

Social Salvation vs. Individual Salvation

From one era to another of human history, human energies seem to be dedicated either to social salvation – think “progress” – or individual salvation – think “enlightenment” or “sanctification”. Sometimes this takes religious guises, other times more secular ones.

We live in a time that, despite its frequent pandering to individual *lusts* and frequent spastic efforts to find “enlightenment” (yoga, New Age, etc), does not really have a structure that encourages individual salvation.

The social structure trains us to want *progress* for our society – whether it’s political and moral (in the way we think about gender, race, etc) or economic (we want more stuff for more people) or technological (we want more power over our natural world). We pursue social progress whether or not that means individual improvement in virtue, heroism, etc.

On the other hand, I would be interested to know whether more traditional and hierarchical societies like those of medieval Europe, despite not having an explicit ideology of individualism, did more to encourage individuals to seek sanctification.

In the relative technological, religious, and artistic stability of more traditional societies, the individual was just about the only actor that *could* change. Time would have been viewed more circularly and less linearly, with each generation restarting the hero’s journey and finding a fleshed-out and tested set of rituals for going from stage to stage. You either progressed as a person, or you didn’t.

This is speculation, but it seems fair speculation to say that more traditional societies at least had stronger ritual support for individual transformation.

It is not speculation to say that as we have become more concerned with technological/social progress, we have managed to make it harder for individuals to become heroic, holy, fully realized beings. Yes, we wield more potential power than ever in the form of computers and data, but we also buy that power with the need for sedentary lifestyles (sitting at desks) and greater economic centralization (corporations), not to mention all the mischief that computers tend to create from pornography to internet trolling.

It probably is not the case that social progress (in the sense of linear change over time) and individual progress are opposed. I think social progress tends to come out of individual progress. But I think it’s much more important that individuals – the only beings who can *experience* change – get priority. And if that means tamping down on the rate of supposed social innovations, so be it.

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