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Opinion

The immorality of world leaders is contagious. Thank heavens for the pope

Simon Tisdall



In a political wasteland dominated by billionaires, war criminals and mega-corporations, the head of the Catholic church is a rare figure of moral leadership

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What do [Donald Trump](#), Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu have in common? Answer: a chronic inability to tell right from wrong. The three leaders currently causing the most harm in the world share a predilection for violence, a chilling lack of compassion, and extraordinary self-regard mixed with paranoia. Yet the characteristic linking them most closely is their rejection of - or failure to grasp - basic moral standards. Worse, these men typically behave, in their public lives at least, in ways that are fundamentally immoral. And that's a problem for everyone. Their moral malaise is contagious.

Ideas about what, in absolute terms, constitutes right and wrong are always contentious, as moral philosophers from Aristotle to Kant have shown. Pope Leo, leader of the world's Catholics, [warned recently](#) that "we are living in a time when it is becoming difficult even to recognise what is truly good for everyone". Yet most people, most of the time, observe a personal moral code held in common with others. There is broad agreement, for example, that it's wrong to kill, steal, cheat and lie. In an ostensibly secular age, 76% of people worldwide [identified with a religion](#) in 2020 - a potent expression of individual and collective morality.

Putin's Russia [deliberately fires missiles at Ukraine](#), randomly murdering civilians. In most people's book, that's immoral. Netanyahu's Israel is still committing genocide by [targeting Gaza's children](#), the UN says. That's immoral, too. And the defining immorality of the Trump regime knows no bounds. The US vice-president, JD Vance, claimed last week that the Watergate scandal that shattered Richard Nixon's presidency [would not be a big deal today](#). Nixon conspired to subvert the US constitution, acted criminally and lied to the American people. But as Vance's remarks implied, such behaviour is par for the course these days.

The normalisation of immoral conduct in public office may be Trump's lasting legacy. Abroad, it ranges from [extrajudicial killings in the Caribbean](#), to the betrayal of Ukrainian and European allies, to kowtowing to Beijing's human rights abusers. The [mass killing of primary school children in Minab](#) at the start of the [unlawful US-Israel war](#) on Iran was militarily inept and morally unforgivable. Yet this atrocity is not so much covered up as arrogantly ignored. At home, Trump's name is synonymous with [crypto-greed](#), rank corruption and sleaze. But his shameless message is clear: all this is normal now.

International law upholds, in theory, a separate, impersonal moral code. Yet its constraints are routinely bypassed, [its indictments flouted](#). Other categories of moral imperative, such as a binding sense of civic duty and societal responsibility, are also eroding in a polarised age. Jeremy Bentham's [utilitarian idea](#) that what is moral is determined by how much it enhances the general wellbeing has scant relevance today. In a contemporary political wasteland dominated by billionaires, war criminals, mega-corporations, AI and arms salesmen, the greater happiness

war criminals, mega-corporations, AI and arms salesmen, the greater happiness of ordinary folk barely computes.

Principles that modern progressives and liberals had thought immutable, such as tolerance and equal rights, are undermined by unprincipled [far-right nationalist-populist reactionaries](#). Elected western politicians who appease autocrats, excuse the inexcusable and [criminalise their opponents as terrorists](#) fuel this invidious moral collapse. Yet the fault is shared. Potentially complicit, too, is every citizen, high or low, who fails to speak out.

Where may moral leadership be found in these shiftless times? Pope Leo, for one, is seeking a way out of the swamp. [Speaking in April](#), he decried “a world ravaged by a handful of tyrants”, leaving little doubt in Washington, Moscow and Jerusalem who he meant. He has repeatedly deplored the evils of war-making and concomitant failures to fund the global fight against poverty, ignorance and disease. And he has fiercely condemned Vance and the US defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, who claim divine justification for acts of aggression. “Woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic and political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness and filth,” Leo declared.

Leo is not just talk. He has a plan. Presiding over a [“consistory”](#) – a rare gathering of all the Catholic church’s cardinals – in Rome last weekend, he sought to tighten up the just-war theory of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas that is frequently hijacked to legitimise so-called preventive wars of choice. Leo argues war is only morally justified for “proportional self-defence”, and only after all peaceful options are exhausted. “War is never worthy of humanity, and it is never blessed by God,” he told the cardinals. [“War is not merely a conflict between states”](#), but originates in “a culture of power”. The world must “rebuild a culture of cooperation”.

This struggle for the soul of today’s newly adversarial world order has drawn in [Islamic](#) and [Jewish](#) religious leaders and thinkers as well as other Christian denominations. Sarah Mullally, the newly enthroned archbishop of Canterbury, defiantly urged [“faithful resistance”](#) to Israel’s expanding occupation when meeting Palestinian Christians in the West Bank last month. The international community had a “moral responsibility” to relieve profound suffering there and in Gaza, she wrote in a pastoral letter – and the time to act was now. Middle East conflicts were “symptomatic of a deeper political and spiritual crisis – an abandonment of [international law](#) and an increasing recurrence of military force”.

It’s not necessary to be a person of faith to value truth, justice and human decency. Looking back, it was usually people on the right – social conservatives such as [Mary Whitehouse](#), Thatcherite ideologues and evangelical preachers such as [Billy Graham](#) and Jerry Falwell – who spoke of moral decay, of the need for moral revival and regeneration. The left eschewed such vocabulary for fear of

sounding judgmental or prescriptive. But old taboos are fading. The secular outlook is shifting.

A return to agreed standards of moral behaviour in international affairs and public life is of fundamental importance if even greater disruption, instability and conflict are to be avoided. For Britain's soon-to-be prime minister, [Andy Burnham](#), and other would-be change-makers across Europe - and for every citizen, too - this is becoming a central challenge of the age. When considering each new decision, policy and plan, this question must be asked: it may be politically, economically or militarily desirable - but is it the right thing to do? If it's morally wrong, it won't work.

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Speaking for tyrants everywhere, Trump declared in January that only one thing restrained him: [“My own morality ... it's the only thing that can stop me.”](#) Here, embodied, is the “darkness and filth” of which Pope Leo warned - for truth be told, Trump is utterly, sickeningly immoral. He and other might-makes-right authoritarians think not of doing good but only of their own selfish ends. Their immoral delusions of godlike omnipotence are the final obscenity. Today's progressive moral majority must find its voice - and cast them out.

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