



Where Does Honesty Come From?

By David Robertson

After attending a meeting in Sydney's CBD, I headed home by train to Artarmon. After I got off the train, I realised that I had left my wallet on the seat. As it had my driver's licence, bank cards, cash, office keys and business cards, I was somewhat disappointed and frustrated at my stupidity. 'Never mind,' I reasoned, 'Sydney is an honest place – my wallet is really of no use to anyone – apart from the cash.. someone will hand it in'. So, the next day I cancelled my cards and reported the missing wallet to NSW trains and the police. I contemplated how much I would reward the person who handed it in - and waited. Two weeks later I'm still waiting. I had had a similar experience in Dundee (twice!) and both times the wallet was handed in. Sydney loses out in the honesty stakes.

Some years ago, *Readers Digest* did a 'lost wallet' test where they dropped 12 wallets in 16 cities throughout the world. The city that came out top was Helsinki where 11 out of 12 wallets were returned. "Of course we returned the wallet", said an elderly couple, 'honesty is an inner conviction.' I was reminded of this when I read this BBC story 'Why Finnish People Tell the Truth' - <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20200615-why-finnish-people-tell-the-truth>

The article argues that being honest is a characteristic of Finnish culture. In an era where phrases like 'post-truth' and 'fake news' are now common parlance, it's worth our while to ask why this is the case.

As regards Finland there are different reasons. One is their history. Having been a country dominated by Russia and Sweden for centuries, once the Finns got independence, they wanted to mark themselves out as different. They were honest and hardworking, unlike the perceived image of their neighbours. A

couple of decades ago there was a problem with football fans in the UK because of hooliganism, drunkenness and violence. The English were particularly infamous for this, but the Scottish fans were not exempt. I remember one incident where some young Scottish fans were threatening to go on a violent rampage...and an older man shouted at them.." Stop it you idiots! What do you think we are? English?!" The very threat of being considered like the English was enough to make them behave! Reputation is a reason.

But, amazingly for the BBC, they point out that there was another more important reason – and that is Finnish Protestantism, which came in the form of the Finnish State Lutheran church. This evangelical church highlighted the importance of education, moral character and self-reflection – as well as living in community. Personal honesty and social trust go together. These are all biblical principles.

Vishal Mangalwadi in his *The Book that Made your World* talks about why Indians didn't make ice cream, but the Dutch did. He describes how he went with a Dutch friend in the Netherlands to get some milk from a farm. The farmer was not in, so his friend put some money in a basket, took the change that was there and left with the milk. Vishal was astounded because in his culture both the money and the milk would have been taken as there was no one around to see. There is a chain of consequences that follow from this:

If this were India and I walked out with the money and the milk, the dairy owner would need to hire a cashier. Who would pay for the cashier? I, the consumer, would; and the price of milk would go up. But if the consumer were corrupt, why should the dairy owner be honest? He would add water to the

milk to make more money. I would then be paying more for adulterated milk. I would complain, "The milk is adulterated; the government must appoint inspectors."

Who would pay for the inspectors? I, the taxpayer, would. But if the consumer, producer, and the supplier were corrupt, why should the inspectors be honest? They would extract bribes from the supplier. If he did not bribe them, the inspectors would delay the supply and ensure that the milk curdled before it got to me.

Who would pay for the bribe? Again, I, the consumer, would pay the additional cost. By the time I paid for the milk, cashier, the water, inspector, and the bribe, I would have a little money left to buy chocolate for the milk – so my children would not drink the milk and would be weaker than the Dutch children. Having spent extra money on the milk, I would not be able to take my children out for ice cream. The cashier, water, bribe, and inspector add no value to the milk. The ice cream industry does. My corruption keeps me from patronizing a value adding business. That reduces our economy's capacity to create jobs."

The person who picked up my wallet and kept it, doubtless thought he was doing little harm. This was a gift: 'you snooze, you lose...tough luck.' No one would see and therefore it was not stealing. What such people don't realise is that their attitude and behaviour harms not only the 'victim' but themselves, and indeed the whole of society. To live in an honest society where people look out for one another is far better than to live in a dishonest and corrupt society where people exploit one another.

Australia was largely founded on a Christian ethic. If we continue to cast away our Christian roots, we will inevitably lose the fruits. We will move from a society where people know that they cannot get away from the eye and judgement of God, and where 'love your neighbour' is a foundational principle; to a 'dog eat dog' society where if we don't get caught it's fine, and where a lost wallet on a train is seen as a gift, not an obligation.

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