

# A Theology of Corruption

*Mark Lovatt brings together his academic work and his practical experience of tackling corruption to advance a theology of corruption. He traces the roots of corruption to a natural desire for security, which results in anxiety and what Friedrich Nietzsche called the will-to-power. The common solution to this anxiety is accumulation of money and power. However, faced with the enormity of the threats to our security, and ultimately our own death, there is never enough money or power. The only solution is to treat money and power as an idol and instead opt for Christ-centred servant-leadership which benefits others rather than oneself.*

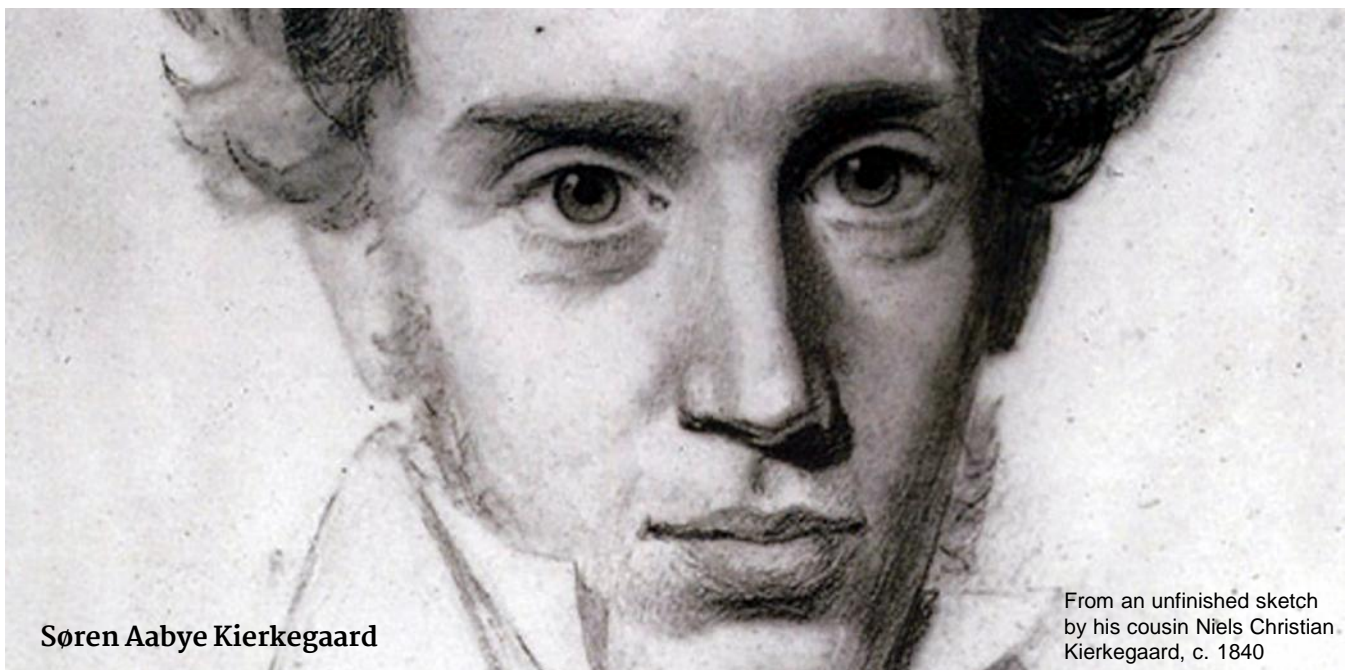
A few years ago in 2012, I wrote an article for FiBQ on our anticorruption work in Malaysia and some of the theological elements which I was bringing to bear in that work to make it effective. In this issue, I would like to go into some depth regarding a theology of corruption I have developed over a number of years, building on my PhD research and supplemented by my practical experience engaging directly with the problem in Asia. I also plan to write soon on some of the developments since 2012 which have shown how

God has been at work through our enterprise here in some very practical ways.

## **Theory and Practice: the Academy and Business**

First then, let us look at the origin of the force of corruption which is having such a major impact on our lives today, and in fact has done so throughout history. I studied existentialism in some depth during the course of preparing my PhD thesis, which was published by Paternoster in 2001 as *Confronting*

*the Will – to – Power: a Reconsideration of the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Two philosopher-theologians who particularly interested me were Søren Kierkegaard, especially his doctrine of anxiety; and Friedrich Nietzsche, especially his concept of the will-to-power. Both these thinkers had a significant impact on the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, who was the main subject of my thesis. Niebuhr, who was writing at the time of the American industrial oligarchs, the rise of Nazism in Europe and the



**Søren Aabye Kierkegaard**

From an unfinished sketch by his cousin Niels Christian Kierkegaard, c. 1840

development of the totalitarian communist state in Soviet Russia, identified (correctly in my view) a common factor in all these powerful forces, which was the burgeoning acquisition of power: a characteristic which is deeply embedded in human nature. He named this characteristic the *will-to-power* after Friedrich Nietzsche's concept, but whereas Nietzsche applauded this element of human nature, Niebuhr identified it as the real nature of sin in humanity, the part of us which is responsible for the grievous evils he witnessed during his time.

I finished my PhD in 1999 and went back into the commercial world, first working for a dot.com and then Powergen (later to be taken over by the German group E.ON Energy), beginning in IT and progressing through Regulation and R&D into Business Development. Taking a career break, I came to Malaysia in early 2009 to teach doctrinal theology at two of the seminaries here, through the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF, previously the China Inland Mission). I met my wife, a Malaysian, during that time, and was also approached by a large company for energy consultancy services, which resulted in my staying in Malaysia where I still reside today. I joined an anticorruption NGO in 2011 where I set up their business integrity programme, and then transitioned to Trident last year. Interestingly enough, the very subject of my PhD became the foundation for my anticorruption work, enabling me to understand the true depth of the problem and so build the systems strong enough to withstand the force of this elemental power in human nature. As part of this development work, I spent some time considering how to apply what I learned during my PhD to the virulent problem of corruption I had witnessed first-hand in Malaysia and which has severely damaged some of my contacts here. The result was this

analysis which I have taught at a number of business ethics seminars with people very familiar with the problem. They have confirmed that this accurately describes what they have witnessed and explains the problem from a theological perspective.

### Outlining the theology

Human beings hold a unique position in creation in that we are beings made in the image of God. We are finite creatures – finite both physically and temporally – and yet we are self-conscious and aware of the eternal. This combination of finitude and self-consciousness makes us aware of the reality of our existence: there was a time when we did not exist, and there will be a time when we will cease to exist, when death will overtake us all. This awareness, unique (as far as we know) amongst all created beings, creates a consciousness of our threatened state. Our very being is at risk day-to-day, and we know this deep down. Each day we read of others who have succumbed to this fate, and any documentary on the geological history of our planet, the vastness of our galaxy, and smallness of even that in relation to the universe as a whole, shows us how infinitesimally small and insignificant we truly are. This awareness makes us *ontologically insecure*: an underlying sense that our being itself is threatened in indefinable but inevitably destructive ways. The state of mind arising from this insecurity is *anxiety*.

The anxious self forms a part of all our daily lives and activities. It is an inescapable factor which conditions and drives our behaviour. We cushion ourselves against the fact of our ontological insecurity through

structures of security, significance and meaning: our well-populated bank accounts, material possessions, relationships, children, social status, professional position, insurance, building up the number of our Facebook “friends”, etc: the list is endless. All these are means of convincing ourselves that we truly matter and have all we need to make it through life (and beyond) and thus can be considered secure. Even religion has its part to play in this agenda, as we will discover shortly. The state of anxiety drives us to seek security, in whatever form we find most effective. But this state of threatenedness is in reality a state of

**‘One of the most versatile forms of power, money, can be so effective in bringing us a sense of security and well-being that many pursue it as their saving force’**

powerlessness. The more power we have, the more secure we feel. One of the most versatile forms of power, money, can be so effective in bringing us a sense of security and well-being that many pursue it as their saving force (an idol) at the cost of pretty much everything else. Of course all of us need

some money, but when something of this world becomes what we understand as the means of our salvation, it shifts from being practical to being idolatrous.

We see this most strongly in some forms of Chinese religion (Taoism particularly) where money can indeed buy everything, in this life and the next. One of my earliest experiences in Malaysia was to walk around Malacca during the time of the annual Chinese festival of the ancestors, Ching Ming, where “hell money”, cardboard effigies of TVs, laptops, beer, and even cars were on sale for the relatives to take to the grave site and burn, thus transferring everything into the spirit world for use by their parents and grandparents. In high-class cemeteries where the feng shui is

good, burial plots cost more than houses, and offspring are put under pressure by their parents to earn as much money as possible so that they can be buried in a good place with nice neighbours. So for them, money is indeed the answer to everything.

It is through obtaining power that we gain a sense of security and therefore overcome our feeling of anxiety. The universal need of the anxious self is therefore *power*. And it is this need for power, or the *will-to-power*, that underlies all human behaviour to some degree, and is clearly expressed in its negative form through corruption.

### Searching for meaning and security through power

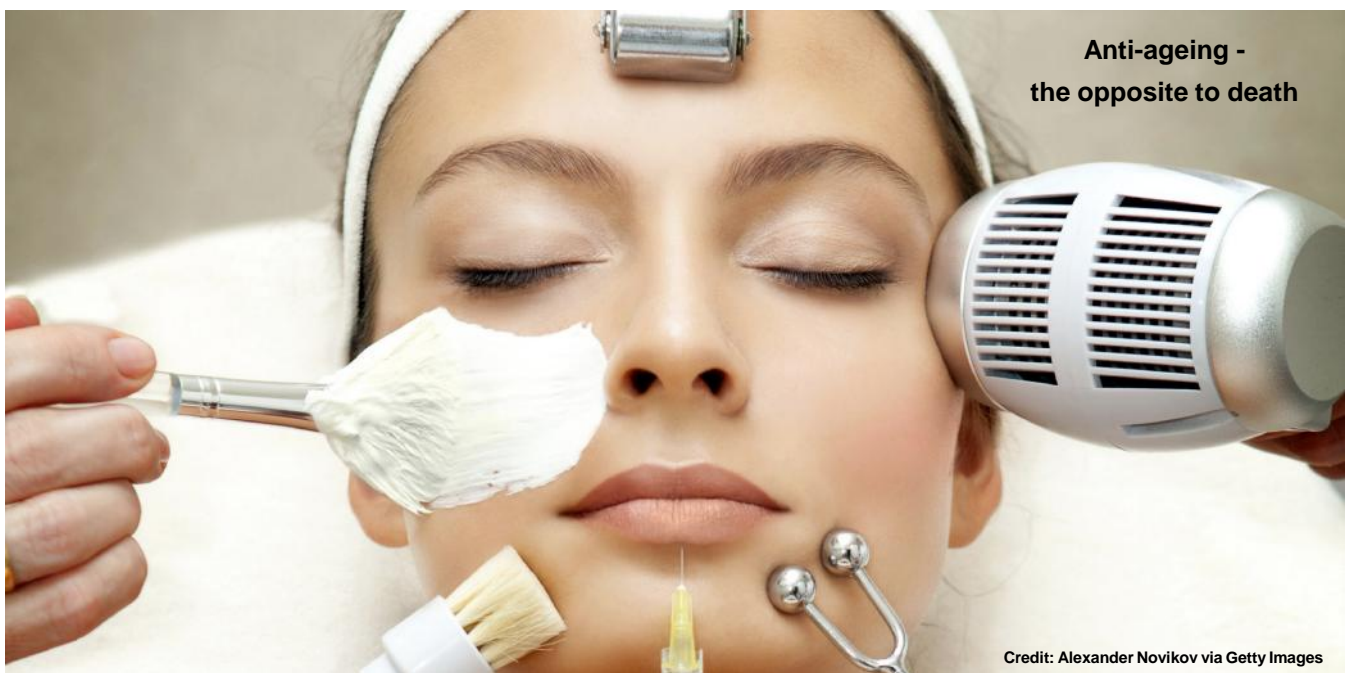
Corruption is defined by Transparency International as “the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain”. I like this definition as it is very wide-ranging, not limited to simply the misplacement of government contracts for financial kickbacks, but the whole range of corruption including favours, extravagant entertainment, nepotism and so on. But notice the key point: this is about power. Let us return to our analysis.

Having become conscious of our threatened state, the self pursues

power to become secure. The trouble is, the threats which surround us are beyond our control, in fact practically infinite: the vast amount of time which preceded us and will follow us in the cosmos; the vast amount of space, of which our entire galaxy is just one tiny point; the forces of disease, accident and war on our own planet; the simple fact of us and our loved ones getting old: all of which add up to the inevitable conclusion of our lives which is to die, insignificant and unnoticed on the universal scale of the cosmos. So what is the antidote? The acquisition of power is the solution to the problem of anxiety. However, infinite power is needed for us to overcome these forces and the power of death which comes with them, as the forces ranged against us are effectively infinite, at least compared to human capabilities. We as individuals are finite though, and the sum of human power is finite. Furthermore, we are in competition for power with all the other people around us who have the same need and therefore the same agenda. This means there is insufficient power to go around for everyone. Ultimately it is a battle for survival: a battle we can never win, but which our very lives depend on. It is the battle to continue to live. This self-centred

agenda affects all our actions to some degree. In fact, it is only when this agenda is met, and our need for security is satisfied, that we are released from the influence of the will-to-power and set free to pursue other, one might say Christlike, objectives. Since this self-centred, need-based quality affects us all, it may be considered a definition of Original Sin. It began with our earliest forebears when they broke covenant with God, became separated from the infinite power of God and triggered the self-centred need for power to sustain themselves, thereby initiating the will-to-power agenda.

Bearing in mind our underlying, essential agenda to acquire the power to live, the gain and exercise of power feels good: it is the antidote to the state of anxiety which lies at the deepest level of our being, and when we use it we assuage the hunger that the anxiety generates. We see this in our contemporary society. As the West has drifted away from God, we have sought to become secure through forms of power other than his. Witness the explosion in anti-ageing vitamins, cosmetics and surgical procedures; the obsession with health, youth and beauty – the opposite to age and death; the determination to gain significance through a high-powered career; the



Credit: Alexander Novikov via Getty Images

Lee Kuan Yew



Photo: Internet

need to “make a difference” and so gain some significance for our lives. Most of these things are harmless, and many of them are good in themselves, but they become destructive when they attempt to replace the power of God with human power and give the illusion that the forces which threaten us are held at bay. Inevitably, as death approaches, the illusion gives way to reality, and the despair which underlies so much of this behaviour engulfs us.

### ‘Power tends to corrupt ...’

Some forms of power are much darker than mere consumerism. Witness the explosion of lust and self-centred, exploitative relationships, most prominent in the form of pornography in recent years. Some forms of power go further: rape, violence, torture and murder, which seem so inexplicable, can be understood much more readily when we understand that power *in all its forms* creates the antidote to our ontological insecurity, and for those who are unrestrained by moral norms, these evil forms of behaviour become the means by which they satisfy the agenda of the will-to-power. So it is that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”. We all have this drive, and while some are better at managing it than

others, we are all affected by the self-centred drive for the acquisition of power.

On the social and national level it is through our cultural checks and balances that this drive is held in check. Over many centuries, the more advanced societies (by and large ‘the West’) have built up the codes of behaviour, authority structures and institutions by which the will-to-power is kept under control, curbing the worst of its excesses and gearing the drive inherent in the will to power to positive and constructive ends such as building the economy or defending our nation. Democracy itself is a response to this universal element of human nature, a structure which has been developed in the UK more than most countries, but is always a work in progress, our response to the corrupting force of the will-to-power. Winston Churchill, quoting an unknown predecessor, described democracy as ‘the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’ Lord Acton penned an equally famous maxim: ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’

As we see fledgling democratic movements struggling across the developing world, we can see that

effective accountability structures for those in power are indeed needed.

The institutions of democratic government, a free press and an independent judiciary are needed to hold the will to power in check at the government level. When these institutions are weakened or proved inadequate, corruption seeps in. Malaysia’s neighbour to the south, Singapore, was governed by the great statesman Lee Kuan Yew for 31 years, who recognised above all else the negative force of corruption and its potential to devastate countries, and was ruthless in applying countermeasures which have proved effective. Many regard Singapore’s success, despite its small size and lack of natural resources, to be directly the result of Mr Lee’s wisdom in managing this force which we have identified now as the will-to-power. Singapore’s GDP per head now stands at around US\$55,000; compare that with Malaysia, a far richer country by way of land and natural resources, with a GDP per head at US\$10,500. Corruption, with its accompanying wastefulness and institutionalised incompetence, is surely one major reason for this.

At the corporate level, the requirements of effective governance, a necessity for any long-term

## Bribery and Corruption

Egyptian Nuclear Power Plant built by Alstom who admitted bribery charges



Photo: Madamasr

business success, also demonstrate the same essential requirement. Why is it that companies nearly always go wrong when ineffective corporate governance is in place? It is an expression of the same issue: the destructive force of the will to power seeking gain for the self regardless of the well-being of others, emerging through inadequate controls.

Can sin become an institutionalised evil? Surely this must be the case. When social structures are built on the basis of the will-to-power by individuals bent on securing their own well-being, misery and pain through formal, established channels is the result. We saw this in the way Enron behaved with its rolling power outages in California in 2000 to 2001. We see this in the developing world where political leaders allocate contracts to their cronies in return for huge kickbacks, to the detriment of the entire nation, resulting in power and water shortages; the lack of necessary infrastructure while unnecessary roads (which quickly fall apart) are built; hospitals which lack essential equipment and much-needed pharmaceuticals, resulting in people

dying of easily preventable diseases; and anyone brave enough to stand up against these abuses threatened, their family kidnapped or killed, and themselves subjected to prison, even torture or death. All this is done to protect the power of those who already have more than they need, or can even spend in one lifetime. But the agenda of the will-to-power is limitless: since we all face unlimited threats, the power we need is never enough, so even those who have built up multi-billion dollar fortunes through corruption still need more. We have seen this first hand in Malaysia, particularly the state of Sarawak, where the personal fortune of the Chief Minister, Taib Mahmud, is estimated at US\$15 billion, and he is still in the process of acquiring more.<sup>1</sup>

How can this apparently insoluble problem ever be dealt with?

### **The Cross-centred theology of servant leadership**

We have learnt that limitless power is needed to deal with the vast threats surrounding each of us, creating our state of ontological insecurity resulting in anxiety and

the consequent agenda of the will-to-power. Of course, only God has that amount of power available. This is a power strong enough to overcome even death itself, the final source of our insecurity of being. This power is given to us freely by God, the power for our redemption made accessible to us through Christ's death on the cross. As sinful beings, it would be impossible for us to enter the presence of God, and for him to abide in us, without the saving work of Christ who paid for our sins and made atonement for us. This makes it possible for God to become our personal Father, enabling us to become ontologically secure by his grace. It is when we accept Christ's work on the cross for us that the barrier is broken, we receive the Holy Spirit, the eternal life which comes from God and all the spiritual, physical and emotional power that we need to continue our existence in relationship with him even beyond death. We are then set free from the tyranny of the will-to-power, free to model Christ and obey his commands, some of which make no sense at all and are practically impossible (for example Luke 6. 27-36) unless the agenda of the will-to-power is dealt with.


It is therefore by receiving the power of God and with it our eternal life that the selfish, sinful agenda of the will-to-power is overcome and the person can be transformed to the likeness of Christ, through the ongoing work of faith, obedience and sanctification. To a large degree the work of sanctification is in the ongoing task of dying to self, as Galatians 2:20 states: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." The living of this life of discipleship is that of taking up the cross daily and following Jesus. Much of this is about sacrificing our own power for the well-being of others: the work of being a servant, as demonstrated by Jesus in John 13. When applied to leadership, this means sacrificing our own desire for power, glory, wealth and all that comes with a high-powered position in order to empower and strengthen others to perform to the best of their ability: the opposite of corruption.

### **From the individual to the company to the nation**

Can this model be applied to a company as well as an individual? I believe this to be the case. One of the concepts we have developed here in Malaysia is that of a corporation "Imaging God". According to this approach, a company itself becomes an outpost for the kingdom of God wherever it operates, by acting with

excellence, creativity, integrity, wisdom, justice, and fatherhood care for its employees. In these ways, the operations of the company are intentionally designed to reflect the character and work of God. Correctly applied, this approach creates a profitable, faith-based business model of excellence resulting in sustainable success. In turn, if enough companies within an industry operate in this manner, the industry itself can be transformed and reach new heights of performance and excellence, to the benefit of their customers and society in general. Perhaps this might be applied to the origins of the stock exchange in the UK, which operated on the basis of "my word is my bond", creating a high-trust, highly efficient environment for trading which set the standard for modern exchanges the world over. Ultimately, even national transformation may be possible as the marketplace and related elements of society are transformed by both individuals and companies acting according to the image of God, guided by biblical standards through the power of the Holy Spirit. Witness the Clapham Sect, active in the 1780s to 1840s, and the huge influence they had on Victorian society and beyond via the British Empire. It is notable that, like many ex-colonies, the Malaysia government service following Independence in 1957 was modelled on the British civil service, with high standards of integrity both required and expected.

When individuals and corporate entities alike are freed from the agenda of the will-to-power they are released to pursue in its place the agenda of the Kingdom of God. When acting from their secure position of being directly cared for by God through faith, all manner of change is possible. This is the principle by which we have operated at Trident. I shall say more about this in my next article.

Understanding sin as the will to power has opened up a whole new area of understanding for me in the anticorruption work I now do as a professional. Our materials and services have been used in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cambodia, Vietnam and Mongolia, as well as in Malaysia. It seems that what we have to offer is something unique and which other companies so far have not been in a position to provide. I would suggest that this is due to our combination of theology and practical experience in a developing economy, which together have enabled us to create the effective and robust systems needed to combat corruption. All this takes a great deal of faith and not a little courage, but we have consistently seen God move in remarkable ways since we began this venture in 2011, and we are confident we will see much more of his work in the years to come. 

Note: our company website is [www.trident-integrity.com](http://www.trident-integrity.com).

1 <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/09/19/taib-is-worth-rm45b-believe-it-or-not/>.



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