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ATTITUDES TO WORK

Abstract: This article presents the Christian conception of work. The author claims that Christians should help create genuine community life and protest against the dehumanizing effects of institutional life. The article also includes reflection on the abolishment of discrimination.

Artykuł prezentuje chrześcijańską koncepcję pracy. Autor postuluje, iż chrześcijanie powinni pomóc tworzyć wspólnotę życia społecznego oraz przeciwstawiać się dehumanizacji efektów życia instytucjonalnego. Artykuł zawiera również rozważania na temat zakazu dyskryminacji.

Keywords: social life, work, discrimination
życie społeczne, praca, dyskryminacja

Right attitudes to work are essential to our enjoyment of it; right relationships at work are equally important. Men and management may be highly motivated, and yet at the same time deeply dissatisfied because they are at loggerheads with one another.

Many European countries have a bad record of industrial relations. There were strikes by bakers, refuse collectors, road haulage and railways workers, hospital workers and ambulance drivers, journalists, teachers and social workers.

This situation is of concern to all thoughtful people, but especially to Christians. For we are in the business of right relationships. God's Kingdom is the Kingdom of right relationship.¹ Reconciliation is at the top of the Christian agenda, because it lies at the heart of the gospel. Sin disrupts relationships; salvation rebuilds them. Jesus came on a mission of reconciliation. He is the supreme Peacemaker; he tells his followers to be peacemakers too.

Moreover, relationships at work are particularly important because God means work, as we have seen, to be a co-operative enterprise, in which we collaborate with him and

¹ J.V. Taylor, *Enough is enough*, London 1975, p. 102.

others for the common good. We all experienced this solidarity during time of change 1989, when united against a common evil, but that unity soon fell apart afterwards, and no common cause has yet been found which could restore it.

THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE OF MUTUALITY

My task is not to presume to recommend policies, which is the task of those involved in government, employment and unions, and for which I have no expertise, but rather to try to clarify biblical principles. So that we can think straight and take whatever action is appropriate to our responsibility.

First, it embodies the principle of mutual service: "If you will serve them, they will serve you" (1 Kings 12:7). This splendid principle was rejected by Rehoboam (Salomon's son), and in consequence the kingdom split into two. But it remains the essential basis of every state and every democratic institution. Jesus himself went beyond a prudential arrangement (we serve in order to be served) and affirmed that true leadership must be interpreted in terms of service ("Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant"). Later St. Paul stated it ("Each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also to the interest of others"), and went on to illustrate it from the incarnation and death of Jesus. (Mark 10:43, Phillipians 2:4, 5-8)

Secondly, it is mutual service based on mutual respect. One might say it is service based on justice, and not on expediency only. To be sure, expediency enters into it ("you serve them and they will serve you"), but the principle's real foundation is justice, namely that the other party is a group of human beings with human rights, created in God's image as we have been, and therefore deserving our respect, as we deserve theirs. To oppress the poor is to insult their Creator; to serve them is to honor him.² It was this truth which lay behind the many detailed social instructions of the Old Testament – for example, the commandment to pay servant their wages the same day, to care for the deaf and the blind, to have compassion on the widow and the orphan, to leave the gleanings of the harvest to the poor and the alone, and to administrator justice impartially in the courts. And the same principle also lay behind the New Testament instructions to masters and servant to respect each other. For they served the same Lord and were responsible to the same Judge.

Turning from biblical to contemporary reality, the contrast is stark.. What prevails is industrial tension, in which each side suspects the other of self-seeking, and so indulges in it too. Each seeks its own interests rather than the other's. It is a situation of conflict born of suspicion and rivalry, instead of a situation of mutual service born of respect and trust.

Such a situation is wholly incompatible with the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ, and we should set ourselves resolutely against it. But how? How can mutual suspicion be replaced by mutual service and competition by co-operation? Shortly, by using work to help people develop, rather than to using people to accomplish the work as the end. Once there is a desire for mutual respect and mutual service, there will be at least three consequences.

² P. Hirst, G. Thomson, *Globalisation in question*, Cambridge 1996.

ABOLISH DISCRIMINATION

The first is that discrimination will be abolished – both the realities and the symbols, which together perpetuate an unwholesome “them–us” confrontation. For example the excessive disparity between the high paid and the low paid.

I do not think total egalitarianism should be the Christian goal, for God himself has not made us identical in either our natural or our spiritual endowments. What the Christian should oppose is the inequality of privilege, and what we should seek to ensure is that all differentials are due to merit, not privilege. In fact, it is a healthy and confidence – building arrangement when discrimination is both open and limited to pay, and does not extend to hidden perquisites for senior management.³

Wage differentials have been a major source of unrest and conflict of the apparent irrationality, as judged by any standard, of our present wage and salary structure. One may search in vain for the rational compound of skill, responsibility, effort and working conditions of a system which would explain why the ward sister in general hospital should be paid (at the top of her scale) about one – sixth of the salary of the University Dean; or why the sub-officer in the Fire Brigade should end a little above where the graduate school teacher began.

Yet human beings have a built – in sense of fair play, so that in all industrial relations arguments there are appeals to “fairness”, and complaints of “unfair practices”.⁴

Surely then, it should be possible to evaluate, compare and classify jobs with a view to a graduated pay scale. It is really beyond the wit and wisdom of human beings to devise a commonly agreed scale of some kind of points system according to qualifications and length of training, skill and craftsmanship, mental and manual effort, risk and responsibility, efficiency and achievement, experience and length of service, working conditions (including dirt, discomfort, danger and tedium), supply and demand.⁵

It is notoriously difficult, but surely not impossible, to compare clerical, manual, and skilled jobs. Such a wage / salary structure would have to be worked out by management and labor together; should ideally include the whole range from directors through managers to workers; would have to be seen to be just (every differential having a rational justification); and would overcome jealous conflict, and the uneven leap – frogging of claims and settlements.⁶

There must be differentials. But unwarranted discrimination in pay, conditions or promotion, “unwarranted” because based on privilege not merit, must be abjured. It is incompatible with social justice, and with the Christian ideal of mutual respect.

INCREASE PARTICIPATION

It seems to be increasingly recognized that the workers in any enterprise, on whose skill and labor its success largely depends, should have a share in both decision – making and profits. Although some directors and managers resist this, and naturally feel

³ From a news report in “Christianity Today” in 2006, New York 2007.

⁴ From the Social Foundations of Wage Policy (London 2000, 2005), p. 146.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

threatened by it, the principle accords with natural justice. I want to concentrate on the concept of decision – making, since the Christian mind discerns in it a basic component of humanness.

Christian tradition has always taught biblical truth, that moral freedom is an essential ingredient in the dignity of human personhood. For the supreme mark of a person is that he orders his life by his own deliberate choice.⁷ In consequence, society must be so arranged as to give to every citizen the maximum opportunity for making deliberate choice and the best possible training for the use of that opportunity. In other words, one of our first considerations will be the widest possible extension of personal responsibility; it is the responsible exercise of deliberate choice which most fully expresses personality and best deserves the great name of freedom. Intuitively people know this. They want to be treated as adults with freedom to decide things for themselves; they know that if decision – making is taken away from them, their humanness will be demanded. They will be reduced either to a child instead of an adult, or to a robot instead of a person.

The essential difference between a “community” and an “institution” is that in the former members retain their freedom to choose, while in the latter it is to some degree taken away from them. In the “institutions”, the day’s activities are “tightly scheduled” and “imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials”.⁸ The key factor is the bureaucratic control, and the existence of the basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called “inmates”, and a small supervisory staff. Characteristically, the inmate is excluded from knowledge of the decisions taken regarding his fate. Therefore in “total institutions” an inmate ceases to be a person with adult self – determination, autonomy and freedom of action⁹.

So important do I believe this to be, if Christians are to help create genuine community life, and to protest against the dehumanizing effects of institutional life, that I will give several examples and then come back to our topic of industrial relations. Before looking at the factory from this perspective, we will look at the school or university, the prison and the hospital.

Christians distinguish sharply between education and indoctrination. Indoctrination is the process by which the leader imposes his or her viewpoint on the malleable mind of the child. In true education, however, the teacher acts as a catalyst to develop the child’s ability to learn by observation and reasoning. The former is oppressive, the latter genuinely liberating.¹⁰ To be sure, the teacher cannot and should not adopt a position of complete neutrality, for children need guidance as they grow in discernment.¹¹

The process of self-education in interaction with teachers should be even more evident in universities and colleges, and also in churches where the preacher should never treat his congregation as nothing more than an absorbent sponge.

Prison is very different, of course, because inmates have had their freedom taken from them, following a fair trial, by the judicial authority of a court. It cannot be right to treat prisoners as if they were free citizens. Nevertheless, they should not be treated as if they

⁷ W. Temple, *Christianity and social order*, London 1999, p. 87.

⁸ E. Goffman, *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*, Garden City 2000, p. 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰ J. Stott, *I believe in preaching*, London 1982, pp. 174–178.

¹¹ John Paul II, enc. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*.

were slaves or robots either. They are still adult human beings, still persons who bear God's image, even while being punished for their offences.

Turning now to the medical field, there is a constant danger that the doctor–patient relationship, already unnatural because of awe in which doctors are held, will degenerate further beyond paternalism to control. The patient remains the person, and when decisions have to be made affecting his health and even his life, he should be left free to make them. Although it is obviously difficult for doctors to explain to their patients complex medical conditions and procedures in non-technical language, yet they are under obligation to do their best to do so; otherwise the notion of “informed consent” to treatment, surgery or research would be meaningless.¹²

Yet patients often feel that they are being bypassed, and even manipulated, because they are kept in the dark about their condition and treatment, and are consequently powerless.

I return at last to industry and to industrial relations. The cry for industrial democracy, in order to facilitate a greater participation of workers in their own enterprise, does not make factories a special case, but is the expression within industry of the universal cry for the humanization of society. We now take political democracy for granted, and are grateful; to those who struggled long to secure universal suffrage, so that ordinary citizens might share in governing their country and in making the laws they are then required to obey. Is not the propriety of industrial democracy equally self-evident? The cause of freedom will not be established till political freedom is fulfilled in economic freedom.¹³

At the heart of many industrial disputes is the question of rules and rule-making – not just what the rules require or forbid, but who makes the rules and why. Management is often dictatorial in making or changing rules, regarding this as “managerial prerogative”. Workers, on the other hand, usually go by what they call – custom and practice – the unwritten but established conventions of the place. Moreover, each side sees the need to legitimize its rules.

Industrial relations are broader than rules and rule-making, however. The whole policy and programme of the company are concerned. It has to be admitted that in many companies the workers lack self-respect because they lack responsibility. They feel oppressed and powerless. The “them and us” mentality is enforced because other people make all the decisions (remote faceless people), while their role is exclusively to react, and indeed to obey. The analogy with slavery, though very inexact, is yet instructive at this point. Christians opposed slavery because human beings are dehumanized by being owned by someone else. Christians now should oppose all forms of labor in which human beings are used by someone else. True, the evil is much smaller, because the work is undertaken voluntarily and is regulated by a contract. Yet it is a contract which diminishes humanness if it involves the relinquishing of personal responsibility and the undertaking to obey without consultation.¹⁴

¹² *The Nuremberg Code* (1947), reproduced in *Dictionary of medical ethics* 1981, pp. 130–132, *Declaration of Helsinki* (1965, revised 1975) reproduced in *Dictionary of medical ethics*, pp. 132–135.

¹³ *Christianity and the social order*, p. 87.

¹⁴ P. J. Armstrong, J. F. B. Goodman, J. D. Hyman, *Ideology and shop-floor industrial relations*, London 1981, p. 121.

Christians will agree that at the very least there should be a procedure of consultation, and, more important, that this should not be a piece of window-dressing but a genuine discussion early in the planning process which is reflected in the final decision. After all, production is a team process, in which the workers contribution is indispensable; should not decision – making be a team process too, in which the workers' contribution is equally indispensable? Self-interest undoubtedly lies at the root of each side's viewpoint. Managers tend to begin their thinking with profit, on which the company's survival depends; whereas workers tend to begin with rising costs and therefore wages, on which their personal survival depends. Their different starting points are understandable. But in discussion each side comes to understand the other's legitimate concerns, and then to see that the two, far from being incompatible, are in fact interdependent.¹⁵

The second kind of participation is profit-sharing. Presumably then there should be some correlation between work and wage. If the company prospers, shared power (responsibility) should bring shared profit. If shareholders benefit from profit, so should workers, whether in bonuses of company or deferred benefits.

The world pioneer in this area appears to have been Karl Zeiss of Jena, Germany, who in 1896 transferred the ownership of his firm to the workforce, while in the United States it was Sears Roebuch who in 1916 decided to use 10% of his firm's annual pre-tax profits to enable employees to buy its shares in the open market.¹⁶

Both aspects of participation (decision-making and profit-sharing) appeal to the Christian mind on the ground not only of expediency (increased industrial peace and productivity) but also of justice (workers have a right to share in power and profits).

EMPHASIZE CO-OPERATION

The fundamental concept of mutual respect and mutual service whose implications for industry we are exploring, should lead not only to the abolition of discrimination, but also to the increase of participation and so of co-operation.

Trade Unions developed in the nineteenth Century (with the active involvement of many Christians) to protect workers against exploitative bosses. Over the years they have secured great gains for labor, both in wages and in conditions. They were therefore absolutely necessary; without their sense of collective responsibility and their persistent struggles labor would still be exploited today.

The tragedy is, however, that the first loyalty of the workers tends to be given to their union rather than their firm, and that confrontation is still built into the very structures of industry. Why should we assume that this structural confrontation is inevitable and therefore everlasting? Why must the language of "winning" and "losing" whenever there is an industrial dispute, be perpetuated? Why should we not dream of, and work towards the day when better structures will be developed which express co-operation? When

¹⁵ H. F. R. Catherwood, *A better way, "the case for a Christian order"*, London 1975, p. 129.

¹⁶ Bishop Robin Woods of Worcester, letter to "The Times", February 16, 1977.

management and labor are locked in confrontation, the public also suffers; when they co-operate in the service of the public, their relations to each other improve.¹⁷

Of course, every firm must make a profit, but its priority concern should be the public whom the company (management, shareholders and workers together) exists to serve. Just as the first responsibility of every business and industry is their customers – not just because the survival of the enterprise depends on pleasing the public, but because service to the public is its *raison d'être*. Put most simply; a company exists to produce goods and services for its customers. In a free society the customer is king, and business exists to satisfy his needs.

In addition, the company itself is best served when management, labor and shareholders are united in serving the public. “If you serve them, they will serve you”¹⁸

The church should be the first community in which class stratification and a “them–us” mentality are overcome. If the followers of Jesus Christ cannot develop relationship of respects and trust, across social barriers, we can hardly blame the world for failing. But improved relationships need not be limited to the church.

We should work expectantly for greater respect and co-operation in every segment of human society. We should not acquiesce in industrial conflict or be pessimistic about resolving it. For all human beings, though fallen and self-centered, have an inborn sense of dignity and justice. So better relations are possible.

¹⁷ Cf. G. Goyder, *The responsible company*, Oxford 2001, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.