

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Sin and work: Christianity and industrial relations, II

THERE IS a vital need to apply christian social doctrines to the basic problems of work and organization. Such an application may be of great social importance, first, because it will clarify the position of Christians in this area, and secondly, it will establish a moral background for the evaluation and judgment of various trends and solutions. Finally, it will allow the transformation of the whole field under consideration in a direction favourable from the christian perspective.

For Christians, work is a continuation of the labour of Jesus Christ himself. It is expected to lead to self-perfection and to the diffusion and propagation of the fruits of redemption to others. Work, inasmuch as it is an expression of the human person, can by no means be regulated merely as a commodity. Industrial relations should be developed in a spirit of human solidarity and brotherhood. Unregulated competition or the class struggle are utterly opposed to christian teaching and also to the very nature of man. The organization of economic affairs must be conformable to practical morality; the interests of individuals and societies must be harmonized with the principle of common good. We have to recognize the obvious fact that the ethical impulse is thwarted by the lack of an adequate bridge between the ethical consciousness of people and their socio-economic sphere of life. Labour (work) on the one hand and democracy on the other can no longer be treated as of no interest from the religious perspective.

In modern democratic societies there is an obsession with personal satisfaction as the natural right of all. The pursuit of happiness has become almost sanctified in secular societies without any deep examination of the moral roots of man and his dignity.

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. . . . Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths (*Gaudium et Spes*, par 16).

Deceptive fantasies of a temporary nature, changing passions and whimsical commitments enslave human beings instead of liberating them and allowing them to enter the higher levels of satisfaction. There is dignity in a spiritually mature man who is master of himself and who makes choices

which are personally motivated and prompted from within. 'Man achieves such a dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself, through effective and skilful action, apt means to that end' (*Gaudium et Spes*, par 17).

According to *Laborem Exercens* (1981), the encyclical letter of John Paul II, a human person should be able to preserve his/her awareness of working for himself/herself. Employment relationships should be considered within a broad framework, that is the concept of an indirect employer in addition to the direct employer. Rational planning and the proper organization of human labour should be designed in consideration of inalienable human rights. A just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socio-economic system. The rights and needs of working women should be taken care of. Free Trade Unions should be allowed as a mouthpiece of the struggle for social justice. It is characteristic of work that it first and foremost unites people and therefore 'both those who work and those who manage the means of production and who own them must in some way be united in this community' (*Laborem Exercens*, par 20). All partners involved in joint work should liberate themselves from group egoism and look to the common good of the whole of society. A strike or a lock-out remain extreme means. It is necessary to proclaim and promote the dignity of work — of all work but especially of agricultural work (*Laborem Exercens*, par 21). The right of disabled people should be fostered. 'Everything possible should be done in order to bring benefit to the emigrant's personal family, and social life, both for the country to which he goes and the country which he leaves' (*Laborem Exercens*, par 23).

The basic principle of the whole encyclical is: that the hierarchy of values and the profound meaning of work itself require that capital should be at the service of labour and not labour at the service of capital. The phenomenon of labour is understood in a very broad sense.

Man ought to imitate God, his Creator, in working, because man alone has the unique characteristic of likeness to God. Man ought to imitate God in working and also in resting, since God himself wished to present his own creative activity under the form of work and rest (*Laborem Exercens*, par 25).

People are expected to grow spiritually through work. They should understand this message themselves, and also the conditions should be provided in which 'the gospel of work' would be adequately implemented.

By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. . . . The cross which this toil constitutes reveals a new

good springing from work itself, from work understood in depth and in all its aspects and never apart from work (*Laborem Exercens*, par 27).

The priority of labour over capital, the moral dignity of honest and useful work, man as bearer of the divine image having dominion over the earth, labour as the axis of human self-making, solidarity and justice achieved in a peaceful manner, moral condemnation of doctrines based on individualism and materialism, rejection of an omnipotent state, the insistence on the function of government to promote and protect common good without taking the place of the grass-root initiatives, the primacy of duties over the rights, the treatment of the oppressed struggling for greater justice as the dynamic element of history — all these factors may also be found in the previous major social documents of the Catholic Church.

How far should people manage their collective affairs on the basis of a direct democracy? Is the whole issue of workers' self-management acceptable in terms of christian teaching? How should Christians relate themselves to the whole issue of the moral liberation of labour from the socio-economic bonds of alienation? All such questions become of great importance in modern times when, in the western world, Trade Unions have an important part to play, and in various parts of the world there are whole economies, as for example, the yugoslav economy, based on the principle of an industrial democracy. The communist régimes claim to give full support to the idea of that democracy. How should one evaluate such claims for the christian viewpoint?

The double existence

To be a Christian only outside the work situation, and at work merely to behave 'pragmatically', leads to an artificial dichotomy between the christian 'world' and the secular 'reality'. The current strong trend towards the humanization of work in general, and of managerial styles in particular, should be welcomed by Christians because it opens up perspectives which allow a considerable extension of the limits of conscious responsibility in work; responsibility which is inescapably personal but at the same time involves several other people.

Quite often in workplaces it is difficult to ascertain who is really responsible for a given evil; many people share the guilt at least in the sense of negligence. Bosses may be blamed much more often for what they missed than for what they did. Being subservient to forces unleashed by their own values and choices, they are so often in bondage that it is no longer in their power to change the course of events.

The anger and frustration caused by sinful work structures leads to the creation of counter-trends which are not necessarily morally better but which undoubtedly make the social situation more complicated or even in

some cases critical. First of all, frustration quite often leads to an extreme negativism, and either passivity or aggression. Exaggerated and unrealistic demands paralyze the adequate functioning of society which suffers from strikes, riots, refusal of citizens to pay taxes, constant governmental changes, and lack of co-operation between employers, civil servants and unions. The progress of civilization does not necessarily lead to a higher level of human satisfaction. On the contrary, the growth of opportunities, potentially available but quite often beyond reach, leads to a shaky emotional balance. 'The seeming endless drive to consume is rooted not in the satisfaction which material benefits bring, but in the torment of emptiness caused by . . . unexamined and unanswered questions.'¹

Industrial relations in the western world are tormented at the present time by the inability of the developed economies to secure enough jobs and give the great majority of workers and employees remuneration adequate to the rate of inflation.² There is a great deal of mutual distrust between unions and management.

With the growth of the public sector, more and more labour conflicts occur in the branches of social life which are particularly vulnerable: schools, hospitals, and removal of the garbage, for example. The traditionally underpaid public employees organize themselves and fight collectively for their rights. In order to keep the public administration intact, governments go into debt which imposes an additional burden on society.

The improvement of this whole complicated situation is not easy to achieve without a change of priorities, acceptance of the conserver-society model, the wide scale participation of all citizens in vital decisions, as well as in the responsibility for their implementation.

Institutionalized sin

There is some confusion in people's minds today about what sin really is. This confusion probably originates from the fact that the exposure of people to social norms is now much more often questioned than ever in the past.

There is a reaction against a legalistic, formalistic, juridic notion of sin as a thing, a breaking of an external law, a disruption of order and stability. There is a greater awareness of man's personal responsibility, a realization that the established order itself, whether in church or state, may be an obstacle to full human development, and so not in accordance with God's will.³

Pride, greed, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, sloth, waste, cheating, stealing, lying, cruelty — all of them have been always with us. The gospel, church teaching, or even the presence of the Spirit do not give us moral solutions in advance. 'God's call is to be heard in the here and

now, in the bits and pieces of everyday life, and to be sought afresh as each new problem arises'.⁴ The reality of our life is a part of the basic goodness of creation and it is up to us to develop our full moral potential.

According to Fagan, it would be better to drop all attempts to draw a sharp line between mortal and venial sin. 'Concern about such a division has been a mental strait-jacket of scrupulosity and fear for millions of Catholics, preventing their growth towards moral maturity'.⁵ It is necessary to get rid of the trivializing notions that divert our attention from the basic problems, to which belong, among others, the sin of omission, complacency, failure to recognize other christian communities, an artificial separation between Church and world, and concentration on private morality. Sin is 'the refusal to behave like a child of God, a failure to reflect the mind and heart of Jesus our model'.⁶ It is our duty as faithful people to respond to God's call to grow and in this way to become fully human. There is nothing wrong in some self-love and self-esteem which are even vital to being human and being Christian. However, essentially we should live for God and for others. The seriousness of sin remains with us but at the same time we should liberate ourselves from any trivialization in this respect.

Sin is a separation from God. To be in sin is to be unrighteous, estranged from God, and at the same time under the rule of the devil (St Paul in his letter to the Romans). The partial control given to people by the progress of science created a climate of innocence in which the mystery of evil and the need of forgiveness were put aside as irrelevant. Science, in order to achieve utter clarity and exhaustive verifiability, 'leaves out any aspect of reality which is fuzzy or murky or mysterious'.⁷ Evil easily gets overlooked when reality becomes morally neutralized in order to achieve a high level of inter-subjectivity.⁸ People are victimized, neglected, reduced to inferiority, overlooked and exploited, not necessarily because somebody has an evil intention but because modern civilization has lost moral sensitivity in several fields. 'Evil remains a reality, but now we find ourselves in a culture which has lost the ability to come to terms with this reality — at least in public'.⁹

In the modern complex world, faith and self-awareness are no less necessary than before. We have a moral obligation to learn about ourselves. The science of consciousness, including psychology and sociology, may be very helpful to all of us in this respect. The exploration of self has been for many years one of the major preoccupations of Carl Rogers and his contribution to psychotherapy is of a particular importance from the christian point of view. The role of a therapist, according to Rogers, is in helping the client to clarify his/her own thinking and feeling.¹⁰ This non-directive, or client-centred, approach to psychotherapy helps individuals to grow for themselves and by themselves instead of developing a dependence relationship with the consultant. Rogers trusts people and their inner

ability to develop positively, gain self-realization, achieve maturity and self-identity. He has rejected the deterministic approach of Freud and his followers.

The nature of consciousness has been studied by people representing various disciplines and it is a very difficult task to take up all these different strands of thinking. There is an urgent need to integrate scientific research in this field (structure of the brain, the operation of the nervous system, the storage and retrieval of mental information, research data in quantum physics, and holography, for example), with the wisdom available from eastern disciplines.

Among the most profound insights of history is that the mystical experience has been essential to the deepest understanding of both man and nature. What is required now is a balance between the scientific inquiry concerning neurophysiology and the mapping of the phenomenology of consciousness through disciplined introspection. Insights from all disciplines are converging to create an emergent science of consciousness in the latter part of the twentieth century.¹¹

The 'prosaic mind' dominates our thinking, especially in the field related to work, automatically excluding everything which looks 'meaningless' because it does not fit into the measurable framework of facts commensurate with the human mind.¹² The preoccupation of people with only fragments of their own reality, the conscious avoidance of any totalizing spiritual experience, commitment to distractions of all sorts, the masochistic temptation to give up hope and indulge in the pursuit of short-term goals, the turning away from God and toward non-Godlike creatures are all features of modern man which undermine the traditional spiritual foundations of western civilization and endanger its survival.

The religious revival in some other civilizations, especially in Buddhism and in Islam shows even more evidently that a style of life based on the idol of an unrestricted consumption, one-sided leisure stripped of any spiritual values, multiplication of appliances, and the wide-spread mutual tolerance based on personal disinterestedness (instead of mutual love and responsibility) leads many people not only to spiritual disenchantment and nausea but also, at least in some cases, to the intensified search for truth on a religious basis.

Here it seems necessary to make a distinction between a truly religious orientation and some trends within 'the theology of liberation' which pride themselves on their trust in marxist analysis and confuse strictly political reform with the spiritual content of religion. There is a basic difference between the christian inspiration of reformatory actions in order to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine

law (*Gaudium et Spes*, par 42) and the activity which makes the Church itself an instrument of non-religious (or even anti-religious) socio-economic powers. The critical comments of John Paul II in Mexico (January 1979) on the latin american 'theology of liberation' emphasized exactly the distinction mentioned above.

There is an important question of how far the existing socio-organizational structures of modern society tolerate or even encourage sinful behaviour because they are programmed towards goals, norms and values foreign to the christian spirit. It is obvious that these structures are based on a kind of rationality which, in several respects, denies the christian claim.

There is an unspoken assumption behind the adoption of the scientific method as the core of our culture. This is that there is no ultimately refractory reality, that all things ultimately are capable of rational ordering, that all things will eventually cohere. This view leaves out of account malice, persistent bad faith and bad will. It leaves out of account the necessity and the possibility of conversion and of forgiveness.¹³

Conditions of work satisfaction

The christian approach is particularly sensitive to non-economic human motivation and to the question of self-growth in work. Unfortunately, what has been written so far in this field is not specific enough. However, among other things, the development of a new theology of labour inspired by Christianity may encourage the development of some useful applications in the work field. This theology would be useful in a better shaping authority relationship at places of work.

Remuneration in general is obviously related to work satisfaction but the mutual relationship between them seems to be quite complicated. First of all, remuneration is directly related to the ability of workers to satisfy their consumer needs outside their workplaces. Secondly, remuneration very often has become a measuring stick for individual success in comparison with others. Thirdly, the level of remuneration determines people's level of social stratification.¹⁴ The principle of justice and equity has to compete in this respect with the search for power, egoism, and even vanity. Here there is no end to the human desire to have more and more in order to establish oneself over and above all others.

As long as people remain modest in their social and individual ambitions they are docile in their expectations of remuneration. With the growing appetites of consumers, people become more and more prone to dissatisfaction with their incomes because their ambitions and expectations become much more far-reaching. A minimum treated by them as 'decent' is then relatively high and they are eager to show great dissatisfaction if anything below this minimum is offered to them.

In democratic welfare states the minimum wages, unemployment and welfare benefits are in some cases (for example in the Netherlands), so high that they discourage at least part of the population from actively searching for more demanding goals in their lives. This leads to some social imbalance which additionally stimulates more dissatisfaction and feelings of insecurity. Paradoxically, societies which have achieved the highest standard of living in the whole history of mankind are prone, at the same time, to a massive negative feeling among the population because of their failure to establish moral peace and order.

People who have more opportunities in front of them, and are constantly encouraged to acquire even more in their life in order 'to keep up with the Joneses' are particularly sensitive to any real or imagined disparity between what they actually have and what they would like to achieve. With the loosening of social controls and the domination of ideals of equality there is even more incentive to push ahead collectively as well as individually. The submissive attitude, or even the indifferent one, become un-acceptable in terms of personal dignity as well as in relation to the 'significant others'.

The nature of work done, its variety, challenge, complexity and clarity, have a great deal to do with satisfaction of workers, their commitment of work, loyalty to the employer, and efficiency.¹⁵ There are several de-humanizing features of work that offend and alienate workers. They are of a general nature or specifically related to the social background of the workers. The appearance of such features is usually related to the moral and social negligence of those who manage collective work and have power to shape its conditions accordingly.

The supervision of work, its competence, style, ability to reconcile the function of co-ordination with the function of stimulation, consideration for the subordinates with the task performance are all valid factors in achieving satisfaction. On the other hand, it would be naïve to assume that good treatment of subordinates by their supervisors would be enough to keep them happy. People in work are often achievement-oriented and supervision that sacrifices the production goals for the sake of a good climate of personal relations may easily become the source of dissatisfaction.

Good interpersonal relations at work go together with satisfaction at work, especially with regards to the desire of people to stay at the particular place of work. Workers who are not socially integrated into the work teams and who do not have enough opportunity to identify themselves with some common good are less motivated to stay, as well as to commit themselves. On the other hand, the group values play the major role in the collective life of the work teams, friendship cliques related to work, interest groups, and associations. Depending on how work is located within these values, workers may judge their work satisfaction more or less positively. Another factor is how individuals differ in their group proneness.

The small organizational units employing blue collar workers show a

higher level of satisfaction, fewer labour disputes, less absenteeism and staff turnover which are probably related to the more developed face-to-face relationships. However, this does not necessarily mean that large complex organizations would not be able to incorporate the small unit principle in their internal set-up, at the same time making full use of their available resources and professional capacity.

Personality growth has great importance in successfully dealing with all kinds of situations, including work. People with clear professional interests, sense of duty, self-confidence and sociability, will react to work stresses in a much more mature manner than people in whom these characteristics are missing. It is an open question as to how much the individual and the workplace match one another. Lack of opportunity for ambitious people pushes them outside; people emotionally unstable have, in general, great difficulty in adapting themselves to their organizational settings or in feeling permanent satisfaction.

Conclusion

With the growth of complex organizations, their structures become more elaborate, the impersonal rules play a growing role, and authority relationships become of utmost importance.

The uniformity, the routinization, and the fragmentation of behaviour run counter not only to the factor of individual differences but to the needs of people for self-determination, spontaneity, accomplishments, and the expression of individual skills and talents.¹⁶

Large organizations 'proceed on the principle that it is easier to make the world to adjust than it is to adjust to the world'.¹⁷

In the field of labour relations and complex organizations a great deal of experimentation is happening currently and it should be carefully scrutinized from the christian standpoint to see whether it really contributes to the spiritual development of individual beings, as well as to social justice.¹⁸ The word *really* seems of basic importance in this respect. Such an 'innovative' approach which depersonalizes institutions and neglects people who constitute these institutions is morally unacceptable. It means that what really counts here is the *process* of an actual achieving of human goals rather than how it appears on the organizational chart. The weakness of several specific projects in the field of industrial relations and industrial democracy consists exactly in neglecting the social and personal reality for the sake of a neat blueprint.¹⁹ Industrial democracy should be treated not as a goal in itself but as the means to improve the social and moral fabric of a society.

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NOTES

¹ Kerans, Patrick: *Sinful social structures* (New York, 1978), p 102.

² This is the source of constant tension because the speculators gain on inflation at the expense of people who depend on their regular wages and salaries and not on profits from other sources. This 'silent majority' feel embittered that the burden of taxation is on them while others enjoy undeserved privileges. Lower middle class people revolt against taxes, are critical about governmental debts and spending and claim that the welfare system gives an undeserved credit to people who are unwilling to contribute to the general welfare.

³ Fagan, S. M.: *Has sin changed?* (Garden City, 1979), p 216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 214.

⁷ Kerans: *op. cit.*, p 38.

⁸ It is too easy to talk about 'objectivity', especially when dealing with human phenomena. What we are able at best to achieve is a wide consent of several subjects. However, this is achieved very often at the expense of the reduction of insight to the most agreeable dominator which may be of a mediocre quality. This is exactly where groupthink fails. Cf Irving Janis, *Victims of groupthink* (Boston, 1972).

⁹ Kerans: *op. cit.*, p 39.

¹⁰ Cf Kirschenbaum Howard: *On becoming Carl Rogers* (New York, 1979).

¹¹ Pelletier, Kenneth R.: *Toward a science of consciousness* (New York, 1978).

¹² Cf Morgan, George W.: *The human predicament* (Providence, 1968).

¹³ Kerans: *op. cit.*, p 50.

¹⁴ Rambo, William W.: *Work and organizational behaviour* (New York, 1982), pp 179-206.

¹⁵ See Srivastha, S. et al.: *Job satisfaction and productivity* (Kent, 1977).

¹⁶ Katz, Daniel and Kahn, R. L.: *The social psychology of organizations* (New York, 1978), p 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 89.

¹⁸ I have just finished a book manuscript tentatively titled *Beyond organization* in which I try to summarize the development of various alternatives to bureaucracy. The socio-moral reconstruction of modern societies towards their humanization is a matter of historical necessity and concerns the future of christian civilization.

¹⁹ According to the marxist view, the organizational blueprint functions as a weapon in the class struggle. In his interesting analysis of the creation of modern technology and bureaucracy in industrial corporations, Dan Clawson in *Bureaucracy and labor process. The transformation of U.S. industry, 1860-1920* (New York, 1980) tries to prove that rationalization in administration has been arbitrarily imposed upon working people against their will, interest and the sense of justice. This is only partially true because any progress meets resistance and usually remains a painful process. The imputation of sinister motives to innovators like F. W. Taylor and others does not lead far enough in the understanding of historical processes.