From Virtue to Algorithm:

A Reflection on Moral Drift in Tech-Driven Enterprises

***Christopher Jensen**'s research shows how a well-intentioned experiment to promote 'moral uplift' among rickshaw drivers in Colombo drifted from virtue and professionalism to driver isolation and the use of algorithms. He suggestes that Christian organisations and businesses can learn from this cautionary tale that virtue grows businesses but is easily eroded by technology. Drift can be prevented by vigilance, reflection on our mission, and authentic engagement with the communities around us.*

Introduction

In the swirling tuk-tuk traffic of South Asia, where thousands of three-wheeled autorickshaws ferry passengers through crowded streets, a quiet ethical experiment began. In the bustling city of Bangalore, India, two men envisioned a better way rooted in peace, dignity, and moral uplift for one of the most overlooked segments of the urban workforce: the autorickshaw driver.

The Peace Auto Initiative (PAI) was launched in 2012 by Anil Shetty and Alok Singh, two social entrepreneurs moved by a disheartening experience in a rickshaw. Their vision was radical in its simplicity: to restore dignity to autorickshaw drivers through a renewed commitment to ethics and community values. Rooted in the Sanskrit principle *Vaishnava Kodambakkam*—"The world is one family"—Peace Auto promoted a culture of humility, gratitude, love, forgiveness, and truth. Drivers joined not for higher fares or financial gain, but to be part of a virtuous community.[1]

Years later and hundreds of miles away, a similar spirit seemed to animate another enterprise: PickMe, a tech-based ride-hailing company in Sri Lanka. Initially, it too aimed to reform the transport sector with training, codes of conduct, and a spirit of professionalism. Yet, over time, a different reality emerged—one increasingly governed by algorithms

Typical Trishaw in Sri Lanka

and customer ratings, rather than by trust, virtue, or human discretion.

This article explores that journey from high ideals to ethical drift. How can a company committed to virtue gradually become dominated by impersonal mechanisms? What can Christians—and Christian institutions—learn from this moral trajectory? What does it mean to sustain virtue in a system increasingly shaped by data, ratings, and efficiency? At its inception, PickMe aspired to bring dignity and fairness to an often chaotic industry. Its leadership emphasised ethics, driver professionalism, and customer service. In many ways, PickMe appeared to embody a technologically scaled version of the Peace Auto vision.

Research Findings

Research was conducted over three years in the city of Colombo, interviewing drivers and management at PickMe with one central question in mind: How effective is PickMe's leadership in fostering virtue and professionalism among the autorickshaw drivers?[2] Interviews with PickMe drivers revealed a surprising openness to ethical language. Many drivers described success in terms that aligned closely with biblical virtue: humility, patience, honesty and respect. They spoke of quality work as serving others well, being courteous, and upholding integrity—even when no one was watching.

This echoes the biblical vision of work as a calling, where labour is not merely transactional, but transformational. In Ephesians 6:6, Paul urges believing slaves to work hard for their masters "not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart." This kind of ethical commitment—doing right even when unseen—was present among many of the drivers I interviewed. Yet, despite its virtuous beginnings, PickMe has followed a trajectory familiar to many tech-based enterprises. Over time, the company's reliance on algorithms, data-driven assessments, and customer feedback began to redefine what counted as 'good' driver behaviour.

In particular, the company placed heavy emphasis on customer ratings. Drivers reported that these ratings often determined their access to more rides, higher fares and employee benefits, creating a system where pleasing the customer—rather than upholding moral standards—became paramount. Several troubling consequences emerged. First, drivers began to feel pressure to comply with unreasonable passenger demands, even if doing so compromised safety or fairness. Second, a culture of anxiety replaced the earlier culture of virtue. Instead of internalising values like patience or honesty, drivers were incentivised to perform whatever behaviour would yield a high rating.

This shift is subtle but profound. What was once a community of practice—a place where character was formed through shared norms—had become a system of surveillance and performance. In virtue ethics terms, this represents a shift from *arete* (excellence of character) to mere compliance.[3]

Salutary Lessons

How did this happen at PickMe? Furthermore, how can Christian leaders sustain moral influence and foster virtuous practice in their organisations without slipping into a similar ethical drift?

In the beginning, the original founder held to a stronger set of principles compared with later management teams, who seemed to rely on management by means of the software 'app', rather than take responsibility for personal influence, ethical training, and ethical leadership. The decline in ethical leadership from management likely reduced the effectiveness of the ethical programmes initiated by management.

Management had the intention to create a culture and organisation that held a righteous organisational purpose, which resounded through the ranks of the 100,000+ driver community in Colombo. A primary finding from the interviews with the 22 trishaw drivers was that the virtuous mission of joyful mobility and dependability was only partially understood by the driver population. While it was clear that the service-orientation function of efficient and affordable transport was part of the institution's aspiration to be dependable, the notion of experiencing 'joyful moments' (the slogan and mission statement at PickMe) was somewhat lost on the drivers.

Also, time was a factor. Over time and as the institution became larger, their ethical aspirations seemed to fade, and the pursuit of external goods (success) appears to have superseded the initial priorities of investing in the drivers' skills and abilities. This could have been due to decline in ethical fervour and a fading of the commitment to exist as an ethical organisation.

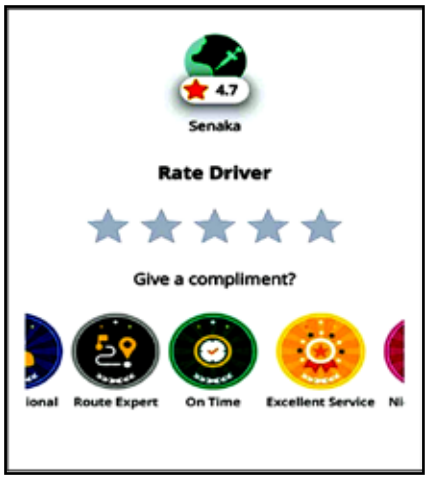
That is not to say that PickMe leadership was totally unsuccessful in fostering virtue among the drivers. This quote from one of the drivers highlights the leadership's impact on their ethical thinking:

> *But after coming to Colombo and joining PickMe, I started practising these general ethics like wishing others a good morning, thanking them, and blessing them. I knew of ethics from my childhood, but I started practising them when I migrated to Colombo. That is where I got the opportunity to practice them. In the village, if you said good morning to others or thanked them, they might laugh at you because it is unusual. (Driver 20)*

In general, the virtues of professionalism and cleanliness were two virtues that can be attributed to PickMe influence. Through training, accountability, and enforced reflection on their job performance through the software 'app', they were able to grow in respect and the practice of virtue.

In reflecting on how organisations can embed ethical practices into their daily life, it's helpful to think about how both formal efforts (like training and codes of conduct) and informal influences (like peer culture and shared values) play a role. In the case of PickMe, both types were present to some extent. PickMe did offer ethics training, especially during its driver onboarding process, where new drivers were introduced to professional standards and expected behaviour. Management also explained that they used a code of conduct—though this wasn't shared with me directly—and that drivers were made aware of it early on. The clearest form of reward and discipline came through the app itself: drivers who were rated highly by customers received more ride requests, while those with low ratings could eventually be blocked from the platform altogether.

This reliance on customer feedback as a way to reinforce ethical behaviour is not without value. After all, encouraging drivers to be polite, punctual, and professional can promote courtesy and respect. But



Passenger-Facing Rating System

it also reveals a limitation: much of the ethical training was one-way communication—from management to the drivers—rather than a shared dialogue about what kind of workplace they were trying to build together.

Christian ethicist Geoff Moore has written about the importance of creating space for honest conversations in organisations—discussions about what truly matters, what counts as '*good work*', and how a business can serve both people and the broader

common good.[4] These conversations, sadly, weren't happening at PickMe. Over time and as the organisation became larger, drivers were rarely asked for their perspective, nor was there much opportunity for them to reflect together on the purpose of their work. Ethics became more of a system to manage behaviour than a shared pursuit of virtue.

What was notably absent were some of the deeper moral commitments that help sustain a truly ethical culture: strong moral leadership, an atmosphere that celebrates integrity, and a culture where doing the right thing is praised—not just for getting higher ratings, but because it's the right thing before God and neighbour. As Christians, we know that ethics is not just a matter of reward and punishment; it's about the shaping of character in community.

Another quiet loss was in the relationships between the drivers themselves. Traditionally, trishaw drivers gathered at common stands, where they shared stories, offered advice, and maintained informal codes of conduct. But the arrival of the app changed that. Now, drivers waited alone for jobs, scattered across the city, connected more to their smartphones than to each other. The sense of community and accountability among drivers—the very fabric of virtue formation—was fraying.

When organisations pursue efficiency and growth, they can unintentionally sideline the very relationships and conversations that make growth in community character possible. Without leadership that values ethics beyond the bottom line, and without structures that include all voices, even well-intentioned efforts can become thin, hollowed out by algorithms and ratings.

Implications for Christians

What can we learn from the moral drift by PickMe? For Christians, especially those seeking to live out faith in business, the story of PickMe is both cautionary and illuminating.

First, it affirms the power of virtue to shape organisations. PickMe succeeded initially not because of market incentives but because of a shared moral vision. The language of humility, patience, and service resonated deeply with drivers, even in a pluralistic and post-colonial context like Sri Lanka. This suggests that virtue has cross-cultural appeal and that institutions can—and should—pursue moral formation as a central goal.

Tom Wright speaks to this when he unpacks Philippians 4:8-9 in his seminal book, *Virtue Reborn*:

> *There are many things out there in the wider world which, because of God's goodness in creation, really are true, holy, upright, pure, attractive, well-reputed, virtuous, and praiseworthy. Christians should not be mealy-mouthed about this. We should be the*

Interviewing Drivers for my research in Colombo, Sri Lanka (January 2020)

first to give praise where praise is due, and equally, to 'think through these things', to ponder them, to inquire how they work and the effect they have.[5]

For the Christian business leaders, the intentional, purposeful practice of demonstrating and encouraging virtue and ethics to the non-believing is inherent in the mission of the Christian Church.

Second, the story warns us of how easily virtue can be eroded when technology replaces human judgment. While algorithms promise objectivity and efficiency, they often fail to account for the wider context, intention, and grace. The rating a driver receives does not distinguish between a driver who kindly declined to speed for safety reasons and one who rudely dismissed a customer. As theologian Jacques Ellul warned, technology is never neutral—it carries its own logic, one that tends to reduce human beings to data points.[6]

Third, this case invites churches and Christian organisations to reflect on their own mission. Historically, the Christian church in Sri Lanka has struggled with the legacy of colonialism and cultural disconnection. Yet, when it engages authentically—seeking to understand rather than dominate—it can find allies in surprising places.

Indeed, many of the virtues drivers valued—honesty, hospitality, respect—deeply resonate with biblical teaching. A church that speaks to these values, not from a place of power but of shared moral vision, may find fertile ground for witness.

If the decline of virtue in tech platforms like PickMe is a cautionary tale, how might organisations sustain their ethical core over time? One answer lies in ongoing moral formation. Virtue is not static—it must be cultivated[7]. This requires more than policies or training sessions. It requires communities where stories are shared, examples are honoured, and reflection is encouraged. Christian institutions have much to offer in this regard. The Church, at its best, is a school of virtue. It teaches not only what is right but how to desire the good. This kind of moral imagination is crucial in business settings too—especially as technologies grow more dominant.

Organisations must also resist the idol of efficiency. While productivity and growth are important, they must never come at the cost of dignity or justice. As Jesus reminded his followers, *'What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?'* (Mark 8:36). Likewise, what good is it for a company to gain five-star ratings but lose its moral compass?

Finally, Christian leaders in business must remain vigilant. Ethical decline often begins not with a decision to do wrong, but with a failure to reflect. As algorithms increasingly mediate our work, we must ask: What kind of people is this system forming? Who benefits? Who is being silenced or stressed? Are we shaping systems that reflect the kingdom of God—or merely mirroring the values of the marketplace?

The story of Peace Auto and PickMe is more than a case study. It is a parable of modern business: a tale of moral aspiration, ethical drift facilitated by technology, and the enduring human hunger for dignity. For those committed to faith in business, the challenge is clear. Virtue is possible—but it must be protected. To quote Christopher Wright: *'Moral integrity is essential to Christian distinctiveness, which in turn is essential to Christian mission in the public arena'*.[8] For Christian business leaders, virtue can be lived out, held in high regard and fostered in the spaces of business. Communities of character can be built—but they must be nurtured. And while algorithms can guide behaviour, only a deeper vision—rooted in love, justice, and humility—can truly transform lives. In the end, the question is not just what our systems do, but what kind of people they are helping us become.

1. Peace Auto, "Peace Auto," 2013, https://www.facebook.com/Peaceauto/.
2. C. Jensen, "Fostering Virtue among Autorickshaw Drivers in Sri Lanka: A Case Study of an Urban Sharing Institution" (PhD Thesis, 88wwz, 2024), https://repository.mdx.ac.uk/item/190354.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).
4. Geoff Moore, *Virtue at Work: Ethics for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
5. Tom Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (SPCK, 2011), p.198.
6. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Vintage books, 1964).
7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
8. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, First Edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), p.367.

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