

The Wheat and Tares Grow Up Together: Morality and Judging Historical Eras

Is the 21st century a time of great moral progress? Or is it a time of decadence? Ask different people and you'll get different answers. In my view, the answer is "both."

On one hand, humans are progressing. The internet and software are breaking down barriers between people and people groups. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and other great prejudices (at least in their traditional forms) are losing their entrenched hold on the human mind. Individual humans can be freer, more creative, and more generous than ever before.

On the other hand, humans are regressing. We're putting more and more faith in centralized governments (contrary to the lessons of the 20th century) and giving up more freedom and responsibility. We're abandoning our commitments to friends, family, and ideas of honor and the sacred. We're allowing ourselves to be addicted by digital stimulants from porn and video games to news feeds and notifications.

We like to be able to put simple moral judgments on historical eras, and every era presents difficulties for the person who wants to put simple labels of "good" or "bad", "progressive" or "regressive" on any time in human history.

Jesus once told a parable which amateur cultural and historical judges (like me) should consider:

*He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, '**No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first***

and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Matthew 13:24-30

Now Jesus wasn't talking about historical eras, but the metaphor of the wheat and the tares (the King James version of weeds) is a good one.

In any and every time, no matter how much we idealize or condemn, there is always wheat, and there are always weeds. The 16th century had exploration and cultural renaissance, but it also had religious warfare and barbaric tortures. The 19th century had abolitionism and industrialism, but it also had colonialism and imperialism. The 1st century had Stoicism and Christianity, but it also had mad emperors and slavery.

For all of these eras and all times (including our own), it does us good to remember the command to “[Let] them (*wheat and weeds*) grow up until harvest.” I read this as a metaphor for the wisdom of reserving blanket judgment.

We may one day be able to say that the centuries in our rearview were “good” or “bad.” But the harvest of consequence has not yet happened for the 21st century, and it's hard to say that the harvests of the 19th and 20th are fully ripe, either. It is too soon to judge. Let time do that. In the meantime, resist the urge either to burn the fields or to swallow the weeds.

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