

Humanity's Choice: Using the Legacies of the Prophets to Find Our Moral Path

-- Lauren Sumida

Corruption manifests in society in many different forms, but it is essentially the consequence of choosing a selfish, evil course of action over good. It stems from the duality of human nature, wherein each individual has equal, inherent capacity for good or evil, peace or violence—and as a function of this duality, they also have the ability to reason and choose one over the other. All of the Prophets utilized this human quality of reason to opt for moral intentions over evil ones in their quests to eliminate corruption and the injustice that often follows. They dealt with the corruption that resulted from humanity's surrender to more primal needs by encouraging people to choose rationality, peace, and benevolence over selfishness and malicious intent, as well as personally demonstrating the benefits of such a choice. While it might be said that the Prophets had the advantage of being mediums for God, and that therein lay their power and influence in society, they have left the human race with the knowledge that when confronted with a choice between an honest, moral path and a corrupt one, the moral path is always more rewarding for oneself and for those around them. From the legacies of the Prophets, we have the tools and confidence to forge modern-day programs promoting understanding and peaceful coexistence, and ultimately to eliminate corruption and injustice.

The Quraish people of the prophet Muhammad's society worshipped the pagan idols centered in Mecca. Muhammad sought to end corruption in his society through preaching, urging his people to stop praying to these idols, "which symbolized degradation and ignorance"¹. The Quraish merchants, who valued the money of the pilgrims who came to visit the Mecca pagan shrines over the truth of Muhammad's revelations and teachings, resorted to violence

against Muslims in an attempt to continue profiting off of the pilgrims¹. The Quraish followed their acts of violence with an offer to Muhammad of unlimited wealth, leadership, and anything else he desired, so long as he stopped preaching his ideals¹. Muhammad's refusal—'I would not do so—even if you placed the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand'—exemplifies a person's ability to choose truth over greed or wealth¹. When the hostility of the Quraish persisted, Muhammad fled with his followers to Medina in order to practice their religion in safety and to stabilize their community. This model of staying true to one's beliefs regardless of the injustices inflicted upon them reflects Muhammad's mission to use the word of God to end corruption and injustice in his society. His perseverance in the face of the religious corruption and greed of the Quraish merchants and the vicious, violent criticisms of Muhammad's spiritual messages they made to defend their pagan idolization proved to his followers, and eventually all of his people, that maintaining one's faith and valuing truth are far more beneficial than choosing wealth and power, which only lead to corruption.

Like Muhammad, Jesus focused on ending religious corruption in his society, emphasizing a love of God and one's neighbors in his teachings. In Jesus' society, the dominant religious power of the Hebrew priesthood (Sanhedrin) wrongfully used their power to accuse and condemn Jesus for blasphemy². As Jesus was a spiritual savior rather than the political savior many Jews believed to be the prophesied messiah, he posed a threat to the religious doctrine of the Sanhedrin. To maintain their religious superiority, they engineered Jesus' Roman trial², and the Roman authorities, in fear of Jesus' popularity and influence ordered his consequent execution³. This is perhaps the ultimate form of corruption—to arrange for the death of an innocent for selfish reasons, to protect oneself, or because of fear. However, Jesus' sacrifice is also the ultimate demonstration of selfless defiance against a corrupt institution, setting an

enduring example of the power of morality over immorality. In his letter from a Birmingham prison, Martin Luther King Jr. relates, “In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment”⁴. Jesus taught by his own example the value of living morally and with compassion, and demonstrated the power a single individual can have to transform corruption and injustice.

The Prophet Moses faced both religious and political corruption in his society, where the Pharaoh of Egypt enforced an institution of slavery and infanticide for Moses' Jewish people. In amending this corruption, Moses brought forth the ten plagues against the Pharaoh and his people, after which he led his own people to Mount Sinai to escape the Pharaoh's continued persecution, parting the Red Sea and preventing the Egyptian soldiers from pursuing him and his people⁵. As with the *hijra*—the flight from Mecca to Medina—that Muhammad led with his people to find safety from the Quraish, Moses led his own people in a mass exodus in order to fully eliminate corruption and injustice through ensuring the safety of his own people and the stability of their faith⁶. Additionally, he relayed the Ten Commandments, guidelines by which his people were to live. Delivering this moral code, which became the basis for Hebrew law, was essential for the establishment of a new Israelite society free of not only the oppression and injustice that had faced them under Egyptian rule, but also the possibility of corruption manifesting in their new society⁵. But despite these measures, in Moses' absence, his people created and worshipped a golden calf idol, prompting the wrath of God, who tells Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt”⁷. Instead

of losing hope in his people, however, Moses persuaded God to be merciful, urging him to “turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people”, thus illustrating the importance of compassion and forgiveness in the face of corruption, even corruption injurious to oneself⁷. Moses reflects the value of honesty and morality through the way he conducted himself with humility and modesty, never using his power as a Prophet for personal gain or wrongful power over his people.

The United States frequently extends a helping hand to other nations experiencing some derivation of corruption, be it political, religious or socioeconomic. Americans are quick to critique the manifestations of corruption in other countries—failed elections in Pakistan, development of nuclear weapons in Iraq and Iran, government-sanctioned ethnic cleansing in Darfur—but in order to confront these international issues effectively, we must first face our own debilitating tendency toward corrupt actions. This follows the Buddhist adage, ‘By helping oneself one helps others, and by helping others one helps oneself’⁸. Americans cannot successfully help other countries deal with their corruption when corruption still affects the United States in every facet of its society. One major kind of corruption prevalent in America is stereotyping, which has infiltrated our society in the form of discrimination, affecting employment, education, politics, and daily life. Stereotypes are a form of corruption—they give the illusion that humankind is divided rather than united, and creating these racial, ethnic, and religious barriers also creates a corruption of the heart, where a prejudiced individual considers themselves superior to another based on a false belief in a false inequality. Said Muhammad, “Truly I am the brother of every pious man even if he is a slave from Abyssinia; and opposed to every villain even if he is a noble Quraishi”¹. It is important to communicate that race and

religion do not define the quality of a person, and it is the misconception that they do that motivates people to discriminate against others.

Unlike most forms of corruption, stereotyping is not tangible; it cannot be dealt with as easily as fraud, theft, or murder, for which there are legal provisions. But because stereotypes have an astronomical influence in society, perpetuating many kinds of corruption, it is extremely important to target racial and religious stereotypes and discrimination, that we might transform them into understanding and equality. Stereotypes are inherent in everyone, and they translate to political, religious, and economic discrimination and separation. They are a form of corruption present within us and in the structure of our society, manifesting at the very least in the form of taunting and teasing between children, and at the very worst in violence and conflict. In describing religious divides, Akbar Ahmed says, “There are important differences, however, between the three monotheistic religions...the differences need to be clarified so as to overcome the problems of stereotyping and misunderstanding”¹. It is inevitable that there will be differences between people, but understanding those differences rather than reinforcing them is key to eliminating stereotypes and injustice.

A program to effectively combat this longstanding shadow over our society would select children and teens from all religious, racial, economic, and geographic areas of society and bring them together to work towards overcoming their differences and possible ignorance about one another through simple learning and interaction. This is somewhat similar to existing programs such as Operating Understanding D.C., a group that brings African American and Jewish high school students together to bridge their cultures and unites them in the struggle against racial and religious discrimination⁹. However, unlike OUDC, this program would bring together students from every racial and religious background from every region of the U.S. in order to help

overcome every form of stereotype and discrimination. They would explore the past, present and future of their different backgrounds and the historic or ongoing conflicts between them in order to better understand one another, eventually as a group becoming microcosm of ideal coexistence. Once students in this program understood each other's backgrounds and recognized one another as equals regardless of their differences, they could begin actively working to spread their understanding, targeting institutions such as the media, which often propagates harmful stereotypes. This program could be also extended internationally. These same students could travel beyond the U.S., demonstrating what they have learned, spreading tolerance and eradicating the stereotypes that plague the rest of the world and often manifest more directly in more harmful ways. Helping other people around the world build homes, improve their education—perhaps by even helping teach children themselves—or raise funding for schools, as well as any other number of other humanitarian aid projects, would help strengthen interfaith and interracial understanding beyond the United States to the entire world. When Martin Luther King, Jr. praised Jesus as a creative extremist, he concluded, “Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists”⁴. And so, even forty-five years later, the same need for creative extremists applies, and a program with teenagers from all different backgrounds offers a chance to cultivate the creative extremists that the United States and the world need to end corruption and injustice.

Like the prophets, we must learn to rely on our better traits as benevolent, selfless humans, and to follow a moral path. Following the Prophets' example and speaking out against injustice and corruption, reaching out to others and overcoming the set stereotypes that society has instilled in us brings civilization closer to establishing peaceful coexistence and equality. Take away layers of religious, economic, and racial divisions that divide us, and we are all

simply human. As of now, that is not enough to eliminate the stereotypes that divide us, lending an edge to the corruption in our society. However, this is not an impossible goal, if we can create programs that help break down the stereotypes that lead to both conscious and unconscious discrimination. By improving the relations between the different religious and racial groups in the United States with compassion and cooperation, we can become a model for the rest of the world, and help them achieve the same equality.

Endnotes

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