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# **THE THEOLOGICAL VIEW OF SOCIAL WORK A CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCE VS. RELIGION DEBATE**

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## **Abstract**

This research paper is based on the topic ‘The Theological view of social work’. In the postmodern era where everyone is occupied with a baggage of problems, social work and selflessness for the sake of the poor is a chance for spiritual revival. Over the years, we have forgotten what our social responsibilities are and the framework under which we must live both our personal and professional missions. The theological view of social work influences its followers to end the social injustice by becoming part of the social work. Material and social blessings were meant to bless humanity and allow connections; instead, they have turned out to be sources of social breakdown. Numerous theorists such as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud had a strong secularist impact on the social work theory. These scientists and theorists doubted and viewed the institution of religion with reservations and hesitancy, promoting instead a secular, immanentist approach to social reality.

*Keywords:* theology, society, church, Christian faith, Bible

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## **1. Introduction**

This research paper is based on the topic ‘The Theological view of social work’. In its first part, it will introduce the topic of social work including its significance, as well as its overall purpose. In its second part, it will present a review of relevant literature focused on the prior research carried out in the field. With the help of previous work, the study will provide a wide spectrum of thought on how social work is perceived according to the Bible. In its third part, it will cover the research methodology for this study, followed by (part four) an analysis of the current findings and discussion. The two areas, findings and discussion, are to answer the given research questions and provide a justification of the stated research hypothesis. The fifth and the last part of this paper will conclude the study providing useful recommendations and implications for further research.

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## **2. Defining the problem**

In the fragmented reality of postmodern era, social work and selfless service to the poor is a chance for a spiritual revival. Social work around the world needs immediate outreach to provide professional practice. The need for social work interventions has never in history been as important as it is today. The time of technology has decreased our sensitivity to social work [1]. While some may live and sleep in riches, others live and die under severe oppression. Life is perceived as unfair; however, Christian theology lifts up the need to end the suffering and inequality. It is especially the so-called 'biblical view' of social work that is known to influence its followers to work toward ending the social injustice. The injustice has shamed and scarred humanity and makes us think of how the Bible perceives social work. Over the years, we have forgotten what our social responsibilities are and the framework under which we have to live both our personal and professional missions. The biblical view of social work has always been a topic of concern for the Christians. Although there is a strong historical influence of social work in the Christian faith, there has not been much development in the social welfare. Today, there are diverse presuppositions connected to the biblical view of social work.

### **2.1. Aims and objectives**

The aims and objectives of this research study are:

- to understand the presuppositions of the biblical view of social work,
- to explore the teaching of social work within the Catholic doctrine,
- to examine the biblical framework under which social work operates and functions,
- to examine the expectations of believers to help and participate in social work.

As our social responsibilities and the purpose of our professional missions become blurry, we look for fresh ways to ground social work, defining clear principles and methodologies it should follow. The numerous ideologies and branches that have emerged confuse Christians on the question how the Bible views social work. The canonical texts, however, must be taken seriously in terms of their exegesis as well as the existential applications of their teachings, for "the trustworthiness of the words of Scripture is not determined by their content and human logic, but by their source" [2]. The wealthy ones seem to be losing their social empathy for the poor. This leads us to our attempt to formulate a pertinent research question: *What is the Biblical view of social work and how does the Bible guide its followers to be part of the social work force?*

## **3. Research methodology**

An accumulation of secondary data is the basic source of this research. In this way, the data is collected from various articles, and journals. The secondary

research analyses data that is gathered from literature, various media of textual information. In this study, the descriptive method of research is also used. The research evaluation in this study is qualitative, since qualitative research in historically oriented studies is more efficient and cheaper in comparison with other methods of research (such as quantitative studies).

### ***3.1. Data collection method***

There was a special concentration on the measurement of relevant literature to choose for this study. In this regard, the year of publishing and research topic have a great significance to select relevant literature. To access the information and retrieve the data used in this study, public libraries, individual libraries, and online libraries were visited. Among the accessed online databases were ProQuest, Emerald, EBSCO, SAGE, and other renowned libraries.

## **4. Literature review**

The purpose of this section is to study previously published literature on social work. The significance of this section in particular is to offer a survey of how other authors interpret social work from the Biblical perspective. This will allow the author of this research paper to base his own analysis on previously conducted research, while offering new ideas about how enhance a biblically informed social work practice.

### ***4.1. The biblically grounded framework for social work***

The research article, authored by Sharon Pittman and René Drumm, was published in 2008 for ‘The Foundation for Adventist Education Institute for Christian Teaching Education Department’. The authors of this research article explore the biblical view of social responsibility and discuss its relevant framework [3]. The authors highlight an important point made earlier by the author of this research paper. Humans have become involved in more things than they can handle; hence their overlooking of some of the most important actions. In this context, the actions refer to providing service to the less privileged people, and serving as social workers. Social work requires selfless devotion and outreach to these people. As mentioned in the article, “What is Man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honour” (Psalm 8.4-8), humans have the ability to understand the given social order on Earth. This social order requires humans to work in the name of God and his teachings. The research article sheds light on the postmodernist technology to influence our current standing. Material and social blessings were meant to bless humanity and allow connections; instead, it has turned out to become a source of social breakdown. According to the research article, without the connection with God

and his teachings, our existence is meaningless. One of these teachings prompts us to become active participants in social work. Our ignorance of this call may lead to a sense of emptiness and result in doubts of our own existence.

The Old Testament in particular has played a significant role in defining social meaning and building social order. It defines the norms and the social order. History shows that people have lived selfless lives, providing service and help to those who struggle for survival and need a meaning for life [4]. The authors of the journal article also discuss the historical call to social justice. Before the modern term 'social work', the Church was dedicated to meeting the acute needs of people who were hurt, marginalized, or oppressed [5, 6]. Christian communities were making sure that all their members be "endowed with a 'moral starting point' that steers him/her to certain goals and practices and away from others", and that they "be aware of the particular traditional narrative that (to a large extent) constitutes [one's] identity" [7] – that of forgiven sinners who are freed by the Gospel to help their neighbours. The first three centuries of the Christian era witnessed to numerous Christian communities embodying inspiring examples of selfless care to people around them. The needs of others were taken seriously and attended to unconditionally. The early Church had undertaken the responsibility of looking after the abandoned and the orphaned children, wounded, sick, homeless people and marginalized groups.

The biblical view of social work and justice can be traced back to the era of slavery [8]. Members and followers of the Church voluntarily fought for the freedom of slaves and some went to the extent of sacrificing themselves on their behalf. Even the socially unacceptable people such as prostitutes, were given a place in the community. The biblical mandate has established institutions that provide and meet the human needs. During the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, various Church groups formed societies that were there to meet the social needs of communities. Hunger, physical and mental illness, disabilities, prison reform, caring for orphans, widows, and unemployment were some of the core issues targeted by these church groups. Social work is directly in agreement with the Bible. While it may be difficult to trace values back to a Biblical mandate, social work imperatives and practices are easily traceable. They are mentioned repeatedly in the Bible so as to make a case for social empathy which would be impossible to ignore. The verse from First letter of Peter: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace..." (1 Peter 4.10) is a valid and relevant example of the kind of message that is in the Bible. The journal article is based on qualitative research and ponders more about the given historical context. It thus allows the readers to relate back to the original context, while searching meaningful correlations today. The extensive use of verses validates the argument that the canonical writings care intentionally about how the poor may benefit from our efforts. However, those who help end up benefiting the most in the end, though not in term of material wealth. The literature allows readers to understand how the church has assisted in helping us better understand the role social work plays in helping people [3].

#### **4.2. Catholic Social Teaching Scripture Guide**

This piece of literature is a guide that sheds light on the Church's best-kept secret (in terms of transforming societies), that is, Catholic Social Teaching. Jesus Christ himself established a society that worked based on charity and justice. The social teachings of the Bible go beyond the historically conditioned social imaginaries, providing a valuable input to our own times, as well [9]. The guide discusses in depth, the Catholic social teaching, and its deep rootedness with the Catholic tradition. Social teachings find their source in the Sacred Scripture and the beginning of the Book of Genesis. Writings from the Gospel and the Apostles are part of the teachings of the Church.

Quite literally, as the name suggests, the Catholic social teaching is dedicated to helping people. The human individual cannot be thought of as a secluded island entirely on his own. We do not live alone, we do not sin alone; therefore, we must become united to help the others. For better or worse, our lives are meant to be lived for others with a strong dedication to help them. Generally, the Catholic social teaching is a method that defines the Church's system of teaching. According to the Bishops, this form of teaching is the basic constitutive part of the Church's mission. Its historical expressions allow the Church to understand the social structures of the given society. This expression is reinstated by the whole of Church; all the members of the community participate in this formula and social doctrine. The guide highlights the inner Catholic mission and claims that we are witnesses to our own faith. Social teaching is not all about giving away some spare change to the poor. It is about selflessly helping and creating a life that is marked by concern and care for others. Jesus Christ asks us to sacrifice our needs in order to provide for the needs of the others. Charity and generosity is part of the Christian faith and the Holy Bible is the existing text of proof. Jesus says in Mark 12.38-40 that the widow gave up everything in order to fulfil the requirements of an unjust system, where the poor have to give up everything so that others can live extravagantly. Biblical examples like this one help us understand the incredible generosity of the woman. The best form of charity is loving someone, and that is the most charitable form of expression. According to the guide, social justice and charitable works are the two feet of catholic social teaching. Charitable work is an action that meets the immediate requirement of people and families. On the other hand, social justice brings change to the existing social structures to promote human dignity. It concentrates on giving people their rights, highlighting the underlying social causes and works to bring about a long-term alteration of social circumstances [9].

The guide is adapted from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development's Scripture Guide. Its purpose is to strengthen the understanding of social teaching. The Bible is a collection of short and long verses and diverse passages, all having the same underlying message. Humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27) and therefore, humans are sacred. God's love toward humans as the foundation of human dignity influences human

understanding of social mutuality and motivates individuals and communities to deeds of selfless love. Our social system expects us to serve people repeatedly for the love of God [10]. It is our responsibility to love other humans since God loves them equally [11]. The community that we live in helps us discern human dignity and the value of each individuality. Every Christian is called to bring this into practice and become the best social workers in the society. All human beings on Earth have the right to live in peace [12]. Food, health care, shelter, and education are some of the basic rights that all people deserve based on their shared human nature. As parents provide for their sick child, the Bible asks its followers to act in a similar manner. The vulnerable and the poor should be looked after with immense care and structural kindness. Working is more than just making a living. For example, social work is not a field where one can earn a huge sum; however, it is done as a reflection of the creative work of God. The function of our economy is to serve the people, and not the other way around. Our faith demands us to provide justice to all workers and provide them with the life and dignity they deserve. We are the keepers of our brothers and sisters. Social work contributes to peace and invites peace; we are thus prompted to become peacemakers. All our work should be dedicated to promoting God's rightful claim on us, His creatures. Living in the right relationships with God improves our relationships with others, and ourselves. It can be said that social work is one of God's fingerprints on earth. Our purpose on Earth is not only to multiply; instead, it demands from us to abide by the divine rules and guidelines. The guide is based on qualitative research and ponders more about the historical context social work. The literature allows readers to understand how the Church has assisted in helping us to better comprehend the role social work plays in helping people in their real-life situations [9].

### ***4.3. Integration of Christian faith and social work practice***

This journal article by Angela Gaddis is a reflection based on the relationship between social work and the calling that stems from one's Christian faith. It assists us in our understanding what exactly the word 'help' means and how it exerts its influence on Christians of all ages [13]. As the author recalls, going to church helped her learn how to help others and eventually it became more than a teaching; it was a natural expectation, an existential anticipation. The teaching defined help as any minor or major task. It could be as simple as helping your grandmother with her yard work. Helping the missionaries and donating to the local shelter are some of the expected forms of help. In the eyes of Gaddis, high school and college were ideal grounds for the practice of this calling. Social work works in harmony with one's personal faith and the Christian view of the world [14]. An important point highlighted in the journal article states that the journey of pursuing the field of social work is not easy. It is riddled with hardships and challenges that affect social life on all its levels. However, learning and growth are unstoppable. Social work is not an easy task. It must be brought into practice and allowed to grow. Both, secular and biblical

presuppositions require personal responsibility and being open to new challenges [13].

This article is an attempt to communicate and understand social work from the experiences of the author. According to the Bible, social work can be authentically implemented only when it is conducted under the premise of the church. Christian spirituality is the foundation that establishes social and moral justice for the secular and the religious institutions. Unfortunately, the practice of social work has seen a substantial decline in the past 50 years. Some argue that neither private spiritualities, nor institutional religion have a place in the practice of social work. A sense of doubt and apprehension has permeated the secular worldview with regard to social work practice and education. The author argues that not only does social work have a religious foundation, but it also promotes a qualitatively different mindset. It promotes a positive worldview and values religion. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed empirical and logical evidence being embraced by the field of social sciences. Numerous theorists such as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud had a strong impact on the social work theory during this time. These scientists and theorists doubted and viewed the institution of religion with apprehensions. For example, Karl Marx thought of religion as a tool of oppression while the other theorists felt that it was a social construct created by society. Furthermore, this social construct created by humans allegedly turns out to be a burden. Instead of improving the provision of social work, the interest deviated towards social diagnosis.

The profession of social work has not always been very kind towards its workers. It has often shown hostility towards institutions and people that acknowledge the field of social work. The journal article argues that in order to bring forth social work and its importance, social workers should avoid and refrain from bringing religion to a central position of importance. Associating social work with religion is only going to make it difficult for the social workers. It will create a different dimension for the advocacy of professional social work. As for the ideology of the theorists, people that do not believe in this kind of secular, immanentist worldview cannot be good social workers [13].

The secular approach underpins the postmodern values and emphasizes each person's right to have a unique set of beliefs. Social workers operating within this framework emphasize values such as worth and dignity of other individuals. However, the basis on which it is done remains doubtful. Social workers are trained to influence and shape individuals so that they can plan (make intentional, purposeful decisions), choose, and become self-aware.

A theological approach to social work adds new dimensions to the process. Apart from the historical significance of social work in Christianity, the Christian faith itself has influence on the development of social welfare. Numerous presuppositions and shared beliefs guide Christian social workers within a specific code of ethics [15]. As the code of ethics states that the social worker is required to help people with their social problems, Jesus Christ says a similar statement in Matthew 20.26-28. Hence, we can draw the conclusion that Christianity and social work both value providing service to others. Christianity

and social work operate hand in hand integrating social practice into a wholesome process of salvation. The profession of social work expects the workers to work on profession strategies. The effort must not look like a practice of charity. A Christian social worker needs to keep in mind that every individual has his own worldview which informs his social beliefs and value systems. It is important for every social worker to respect the worldview of his or her clients and the people they are looking after. In addition, one must recognize that numerous methodological assumptions exist in this field, as well as numerous contradictions. Therefore, an important attribute that is important amongst all social workers is to be nonjudgmental. Christian social workers may often face inner struggles while doing their job, especially when they must deal with heinous acts. The Bible gives clear instructions to Christian social workers on how to strengthen their practices and help individuals as well as communities [13].

## **5. Findings and discussion**

Building up on the literature review and available evidence, we can confidently claim that the Bible has a positive view on social work. For example, Saint Paul says in Romans 12.13-17: “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.” Helping another being is, according to the text above, an act of blessing. Hospitality is the best approach for starting social work and working to help the needy. Once humans embrace the biblical impetus to participate in social work, the practice of social work will see a significant turn. This turn will be positive and will result in inviting stronger workforce of social workers. The differentiation between secular worldviews and the religious worldviews has led to massive confusion amongst the people. Knowledge of the biblical view on social work is essential to have a clear view on what the Christian faith demands and expects from us. As mentioned in Nehemiah 2.17-18, “Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.’ In addition, I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and of the words that the king had spoken to me. In addition, they said, ‘Let us rise up and build’. So they strengthened their hands for the good work”.

These verses signify that God always planned and wanted man to look out for one another to prosper. Creating a connection between the Christian faith and social work practice, however, is a cumbersome process. While doing so, people often get lost and confused, internally torn between the expectations of the society, and their inner faith. There is a fine line between worldview and religion. Both sides have similar expectations but some minor and major



elements give rise to further debates. The biblical view of social work has always taken a debatable and arguable turn. Christian social workers face a dilemma when they are put in a situation where they may have to solve a difficult problem. While their religion may influence them to avoid that act, the worldview may act differently [15]. The worldview would influence the individual to help the people for the sake of humanity. The thin line between these two sides has led to various controversies and has led to massive disturbances. Instead of focusing on the problem, social workers are submerged by the web of inner turmoil and dilemmas. Self-discovery, encouragement, and empowerment are a few characteristics that are often embodied by social workers. Due to this prevailing issue, Christian workers go through phases of acceptance and oppression. These workers find it difficult to integrate their practice and their faith. Working under the guidelines of the Bible, helps them function with both the worldviews and the views of their faith.

Despite the extensive history of Christian faith and social work, people today doubt that the two can work in compatibility. Numerous scholars believe that even though there are tensions, some areas of Theology and social work exist in harmony and work in agreement. Four principles that have had noticeable influence on the motivation for social work are: (1) justice, (2) love, (3) self-fulfilment, and (4) responsibility [16]. However, the most important element of social work is dignity. Dignity of the social worker and the people being helped is essential for the function of a biblical view. As mentioned earlier, some may live and sleep in riches while others live and die under severe oppression. Life is unfair; however, Christian religion prompts us to strive to end the suffering and inequality. The biblical view of social work influences its followers to end the social injustice. Over the years, we have forgotten what our social responsibilities are and the framework under which we must live both our personal and professional missions. This is evident from the literature review conducted and the choice of literature selected. The three analysed pieces of literature (the study by Sharon Pittman and René Drumm [3], the Catholic Social Teaching Scripture Guide [9], and finally the journal article by Angela Gaddis [13] - subheadings 4.1–4.3) address the same subject with different approaches and challenges.

The Biblical prophet Isaiah claims that God has everything planned for his creation: “Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, ...then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday...If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly.” (Isaiah 58.9-14)

This verse from the Bible is a written proof that God has everything planned for his creation. Social work invokes the same principle; people that are bound to get help will get help from the followers of Christ. The Bible only asks believers to have faith in God and wait for a positive outcome. This issue has

never been more prominent than it is today. The cultural and social changes in our age have influenced our priorities and objectives [17]. Materialism and greed have distorted some of the current conceptions of social work. That which was supposed to be a self-less act has now become an act that expects a larger outcome. Around the world, there have been cases where social work has been done with the goal to extort money out of people. The essence of social work dies once its original, authentic objective becomes the social worker's own profit. On the other hand, the 'benefit' that we can gain from a genuine practice of social work is a good conscience before God as we serve humanity for the sake of God [18].

Social work today is given additional attention primarily because it is declining [19]. In an era when inflation and price hikes are common, money and other incentives have become a necessity. Even if the individual may not be eager to ask money for the service, he or she is left with no other choice; there are bills to pay and a household to manage [20]. Social work is directly in agreement with the Bible. While it may be difficult to trace values back to a Biblical mandate, social work is easily traceable. "Church doctrine and real-life practice of one's Christian identity converge on the mission field, that is, in our daily life of witness as we fulfil our human callings in the new freedom of ... faith" [21]. The biblical mandate has established institutions that provide for the human needs. During the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, various Church groups formed societies that were established to meet the social needs of communities. Hunger, physical, and mental illness, disabilities, prison reform, caring for orphans, widows, and unemployment were some of the core issues targeted by these groups [22].

## **6. Conclusions**

The Biblical view of social work is a complex field that requires extensive research to draw conclusions. As discussed earlier, the Bible clearly asks believers to have faith in God which will in turn motivate them to do good in His name. This issue has never been more prominent than it is today, as Halagová comments in her recent work [23]. Changes in age have influenced our priorities and objectives in favour of an unchecked consumerist lifestyle. The self-less acts of social work have since become conditional acts help based on an idea of profit [24]. Around the world, there have been cases where social work has been done to extort money out of people. The essence of social work vanishes once its original objective morphs into a selfish gain game. If we fail to notice the seriousness of this change, the world will become a more hostile place than it is now. It is the responsibility of a biblically informed and theologically shaped social work conducted by Christian communities worldwide to help retain "the much needed social fabric ... fertile with practiced virtues," which can preclude "the spawning of totalitarian moods and solutions" [25] in our societies. The inequality and unfairness that exist in our world today must be taken head-on

through authentic and effective, biblically based and Gospel-motivated social work.

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