

Disclaimer

The Best Essay Award is intended to recognize students' efforts and achievements, and to showcase their good work. Essays receiving the Award and put under this Collection are reviewed according to the selection criteria of the Award and do NOT necessarily meet all of the requirements for a written assignment/coursework of the General Education Foundation Programme.

# **Reconstructing Jesus's Social Order in the Secular World**

**Ng Wing Yee Alexas**  
**Global Studies, Chung Chi College**

## **1. Background**

While the 884,000 Christians (HKSAR Government 331) in Hong Kong all worship one God, their distinct interpretations of civic participation and order divide them. Progressive believers push for socio-economic reform for the church and justice; conservatives uphold the Bible's literal commands against liberal ideas like abortion. The majority, otherwise, veers from the social chaos to distance themselves from the secular world (2 Cor. 6) or rejects democratic transition as they respect any ruler as the "minister of God" whose powers are God-ordained (Rom. 13). The incongruity stems from the motley conclusions to the "What Would Jesus Do" (WWJD) question Christians ask themselves to shadow Jesus in their day-to-day actions. Nonetheless, the current Hong Kong society is by no means close to the Kingdom Jesus promoted.

While Rousseau's ideal society was unknown in the First Century, Jesus's conducts carry certain democratic tendencies. This essay dissects the fundamentals and essences of Jesus's teachings in the Gospels and

Rousseau's Social Contract<sup>1</sup>, searching for compatibility of the ideal social order in the secular and sacred worlds to provide insight for Christians vis-à-vis civic participation.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Interpreting Jesus's Social Order

### 2.1 The Majority Practice

Many Christians prioritise their afterlife in heaven and use “Render unto Caesar” (Mark 12:13–17; Matt. 22:15–22; Luke 20:20–26) to justify their avoiding politics. Indeed, Jesus preached to “seek first” (Matt. 6:33) the kingdom of God and emphasised it as “not of this world” (John 18:36). He demonstrates little interest in Caesar's tax but exercises kindness and miracles through feeding and healing (Matt. 9:35).<sup>3</sup> He orders giving to the needy “in secret” (6:1–4) and proclaims love as the “greatest commandment” (22:36–40; Mark 12:28–31) to the extent of “[loving] your enemies and [praying] for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). These actions not only display love and kindness, also humility and altruism. Jesus's latest instructions for the disciples was to “preach the [kingdom] and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2)<sup>4</sup>, so this seems to justify how some Christians dedicate themselves solely towards charitable work and evangelical ministries and disregard contemporary politics.

---

1 refers to Rousseau's concepts in *The Social Contract*.

2 Note that the primary audience intended for this essay are Christians, those who accept the Bible and intend to follow Jesus's order; and that the primary purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the compatibility of Rousseau's ideals in Jesus's teaching, not vice versa.

3 More examples in Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14 (feeding); and Matt. 8:14–16; Luke 4:38–41 (healing).

4 More in Matt. 10:1; Mark 16:15; Luke 10:9

## 2.2 An Alternative View

Contrariwise, political activists (Tai; Wong) focus on Jesus's social justice. Although social and political institutions bear little relation to Jesus's teachings, his actions challenged the social order then. He befriends those considered sinful (Luke 19)<sup>5</sup>, honours women (Luke 21:1–4)<sup>6</sup> and encourages the rich to distribute their wealth (Luke 12:33)<sup>7</sup>. He criticises the authorities (Mark 12:40; Matt. 23:25), even disregards and gives new interpretations of the laws (Matt. 5:17–48)<sup>8</sup>. Some even modelled elements of civil disobedience in Jesus's words to “bring sword” (Matt. 10:34) and for his not complying with Pilate or the high priest (Matt. 26:63; Mark 15:5).

## 2.3 How to Analyse?

Is Jesus inconsistent? Or are we “nullifying the word of God by tradition” (Mark 7:13) like the Pharisees? Which facet of Jesus shall Christians follow? Contemporary theologian, Chan, observes the danger of “selective *Imitatio Christi*”<sup>9</sup>. He proposes not to regard Jesus's words or deeds themselves as divine command theory and mimic them literally, instead evaluate the underlying character and morals holistically by virtues ethics. Through Chan's approach, the virtues and order of the world Jesus preached parallel with Rousseau's ideal social order in many ways.

---

5 More in Matt. 11:19; Mark 2:13–17; Luke 7:37–38.

6 More in Mark 5:21–43; John 8:10–11.

7 More in Matt. 19:21

8 Also see “Jesus Heals on the Sabbath” (Mark 3:1–6; Luke 13:10–17) for Jesus disregarding some the Jewish Law.

9 *My trans.*, original: “選擇性地「效仿基督」”(陳韋安)

### 3. Analysing the Similarities and Differences

#### 3.1 Similarities in Jesus's and Rousseau's Teaching

##### 3.1.1 *The Ideal World*

The heart of Jesus's message is to get people into "the kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14; Matt. 6:33). Introduced through various parables (Matt. 13:44–46; 47–52; Mark 40:30–34),<sup>10</sup> it is essentially a land where people live happily ever after.

Although more practical, Rousseau seeks a similar ideal: a society that protects and defends all, as well as their goods and liberty (*The Social Contract*, bk. I, ch. 6). In fact, Rousseau's ideal society shares much resemblance to Jesus's demonstration of his sacred kingdom—all inclusive and equal. Rousseau wants for no minorities to submit to the choice of majority (bk. I, ch. 5). The general will must be impartial and serving all members of society by definition (bk. II, ch.1). Likewise, Jesus clears the ethnic barriers as he abandons the Jewish laws and proclaims "whoever believes and is baptised will be saved"—setting a uniform requirement for Jews and Gentiles alike to enter his kingdom (Mark 16:16)<sup>11</sup>. As Jesus instructs his disciples to spread the invitation<sup>12</sup> to "all the world" and "all creation" (Mark 16:15), it is made clear that Jesus's house is "for all nations" (Mark 11:17) as Rousseau's ideal.

##### 3.1.2 *How to Reach the Ideal World?*

The essence to achieve these "lands-of-happy-ever-after" corresponds

---

10 Apart from the two mentioned, also studied Mark 4:26–29; Matt 20:1–16 as background information.

11 to enter his Kingdom (or be condemned)

12 (that is, to believe and enter his Kingdom)

on multiple levels.

### *3.1.2.1 Give to Take*

Jesus suggests his host to feast the disadvantaged for repayment (Luke 14:12–14) and giving to the poor for “treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). Rousseau proposes forgoing natural liberty in exchange for civil liberty and the proprietorship of property through the General Will (bk. I, ch. 8).

Whereas both suggest some sacrifice for something greater, the change of hearts is what they propose to reach the ultimate prize.

### *3.1.2.2 The Change of Hearts*

Above civil liberty, Rousseau introduces moral liberty as the “remarkable change” which is “so great” that it uplifts one’s “whole soul” (bk. I, ch.8). He argues this internal adjustment would “substitute justice for instinct” in conduct and give “actions morality” as the superior good, making man a “true master of himself” (bk. I, ch.8). Jesus emphasised similar virtues above doings. He teaches Nicodemus men “must [be] born again” of “spirit” to enter the Kingdom (John 3:6–7) and instructs his followers not to judge others but work on self-transformation (Mark 7:3–5).

### *3.1.2.3 The Common Prerequisite*

Above all, the foundation for Rousseau’s Common Good and Jesus’s demands centres around relinquishing the default human self-centeredness. Rousseau’s general will relies on man to prioritise the “Common Good”: what is beneficial to every member of society beyond self-interest (bk. II, ch.1). It takes a corporate capacity for each to put down “his person and all his power” under the general will where men can reach the “supreme direction” (bk. I, ch.4). Jesus likewise asks whoever wants to follow him to “deny

themselves”, “take up [the] cross” and “follow [him]” (Mark 8:34), calling people to give up oneself, be willing to serve and sacrifice for others.<sup>13</sup> Such self-submission is a contract one takes for not only himself but the others: subordinate their particular wills in return for benefits encompassing the whole populace (Rousseau bk. II, ch. 3), or in Jesus’s words: to “become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). The civic virtue of Rousseau and God’s agape are strikingly analogous.

### 3.2 Reconciling the Differences

As the fundamentals of the Social Contract essentially accords with Jesus’s teachings, the differences are reconcilable.

#### 3.2.1 Source and Scope of Power

Is Jesus’s top-down power contradictory to the popular sovereignty theory?

Many Christians support the current administration as the “God-ordained” authority. They concentrate on Jesus’s ultimate authority that is against the popular sovereign, thus consider Rousseau’s bottom-up source of legitimacy contradictory to their ideal government structure. Jesus’s all-encompassing power also seems to exceed the limits Rousseau defines for the legislator.

*[The Response]*

Rousseau’s government is not any less God-ordained. Jesus confirms all power (including Pilate’s), are “given from above” (John

---

13 that is, considered as a Greater Good and the righteousness.

19.11)—that is, inclusive of democratically-elected governments. The popular sovereignty principle, while antagonistic to the divine right of kings theory<sup>14</sup>, does not challenge Jesus's transcendent Kingship that is clearly not associated with any political institutions on earth. Rousseau's proposition of limited government power is intended to protect the people from human rulers who are flawed in nature—also irrelevant to Jesus.

### ***3.2.2 Freedom, Submission, and Individual Rights***

The complete submission Jesus asks is a “renunciation” Rousseau considers as “incompatible with man's nature” (bk. I, ch. 4), is it?

Rousseau's fundamental quest was for man to “obey himself alone” and “remain as free” (bk. I, ch. 6), yet Jesus teaches obedience and submission to God's will (Matt. 4:8–10; John 8:31; 14:23–34). As Rousseau strives to protect private property, Jesus orders to “sell all possessions [and give them] to the poor” (Matt. 19:21).<sup>15</sup>

*[The Response]*

Rousseau's freedom does not equate “common liberty”<sup>16</sup> and is subject to limitations (bk. II, ch. 5). Man is free under the Common Good, and is subject to exile or death under any violation (bk. II, ch. 5). Citizens shall submit to the “supreme direction of the general will” (bk. I, ch. 5) as believers shall submit to God's will. What

---

<sup>14</sup> which contemporary monarchs claimed

<sup>15</sup> Also Mark 10:21; Luke 18:20

<sup>16</sup> “an upshot of the nature of man. His first law is to provide for his own preservation, his first cares are those he owes to himself; and as soon as he can think for himself he is the sole judge of the right way to take care of himself, which makes him his own master.” (bk. I, ch. 2)

Rousseau promotes as the general will that is “always right and tends to the public advantage” (bk. II, ch. 3), is within the domain of God’s will, that is good, pleasing and perfect (Rom. 12)<sup>17</sup>—both of which aim for the good of the people.

Conversely, Jesus’s contract is not without individuality. Not everyone was called to leave everything behind (Mark 5:19). Human of diverse gifts and actions are welcomed to his table and are made equal as they accept the contract and gain “rights to become children of God” (John 1:12). Jesus asking *the rich man*<sup>18</sup> to sell everything is by no means disrespecting private property. It was a one-off suggestion tailored to the rich man’s spiritual needs. Jesus never coerced anyone to take his covenant, instead allows free will for every human to reject Jesus and undergo the human condition of death without eternal life.

Compliance to God is a “two-way commitment” (Rousseau bk. I, ch. 7) which Rousseau used to describe the relationship between the state and individuals. Rousseau concludes his proposition with a straightforward principle: “men who may be unequal in strength or intelligence become equal” by the social contract (bk. I, ch. 9). Jesus’s offer is more intense—a blood covenant to accept Jesus for the “forgiveness of sins”—yet achieving too, Rousseau’s principle: that men also become equal (without sins) in the Kingdom.

For Christians, if humans are given the liberty and choices to accept or reject the transcendent power of Jesus, shouldn’t any state follow

---

17 according to Paul,

18 the particular rich man as referred in Mark 10:21–23



Jesus's example and adopt some respect for individuals and freedom as Rousseau proposes?

Although<sup>19</sup> God's Kingdom encompasses any worldly order, the evaluation shows Rousseau's ideals are in no fundamental conflict with, even, correspond to Jesus's virtues and social order on earth. The notable consensus shall help Christians discern the compatibility of Rousseau's system within Jesus's reign.

## 4. Discussing Application and Limitations

### 4.1 Rebutting Those Claiming Apathy in the Name of God

Despite the consensus, the above analysis is of little value to those who quote Jesus's "kingdom is [neither] of" nor "from the world" (John 18:36) to ignore the human social order. "*Doesn't God demand the change of hearts?*"<sup>20</sup> They consequently disregard freedom and equality in the secular world and direct all efforts to pursue spiritual goods.

*"Or, can there be a 'Kingdom of God' on earth alongside spiritual advancement?"*<sup>21</sup> Having established the danger of over-emphasising a single bible verse, what can be observed from virtue ethics?

Jesus tells a teacher of the law that he is "not far from the kingdom of God" for his wise answer (Mark 12:34). What is so wise? To love God with "all heart, all understanding, and strength" and "love neighbours as [ourselves.]" Jesus also acknowledges those "poor in spirit" and "persecuted because of righteousness" to be in heaven (Matt. 5:3–10).

---

19 for Christians,

20 —a question they would ask.

21 —is my question for them in response.

Additionally, Jesus stresses the importance of righteousness. He says whatever causes “stumble” shall be “plucked out” for it is better to enter his kingdom “one-eyed, than with two eyes to be thrown into hell” (Mark 9:47). How can one simultaneously overlook the oppressed and love God?

Within God’s divine sovereign and plans, he nevertheless appreciates human efforts that glorify his character (Piper). When Jesus was on Earth, he demonstrated what is right to do and his social order that is, analysed as above, all-inclusive. As Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples to spread the news of his Kingdom, he shall not oppose, at least, his followers’ efforts and attempts to make the secular world (that is also within his reign) closer to his teachings.

#### **4.2 Rousseau’s Sovereign Is Where God’s Kingdom Is Near?**

Although God’s Kingdom cannot be seen (Luke 17:21), what could be close? Rousseau’s social order models many intrinsic elements of Jesus’s kingdom. It is where people pursue a common good, and are satisfied to “deprive” self-advantage for the others; where everyone is equally protected and cared for.

From the side of Rousseau, only a society guided by *agape* can Rousseau’s ideals be perfectly achieved. Rousseau’s democracy is “close” to what one may interpret as the Kingdom of God on earth.

God is good and wants the good for his people—this is universally established among Christians. Hence, Rousseau’s ideal and general will are at least compatible with God’s will. While the Kingdom above is unimaginable, the social contract can be one practical approach to model the social order Jesus demonstrated in the secular world. As Jesus favours his people to glorify his name through good deeds (Matt. 5:16), pursuing

the objective goodness through Rousseau's general will is one possible response.

In my limited human intelligence, the above analysis is limited in scope and the answers are non-conclusive. Nonetheless, *how should Christian glorify God in the secular world* is a question many Christians ask themselves on a daily basis. The conceptual analysis of this essay aims to clear some misconceptions that might have hindered some God-delighted conducts. The results, in my humble conclusion, points to a response that is potentially constructive to the world in a systematic manner—that is, to reconstruct Jesus's social order in the secular world through Rousseau's Social Contract. Supporting Rousseau's government, is a simple step that is not only constructive, but one that could unite efforts to bring what is collectively beneficial to all humans (thus, glorifying in a larger scale than most possible individual efforts). Also a good deed that can be exercised in conjunction with our efforts in charity or evangelistic ministry.

## **5. Introspection Instead of Conclusion**

Constrained by human limitations, no absolute conclusion can illustrate God's kingdom. This essay is by no means suggesting any profane political agenda in the name of Jesus, or to declare a certain lifestyle, but to provoke introspection on the links between Christian faith and day-to-day actions.

Christians are told to “be in the world”, although not of it (John 18:36). What would Jesus ask us to do? Jesus speaks in parables; God does not directly communicate with earthlings anymore. There is no uniform answer for WWJD in our turmoil. However, from virtue ethics, we can confirm Jesus did not ask his followers to be passive in his frequent instructions of

“go”, “do good”, and “give” for his disciples. “Be in the world and not of it” does not justify apathy from the figurative version to be just physically present, or one’s faith becomes “hollow” (McCoy). Instead, looking after the distressed is one way to “keep oneself from being polluted by the world (Jas. 1:27).

While heaven is still beyond reach, Rousseau’s scheme is somewhat feasible, compatible, and practical to help the destitute or oppressed systemically. Rousseau’s social system, although not exclusively, is a good method to reconstruct Jesus’s social order. As God ordains earthly authorities, any power from Rousseau’s model is no less God-ordained. There are no sufficient biblical grounds to reject Rousseau’s social contract in the name of religion. In fact, if ever Rousseau’s idea can be realised it will be through the Jesus (John 10:9)—love that transcends the practical limitations Rousseau himself identifies. For Christians, all good, including Rousseau’s, are “possible with God” (Mark 10:27).

## Works Cited

- HKSAR Government. “Chapter 21. Religion and Custom.” *Hong Kong Yearbook 2016*. HKSAR Government, 2017.
- Holy Bible: New International Version, Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1979.
- McCoy, Alex. “Love the City.” 5 March 2017, St Andrews Church, Hong Kong. Sermon.
- Piper, John. “Good Deeds and the Glory of God.” *desiringGod*, 16 Feb. 1987, [desiringgod.org/messages/good-deeds-and-the-glory-of-god](http://desiringgod.org/messages/good-deeds-and-the-glory-of-god). Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Translated by G.D.H. Cole. BNP, 2007.

Tai Yiu Ting, 戴耀廷. 〈耶穌基督是最偉大的公民抗命者〉. Facebook, 17 Aug. 2014, [www.facebook.com/BennyTaiHK/posts/280969642096804](http://www.facebook.com/BennyTaiHK/posts/280969642096804). Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Wong, Joshua. 〈踏上社運路 — 個人經歷與理念分享〉. Facebook, 23 Mar. 2011, [www.facebook.com/notes/黃之鋒/踏上社運路-個人經歷與理念分享/10150473287375121](http://www.facebook.com/notes/黃之鋒/踏上社運路-個人經歷與理念分享/10150473287375121). Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

陳韋安, 〈每個人都在WWJD〉, 《時代論壇》, 2017年9月22日。

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Teacher's comment:**

Ng's article shows a deep and passionate understanding of the Bible. She attempts to reconcile the inconsistency between the "religious" Jesus and the "political" Jesus. The key is to interpret Jesus's idea "the Kingdom of God" in terms of Rousseau's theory. This opens an impressive dialogue between Christianity and liberalism, which are usually seen as being against each other. Ng observes that Rousseau's ideal society and Jesus's description of the sacred kingdom share many resemblances; both are illustrating an inclusive and equal community among human beings. An interesting direction is therefore suggested to contemporary Christians. Instead of being apolitical or complaining that secular democracy is unfair to religious believers, Christians should try their best to reconstruct a "Kingdom of God" on earth, i.e., Rousseau's Social Contract. (Wong Baldwin Bon Wah)

