

**“Social Progress is only Possible on the Basis of a Sound
Christian Morality.”**

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Introduction

Human experience and facticity attest to the fact that, no matter what it takes, nobody absolutely lives as an island. Instead, we are in one way or another, globally connected to the effect that what happens in one part of the world yields a virtuous or pernicious effect on the rest of the world. Accordingly, it is legitimate and necessary to have an established set and system of morals and values to guide our social life in order that every individual and the society at large progresses toward the good. However, the topical question which preoccupies us is how can we foster this social progress. As a result, this paper endeavours to explain whether social progress is only possible on the basis of a sound Christian morality or not. Yet in order to substantiate this, we shall begin by understanding Christian morality and then see if it can be the only necessary condition for social progress or not.

Definition of Terms

Will and Ariel Durant, define morals as the rules by which a society exhorts its members and associations to behaviour consistent with its order, security, and growth.¹ Social morality is then understood as the set of social-moral rules that require or prohibit action or a moral philosophy, which sees the fact that we live in a global-society with all of us being connected, and as such, we have an effect on others, and others have an effect on us.² Subsequently, Pope Paul VI expresses Christian morality as a personal sense of right and wrong which is fully informed by one's individual Christian beliefs and faith.³ Comprehensively, these definitions seek to point out that we ought to do the right things which we know by our natural reason and conscience in order to foster social progress by way of living together in cooperative, mutually beneficial, social relations where everyone is an end and not a means.

On Whether Social Progress is only Possible on the Basis of Sound Christian Morality or Not?

Christian morality fundamentally acknowledges the reality that a human person is essentially a social being who must be accorded the fundamental right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.⁴ Not only that, but Christian morality also respects both the sanctity of human life and the priceless divinely endowed dignity which merit human persons have their rights protected. In that vein, Christian morality emphasizes on the aspect of human solidarity to promote the welfare of the poor and vulnerable so as to create a favourable world in which the love our neighbour, justice and peace reign supreme.⁵ To that end, Pope Paul VI, argues that Christian morality encompasses a considerable number of factors and values, but all culminate in establishing a just society in which all people live a purposeful life in relationship with all creation as willed by their creator.⁶

Having stated these main Christian moral tenets, we turn back to our question to see if they can actually suffice to effect social progress. In order to socially progress, we must re-examine what we believe. According to Shapiro, Christian morality makes us believe that freedom is built upon the twin notions that God created every human person in His image, and that human beings are capable of investigating and exploring God's world.⁷ These twin notions, Shapiro maintains, are the diamonds of spiritual genius which have built our civilization, and built us as individuals.⁸ They have taught us therefore that the government has no right to intrude upon the exercise of one's individual will, one is bound by moral duty to pursue virtue, human beings are capable of bettering our world through use of our reason, and that we are bound by higher purpose to achieve all these.⁹ Contrary to the USSR, Nazis and Venezuela who attempted social progress without Christian morality and respectively starved and brutally slaughtered tens of millions of human beings, shoved children into gas chambers, reduced citizens of their oil-rich nation to eating dogs; Shapiro hails Christian morality which has built prosperity, peace, human rights, ended slavery, defeated the Nazis and the Communists, lifted billions from poverty, and has given spiritual purpose to billions of people.¹⁰ As

a result, we cannot flatter ourselves to believe that we can abandon the Christian morality and somehow survive indefinitely.¹¹

According to Ammerman and Davie, social progress requires that the society engages in moral deliberation and moral judgments in order to make a positive difference.¹² Social progress is not simply a matter of finding the right technological formulas but imagining what a society could become through reaching beyond oneself and the everyday world as it is.¹³ Progress implies pursuing a sense of meaning and purpose which is fully found in a Christian morality. Ultimately, Christian morality and social progress are mutually implicated.

Although some attempt to rationalise that in every age people have been dishonest, governments have been corrupt and man has never reconciled himself to the Ten Commandments; Will and Ariel Durant hold that for sixteen centuries, the Christian world maintained its continuity and internal peace by a strict and detailed moral code, almost without help from the state and its laws.¹⁴ The two historian philosophers champion that even the sceptical person develops a humble respect for Christian morality, since he sees it functioning, and seemingly indispensable, in every land and age.¹⁵ Will and Ariel further notes that to the unhappy, the suffering, the bereaved, the old, Christian morality has brought supernatural comforts valued by millions of souls as more precious than any natural aid.¹⁶ As such, Christian morality has conferred meaning and dignity upon the lowliest existence, and through its sacraments has made for stability by transforming human covenants into solemn relationships with God.¹⁷ In a like manner, Thorsteinsson appreciates that despite that Christian morality have been expressed, understood, and actualized differently in different social settings, it has so far proven to be the driving force of social progress with its deep natural reservoir of human warmth and social consciousness.¹⁸ Succinctly, the novelty and uniqueness of Christian moral teaching is what it takes for a society to progress.

By and large, Pope Paul VI uphold that Christian morality played crucial roles in reducing slavery, family feuds, and national strife, extending the intervals of truce and peace, and replacing trial by combat or ordeal with the judgments of established courts.¹⁹ In fact, a sound Christian morality managed to soften the unforgettable penalties exacted

by Roman or barbarian law, and vastly expanded the scope and organization of charity.²⁰ As a matter of fact, the French Revolution reminds us that rationalism cannot solely govern the world without regard to the religious needs of the soul.²¹ Renan therefore adds that Christian morality is necessary because a natural ethic is too weak to withstand the savagery that lurks under civilization and emerges in our dreams.²² To this end, there is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully progressing without the aid of sound Christian ethics.

According to Pope Paul VI, social progress is not limited to economic growth only as a big deal of Marxists think.²³ Of the many factors, it is instead a sound Christian morality that makes an economy integral, complete and promotes good of every man if not the entire human family as willed by God initially.²⁴ Thus, a sound Christian morality teaches that patriotism unchecked by a higher loyalty can be a tool of greed and crime.²⁵ This proves that when Christianity grows weak, virtue is lost and the society becomes a menace.

The impact of Christian morality extends to a wide variety of fields without which social progress is possible like family, gender, sexuality, diversity and democracy, conflict and peace, everyday wellbeing and care for the earth.²⁶ Ammerman and Davie argue that economic wellbeing, education, and healthcare are social progress goals shared by Christian morality. Admittedly, researchers and policy makers pursuing social progress will benefit from careful attention to the powerful dictates of Christian morality which shape, mobilize and effect positive social change.²⁷ Thus, the pursuit of social progress and human flourishing is inevitably intertwined with Christian morality since where social and political life is most precarious, Christian morality provides key protections and forms of self-help and solidarity.²⁸

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, holds that human beings and the environment form a seamless garment of existence, a complex fabric that we believe has been fashioned by God.³⁰ It follows that to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin and our relationship with nature resonates ours with God. In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis stresses that the gift of creation requires a strong sense of responsibility toward both humans and non-humans. Pope Francis maintains that

dominion over nature is not free rein to indulge in exploitation but instead a responsibility to protect divine creation which Christians understand as a gift to all humans, including future generations.³¹

However, some recusants have doubted that Christian morality has ever promoted social progress, since social progress has flourished even in ages of no Christian morality.³² Remarkably, not so much of a sound Christian morality was witnessed during the industrial revolution but the society still progressed. In fact, the Christian morality is often advocated by people who frequently prove biasness, venal, and extortionate.³³ Sadly, while preaching peace, Christianity has fomented religious wars in sixteenth-century France and the seventeenth-century Germany.³⁴ In point of fact, the French Revolution which revolted against Christian morality, resolutely became successful in its aimed goals. Even in a more radical manner, Karl Marx, maintains that social progress is possible only through abolition of Christian morality which he considered the narcotic drug of the people. Marx contended that Industrial Revolution brought about democracy, feminism, birth control, socialism, the liberation of literature from dependence upon aristocratic patronage, and the replacement of romanticism by realism in fiction-and the economic interpretation of history, without Christian morality and the society progressed.³⁵ In fact, the Christian idea of hell gains its entire morality for it accommodates contradiction in the sense that a God who created billions of men and women, regardless of their virtues and crimes, are all predestined to everlasting hell.³⁶ Laconically, in Marx's view, Christian morality hinders social progress because it maintains the status quo.

Further from the above, the role of technological progress which gives humanity some supremacy, is the source of social progress witnessed in increasing our standard of living over the past two hundred years.³⁷ Ammerman and Davie argue that Christian morality as a system of belief based on supernatural assumptions, stands in natural opposition to empirical, scientific, and political ways of understanding and ordering the world.³⁸ In other words, the forces of the modern world remove the necessity of supernatural explanations on morality as a powerful force shape to determine progress of the secular public world. Today the rising power of law and government permits the decline of the Christian

morality without basically endangering the stability of the state.³⁹ In their view, Ammerman and Davie, underscore that a sound secular morality is a necessary path to progress.⁴⁰ To this end, Gibbon said that the period during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, is that which elapsed from the accession of Nerva to the death of Marcus Aurelius of which it was not shaped by any Christian morality.⁴¹ Therefore, what moves society is merely the progression of all of the various forces at play in the universe, channelled into action in a particular moment and not only Christian morality. Will and Ariel conclude that social progress is a broad enterprise, and only a fool would try to limit it to the soundness of a Christian morality.⁴²

Conclusion

To sum up, upon a close scrutiny of the arguments forwarded in this essay, one can arrive at the realization that the main points affirm that social progress is only possible with a sound Christian morality at play. Actually, it is only a sound Christian morality that upholds life and dignity of every person in every move and action he or she makes because it focuses much on the recognition of every person as an end and not a means to some dehumanizing endeavours. Certainly, when people treat each other as ends, social progress is inevitable. Although some have opposed this stand on the perspective that society, like a body composed of many parts, needs not only a sound morality to progress, we have in turn argued that Christian morality is all encompassing and its necessity knows no boundary. As a result, a society devoid of Christian morality retards, if not die, in its effort to progress.

¹ Will and Ariel Durant. *The Lessons of History*. (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1968.) 37.

² Mugomba, Sheunesu. Class Lecture. *Social Morality*. (Holy Trinity College. Harare. August 2020.)

³ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (*Populorum Progressio*)" in *Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society* by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 108.

⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Washington, D.C. Publication No. 5-3152005.) 1.

⁵ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (*Populorum Progressio*)" in

- Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 109.
- ⁶ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)" in Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 111.
- ⁷ Shapiro Ben. *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great.* (New York: Broadside Books-HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.) 23.
- ⁸ *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*, 23.
- ⁹ *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*, 24.
- ¹⁰ *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*, 25.
- ¹¹ *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great*, 27.
- ¹² Ammerman N T and Grace Davie. «Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress.* (Cambridge University Press.) 12.
- ¹³ «Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, 12.
- ¹⁴ Will and Ariel Durant. *The Lessons of History.* (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1968.) 37.
- ¹⁵ *The Lessons of History*, 45.
- ¹⁶ *The Lessons of History*, 45.
- ¹⁷ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)" in Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 110.
- ¹⁸ Thorsteinsson Runar M. *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality.* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2010.) 3.
- ¹⁹ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)" in Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 110.
- ²⁰ *The Lessons of History*, 50.
- ²¹ *The Lessons of History*, 54.
- ²² *The Lessons of History*, 55.
- ²³ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)" in Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 108.
- ²⁴ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)" in Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 108.
- ²⁵ Pope Paul VI. "On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)" in Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society by Gibson Winter ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968.) 50.
- ²⁶ Ammerman N T and Grace Davie. «Religions and Social Progress: Critical

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- ²⁷Ammerman N T and Grace Davie. «Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*. (Cambridge University Press.) 5.
- ²⁸Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, 5-6.
- ²⁹Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, 21.
- ³⁰Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, 20.
- ³¹Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, 20.
- ³² Will and Ariel Durant. *The Lessons of History*. (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1968.) 49.
- ³³ The Lessons of History, 49.
- ³⁴ The Lessons of History, 51.
- ³⁵ The Lessons of History, 56.
- ³⁶ The Lessons of History, 51.
- ³⁷ Stiglitz Joseph E. and Bruce C. Greenwald. *Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.) 2.
- ³⁸ Ammerman N T and Grace Davie. «Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*. (Cambridge University Press.) 7.
- ³⁹ The Lessons of History, 52.
- ⁴⁰Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships.» *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, 8.
- ⁴¹ The Lessons of History, 52.
- ⁴² The Lessons of History, 53.