

Social Work Through Two Lenses.

MINDSET

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Social work is a profession grounded in service to others, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized. While practitioners may share a common desire to help, the motivation, philosophy, and methods often differ depending on one's worldview. Worldview matters. Your view of a challenge influences your choice of a solution. And choices always have consequences. Poor choices typically produce incomplete or negative consequences. Two prominent frameworks are the biblical perspective and the secular humanistic view. This article explores how each lens approaches social work—highlighting both contrasts and areas of common ground—across themes such as purpose, view of humanity, ethics, intervention, and ultimate hope.

1. Foundational Purpose: Divine Calling vs. Human Responsibility

Christian Biblical Perspective:

In a Christian worldview, social work is a sacred calling rooted in Scripture. It flows from obedience to God's command to love one's neighbor and seek justice. The work is not ultimately about human goodwill, but about glorifying God and participating in His redemptive plan for the world. **Micah 6:8** captures this call:

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." This redemptive plan includes shalom. Shalom is a biblical word that signifies wholeness, completeness, well-being, and harmony in all aspects of life. This includes physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being, as well as peaceful relationships with God and others. This was and is God's designed intent for people. (Jeremiah 29:7)

Christians see social work as part of their discipleship—responding to the needs of others because Christ first loved them.

Secular Humanistic View:

Secular humanism, by contrast, places human beings at the center of meaning and purpose. Everything revolves around humans and what humans decide what is important. The purpose of social work is grounded in human responsibility to improve the well-being of others through rational compassion, societal progress, and ethical duty. There is no appeal to divine authority—rather, helping others is seen as essential for the flourishing of the individual and the collective.

Contrast:

Whereas the Christian sees social work as obedience to God's will and part of His redemptive plan, the humanist sees it as fulfilling an ethical obligation to humanity. The Christian's purpose is first vertically oriented (God-centered) then horizontally oriented while the secular humanist's is exclusively horizontally oriented (people-centered).

2. View of Humanity: Image of God vs. Inherent Goodness

Christian Biblical Perspective:

The Bible teaches that every person is made in the **Imago Dei**—the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This gives each person intrinsic worth, dignity, and value, regardless of social condition or behavior. Humanity was initially created complete, good, and in proper relationship with themselves, others and God. As His image bearers, they possess the ability to reflect the goodness of God. However, Christians also believe in the fallen nature of humanity due to sin (Romans 3:23). They are by nature born with in-born brokenness, which affects and reflects them spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and physically. Thus, while people possess great worth, they are also in need of spiritual redemption and moral transformation.

Secular Humanistic View:

Secular humanism generally assumes that people are inherently good or neutral and capable of self-actualization. Human behavior is largely shaped by environment, upbringing, and social conditions. The goal of social work, then, is to remove barriers to a person's growth and allow them to reach their fullest potential.

Contrast:

The Christian view acknowledges both dignity and depravity, nature and nurture, calling for both care and moral accountability. The humanist tends to affirm dignity without the theological category of sin. This affects how each perspective diagnoses root problems and what constitutes healing.

3. Ethical Framework: Biblical Morality vs. Secular Ethics

Christian Biblical Perspective:

Ethics in Christian social work are grounded in God’s revealed truth—Scripture provides clear moral boundaries and guidelines. For example, integrity, sexual ethics, truth-telling, justice, and care for the vulnerable are all shaped by biblical teachings. The fear of the Lord is seen as the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), and ethical decisions are made considering eternal accountability- a higher standard set not by inherently broken human beings, but by a Holy God not tainted or influenced by brokenness.

Secular humanistic View:

Secular humanism bases ethics on exclusively human reason, consensus, and principles such as autonomy, justice, and harm reduction. Ethical systems like utilitarianism (maximizing well-being for the greatest number) or deontological ethics (following moral duties) often guide decisions. These frameworks evolve over time and vary by culture and social consensus.

Contrast:

While both perspectives value compassion and justice, their sources of authority differ. The Christian looks to God’s unchanging Word through which human reason, science and human experience is filtered- referring to the “instruction manual” for human relationships. The biblical Christian believes that since humanity is inherently broken, any ethics that it creates will also be broken- unless they look outside themselves to borrow from an unbroken Source for ethical decision-making that doesn’t change based on whim, incomplete knowledge or self-centeredness. The secular humanist relies solely on human reason, science, and human experience. What is considered ethical in one worldview may be questioned or even rejected in the other.

4. Means of Intervention: Spiritual and Practical vs. Primarily Secular

Christian Biblical Perspective:

The biblical Christian assumption is that the Creator of humans best understands humans- what they were designed to be and to do. Since it also believes that a human is made up of not only body, mind and emotions, but also spirit, an effective holistic approach will include all these dimensions. Christian social work incorporates both spiritual and practical dimensions. Prayer, Scripture, church support, and spiritual counsel may accompany traditional interventions like counseling, advocacy, variations of cognitive behavioral therapy and resource connection. The aim is holistic transformation—addressing body, mind, and soul.

Secular Humanistic View:

Secular humanistic social work focuses primarily on psychological, emotional, and social strategies. Techniques may include cognitive behavioral therapy, empowerment models, community organizing, or systemic advocacy. Interventions are generally secular, with spirituality addressed only if the client desires.

Contrast:

The Christian sees spiritual care as essential to true healing, while the humanist often regards religion as a personal preference or cultural expression. Christian practitioners may navigate tension when working in secular settings where expressions of faith are restricted.

5. Ultimate Hope: Redemption in Christ vs. Progress Through Humanity

Christian Biblical Perspective:

Hope is central to Christian social work—not in systems or people alone, but in the redemptive work of Christ. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection offer healing not only for individuals but for the world. Social workers are agents of this hope, pointing others to a deeper restoration. Revelation 21:4 speaks of a coming day when: *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..."*

Secular humanistic View:

Hope in secular humanistic social work is often placed in social change, education, mental health, and scientific advancement. The future is seen as open-ended and improvable through human ingenuity and moral evolution. There is optimism that through effort and reform, society will become more just and humane.

Contrast:

While both seek to alleviate suffering, the Christian rests hope in a transcendent Savior. They have not seen humanity's tendency throughout history to become less self-centered or less broken. Because of the inherent brokenness of humanity, they don't believe that humans possess within themselves what is needed to become unbroken.

The humanist's hope is in human potential, not an External intervention. This distinction affects how practitioners cope with failure, injustice, and suffering. The Christian can grieve with hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13); the humanist often grieves without a framework for eternal restoration.

6. Common Ground and Collaboration

Despite profound philosophical differences, Christian and secular humanistic social workers often collaborate in meaningful ways. Both affirm the inherent dignity of people, advocate for justice, and serve the marginalized. Shared values like empathy, compassion, and professionalism bridge the gap.

Many Christian social workers engage successfully in secular environments by respecting boundaries while quietly embodying their faith. Likewise, humanists may appreciate the deep moral conviction and compassion that Christians bring to their work.

Conclusion: Two Roads of Compassion with Different Destinations

Both the Christian and the secular humanist are driven to serve hurting people—but their maps differ. The Christian walks the road of compassion with the cross in view—seeing every client as a soul loved by God and every act of service as a reflection of Christ's love. The humanist walks the road of compassion with human dignity and reason as guides, believing that through empathy and action, we can build a better world.

For the Christian, the goal is not merely social improvement but spiritual reconciliation—to be agents of both justice and grace. They believe that shalom freedom comes through being freed by a freer- a Liberator- who has the power to truly free us in all aspects of our lives. For the secular humanist, the goal is to empower others to live free, dignified lives through the best of what humanity can offer.

In the end, both roads serve the broken. But only one, the Christian would argue, leads to lasting shalom healing, hope, and eternal peace found in Christ.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 25:40 "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

1 John 3:17-18: "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."

Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Proverbs 31:8-9: "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Quotes

"There is no greater joy nor greater reward than to make a fundamental difference in someone's life." Sister Mary Rose McGeady

Ask Your Mentor

1. What are your thoughts on the distinction between the biblical and secular humanist perspective on social work? Do the differences seem to ring true? Or not?
2. Are there other ways that you've seen a difference in approach to social work between the two perspectives? If so, please share.
3. What are some areas that you think one perspective has borrowed from another, or influenced the other?
4. What do you wish you would have known about social work now that you didn't when you first started?
5. What have been some of the challenges that you've faced as a Christian working in social work?

Reflect & Respond/Self-Rate

1. To what degree do you see social work as a redemptive calling, something that God wants done in this world?
2. With which of the two perspectives have I been educated or trained to think about social work? How might that influence my approach for the better? For the worse?

Creative Connection

Think of a song, character or person from a book, movie or history, or an everyday item that personifies the main idea of this lesson and share it.

Go Do. Action step.

1. Ask God, "Are there any perspectives about social work that you want to change in me? If so, what?" Listen
 2. Trust & obey. What might God be asking you to do? What would it look like to trust Him with that as you obey?
 3. Practice. How I will practice this over the next month:
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Go Deeper: Further Conversation & Study for those who want to go deeper.

Social work has been explained as a profession dedicated to enhancing human well-being and helping meet the basic needs of all people, with a particular focus on vulnerable, oppressed, and impoverished individuals and communities.

Explore the gospels to discover how Jesus did this.

Sources & Resources

- Video: Shalom, Bible Project. <https://bibleproject.com/videos/shalom-peace/>
- Song: No Longer Slaves, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8TkUMJtK5k>
- Video: Why is it important to see social work as a calling for people of faith? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbuEOauKPnE>
- Article Photo: rawpixel