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WORK AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Abstract: **Work and unemployment.** The article looks close at labor from a Christian perspective. The author discusses the value of labor and its role for human life as well as for community. He addresses issues related to unemployment, lack of jobs and impact of them on human life. These issues are placed in the social, psychological and theological context.

Artykuł dotyczy problemu pracy widzianej z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej. Autor omawia wartość pracy oraz jej rolę w życiu człowieka, porusza również zagadnienia związane z bezrobociem oraz wpływem braku pracy na życie człowieka. Zagadnienia te umieszczone są w szerokim kontekście społecznym, psychologicznym i teologicznym.

Keywords: work, unemployment, Church
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ATTITUDES TO WORK

Work occupies such a significant place in most people's lives that, if we are Christians, we must know how to think christianly about it and about the trauma of unemployment. After all, the average worker still divides his day into three more or less equal periods – eight hours' sleep, eight hours' work and eight hours' leisure. So our work occupies a third of our day, indeed a half of our waking hours. We also acknowledge the importance of work by our habit of defining people in relation to it. Although English or American convention teaches us to ask "how do you do?", the real question which interests us is "what do you do?"

Some people are very negative towards their job and give the impression that, if possible, work is something to be avoided. Other people tolerate their job as a necessary nuisance, a way of earning a living, and a tedious consequence of the Fall. Yet another group of people have no particular understanding of their work. They have never stopped to think about it. They simply accept it. They say: "I go on working for the same reason that a hen goes on laying eggs. In other words, work is part of our human nature. Man is a compulsive worker, as a hen is a compulsive layer of eggs"¹.

Those who are trying to develop as Christian mind on work, however, look first on Creation. The Fall turned some labour into drudgery (the ground was cursed, and cultivation became possible only by toil and sweat), but work itself is a consequence of our creation in God's image. God himself is represented in Genesis 1 as a worker. Day by day, or stage by stage, his creative plan unfolded. Moreover, when he saw what he had made, he pronounced it "good". He enjoyed perfect job – satisfaction. His final act of creation before resting on the seventh day, was to create human beings, and in doing so to make them workers too. He gave them some of his own dominion over the earth and told them to exercise their creative gifts of in subduing it. So from the beginning we have been privileged stewards of God, commissioned to guard and develop the environment on his behalf.

SELF-FULFILLMENT

First, work is intended for the fulfillment of the worker. That is, an important part of our self-fulfillment as human beings is to be found according to God's purpose, in our work. We can affirm this with confidence in view of the very first instruction which God addressed to man and woman: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1, 28). Here are three successive commands, each leading logically to the next. They could not subdue the earth without first filling it, and they could not fill it without first reproducing themselves. This original and composite commandment expresses, then, a basic aspect of our vocation as human beings.

We have already seen when thinking about our responsibility for the environment, that our dominion over nature is due to our likeness to God. Or, to express the same truth in different terms, our potential for creative work is an essential part of our God – likeness. Our Creator has made us creative creatures. We can say that work is primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. Since the Creator has given us gifts, he intends them to be used. He wants us to be fulfilled, not frustrated.²

Pope John Paul II is clear and outspoken about the fundamental place of work in human life. In his encyclical on "Human Work" entitled *Laborem exercens* he writes:

Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work (LE, p. 4).

¹ B. Axford, *The Global system. Economics, politics and culture*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 89.

² D. Baecker, *Kapitalismus als Religion*, Berlin 2003, p. 27.

From the early chapters of Genesis “the Church is convinced that work is a fundamental dimension of man’s existence on earth” (ibid. P. 13). For this reason, he continues, “human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question”. If the latter is “making life more human”, as the second Vatican Council said it was, “then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance” (ibid. P. 12).

So then, “work is a good thing for man”, not only because through work he transforms nature to serve his needs, but because through it, “he also achieves fulfillment as a human being, and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being” (ibid. p. 33).

The concept of self-fulfillment through work is certainly much more difficult in some countries and regions, where the choice of job is extremely limited, and in particular kinds of work. The mining of coal (or for that matter of cooper, tin, gold and diamonds) involves dirt, discomfort and danger, and everything should be done by mine owners to reduce risks and unpleasantness. Then there is the tedium of the factory assembly line: mechanical, artificial, divorced from nature, utilizing only the smallest part of man’s potential capacities, it sentences the great majority of workers to spending their working lives in a way which contains no worthy challenge, no stimulus to self-perfection, no chance of development, no element of Beauty, Truth or Goodness. The post-communist countries are facing this problem. So, we should support every attempt to enrich or humanize working conditions.

Other manual jobs, although not tedious like the assembly line, are thought by some to be “menial” or “demeaning”. Take refuse collection as an example. It can involve the handling of rubbish that is filthy or smelly or both. Yet it is, of course, a vital service to public health and hygiene, and as such should provide a measure of job satisfaction. It is up to us to make it possible.

THE SERVICE OF MAN AND GOD

Work is intended not only for the fulfillment of the worker, but also for the benefit of the community. One can imagine that Adam did not cultivate the Garden of Eden merely for his own enjoyment, but to feed and clothe his family. Throughout the Bible the productivity of the soil is related to the needs of society. Thus, God gave Israel a “land flowing with milk and honey”, and at the same time issued instruction that the harvest was to be shared with the poor, the alien, the widow and the orphan. Similarly in the New Testament, the covered thief is told to stop stealing and to start working with his own hands, so that he “may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4, 28). The knowledge that our work is beneficial and appreciated adds considerably to our sense of job satisfaction.

Certainly the Bible regards work as a community project, undertaken by the community for the community. All work needs to be seen as being at least to some degree, public service. This principle throws light on the discussion about the purpose(s) of business.

It is acknowledged by all that a successful business must make a profit; provide adequate wages, good prospects and pleasant working conditions for the workforce; invest in research and development; declare a dividend for shareholders; pay taxes to the

government; and serve the public. The point of controversy concerns the order in which these six purposes should be placed. Many business people insist that profit must head the list, since otherwise the firm will sink. And everybody agrees that profit is indispensable of survival, but Christians feel uncomfortable about giving priority to profit, lest it seems that the chief end of the company is self – service – although of course there is a distinction between retained profits and distributed profits. It appears more consistent with the Christian emphasis on “ministry” to give priority to the provision of whatever goods or services the company offers the public. We then of course have to add immediately that in order to serve the public, and so stay in business and (or) expand in order to do so, the firm must not only pay its workforce and its taxes, but also make a profit, out of which it can plough something back for research and renewal of equipment, and pay a dividend. In other words, all six obligations of a business dovetail with one another. Some prefer to visualize them as the spokes of the wheel, in which priority is not given to anyone purpose, rather than as the layers of a pyramid. Yet the Christian mind still wants to insist that service to the community should come first.³

After all, it is not only true that a firm cannot serve the public without making a profit; it is also (and perhaps more) true that it cannot make a profit if it does not serve the public acceptably.

More important even than service of the community is the service of God, though the two cannot be separated. Christians believe that the third and highest function of work is that through it God should be glorified – that is, that his purpose should be revealed and fulfilled.

God has deliberately arranged life in such a way that he needs the co-operation of human beings for the fulfillment of his purposes. He did not create the planet Earth to be productive on its own; human beings had to subdue and develop it. He did not plant a garden whose flowers would blossom and fruit ripen of their own; he appointed a gardener to cultivate the soil. We call this the “cultural mandate” which God gave to man. “Nature” is what God gives us; “culture” is what we do with it. Without a human cultivator, every garden or field quickly degenerates into a wilderness.

So there is co-operation, in which indeed we depend on God, but in which he also “d e p e n d s” on us. God is the Creator; man is the cultivator. Each needs the other. In God’s good purpose creation and cultivator, nature and nurture, raw materials and human craftsmanship go together.

This concept of divine – human collaboration is applicable to all honourable work. God has humbled himself and honoured us by making himself dependent on our co-operation. Take the human baby, perhaps the most helpless of all God’s creatures. Children are indeed a g i f t o f t h e L o r d, though here too the parents co-operate. After the birth it is as if God drops the new-born child into the mother’s arms and says “Now you take over”. He commits to human beings the upbringing of each child. In the early days the baby remains almost a part of the mother, so close are they to each other. And for years children depend on their parents and teachers.

Even in adult life, although we depend on God for life itself, we depend on each other for the necessities of life. These include not only the basic needs of physical life (food,

³ Conseil Pontifical „Justice et Paix” Pour une meilleure répartition de la terre. Le défi de la réforme agraire, 1997.

clothing, shelter, warmth, safety and health care), but also everything which makes up the richness of human life (education, recreation, sport, travel, culture, music, literature, and arts), not to mention spiritual nurturing. So whatever our job – in one of the professions (teaching, medicine, the law, the social services, architecture or construction), in national or local politics or the civil service, in industry, commerce, farming or the media, in research, management, the services or the arts, or in the home – we need to see it as being co-operation with God, in serving the needs of human beings and so helping them fulfill his purpose and grew into human maturity.

In some jobs the co-operation is direct, and therefore easy to perceive. The farmer plants and sows; God gives the increase. Or take the case of medicine. The words of Ambroise Paré, the sixteenth-century French surgeon, sometimes described as the founder of modern surgery, are inscribed on a wall of the *École de Médecine* in Paris: “I dressed the wound, but God healed him”. In other kinds of work the co-operation is indirect, in which case we need insight to grasp it. When asked whether his doctoral research in solid state physics was “useful”, Robert Newport replied: “Well, it’s not directly related to anything. But then he went on: I hope that later my findings will link up with those of others and the results will be applied in industry” (David Field, *Just the job*, London 1978, pp. 93–94). That is an example of what I mean. And, although I have developed in a specifically Christian way this principle of looking beyond the immediate to the ultimate, it is surely applicable to very many jobs undertaken by non-Christians.

In the light of the three purposes for work which I have been considering, I am ready to attempt a definition: “Work is the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God⁴.”

Fulfillment, service and worship (or co-operation with God’s purpose) all intertwine, as indeed our duties to God, others and self nearly always do. Certainly self-fulfillment cannot be isolated from service. For job satisfaction is not primarily attained by a fair wage, decent conditions, security and a measure of participation in profits, important as these are. It arises from the job itself, and especially from that elusive thing, “significance”. Moreover, the main component of significance in relation to our job is not even the combination of skill, effort and achievement, but the sense that through it we are contributing to the service of the community and of God himself. It is service which brings satisfaction, discovering ourselves in ministering to others. We need not only to develop this perspective on our own work, but, if we are employers or managers, to do our utmost to develop it in our workforce.

THE TRAUMA OF UNEMPLOYMENT

When we have grasped the idea of how central work is to God’s plans for people, we can see at once how seriously unemployment threatens our humanity. Referring to the unemployed in England during the Depression years, William Temple wrote:

⁴ R. Fung, *Good news for the poor, your kingdom come*, (WCC 1980), p. 145.

“The gravest and bitterest injury of their state is not the animal (physical) grievance of hunger or discomfort, nor even the mental grievance of vacuity and boredom; it is the spiritual grievance of being allowed no opportunity of contributing to the general life and welfare of the community” (William Temple, *The unemployment experience*, Hodder 1986, p. 83).

It is a shocking experience to be declared “redundant”, and still worse to have to think of oneself thus. Many people live in fear of happening to them.

On the European continent the figures vary considerably from country to country. According to the Department of Employment in September / October 1999, the percentage of the workforce unemployed was highest in Italy (16, 7 percent) and lowest in Switzerland (0,5 percent). In Japan it was 2,2 percent, in the United States 4,9 percent, in Australia 6,1 percent and in Canada 6,7 percent. In Central European Countries the statistic are higher still.

Moreover, it seems certain that, at least in the immediate future, the problem is going to get worse. Developing nations will become increasingly industrialised and will compete in world markets to sell their steel, ships manufactured goods. Microelectronics, particularly Internet will complete the Industrial Revolution. Computers will take over the running of factories, the ploughing of fields (by driverless tractors) and the diagnosing of diseases. There will be no sense in trying to resist this development, like in XIX century. We have to come to terms with it.⁵

Unemployment is not a problem of statistics, however, but of people. In the Third World, where no wage – related unemployment benefit is available, it is often a question of actual survival, but in the West the suffering is more psychological than physical. It is a poignant personal and social tragedy. Industrial psychologists have linked unemployment to bereavement, the loss of one’s job being in some respects similar to the loss of a relative or friend. They describe three stages of trauma. The first is shock. A young unemployed man in Lublin spoke of his *h u m i l i a t i o n*. Another one felt *i m m e - d i a t e l y d e g r a d e d* and said to himself, “I’ve become a statistic, I’m unemployed”. On hearing that they have been sacked or made redundant, some people are angry, others feel rejected and demoted. Their self – image has suffered a bitter blow, particularly if they have dependants they cannot now provide for. Unemployment brings tension and conflict to their family life. At this stage, however, they are still optimistic about the future⁶.

The second stage is depression and pessimism. Their savings are exhausted and their prospects look increasingly bleak. So they lapse into inertia. As one man summed it up, “I stagnate”. Then the third stage is fatalism. After remaining unemployed for several months and being repeatedly disappointed in their applications for jobs, their struggle and hope decline their spirit becomes bitter and broken, and they are thoroughly demoralised and dehumanised. In July 1999, 41 percent of the unemployed in Europe had been out of work for over a year (Social Trends, No 19 (1999) p. 80).

⁵ J. H. Mittelman, *The globalisation syndrome. Transformation and resistance*, Princeton 2000, p. 67.

⁶ Ibid.

SOLUTIONS AND PALLIATIVES

How should Christians react to the problems of unemployment? The ultimate solution belongs to the realm of macroeconomics. Everybody seems to be agreed that unemployment is due to the current world recession, and that it can be overcome only by more trade bringing more demand, bringing more jobs. But experts do not agree on how this growth can be secured. In Western Europe making industry more competitive is the cry from government, employers and unions. To this end some advocate a massive reflection of the economy by government investment and job creation. Others hope to stimulate a more dynamics economy in private (though government – encouraged) investment. Others accept dictum “small is beautiful” and believe we should turn from huge capital – intensive enterprises to modest labour intensive projects. Yet others believe that the new micro – processor technology will force this decentralisation upon us anyway. In the short-term the silicon chip will undoubtedly decrease jobs; but in the long term, they add, the Microprocessor Revolution – like the Industrial Revolution 200 years ago – will create more jobs. The 1979 report commissioned by the Department of Employment, entitled *The manpower implications of micro-electronic technology*, was tentatively optimistic. Its authors pointed out that “the evidence from the economic history of the entire industrial age is that technological change has been beneficial to aggregate employment” and that “western industrialised countries have experienced an almost continuous period, since 1945, of both rapid technological change and increasing employment” (pp. 6 and 9).

Turning from long-term to short-term remedies, or from solutions to palliatives, there seems to be more agreement. Successive governments, maybe less in our region, have done much in their regional policies, training and retraining schemes, and job creation programmes, which give the unemployed either training or work experience until they can find a job, using public money to create community jobs which are organised by voluntary “managing agencies”. Voluntary Projects Programme pays the expenses of training, travel, tools and materials for those wishing to undertake voluntary service. These kind of programmes are sponsored in England by the Trades Union Congress and by Local Trades Councils in order to create small business. There are one and one – third million small businesses in Britain.

In West Germany there are half as many again, in Japan five times, and in the USA ten times as many. There is a common opinion in Britain that two or three million people still can be employed in this way.⁷

Various proposals are also being made not so much to increase demand for labour as to decrease supply. The principle behind them is to redistribute the same amount of work, by spreading it over more people. One arrangement being canvassed is job – splitting or job – pairing, by which the same job is shared between two people, who work either a week in – week out or a morning – afternoon rhythm, giving them more freedom, although also of course less pay. Other people are urging the reduction of the weekly total of hours worked, the strict curtailment of overtime, the banning of black economy jobs, the extension of annual leave, the provision of more sabbaticals, and earlier voluntary retirement.

⁷ G. Kirchgässner, *Homo oeconomicus*, Tübingen 2000, p. 247.

Have the Catholics, Christians in general, any specific contribution to make? Yes, they have great perspective, after 2000 years of their existence. They know that we are in the midst of a revolution that will count as one of the most momentous in the history of human society. In the light of this, the first concern is that we shall learn lessons from the Industrial Revolution and not repeat them. The introduction of new technology cannot be resisted; but it should be carefully controlled and kept compatible with the human needs of the society in which it takes roots. Also, we have somehow to ensure that this time the benefits of the micro – electronics revolution, and the burdens of adjustment to it, are evenly shared. Otherwise, another disastrous “two-nations” situations will emerge, separating the beneficiaries from the casualties.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Travelling across the world, but coming from Poland I can say that in the present transition period the Church should have a key role. In the Industrial Revolution it missed its opportunity, and ever since the working masses, not only in Britain, have been alienated from it. This must not happen again. And, since the unemployed have no union to represent them or plead their cause, the Church could be the voice of the voiceless. It is well placed to do so. Straddling as it does the whole spectrum of the community, it can be a unique lobby, articulating the Christian social demand and encouraging its people to discover and apply such demands through national and local Church initiatives.

Let me spell out, as the Catholic priest, at least three ways in which the Church can and should be helping.

F i r s t, many of us need to change our attitudes towards the unemployed, and persuade the public to do the same. We usually tend to despise those who are less in the struggle to survive, as if it were their fault. No doubt there are a few work-shy people who do not want a job and prefer to sponge on the community. But they must constitute a tiny minority. The great majority of unemployed people want to work, but cannot find a job. They are victims of the recession and of the new technology. There is need therefore for more Christian sympathy toward them and more pastoral care. We have to repent of looking down on the unemployed, and of ever imagining that the words “workless” and “worthless” might be synonymous. St. Paul’s dictum: “if a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3, 10) was addressed to voluntary not involuntary unemployment, to the lazy not to the “redundant”. So we need to welcome and support the unemployed in the local Church; otherwise our pious talk about “the Body of Christ” becomes a sick joke ⁸.

S e c o n d l y, the Church can take its own initiatives. For some 10 years, at least in my country, and for some 35 years in Western Europe, now on increasing number of local parishes have come to realise that the buildings they inherited from the past are both too large for their needs and unsuitable for their responsibilities. Many have therefore developed imaginative plans to preserve (and usually remodel) an area for

⁸ W. Temple, *Christianity and social order*, London 1975, p. 121–122.

worship, and convert the rest for other purposes, especially for appropriate service to the local community. Some such centres accommodate a children's play group or nursery school, a club for Mums and Toddlers, a luncheon club and chiropody service for old people, an open youth group, a coffee bar, etc. They are also beginning to be used to serve the unemployed. The first is Pastoral Care (coping with being out of work). Why not open a drop-in centre or recourse centre on church premises, where unemployed people can find companionship, information, a library, refreshments, recreation and better chance to get jobs or joining with others to set up kind of small business.

The third way in which the Church can help is by making a determined effort to make, publicize and act on the distinction between "work" and "employment". For although all employment is work (we are not paid for doing nothing), not all work is employment (we can work without being paid for it). What demoralizes people is not so much lack of employment (not being in a paid job) as lack of work (not using their energies in creative service). Conversely, what gives people a sense of self – respect is significant work.⁹

Work significance is more important than wage or salary, is giving us a sense of self-worth. To employ people to dig holes and fill them up again brings pay without significance; to work creatively but voluntarily brings significance without pay. Of the unemployed people I have known personally, several have spent time in study, one who had camera used the opportunity to improve his photographic techniques in the hope that later he would be able to make audio-visuals, while a young woman spent many hours visiting and supporting some alcoholic friends who lived in the flat below her.

The current social revolution will not leave any of us untouched. If the average working week is reduced to 35 hours, and then to 30, how shall we spend our extra free time? Should the Church not be both suggesting and offering some constructive alternatives to television, video and Internet? For creative leisure, though unpaid, is a form of work. The possibilities are numerous: do it yourself repairs, redecoration and improvements at home; servicing the car, motorbike or bicycle; self-education through evening classes, correspondence courses or Open University; cultivating the vegetables, keeping pigs or chickens, working with wood or metal; dressmaking, knitting and embroidery; making music; painting, pottery and sculpting; reading and writing; and where possible doing these things together, spending more time with family and friends. Then there is the whole sphere of community service, either through the local church or a voluntary organisation or on one's own initiative: visiting the sick, the elderly or prison inmates; redecoration an old person's home; working with mentally or physically handicapped people; babysitting; collecting other people's children from school; teaching backward children, or ethnic families – to read and write; helping in the local hospital, school, club or church. Another words, mankind by creation is creative; we cannot discover ourselves without serving God and our neighbor.

⁹ Ibid., p. 123–124.

A MORE RADICAL VIEW

During the eighties futurologists have been trying to visualize what the nature and place of work will be in the twenty-first century. In 1982 the International Labour Organisation estimated that, in order to achieve world-wide full employment, a thousand million new jobs would have to be created. This led to comment that will never return. Continuing population growth, the new technologies, the fear of inflation and global trade competition will combine to make the recovery of full employment on impossible dream. This certainly looks like being the case in Europe. In spite of original hopes that the European Economic Community by removing trade barriers would stimulate economic growth, the European steel, coal, shipbuilding and textile industries have all collapsed before expanding productivity in Brazil, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. This has of course meant a welcome degree of great employment in those countries, but nothing has yet arisen in Europe to compensate for the huge redundancies involved.

The Christian understanding of work as self-fulfillment through the service of God and neighbour should have several wholesome consequences. We shall value our own work more highly; see to it that those we may employ are able to do the same; feel deeply for the unemployed, and try to ensure that though out of employment they are not out of work. In summary, all of us should expect to remain workers all our lives, so that even after we have retired, we may spend whatever energy we have left in some form of service.