

Global Faculty Initiative

The Faculty Initiative

seeks to promote the integration

of Christian faith and academic disciplines

by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars

across the spectrum of faculties

in research universities

worldwide.

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net

Preview Response

VIRTUES / HUMANITIES

Priscila Vieira

Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Communities and Societies, Brunel University, UK

Postdoctoral Fellow at School of Communication in the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (CAPES/PNPD), Brazil

I found Professor Herdt's brief very stimulating, especially as it attempts to connect the issues of virtue and institutions. I will reflect upon this relation adding some postcolonial concerns to it, and developing my comments from the interconnections between key issues such as: technique; social media; public life/politics; and postcolonial institutions.

I vividly remember attending several debates around **technique** during my undergraduate journalism studies. After all, the development of technology is a condition of possibility for social communication. Later on my academic career, as a Researcher in the field of *Media, Religion and Culture*, I have studied Evangelical media in Brazil from the 20th to the 21st century. I concluded, then, that there was an understanding among this social group that technologies were neutral, and this was based upon a clear distinction between technique and content – with the later been considered as more valuable. Virtue was in the content. But Professor Herdt's brief repositioned this relation: is technology neutral with respect to morals or virtues?

This question (partially) leads me to my second strand of considerations: **social media and public life**. I say partially, because technique and technology are an indispensable part of social media – and as consequence, for contemporary public life. But technology is not the only component of social media – which is a complex kind of media (here I will drop the use of the notion of *techne* because social media begins when there is a fusion between technique and *logos*). There are technological and human elements in this space, where there seems to be a blurring between humanity and technology. Are these technological elements neutral? Can they be said to be virtuous or evil? In media, the human is everyday more similar to his or her own technological production. Are social exclusion, the growth of individualism, the impossibility of dialogue, the fostering of extremism to be considered technological phenomena only? Or are they human phenomena? Or do they belong to the media alone? Or is media per se also capable of generating communities and fostering affection and actions of compassion, mutual recognition, and happiness? Are they capable of cultivating virtues? Recently I have started research on the realities of dissemination of Fake News among Evangelicals in Brazil. It is surprising to see how deep this social group was connected to the dissemination of disinformation that has taken over the country since the Presidential elections of 2018. Questions related to virtues, including (or specially) theological ones,

are important to reflect on these relations. Might the cultivation of virtues in individuals and institutions like the media forestall or prevent fake news or distortion of news?

The relation between virtues and **institutions** is particularly intriguing. Here, postcolonialism could – or perhaps, should – be a starting point. This might sound strange in western societies, in countries religiously Christian and historically part of empires. But for a colonized citizen of a former colony, in countries determined by huge social inequalities, to raise the question about the possibility of *virtue* in institutions (especially political or governmental institutions) is to risk complete misunderstanding or being made the object of ridicule. States and their apparatus are considered intrinsically unjust and beyond fixing. There is no doubt about it. The majority of the population does not feel represented by their institutions and does not effectively participate in these institutions. That might be the reason why anti-corruption discourses are so attractive – even when coming from the most corrupted mouths. In Brazil, the "morality of politics" is a vivid and common expression in political discourse. However, it is a morality that is never close, never effective and eventually serves purposes that are anti-political, flirting with and feeding on fascist experiences of our recent history. In Brazil, the question about the possibility of overlap between virtue and politics, virtue and social institutions, is urgent. Can calling out vices in institutions, can building virtuous institutions, be even imagined?

Finally, follows the question about virtue and **academia**. Social injustices seem to reproduce themselves in academia. There are a few possible causes for this such as lack of due care, social reproduction, absence of specific public policies, or the perpetuation of class privileges. A Brazilian intellectual used to say that the poor quality of public education (basic, fundamental, secondary and higher) was "not a problem, but a project". When the effects of the latest and most significant policies of granting access to higher education for low-income families were slowing in the country, they were interrupted by two political coups (2016 and 2018).

The questions I raise in all these cases: Is it really possible to think about institutions that contribute to the flourishing of virtues? Or, more specifically, is virtue capable of redeeming institutions that build upon colonialism, oppression and injustice?

Looking forward for the long version.

For more information

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net