

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Sin and Work: Christianity and industrial relations, I

CHRISTIANS should stand for reconciliation in all conflicts including those in the field of industrial relations. To blame only one side — ‘big unions’ or ‘top management’ — would be an immoral simplification in this respect. The menace of industrial disputes will not be diminished through a denial that they are often greatly complicated by a whole variety of factors. A full awareness of the contingencies of a given conflict is badly needed in order to put it into some kind of perspective for both protagonists.

To talk of reconciliation in industrial relations while avoiding the central issues of a specific industrial dispute does not make much sense from the christian point of view. From this perspective:

industrial peace is not the absence or repression of conflict, but the fruit of social justice which itself is not a static law but a dynamic striving after greater justice. An apparent industrial peace is not morally neutral, nor does it indicate the absence of conflict. Silence does not necessarily denote contractual agreement when employees have no real choice.¹

Acceptance of a *status quo* that is morally wrong is not the same as christian reconciliation. On the other hand, it is the obligation of a Christian to avoid any interference that may be questionable. Christian radicals have a tendency to declare themselves to be on one side of an industrial conflict while neglecting the arguments of the opposite side.

An authentic spirituality must take the existence of conflict seriously, otherwise spirituality becomes harmful, a degenerate spirituality which simply manages conflict, seeking to reconcile opposites, erase real distinctions, so that even good and evil are reconciled. It is the pathetic search for ‘neutral’ ground away from the struggle, but is there really any neutral ground anywhere in the universe for Christians?²

Christians have no other choice than to take the side of right in a conflict; but this is not necessarily the same as accepting the concept of class war and being blind to the dangers of over-simplification. To equalize society in a crude way:

. . . amounts to the assertion that the remedy for envy is its repression, and we are back again to the problem of conflict. . . .

What matters is not that material resources should be equalized, but that they should not be so differentiated that different groups have different experiences of life. It is here that we can locate the spiritual problem which Christians have somewhat vaguely been claiming is at the root of society's ills. Yet even this is an over-simplification. Goldthorpe and others, in their study of three Luton firms, have concluded that a worker can double his income and own his own house without ever experiencing middle class life.³

Christians should be the guardians of the spirit of community which is constantly endangered by divergent vested interests, the egotism of bureaucrats and political leaders, and the greed of privileged groups or the jealousy of the under-privileged masses. Social reconstruction is *not* the *major* preoccupation of Christians for whom the moral order and love between people should always be a priority. If it is taken for granted that law is not a remedy for human failing, then any 'perfect' socio-legal system which is treated as an ultimate solution (Communists are the best example of this wishful thinking) will be questioned by Christians. Of course, there is nothing wrong in Christians taking an active part in social reconstruction — as long as it remains within the limits of morality and does not rely on oppression as the means of forcing people to accept the new social order.

The christian mission in the field of work

Christians should contribute, as individuals as well as in groups and institutions, to the climate of mutual trust, moral responsibility and forgiveness in the field of work. The idolatry of one-sided economic progress and the neglect of non-economic factors is in total disagreement with the christian spirit. The christian approach should not leave out of consideration those aspects of reality which are considered murky or mysterious,⁴ and whose basis is the mystery of forgiveness. According to christian tradition,

one becomes a person by freely accepting responsibility for an emerging pattern of meaning in one's life. A person is one who stands by his story, who has attained the integrity (that is, wholeness) whereby his actions and words reflect who he is and what his life stands for. To be a person is, in other words, to be faithful to one's word.⁵

How to convince people that it is worthwhile being faithful to Christ's word, is a major question for Christians, as is the reform of work-structures so that people can find a meaning in them, exercise responsible freedom and develop long term commitments which give direction and purpose to their daily work. A depersonalized, highly fragmented and externally directed work-life cannot produce deeper commitment. If organizational patterns are not based on the belief that they contain specific moral

imperatives, which all good workers obey,⁶ there is little chance that they will become well rooted in the minds and hearts of people. Any mechanical treatment of workers which lacks appeal to their spiritual needs and aspirations, leads to passive resistance and to an almost complete absence of interiorization of norms and values. There is an awareness in the practice of administrative techniques that to depend merely on aspects of people's personalities almost automatically eliminates any spiritual depth. 'Authentic depth is achieved only if there is continuity and coherence knitting the several decisions into one biography'.⁷

Work structures should be so arranged that they encourage people to grow, instead of forcing them to choose a narrow base and to lose the ability to see beyond its limits.⁸ New developments in the field of job reform open up new perspectives in this context, particularly in Scandinavia.⁹ They show, among other things, that the direct involvement of workers, on the shop floor, in decision-making of vital importance to themselves is possible and highly rewarding, but this only works effectively within the framework of basic human freedoms. Blueprints of industrial democracy, even the most ambitious ones (for example in Yugoslavia), will not free workers from alienation when these freedoms are missing.¹⁰ Unfortunately, western socialist advocates of labour liberation tend to miss this very important point¹¹ and so take too many things for granted: the problem being that they lack direct experience of the way socialism is practised in totalitarian countries. More importantly, the collectivist approach of Marxism in its emphasis on group consciousness, tends to dilute the role of the individual and of personal responsibility. There is no place in this pattern of thought for the personal drama of individuals as they try to discover themselves, overcome fragmentation, or opt against 'nothingness', and move from self-righteousness to the more permanent righteousness rooted in the spiritual.¹²

According to A. F. McGovern,

The dominant 'classical' Marxism, with its atheistic world-view, is incompatible with Christianity and presents itself as such. Marxism viewed as a self-critical method of analysis is not incompatible. When tactics and strategies of social change are added on, Marxism may or may not prove incompatible. Socialist ideals of co-operation and sharing are certainly compatible with Christianity.¹³

This author is mildly sympathetic to Christians who cooperate with Marxists. However, he warns readers that 'the marxist world-view can be proposed as philosophy respectful of other views or it can be imposed as a state ideology'.¹⁴ This approach, however, does not compare marxist ideology with its practical implications for societies organized on marxist principles.¹⁵

When Christians are tempted to show good will towards Marxism they

should not cease being critical. They should not ignore the fact that the ability to view socio-economic problems 'holistically' is not only characteristic of Marxism but also of the christian tradition. The problems of poverty, unemployment, consumerism and powerlessness were not 'discovered' by Marxism but were always present within the framework of christian thinking.

McGovern may be right in claiming that Christianity 'has failed at times in the past to recognize the impact of socio-economic conditions on the individual'.¹⁶ However, the same could be said of the kind of Marxism implemented in the U.S.S.R., China or Cuba. We cannot blame Marx himself for the failures of various socialist systems, but far-reaching bureaucracy is a common phenomenon of all of them, and the neglect of the individual remains a widespread sickness.

Marxists did not design the ideal collective society. They took over some aspects from other ideological traditions (collective farms, state bureaucracy, despotism, mass indoctrination) and used them as the means of gaining power. The authority of the leading institutions has grown so much in marxist states that all other considerations have lost their significance.¹⁷ Under such conditions these societies have been denied their independent existence to a large extent and have become objects of political manipulation¹⁸ in the same way as economic manipulation has effectively penetrated all social bonds under capitalism.¹⁹ In reality both Marxism and capitalism function as ways of channelling all human effort into artificial structures imposed upon societies and preventing them from developing spontaneously as autonomous, socio-moral entities. Public interest in both cases has become identified with official doctrine: 'What is good for General Motors is good for the U.S.', and 'What is good for the Communist Party is good for Russia'.

Obviously there is a constructive role for Christianity in overcoming alienation in general, and work alienation in particular. The sense and power of the symbolic has already been emphasized in the social psychology of complex organizations and work, but the question of meaning cannot adequately be answered at the empirical level.

Symbols bridge the gap between subject and object in the two directions: symbols are both the reflection of society in the human mind and the objective structure of the social world which men have created according to their imagination. The symbols of the future have power in the production of society.²⁰

The reality of work is producing great disillusionment amongst workers, and Christianity should be a major source of inspiration.

The christian belief in God's promise of forgiveness is necessary for contemporary technological culture if it is to face its present crisis.

The Christian should be devising ways to invite contemporary secular man to take his sinfulness fully into account in order to be truly free, that is, in order to be forgiven. This is the historic need . . . for the notion of 'social sin' in our day. It is the correlative to forgiveness, a notion which our culture has lost the ability to entertain publicly.²¹

Reality is incomplete and still in the making for Christians — this concept is valid in reference to the specific reality of work and organizations. Instead of promoting, as Marxism tends to, an unrealizable dream of the perfect social order, Christianity preaches the life of salvation realizable through a conscious choice between truth and evil, peace and self-defeating struggle.

The glory of the future is the unfolding of present grace. . . . Faith in the divine promises does not make people inactive; it empowers them to act. . . . History is destined for redemption, yet undetermined; it is alive by a divine drift toward humanization, yet remains the locus of catastrophic sins; it is ever open to the unexpected new.²²

Any determinism is unacceptable for Christians because 'history remains open to human freedom and creativity, open to the unexpected'.²³

It is an open question as to how far the christian Churches can involve themselves in the whole business of job reform. Of course, it is the individual right of all members of the Church, lay people or clergy, to take the initiative in the field of trade unionism, workers' control, and management participation. However, in addition, it is very important for the Churches to adopt a critical role regarding the moral criteria for any job and workplace reforms. It is not up to the christian Churches to identify themselves with a single option, for example, to opt for management against trade unions or vice versa. Christians should remain open to a variety of approaches which embody critical social concern and should accept differing positions as long as they are based on good will.

Moral evils at the workplace

There are many moral evils in the context of work which torment people and quite often prevent any reform from being implemented. Many individuals seek to possess better jobs, insignia of power, or higher incomes, and they envy others who already possess them. With the growing emphasis on equality in modern society this moral torment of *resentment* becomes a general phenomenon and leads to many labour tensions. For example, collective bargaining for wages is usually very much influenced by the comparative distribution of wages. People struggle for a small wage improvement not so much because they badly need a little more money but

because they want to improve their relative position in the pecking order. 'Resentment makes our lives mean, narrow and shabby; it sucks joy, beauty, goodness, and generosity out of our experience'.²⁴

Estrangement is another very common plague in places of work. It is dictated either by the objectively adverse conditions of work, or by a state of mind which does not allow working people to reach self-fulfilment. With the increasing aspirations of workers, they have become more exposed to estrangement because the level of expectations usually grows faster than the ability to satisfy them. According to Ernst Bloch, human beings are constantly longing for the 'new', and this 'hunger' exists in man's imagination. The quest for fulfilment of this basic need leads to constant social change.²⁵ Breaking the bonds of continuity and heritage is characteristic of the industrial revolution and leads to the 'quest for community'. The lack of intimate bonds and true companionship is one of the most evident socio-moral failures of modern 'sinful' work-structures. There are at the present time several sincere efforts to reintroduce into the organization of work, elements of the intimacy of a small group.²⁶ This should find support and understanding among Christians. Bonds of mutual loyalty and appreciation can develop only in small groups and therefore it is necessary to encourage the incorporation of these groups into modern work organization.²⁷

The *righteousness* of managers and experts is taken so far that they become closed to any understanding of how much humility is needed especially in higher positions within organisations. 'Those who possess truth completely, totally, fully, are dangerous. And if that truth is secret, hidden, inaccessible to the common herd, or if truth proclaimed is rejected or ignored, then the truth-possessor is doubly dangerous'.²⁸ Among managers and trade union leaders there are many such 'doubly dangerous' persons. What can be done in order to introduce the element of humility into the role of leadership? It seems worthwhile mentioning that in the traditional social organization of at least some african tribes there are quite efficient ways of teaching humility to their chiefs.²⁹

The socialization of work is inadequate and very often leads to people becoming either over-socialized, thus losing their own judgment, or under-socialized, thus thinking only about themselves. The conformism of an over-socialized group offers an illusion of invulnerability, unanimity and unquestioned morality. Dissidents are treated as an evil. Shared stereotypes become the basis of group rationalization. There is a strong self-censorship which prevents individuals from achieving self-awareness.³⁰

On the other hand, under-socialization leads to a narrow individualism which prevents people from involving themselves in anything beyond the scope of their own vested interest or which encourages them to use the camouflage of 'public interest' in order to promote their own business. There are several morally disastrous implications of this approach. 'The

person who refuses generosity becomes a narrow, closed, atrophied human being'.³¹ The personal example given by managers to their subordinates is of primary importance. The supervisor who does not keep his own word, does not respect those who trust him, avoids responsibility, plays a cheap public relations game instead of trying to establish real confidence, will not adequately be able to socialize people around him, or to stimulate their goodwill and commitment. Identity comes only through fidelity.

There is no justification for enforced virtue:

The world of freedom is a risky, chancy, uncertain, problematic place, but it is a world of human beings. The world of the professional do-gooders may be a paradise of order, security, serenity, but there is no room for freedom. For the Do-Good Demon is an authoritarian, and like the Grand Inquisitor, he is quite convinced that we simply cannot permit other human beings to run the dangers of being free.³²

To decide what is really good for other people is always risky and even morally dubious. It is therefore better to ask these people directly what they really want. An understanding of this simple truth lies behind the growing popularity of industrial-democracy schemes. On the other hand, the richness and diversity of human behaviour at work (and outside of it) cannot be squeezed easily into simple patterns.

Systems are useful and necessary scientific tactics; science abstracts from reality in order to understand portions of it. But politics cannot abstract from reality; politics take place right in the centre of the messiest, murkiest, most complicated part of reality — where one human being encounters another. No system can ever explain it.³³

Christianity has an esteem for the mystery of human behaviour and does not pretend to offer simple explanations. Moral directives have universal roots but should be applied anew to human situations which arise from changes in technology, transformations of social and cultural structures, and the growing level of awareness. The christian appreciation of human flexibility is not identical with contemporary moral relativism.

The reality of organisations is of an artificial nature and quite often pushes people to extremes. They sometimes become over-enthusiastic and expect more than is possible. They may on the other hand become deeply discouraged, feel abandoned, think that people in authority neglect them, or do not pay attention to their basic needs and demands.

A considerable amount of conflict in work organizations stems from these phenomena. It is very important to ask how to reduce anxiety, hatred, dissatisfaction and disloyalty. The depersonalized nature of bureaucracy makes this task virtually impossible and therefore there is a tendency in modern times to abandon this organizational model

and to experiment with alternatives (matrix organization, group work, management by objectives, and so on).³⁴ We have to look for structures which encourage enthusiasm and voluntary cooperation instead of suppressing both of them. Christian teaching is based on the idea of resurrection and the possibility of ultimate victory over fear, present in all of us. Bureaucracy very substantially limits the scope of moral concerns among executives and makes them immune to the external world.³⁵ This promotes a preoccupation with power and appearances and opens the way for mediocrity. Triviality and short-term perspectives overtake crucial concerns. According to St Thomas Aquinas, the root of evil is that people choose a narrow perspective over the broad perspective. The 'slavery of sin' results from fear of opting for liberation, and of accepting guilt and repentance. The refusal of people to grow beyond their individual or group bias may be a sin when it is done consciously and contradicts basic christian principles. The distortion of social reality by group bias has wide moral consequences:

The comfortable oversight of the rationalized infidelity distorts subsequent situations, evoking not its reversal but an accumulation of the irrational, a widening of the circle of mistrust. People expect the worst of others and prepare for it by accumulating power.³⁶

The struggle for human survival within bureaucracies preoccupies people so much that they voluntarily choose to remain ignorant and cherish illusions rather than pursue deeper levels of being.³⁷ Continuity and stability are the dominant values of bureaucracies which are created mainly for their own survival, and not to maximize gains. This introduces a strong element of fear, and 'fear is at the root of everything that is evil',³⁸ because it removes hope from human life.

We should ask ourselves whether the assumptions on which the present structures of organisations are based, are in fact unbiased, broad and constructive. This question becomes particularly acute when these structures are artificially imposed on traditional culture and result in deeply rooted social and moral dilemmas which endanger the smooth functioning of society.³⁹ Well established traditional bonds and standards of mutual cooperation crumble under the impact of formal structures imposed from outside and based on power and necessity. Socialization in a deeper sense becomes impossible; people adapt themselves to the new situation on the principle of only *partial* personal involvement. There is a growing gap between appearance and reality.⁴⁰ The distance between *formal* and *informal* behaviour undermines the authority of supervisors and of the whole organization; the feeling of anomie and alienation very strongly influences the personalities of working people.⁴¹

In work structures several characteristics may be justifiably considered destructive by working people, consumers, clients and those people who

experience some indirect dependence on them (for example, members of the local community near a factory).⁴² The manipulative techniques of modern public-relations appeal to fear, vanity and other undignified weaknesses in people. Constant reinforcement of these negative characteristics may in the long run have a disastrous effect on the morality of society. Emphasis on self-advancement in careers distorts the personality, and introduces a strong element of artificiality into human life which impoverishes the spiritual dimension of individuals and groups. Work-loads and work schedules may be such that they seriously distort people physically and psychologically. It is well known that workers who are exposed for long periods to monotonous work, suffer psychologically and look for any opportunity to change their job.

How far does the social set-up contribute positively or negatively to the spiritual well-being of working people? People who lack power to defend themselves may be easily exploited by their powerful work-colleagues and supervisors.⁴³ Inequality between sexes, ethnic groups, occupational categories and interest groups may offend the human dignity of working people and lead to mutual antagonism. Changes in modern society call into question traditional income, power and prestige differences. This causes animosity, as in the U.K. To understand better what is happening in the U.K., we should remember that blue-collar workers are still paid less than in other western developed countries, while the cost of living is approximately the same or even higher than in North America. Lack of an adequate moral sensitivity and an inability to make reasonable judgments as to what is right and wrong, prevent people in responsible positions from taking preventive action. Traditionally, self-assertiveness has been much praised in managers, as well as in union leaders, with the result that the practice of such christian virtues as empathy, modesty and humility has become almost impossible. Admiration for manipulators, authoritarians and even con-men may very seriously damage the selection of top ranking personnel and negatively influence the moral atmosphere at places of work.

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NOTES

¹ Langford, Michael: 'Christian Responsibility and Industrial Relations' in *New Blackfriars*, 1980, p 221.

² *Ibid.*, p 222. ³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Kerans, Patrick: *Sinful social structures* (New York, 1974), p 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 45.

⁶ Kahn, R. L., and Katz, D.: *The social psychology of organizations* (Wiley, 1978), p 309.

⁷ Kerans: *op cit.*, p 45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 47.

- ⁹ See A. J. Matejko: 'Work and the Welfare State. Experiences from Sweden', in *International Review of Sociology*, 1980, XVI, 1, 19-52 and A. J. Matejko and S. Rubenowitz, 'The Sociotechnics of Working Life: Experiences from Sweden', in *Europa*, 1980, 3, 2, 155-84.
- ¹⁰ Matejko, A. J.: 'Learning from the Yugoslav experience in self-management', in *The Labour Gazette*, vol 78, n. 10 (October 1978), p 471.
- ¹¹ Cf Harry Braverman: *Labor and monopoly capital. The degradation of work in the twentieth century* (New York, 1974).
- ¹² Cf Karl Rahner: *Foundations of human faith* (New York, 1978).
- ¹³ McGovern, Arthur F.: *Marxism: An american christian perspective* (Maryknoll, 1980), p 310.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 310.
- ¹⁵ Cf A. J. Matejko: *Overcoming alienation at work* (Meerut, 1976), pp 173-200.
- ¹⁶ McGovern, p 327.
- ¹⁷ Cf A. J. Matejko: *Social change and stratification in Eastern Europe* (New York, 1974).
- ¹⁸ Cf A. J. Matejko: 'The "Leisured" complex organizations in a developed mass society' (Edmonton, 1981). Paper for the *Third Canadian Congress of Leisure Research*.
- ¹⁹ Cf A. J. Matejko: 'The manipulated freedom in mass societies: West and East', in *International Review of Sociology* (1980), XVI, 2, 3: 238-276.
- ²⁰ Baum, G.: *Religion and alienation: a theological reading of sociology* (New York, 1975), p 279.
- ²¹ Kerans: *op. cit.*, p 51.
- ²² Baum: *op. cit.*, pp 284 and 286.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p 286.
- ²⁴ Greeley, Andrew M.: *The Devil, you say! Man and his personal devils and angels* (New York, 1976), p 45.
- ²⁵ Bloch, Ernst: *Man on his own* (New York, 1970) and *A philosophy of the future* (New York, 1970).
- ²⁶ Cf R. Likert: *The Human Organization* (New York, 1967); see also A. J. Matejko: *Beyond an Organizational Society* (Amritsar, 1982).
- ²⁷ Cf A. J. Matejko: 'The sociotechnics of autonomous work groups as social systems', in *Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology* (1981), 2, 2.
- ²⁸ Greeley: *op. cit.*, pp 83-84.
- ²⁹ Cf C. M. Gluckman: *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford, 1960).
- ³⁰ Cf I. Janis: *Victims of groupthink* (Boston, 1972).
- ³¹ Greeley: *op. cit.*, p 128.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p 144. ³³ *Ibid.*, p 161.
- ³⁴ Cf A. J. Matejko: 'Management Participation', in *International Review of Sociology* (1979), XIII, 3, 159-210, and 'The obsolescence of bureaucracy', in *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* (1980), 35, 3, 456-92.
- ³⁵ Cf. A. J. Matejko: 'From the crisis of bureaucracy to the challenge of participation', in *Management and Complex Organizations in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Raj Mohan (New York, 1979).
- ³⁶ Kerans: *op. cit.*, p 79.
- ³⁷ Cf A. J. Matejko: 'The Existential Anguish', in *Migrant Echo* (1981), X, 3, 207-26.
- ³⁸ Greeley: *op. cit.*, p 188.
- ³⁹ Cf. W. M. Moore: *The Impact of Industry* (New York, 1965). Also A. J. Matejko: 'Perspectives of task orientation in developing countries', *East Africa Journal*, VI (8 August 1969) and 'The Upgraded Zambian', in *Phylon*, vol 36, n. 5 (Summer 1975).
- ⁴⁰ Matejko, A. J.: 'The existential anguish', *op. cit.*
- ⁴¹ Matejko, A. J.: *Beyond an Organizational Society*, *op. cit.*
- ⁴² Cf William W. Rambo: *Work and Organizational Behaviour* (New York, 1982), pp 150-77.
- ⁴³ On the discrimination against women in large corporations, see R. Kanter: *Men and Women of the Corporations* (New York, 1977).