are not blueprints for policy -- even tax policy. Rather, the scriptures contain principles that faith leaders and tax experts with faith backgrounds see as relevant to public policy."

Do you expect your faith leaders to apply scriptural principles to public policy? Why or why not?

If you do, how do you expect them to go about doing so? In sermons? In columns distributed to congregants? In community activism?

Are you comfortable when a faith leader deals with one arena of public policy, but not another (e.g. abortion but not taxation; war but not the lottery)? Explain.

Ben Romer, David Leslie and Ammar Amonette - representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths - reference the notion, in their respective scriptures, that those who have more should share more.

What does the idea that "to whom much is given, much is required" mean to you?

The documentary also brings up the concepts of progressive and regressive tax structures. Tax expert Jim Nowlan describes the difference this way:

"A regressive tax is one in which as income increases, the rate of taxation decreases. Whereas in a progressive tax, as the rate of income increases, the rate or the proportion or the percentage of taxation also increases."

Have you ever thought about the tax structure in your state? What kinds of good and services are taxed in your state? Are there moral implications to the structure your state has adopted?

Discuss your impressions of regressive and progressive tax structures and how you came to your conclusions.

Several interviewees discuss “sin taxes,” or excises on products like alcohol and tobacco.

What is your opinion on taxing those products?

Faith leaders and tax experts interviewed in the documentary also discuss the lottery and other forms of gambling. Pastor David Wheeler even calls the lottery a form of state-supported “tax evasion.”

Do you agree with criticism of the lottery on grounds that it generally shifts a public funding burden to the poor? Why or why not?



Social Duty and the Pulpit (Segment Four)

Several interviewees say their houses of faith have never connected morality to tax policy.

Tami Sober says, “During my lifetime I’ve never heard a sermon from the pulpit that’s advocated for a good tax policy.”

Have you? Discuss.

If your church, synagogue or mosque has never addressed tax policy, list reasons why it hasn’t.

Wayne Flynt argues that in a congregational setting, the congregation itself basically determines when an issue is “moral” and therefore allowed to be spoken of from the pulpit, and when an issue is “political” and therefore forbidden.

Do you agree with his assertion? What is the case for your house of faith? How does it determine what is moral versus political?



Conclusion

Do you believe in the idea of the common good? If so, what is the relationship between justice and the common good?

Ralph Martire says:

"You would think that Christians would be all about having a public sector that obviates the worse vicissitudes of poverty. You would think they would be willing to pay for that and push for that. You would think if you read through the New Testament and the hundreds of references to poverty therein that you would feel morally compelled to jump out in front of this. And you would be wrong."

Do you agree with Martire in his assessment of Christians' involvement with the public sector? If you agree, what accounts for their lack of interest and commitment?

What is your assessment of the interest and commitment of other faith groups?

If the government just "got out of the way" and let houses of faith meet people's needs, would they? Could they? Discuss.

Earlier in the documentary, Ralph Martire says, "I think most Americans, whether they're conservative or liberal in their leanings, are fair." In the conclusion, Mark Knuston says, "I think most people who attend churches want to do the right thing."

Do you agree with their assessments? If so, what's missing? Do you agree with Martire, who earlier said folks were fair, but they simply didn't get good information?