

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Letting tribal loyalty blind us from morality



Douglas Kindschi Director,
Kaufman Interfaith Institute

We are living in a time when morality is taking center stage in ways quite unthinkable just months earlier. Sexual indiscretions were long overlooked in the political and entertainment worlds, but now we are seeing a dramatic change in attitudes. In the political, broadcasting, cinema and business worlds, we are seeing a revolt against sexual harassment.

As Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson recently wrote: "What seemed for generations the prerogative of powerful men has been fully revealed as a pernicious form of dehumanization. Men ... have been exposed at their moments of maximum cruelty and creepiness — just as their alleged victims (on credible testimony) experienced them. An ethical light switch was flipped. Moral outrage — the appropriate response — now seems obvious."

Gerson, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, points out that this outrage is not coming so much from the religiously conservative voices whom one would expect would take such a stand against "injustice and exploitation — as the Christian gospel demands."

He decries those "for whom the dignity of girls and women has become secondary to other political goals." When the female governor of a state admits she has no reason to disbelieve those who have accused the candidate for U.S. Senate of molesting underage girls, but still will vote for him because of his

political party, then Gerson says tribal politics has led us to "tribal morality." We can excuse immorality if it leads to my tribe winning in the political arena.

Gerson also cites prominent religious leaders who have supported that same candidate because he would vote on the right side in Congress. He concludes by affirming that the primary emphasis should be on the rights and dignity of each individual.

"This is the firm moral ground upon which our debate on sexual harassment should be conducted. Political figures guilty of coercion, exploitation, dehumanization, cruelty and the abuse of power should not be trusted with power. Even on our own side."

DOING WHAT THEY ONCE CONDEMNED

Also dealing with the relationship between politics, religion and morality was another columnist writing in the New York Times about his country of Turkey. Mustafa Akyol discusses the impact of a political revolution that brought to power religious conservatives who now dominate most of the government and media.

This revolution has led to an undesirable result, writes Akyol: "The religious conservatives have morally failed because they ended up doing everything that they once condemned as unjust and cruel. For decades, they criticized the secular elite for nepotism and corruption ... and for using the news media to demonize and intimidate their opponents. Yet after their initial years in power, they began repeating all of the same behavior they used to condemn, often even

more blatantly than their predecessors."

It is a familiar story. "The religious conservatives have become corrupted by power. But power corrupts more easily when you have neither principles nor integrity," Akyol continues. This gap between religion and morality raises the question, "Does religion really make people more moral human beings?"

Akyol responds by pointing to the two fundamental ways that religion can work. It can be a source of self-education or of self-glorification.

As a source of self-education, "religious texts often have moral teachings with which people can question and instruct themselves. The Quran, just like the Bible, has such pearls of wisdom. It tells believers to 'uphold justice.' It praises 'those who control their wrath and are forgiving toward mankind.' It counsels: 'Repel evil with what is better, so your enemy will become a bosom friend.' A person who follows such virtuous teachings will likely develop a moral character, just as a person who follows similar teachings in the Bible will."

'RELIGION ... AS DRUG FOR THE EGO'

But religion can be a source of self-glorification when one assumes to be "already moral and virtuous simply because you identify with a particular religion. ... A religion's adherents assume themselves to be moral by default, and so they never bother to question themselves. ... For such people, religion works not as cure for the soul, but as drug for the ego. It makes them not humble,

but arrogant."

Akyol, as a Muslim, continues by quoting an "exceptional Jewish rabbi who lived two millenniums ago, Jesus of Nazareth." He cites Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees, who are "confident of their own righteousness and look down on everybody else" (Luke 18:9).

'US VS. THEM'

This religion stripped of morality occurs when a belief system is reduced to simple group identity. Akyol continues, "This kind of 'us vs. them' mentality can corrupt and radicalize any religious community — Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists alike can become hateful militants when they see themselves as righteous victims."

By discussing the observations from these columnists, I am not trying to make a case against conservative values, morality or even political impact. My point is that power corrupts. As citizens, we must always be vigilant to the danger of political power agendas overwhelming the basic moral lessons that our religions have taught, and that all persons of good will would affirm.

These are confusing times when our tribal loyalties build walls between polarizing communities and threaten our basic religious and human values. Let us rediscover and reaffirm the dignity of all, regardless of gender. Let us also guard against letting our political commitments cloud our moral judgment.

interfaith@gvsu.edu