

CHRISM Paper 3

Spirituality for work

In exploring a spirituality of/for work, I wish to consider - briefly - four aspects: what I mean by 'spirituality', 'work', 'work and vocation', and 'theological perspectives on work', before offering a way of seeking a spirituality of/for work.

What is spirituality?

All of life is spiritual, for all is part of God's creation; there is no division between sacred and secular, work and worship, religion and politics. Spirituality is not apart from our daily lives, it is our daily lives. But it is a life with a cutting edge not avoiding the pain or the fear. (Ecclestone et al. 1986: 1)

Alan Ecclestone suggests that spirituality is the area of response that humans discover and speak about on becoming aware of God. It must be (by nature) in some sense prophetic, and have environmental sensitivity.

A new look at the ground we stand on is always a "must" if we are to know ourselves in the presence of God in the factory, laboratory, farm, city, all of which have their particular problems of right wage and ultimate purpose. (Ecclestone et al. 1986:7)

Jill Robson (1987:21) suggests that spirituality is about an attempt to find or grow towards an integration of the holy or spiritual dimension, with all other areas of living. She differentiates between a world-affirming incarnational theology and a world-denying theology. In the former, creation is seen as good: therefore human beings are basically good. In the latter, human nature is a fallen nature: the image and likeness of God now marred by original sin. From this perspective out, true nature is our spiritual one and the body is to be subdued. If this latter theology undergirds one's attitude to work then work is part of the suffering, part of the punishment we have to endure. A spirituality of work would be one of suffering or need for grace, at a distance from God. Robson identifies a number of "ways" of finding spirituality. These include:

- teaching it as a specialist branch of theology - expert but not necessarily practising
- induction into a set of principles - with rules/commandments / "ought to's"
- giving people a chance to fall in love - the ambiguity of religious experience
- offering role models - the holy person
- skills learning for a specific function - getting it right education - relevant, liberal, wide-ranging, applicable, understandable, attractive
- engaging in action-reflection

Robson's final model of engaging in action-reflection is an excellent basis for looking at work and seeking to define a spirituality. Starting with one's own experience it looks at it from as many viewpoints as possible. Our job is to discern God's action -known through revelation, scripture, prayer and the life of faith -and hold our experience against that theological judgement. Putting this into practice will realise a spirituality.

Work

The experience of work, interpreted from the perspective of Christian faith, demands a view of the world, of creation and of work as part of the process of being perfected. God's act in salvation was not (the Christian believes) a completed event but one wherein the saving and making new continues. God, incarnate in His world, continues to create, to be active in and through the activities of his creation.

Work is a singular opportunity to participate in that creativity of God in line with the purpose of God, taken here to be a completion of creation and the realisation of the kingdom. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1957) identifies (but does not concur with) the feeling which besets so many Christians that "work is always at the level of a spiritual encumbrance... A few moments of the day can be salvaged for God, yes, but the best hours are absorbed, or at any rate cheapened, by material cares".

Work was subsumed into the practice of the presence of God by Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite lay brother. He detested his work in the kitchen, but, for thirty years, "did it for God". Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes a spirituality of work in uniting it with prayer; work is better done when "as to the Lord". The idea of prayer giving meaning to work is also found in George Herbert's poetry. But this attitude can devalue work. J.G.Davies (1973:202-205) says that no refurbished gospel of work will do if it merely encourages grinning and bearing it. This attitude results in a greater emphasis on leisure which then causes a split between unpleasant work and pleasant fulfilment outside it.

The attitude towards work, whether work is seen as natural (creative) or unnatural (labour, punishment), a curse or a blessing, will influence its role in a person's life and his or her spirituality. If it is regarded as a necessary evil there will be no sense of fulfilment; it will not be seen as capable of redemption, of change. If work is seen as a blessing then people may be co-workers with God in his creative activity.

When motivated by altruism, by love for neighbour and community, as Martin Luther saw work, it will be valued as a ministry. When it is seen as the fruit of faith, a sign of salvation, as perceived by John Calvin, or even as a good thing to be doing, work will be fulfilling. Motivated people will thus increase their efforts and produce more. If work is seen as an offering to God (as it is by many Catholic and Orthodox Christians) its more dehumanising, devaluing, and depersonalising elements will be resisted. The work will be aligned with the offering of Christ's redemptive work. Work can be valued for itself. Teilhard de Chardin (1957) asks,

Why should there not be men vowed to the task of exemplifying their lives, the general sanctification of human endeavour? - men whose common religious ideal would be to give a full and conscious explanation of the divine possibilities or demands any worldly occupation implies ... in the fields of thought, art, industry, commerce and politics, etc ... to carry out in the sublime spirit these demands - the basic tasks which form the very bonework of human society?

Work and Vocation

"Vocation" in the New Testament always referred to God's call to men, thought of as the life of faith, within the body of the church -the ecclesia; called "out" of the world. Paul was called to be an apostle, not a tent maker. Vocation referred to a religious calling. A monk was called to separation from the world, to contemplation and work as a discipline.

Meister Eckhart taught that "the just man seeks nothing in his works". Nevertheless the way to salvation gradually came to be seen to be through works. His teaching later charged the words of the Protestant theologians who believed that a form of mysticism which preached union of the soul with God in his essence was irreconcilable with the Christian Gospel.

However, if the world is the place (as the Reformers claimed) where Christian vocation is to be worked out, rather than in the contemplative or withdrawn life of the monastery, then coming close to God cannot be confined to overt service of the church. Luther believed men were to serve God in a vocation, Calvin taught that it was through a vocation. In the period following the Reformation the idea of vocation was secularized to the concept or understanding of a calling to particular occupations; for example law, medicine or teaching.

By the 17th century holiness was being seen in even more individualistic terms. To John and Charles Wesley, keeping the stability between the contemplative love of God and the social holiness of neighbourly love, labour was a virtue - a sign of inward grace. One had to "work at it".

Jurgen Moltmann (1984:37) suggests that work is better seen as achievement, and not as Luther did in terms of vocation, or Calvin in enterprise. Work allows participation in God's history. He develops the idea of work as service. The ethical argument has moved from a duty to work, to a need to work and now today - in the light of high unemployment - to the right to work. If in fact work brings fulfilment, then the nature of the work is equally important,

Malcolm Grundy (1994) stresses too that work may be seen to be fulfilling or rewarding, and that there may be the sense of excitement generated by the thought of working in partnership with God in the continuing work of creation.

The idea of 'vocation' as a call to each one of us to live a Christian life, needs to be pursued.

Theological reflection

The creation stories in Genesis are the source of much theological thinking about work.

In Genesis 1:29 the plants and the fruit are given to Adam freely as a gift. i.e. - there is an absence of both work and leisure.

Genesis 2:15 relates how the Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and care for it. Now the suggestion is that Adam may have food but some work is required of him. i.e. work is a natural activity.

In Genesis 3:17-19, following the disobedience of Adam and Eve, we have the words of God which provide the notion of work widespread today: "with labour you shall win your food. You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow". i.e. work is punishment.

The picture of God blessing the man and the woman, their union and their creativity occurs in Genesis 1:28. The image is strong and affirmative with its endorsement coming in Genesis 2:19. God brings the animals to the man for him to name, thereby giving him (in Hebrew understanding) power over them. Man can be imaginative and in control of his environment.

Work is seen as creative and fulfilling. i.e. work brings creativity and fulfilment. It is a theological axiom that the organisation and conditions of work should not be dehumanising. It is also a theological axiom that resources should be used for the good of all and targeted to those most in need. Productivity should exhibit (or demonstrate) this. Justice demands the equitable distribution of goods and wealth; the realisation and utilisation of profit should reflect this. Work should not govern but contribute to the life of the community; it should not exploit the environment.

If work is to be seen in these humanistic terms it has to be considered in relation to the doctrines of creation and of humanity. Its practice is one of spirituality.

M.M.Thomas (Davies, 1.973:19 1) writes:

The purpose of theology is not to find divine sanctions for an historical movement, but to help discern what is of Christ and what of the devil in that movement so that we may know the nature of our response in faith. True theology, is not a means of enhancing self-righteousness and political messianism, but a spiritual source of constructive and discriminating participation. ... If it is affirmed that what God does in secular history is absolutely, hidden and that even a partial discernment is impossible to the eye of faith, then we are left without any guidance as to the nature or direction of our participation in secular affairs. ... The result will be a divorce between faith and participation in life which creates a dangerous split between secular responsibilities and the exercise of Christian spirituality and Christian mission.

So while traditional holiness cuts itself off, not only from sin, but often from the hopes and travails of the world, worldly holiness is achieved by responding to the summons of the holy to serve in the world. The secular existence is the locus of the encounter - the holy gives it meaning. If sacred and secular are separated the self too lacks integration; it is not whole.

With his incarnation, God showed himself present and active and concerned with his world. Yet many Christians find it difficult to "see" God in everyday activities. Sometimes we find it difficult to interpret our faith in the secular world where we live.

We need to be able to express the activity of God, which Christians can readily characterise in religious language, in secular language. Interpreting secular terms into religious language is often easier than putting religious language into the secular. The world celebrates birthdays, retirement, house-warmings and wakes, The Church talks of rites of passage. Both the world and the church wish to mark changed circumstances, acknowledging that something significant has happened.

On the next page you will find some suggestions of church / world -parallels. The parallel is possible because the love of the incarnate God is present and similarly active in both, although recognised and named differently.

Spirituality and work

Ursula King (1989:68ff) points out that women's very different historical experience of work (to men's) in the widest sense may provide an inspiring resource for thinking about work and spirituality in contemporary post-industrial society:

Many types of work possess negative, oppressive and enslaving features but in its positive sense human work is a source of worth and strong identity, and occasion for human creativity, self-expression and a sense of achievement. Work thus understood and undertaken is an act of self-transcendence which can provide important moments for personal growth and spiritual insight.

Recovery of the spiritual sense of work is imperative if women are to be liberated rather than automated by it. ... Recovery of the spiritual sense of work and the moral imperative it contains demands that women do not abdicate - as men once did - from the nurturant hearth-centred labour that they had known, but that this be integrated with the achieving, world-shaping enterprises they have generally avoided. Likewise, their liberation can be fulfilled only if men integrate their one-sided competitive, worldly pursuits with the private sphere of home maintenance and child rearing. (Kolbenschlag in King, 1979: 71)

Spirituality of work need not be recognised only in terms of a Christian faith. Lewis Mumford (Bleakley, 1983:73) maintains:

The functioning of work is to provide man with a living: not for the purpose of enlarging his capacities to consume but of liberating his capacities to create. The social meaning of work derives from the acts of creation it makes possible.

Grundy (1994) points out that while spirituality and work are not always seen as natural companions in our Christian tradition, many people are seeking a spirituality for their working lives. He echoes Bonhoeffer's statement (1964:255)

In the encounter with Jesus Christ man hears the call of God and in it the calling to life in the fellowship of Jesus Christ ... The spirituality of risk has not been much explored. Christians need to affirm a dynamic lifestyle, the changes which have to occur if people are to grow.

Grundy goes on to suggest that a look at God's relationship with the people of the Bible shows that they were never allowed to stand still; their own survival and growth depended on movement. He talks of a spirituality of risk which moves outwards into the unknown, with the security of knowing God and an understanding of key human values.

Another new concept he introduces is that of a spirituality of failure which acknowledges that even the best we can do cannot be enough. It is not a morbid response of depression or hopelessness but one which will help us to stay with God when we fail, and will help when we start all over again. Finally, Grundy writes of a spirituality of resurrection now, and says that nowhere more than in industry and commerce can the experiences of death and resurrection be felt. To talk of the continuing need to renew a company, or for a new product to take the place of an old, is to talk of the experience of death and resurrection. If, as Grundy attests, we can interpret the events of everyday life in ways which identify with the experiences of death and resurrection, we are coming close to a spirituality which

makes the right connections. I would add that we need a spirituality of process, of policy, and of transformation as well.

Conclusion

In seeking a spirituality of work a number of avenues may be explored.

There must be some reservation about the sense of calling introduced by Luther who linked the calling to a job to duty towards God. Work can be done, however, to the glory of God. Luther and Calvin had very distinct views on work and its place in the salvation of man; they were at odds with the Catholic thinking of their time but progenitors of the capitalist ethos. If we work out a "vocation" in the world, then work allows participation in God's history.

Christians believe that God created, and is continuing to create and to redeem his world. Belief in an incarnational God sees his activity in all things in the world. Teilhard de Chardin said:

By virtue of the creation and still more, of the incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those know how to see; work therefore, is "of God".

We are called to be co-creators with God. This links science and theology. [Christians who are trying to reconcile science and religion often ascribe different functions to the two fields, for example, science may answer the "How?" questions, while religion responds to the "Why?" ' Teilhard de Chardin (1957) and Polkinghorne (1992) address this dualism differently]. Creation was once understood to be a once-for-all act. Now we believe creation is an on-going process. As Christians our ultimate accountability is to God and hence to the spiritual values of justice, the common good, sustainability, and to the wholeness of the community. This may conflict with the accountability we have to the organisation, the state, the government, the corporate institution or the place of work.

There is a need to recognise different attitudes to work and their implications for theology and spirituality. The four principal themes identified in creation and work (absence of work/leisure, work as natural activity, work as punishment, work as creativity and fulfilment) give rise to very different expectations. In addition, just as God rested from his creative work, contemplated and saw that it was good, so too, people need, not merely to escape from work, but to rest and contemplate. Work should be more than just a paid job; it should be a creative fulfilling occupation. It needs to stimulate the self. Reading, meditation and contemplation are not usually thought of in relationship to work yet the papers on the desk, the decisions to be made, the policies to be agreed, the contract to be signed, all require reflection and the making of value judgements. Reflection on the practice of prayer, before or with work immersed in it, on the practice of living (working) in the presence of God or work undertaken as if for God, still leaves a dimension of work unaddressed. "Working" itself must be validated.

We must discern and point to signs of God's activity.

In order to attain a spirituality of work perhaps we should assimilate the argument of Davies and act upon it.

Because redemption or salvation has been conceived for so long in individualistic terms, Christians have failed to see signs of the Holy in society at large. To acknowledge this is to appreciate the narrowness of certain concepts of salvation and also something of the cosmic scope of the divine activity. Moreover it is to realise that economists,

development planners, community workers, may be agents of the holy. In other words, salvation is not to be spiritualised (the saving of souls) but understood as restoration to wholeness ... it is at this level of the penultimate that we must participate in the struggle for economic development and social justice. To say that work of this kind is a sign of the holy is to make an affirmation of faith. (1973:212)

church (religious) words & phrases

care for the poor / children of God /
care for the vulnerable
loving one's neighbour / fellowship

confession / repentance

redemption / grace / salvation
mission

reconciliation
going the extra mile
resurrection

led by the Spirit / word (Word)
creativity

freedom
stewardship
contemplation / meditation
covenant
fruits of the Spirit / talents
my brother's keeper
conscience
death
worship (worthship) / love
salvation

world of work words

rights / equality / justice

teamwork / sharing / community care / putting
others first

ownership of responsibility / truth / guilt /
apology

forgiveness / rescue

business trip / representative / delegate /
engagement

coming to terms / accepting / making up
unpaid overtime / work at home / generosity
the new life that comes with a new job / house
/baby / wheelchair / cure

inspiration / idea

sculpture / decorating / poetry / gardening /
computer programming / architecture / physics
autonomy

use of resources / responsibility

value judgements / decisions

contract / policy / agreement

skills / abilities

safety / efficiency / management

morals / ethics

death / redundancy / bereavement / loss

valuing people for themselves

restoration to health / wholeness

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