

## Adopting Biblical Teachings of Equality and Tolerance in Today's Diverse Society

-- Diana Jeang

The history of human civilization recounts timeless inequalities. A notable barrier to the advancement of peace has been the persistent corruption of inequalities amongst races, classes, genders and religious beliefs. Since the beginning of organized society, a failure to promulgate the fundamental concept of equality despite apparent differences has been the root of many unspeakable evils. Examples span the biblical times (the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt; the conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans) to the middle ages (the Inquisition; the Crusade) to the recent past (the slavery and segregation of African Americans; the Holocaust) to our present days (an intolerance of religious differences, e.g., the 9/11 attacks; the inequities that drive economic migration, e.g., the illegal immigration angst in the United States). Indeed, the corruption of inequalities has been recognized as a scourge against humanity by leaders of peace throughout the ages who have strived to “right this wrong.” Early in our civilization holy men, including Moses, Christ and Muhammad, taught against the injustice and corruption of inequalities at immense personal costs. The teachings of these three leaders form the foundation for the “rule of law” in many of today’s Christian, Jewish and Islamic countries. It is instructive to consider how Moses, Christ, and Muhammad battled against corruption; however, that war has not been won. Indeed, while countries like the United States have attempted to weave “Christian values” into the fabric of our society, stark inequalities remain.

Moses was the first of the three religious leaders who sought to correct the corruption of inequality of his time. He delivered the Israelites from the oppressive hands of the Egyptians, and is considered one of the most important figures in Judaism. Moses taught an equality which

transcends social classes. In Moses's time, Egypt was a powerful empire built upon the sweat and blood of the people of Israel. Although Moses was the adopted son of the Pharaoh's daughter and was raised in a high privileged class, he, nonetheless, recognized the sufferings and pains of the Hebrew slaves. One day, Moses saw an Egyptian overseer torturing a slave. He was pained by the cruelty of the Egyptian slave driver. Although Moses knew that his actions would endanger his own life, he threw himself on the slave-driver and killed him (Wiesel 186). This selfless act against the unjust torture of his people forced Moses to flee from Egypt. When Moses returned to Egypt, it was not to live a life of luxury but as an Israelite "slave" to lead his people out of oppression and suffering. Thus, Moses could show the Pharaoh that there is equality between the life of a Hebrew slave and that of an Egyptian royalty.

After liberating the Israelites, Moses continued the teaching of equality amongst social classes in his newly organized Hebrew society. One of the many laws that Moses instructed to his people was of fairness in judging others. He taught them not to show "partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly (Leviticus 19:15)." Hence, Moses established the creed that all people are equal and are to be treated and judged the same, regardless of wealth, birth, or social class.

Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christian faith, espoused the equality between the healthy, the able, and the sick and disabled. In Jesus's time, society viewed disabilities and illnesses as signs of sin and evil (Gabriel 114). The unwell, the mentally retarded, the physically crippled, and the spiritually adulterated were shunned and ostracized. One day when Jesus and his followers met a man blind from birth, the disciples asked Christ, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" But Jesus replied with love and declared that the sick and the infirm are to be embraced by God's miracles (John 9:1-3). On another day, the

teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had committed adultery before Jesus and told him that the law commanded that such a woman be stoned. In response, Jesus said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:3-7).” Through his ministering of the sick, Jesus preached tolerance and compassion. He gave sight to the blind, gave hearing to the deaf, let the lame walk, and cured the lepers (Gabriel 111-112). Jesus taught his disciples: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give (Matthew 10:8).” Christ’s deeds reflected the notion that God accepts equally the lives of the well and the lives of the mentally, physically, and/or spiritually unwell.

No less than Moses or Christ, the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, recognized the corruption of racial and tribal separatism. In Muhammad’s days, the Arabic nations were fragmented by dissent and tribalism. Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh, had long become rich by trading in the surrounding countries. The Quraysh city, Mecca, had become a thriving mercantile city, but in the aggressive stampede for wealth, basic values had been lost. Instead of caring for the feeble, as the nomadic code prescribed, the strong Quraysh clans profited and preyed at the expense of the weak. Tribes fought each other, discriminated against one and another, and were in disarray without a common purpose (Armstrong 3).

In this setting, Muhammad laid down a foundation of morality, justice, equality, and brotherhood (Zohery). Universal brotherhood was a key value in Muhammad’s nation of Islam. He taught equality amongst people of different backgrounds and he instilled tolerance and understanding, which were keys to quelling tribal strife and establishing peace amongst Islamic nations.

Moses, Jesus and Muhammad mentored three equalities: the equality of differing social

classes; the equality between the well and the infirm; and the equality amongst different people and races. These are high principles which have contributed much to moving human civilization forward. Regrettably, years hence, we have failed to consummate durably the teachings of these three holy figures. Two events in the not too distant past, the Inquisition and the Holocaust, serve bleak reminders of the lingering corruptions of inequality.

The Inquisition covered three different periods (Medieval, Roman and Spanish) in European history during which the Catholic Church and the government collectively persecuted and killed Jews, Muslims and Protestants (Jones). The church employed a tribunal called the Inquisition to accuse and convict people of disobeying Catholic authority. Punishments were severe and cruel including excommunication, imprisonment for life and burning at the stake. The Inquisition stretched through the better part of a millennium during which thousands perished (“Inquisition”). Will Durant wrote in his book, *The Age of Faith*, that “making every allowance required of an historian, we must rank the Inquisition, along with the wars and persecutions of our time, as among the darkest blots on the record of mankind, revealing a ferocity unknown in any beast (Jones).” The Inquisition skirted the teachings of Moses, Christ and Muhammad, on tolerance and equality; and its memories will forever blight the history of Catholicism.

The Holocaust illustrates another equally egregious violation of the gospels of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. In the mid-twentieth century, Nazi-Germany fanned discrimination and religious intolerance throughout Europe. This led to the systematic extermination of people regarded as “racially inferior.” Victims of the Nazis were sent to concentration camps, where they toiled at hard labor, and many perished from exhaustion or forced starvation. Others were sent to death camps, built exclusively for the purpose of killing large numbers of defenseless

people. In a short four years, the Holocaust murdered more than six million Jews (“The Holocaust”). It is forever a reminder of man’s inhumanity to and intolerance of others. Collectively, the Inquisition and the Holocaust demonstrate the potential for evils to emerge when the teachings of equality and tolerance fade.

Sixty years after Nazi-Germany, the United States is often held up as the example of a nation built on equality, liberty and justice. Have we fully emulated the dictates of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad? Have discrimination and inequality departed the American horizon? An objective examination of the history of the United States would suggest otherwise. Indeed, America has prospered in part from her economic exploitation of certain ethnic minorities. Arguably, the most notable instance of exploitation is the enslavement of Africans, beginning in the colonial period and lasting to the end of the Civil War. Sadly, American injustice to African slaves was not unique. Hence, in the mid-1800s America imported Chinese to work as “coolies” building the transcontinental railroad. The coolies were treated to subhuman labor conditions and subjected to steep social and economic discrimination. The victimization of and discrimination against Chinese immigrants was remarkably codified through many government legislations such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, reflecting an institutional acceptance of intolerance and inequality (Thernstrom 220). Clearly, within our own shores and in our age, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad’s principles remain partly unfulfilled and overlooked.

In America today, intolerance and inequality remain major themes of social discourse. Yesterday’s discrimination against Chinese railway coolies has reemerged in today’s solutions for Hispanic “illegal alien” farm workers. On our television networks and over our airwaves, there is a rising sentiment among Americans that illegal immigrants are overly numerous and are taking jobs away from “us” (Aizenman). Some politicians have sown the fear that illegal

immigration is causing a rising crime wave. In these moments of emotional exuberance, can America, as a nation of immigrants, recall that “we” may be no different from “them?” Is it possible to grasp that nationality is perhaps no more than an “accident” of birth? Do we forget that opening our doors to the values of equality and tolerance of diversity have been boons rather than scourges of American society?

Although inequality and discrimination are corruptions at the root of many conflicts and inequities, can we do more to address these issues? While there are no ready answers, some examples of progress offer hope and optimism that continued effort in teaching equality and tolerance may ultimately work.

A story of progress can be seen in present day India. Here, the social caste system has been a strong barrier to progress. Yet, change is coming to this ancient societal prejudice. Young Indian children are being taught at an early age against prejudice and discrimination, and they are being empowered through education. A recent article in the *Washington Post* documented that attitudes toward different castes are being reshaped through early childhood schooling. The article speaks of Ramu, a teenage dishwasher subjected to cruel treatment by his employer because it was accepted that “as a member of India's lowest and most shunned caste, [Ramu] could never amount to anything.” But Ramu’s “destiny was changed” when he was afforded an opportunity to enroll in a foreign-run private school for Dalit children. By providing all castes with equality in opportunities, institutions and schools are taking action to dismantle a 3,000-year-old barrier (Wax).

The three Abrahamic religious leaders made their most powerful assaults on the corruption of inequality and intolerance through teaching and educating people. Thus, it is through unfettered access to teaching and educating all individuals that we can hope to combat

these issues today. “Hope starts and ends with the schools. Fix the schools, and society will begin to be fixed,” said Ashok Agarwal, a lawyer who runs Social Jurist, a watchdog group that litigates education cases on behalf of marginalized sectors of society (Wax). Following on the work of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, we should continue to disseminate the message of tolerance of diversity and just equality for all. Society is the richer when diverse individuals have equal opportunities to contribute. Our challenge is to achieve these important goals through widespread and early teachings of values. To that end, an increased amount of money should go into public education for the specific purpose of educating youth on tolerance and diversity.

Reflecting on the lives of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, the path to a future of peace becomes more clear. Coexistence and tolerance may not be values that come naturally to society, but they are values that can be taught, learned, accepted and embraced over time. Although the past evils of inequality cannot be changed, future evils can be prevented. Human beings are capable of learning from past experiences and evolving to act better. Good changes have come. Many of our once exploited groups in the United States have made significant advances. Today’s descendants of the coolies, the Chinese Americans have the highest median income in the United States and are widely viewed as economic and academic success stories (“Asian Americans and Wealth”). As a further example of progress in diversity, the upcoming American presidential election has two front runners, an African American and a woman. Intolerance and inequalities will happen, but they need not prevail. If we root out these pernicious injustices, we pre-empt the emergence of future evils. A popular theme echoed amongst our politicians this year is “change.” By reinforcing the teachings of Christ, Moses and Muhammad, the leaders of today can change our society towards more equality, diversity and tolerance — if these were to happen, then our world will become a more peaceful place.

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