

Morality Part 9

Social Ethics

Education

We don't normally think of education in terms of social ethics or even in ethical terms. Education, however, has become a challenging topic in light of social ideologies.

Society views education as both a right and a necessity. Children are required to attend school until the age of 18 or have proof of comparable education. Although we don't mention it in conversation, we value education as one of the great successes of our modern era and a necessity for democracy. We pride ourselves on our ability to think and make intelligent decisions for the good of ourselves and the good of the country, community, and world. Education is one of the foundational hallmarks of the Western world and a gift we prize akin to our freedom.

The Church follows closely with the general thoughts and sentiments of the modern world. Yet, the Church takes a different spin on the importance of education. Education is a right of all people. The ability to learn to think is the hallmark of Christianity. One of the both pitfalls and achievements of the Church is her great intellectual advancements in the realm of faith and worldly sciences. The importance of education is not the promotion of learning and the memorization of facts. Education's greatest merits lie in the ability for a person to think and reason, to synthesize information and advance humanity through it, to use the faculty of our reason to learn the higher truths and to live them well. In essence the value of education is the ability to live well by seeking the truth in freedom.

Modern educational systems have changed radically from the original roots of education. Education started as a means to explore the created world and to advance the cause of humanity through the exploration of the knowable world. This quest was left for those few who had the intellectual capacity and time to freely think about the world and seek higher truths. In contrast modern educational systems emphasize memorization and the regurgitation of assumed truths. This system devalues the development of the mind and its faculty towards reason. Ultimately a system focused on itself and the consumption of its own facts breeds a society of people unable to think, hence brain-washed.

Rights and minorities

No topic could be more present to the modern mind than the idea of rights and, more specifically, the rites of minorities. Coming from an age of repression many modern people focus on the rights of minorities as a way to advance society into an age of acceptance, tolerance, and peace. If all people had the same rights and were treated fairly, then everyone would live in peace.

Rites are the best place to begin this discussion. The challenge with rites is proving where they come from and who has rights. Most countries of the world supply their citizens with the rights applicable for their county. Some countries afford more rights to their people than other

countries. Regardless of the source of rights, rights ultimately are given from an organization or person in a higher power status to those of a lower power status. For example the United States government gives rights to its citizens based on the rights prescribed in its constitution. From this basic starting point, rights should be a simple and easy topic. Find the source of the rights, determine whether the rights are from that source and apply to the situation, then you will know the rights of a given person.

The Church declares that rights are given from the highest power namely God. God gives specific rights to all peoples regardless of nationality, race, religion, or background. These rights carry from place to place and cannot be taken away without moral laws being violated. The inalienable rights given by God are freedom, dignity, personhood, common care, work, education, food, and life.

Often the issue of rights and minorities become the main topic of discussion. Should minorities have rights above those of the dominant group, below the dominant group, or the same as the dominant group?

Instead of entering a complex and strange argument, I will skip to the Church's perspective on minorities. Over the last century the Church has spoken numerous times on the ethicality of minorities. The answers are rather simple. The Bible clearly indicates that those who are oppressed are the one's whom God favors. Thus the Church teaches that God has a preferential option for the poor. Those who are on the bottom rung of society become the focus of the Church and her ministry. All Christians are obliged by law to care for all people in their midst and, in a special way, for the poor. As much as minorities fit into this category, they deserve the treatment the law demands. However, the topic of minorities is as strange as the topic of skin color. The more tan a person is, the more differently we treat them. Thus the real issue behind minorities is racism. On this topic the Church is very clear: all people must be treated with the same dignity and given the same rights.

Affirmative action

Closely associated with the topic of minorities and racism is affirmative action. Affirmative action was inaugurated in the late 20th century to combat the effects of racism and economic repression of minorities. In order for that last sentence to make sense, we must venture into the issues that plague economic advancement of minorities. Since the founding of this country, most immigrants faced an uphill battle to advance both economically and socially. As one of the lowest rungs of society opportunities we understand as normative today were not the case for minorities. The most affected by this lack of ability to advance were the blacks. We often think of advancement in individual terms: this particular person lacks the ability or means to advance socially or economically. This is not the case. The lack of the ability to advance is a social issue. If parents do not have the means to provide the advancement or resources their children need to succeed, then the children cannot advance as easily as others. This cycle perpetuates itself in each generation. Affirmative action was developed to combat this generational and cultural divide that limits the chances of success to specifically those who are minorities.

What did affirmative action do? Affirmative action divided people into cultural and racial classes giving specific races a higher (and sometimes lower) chance to being successful at specific goals such as receiving scholarships and admittance into colleges and programs. Ultimately affirmative action became racial profiling by giving specific races higher advantages based on race. In the last few years these tables have turned slightly. Asian Americans are now seen as more advantaged than their white counterparts in the areas of math and science and therefore affirmative action has given them negative scores on math and science to even the playing field between Asian Americans and other races. This process will continue as long as we hold the opinion that racial profiling is the best means to advance the minorities.

The Church is adamant about the negative consequences of racism. Whenever we limit a person to their race, then we cause division and degrade their dignity. The issue still remains that certain people are strongly disadvantaged based on their upbringing, social status, or abilities. As mentioned earlier in this series, the principle of subsidiarity and the respect of the dignity of the individual need to apply in these cases to promote justice. Each person, regardless of their race, should be treated the same and judged based on their circumstances and abilities. This system would be lead to true justice and allow people to flourish.

Environmentalism

Environmentalism has become one of the contentious issues in the Catholic world. Pope Francis spoke about the importance of climate change and the protection of our environment in his encyclical *Laudato Si. Laudato Si*, On the Care of our Common Home, received immense criticism from those who reject the notion of caring for our environment. Pope Francis, however, sees the larger world. A world in which the care of our environment is one of the leading causes of poverty and humanitarian issues globally. Many of the rivers in India are so immensely polluted that the people cannot drink the water or even use it. In Central and South America the exploitation of the peoples by the United States has led to a sanitation problem polluting their rivers and lands. The economic growth in China has caused immense devastation in air quality devastating the health of individuals especially in bigger cities. These issues, seen from a global perspective, show the importance of protecting our environment.

The Church teaches that the care of our environment is a moral good. When God created Adam and Eve he gave them one command. For centuries this command has been translated as “to have dominion over and subdue.” Thus for centuries the peoples of the Church understood our role in relation to the environment as one of dominion and control. Yet, this view doesn’t match the lived experience of the Jewish people nor the proper understanding of these words. Instead they should be translated as to “care and protect.” The Jews are the best example of this translation. The Holy Land for the Jews is a sacred land that needs to be protected and cared for. They make sure the land is clean and provided for so that it can provide for them. The Church follows suit with this translation. We are stewards of the planet and have been give the task of caring for the Earth. We will also be held accountable for our actions concerning the planet. Therefore our role is to use our intellect and abilities to find ways to maintain the beauty and good of the Earth while continue to thrive as humans and continue the mission of Christ.

The major critics of Pope Francis argue that the care of the Earth is not a moral good since we await the destruction of the world at the end times and that care of humans come first. Thus the spiritual good of the Church outweighs the moral good of caring for the planet. To a limited extent they have a point. Some proponents of an environmental ethics argue that we must abandon western civilization and live off the land. They challenge the Church as a destroyer of the environment and thus detrimental to human well-being. Hearing these arguments, the opponents of an environmental ethics of the Church fear this kind of degradation of the good of the Church and the destruction of Christendom.

A middle ground exists. Either extreme of abandoning western civilization or an ignorance of environmental issues is destructive to our call and the good of all peoples. Instead we must work to find ways to protect and care for our environment in ways that make sense given the progress of humanity. Some argue that unmitigated consumerism plays a large role in the destruction of the environment. Others argue that our wastefulness contributes is the largest contributor. Ultimately no one answer suffices to explain the situation we are in. But one solution does exist: we must choose to work together and realize our true needs and the good that comes from protecting our environment. No solution works as long as we are divided. As Pope Francis states in the first line of his encyclical: this is *our* common home.

Freedom of Speech

The issue of free speech has reached the headlines more often in the last decade than for many years. As a Constitutional right we feel obliged to respect the freedom of each individual to speak their minds and opinions without fear of repression. The original goal was to prevent oppression and allow the free exchange of ideas for the good of a democratic country. The questions that most people ask today are: are there boundaries to free speech? Can we limit certain types of speech like hate speech?

The Church teaches that free speech is a right that allows for the good of the individual. By giving people the ability and right to freely speak their minds, we can address errors, call people to conversion, allow the free exchange of ideas, and seek higher truths. Throughout history those who spoke against the common trends led to the advancement of society. Therefore it is a moral good to allow individuals to have the freedom of speech.

Are there boundaries? As much as we give boundaries to free speech, we repress thoughts and ideas both good and bad. Repressed bad ideas reemerge later as hate crime and discrimination. Repressed good thoughts limit society's progress. The issue with limiting free speech is the prevention of the growth and flourishing of individuals. How can we call people to conversion and reformation of thought if their thoughts are never expressed? We need people to speak their minds and the charity to call out hate speech, errant ideas, and speech that degrades the individual if we are to respect the dignity of all people. The Church's hope seems idealistic. We are often too afraid to challenge another person for their problematic comments and therefore we perpetuate these ideas. We need to work to build a society where we strive to promote the good in everyone and allow them to express themselves and yet grow in understanding and right speech.