

# HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND WORK?

By RAY CASSIN

I VAN REITMAN'S FILM *DAVE* TELLS the story of an employment-agency director who closely resembles the US president. Through some chicanery on the part of the president's minders, this lookalike is substituted for the man in the Oval Office – and then astounds everybody by acting as one would expect a decent person to act. Among other offences against conventional political wisdom, he promises that in future the administration will ensure that every American who wants a job gets one. This pledge is taken by some as a sign of his naïve goodness, by others as a sign of lunacy, and, by most, as ludicrous pork-barrelling.

Work, or the lack of it, underpins much of the film's humour. When the real president's wife discovers the substitution, she asks her new partner what he used to do before he started running the country. He tells her, and she replies: 'You mean you find people jobs? That's pretty rare around here.'

Work. We are less and less sure what it means, and not only because the term obviously has a wider reference than paid employment of factories, offices and shops. The presidential lookalike in *Dave* is a kind of latterday Prince Myshkin, the hero of Dostoyevsky's *The idiot*: someone not worldly enough to be duped by the guile of the worldly-wise. So when Hollywood goes searching for a character who makes a plausible Myshkin for the 1990s, what does it come up with? A man who finds people jobs; a man who helps people find a project that not only puts food in their mouths and a roof over their heads, but that enhances the significance of their lives.

That such a person can be made the hero of a political comedy suggests that our expectations of work – both getting it and enjoying it – have been consigned to Cloud Cuckoo Land. They are now matters of deep anxiety rather than mundane reality. We want a saviour figure to come along – and do not even remotely expect that this will happen. In the western democracies, who takes seriously a politician who promises full employment? Yet what politician in a western democracy could survive without ritually suggesting that a jobs-a-plenty world is, if not just around the corner, then at least attainable some way down the track,

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

provided we follow whatever prescription for 'recovery' he or she is touting?

The anxieties that *Dave* teases out are, of course, only partly the result of a worldwide recession that has made unemployment rates in industrialized societies more politically sensitive than at any time since the 1930s. Fundamentally, this latest form of the feeling that 'all that is solid melts into air' is a recognition of structural changes taking place in the world economy. The organization of paid work is now symbolized not by Manchester and Detroit – by the factory and the assembly line – but by Silicon Valley and the computer, and 'work' is no longer something that, paradigmatically, happens in a fixed place during a fixed unit of time, for a fixed output and reward.

The key technology of the age is that of information transfer, and the masters of the age are those who wield this technology most effectively. Control of information is eroding the old distinction between producers of goods and producers of services, because every worker now provides a 'service' of one kind or another. And, distinct from all these changes but profoundly affecting them, several decades of feminist politics have exploded another dubious distinction bequeathed by the Industrial Revolution: that between the 'public' world of remunerative work, and the 'private' world of the home.

Christians are heirs to a tradition of theological and spiritual reflection on work that, in some respects, is well placed to resolve the anxieties of this post-industrial world; certainly, the tradition is better equipped to do so than it was to meet the upheavals of the first industrial revolution. In the Christian scheme, work has been understood as a human sharing in the creative activity of God. Human beings, created in God's image and likeness, transform the rest of creation through their labour, and from this act of transformation can be derived both the inherent dignity of work itself and the ultimate worth of any of the products of work.

It may be objected that this vision of human activity is in fact only one strand of Christian thinking about work, and that historically it has not been the dominant one. For most of the Christian era, some would contend, the theology of work has been a subordinate part of soteriology: work has been seen as a penalty, a consequence of the Fall, rather than as something intrinsic to God's creative purpose. This pessimistic view is certainly present in the thought of influential figures in the history of theology, especially in the Western Church. Its most elaborate expression is probably the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, and it recurs in later theologies, such as Calvin's, which have a strongly Augustinian flavour.

Of Augustine and his heirs, more later. But it should be said first that our readiness to identify the Augustinian view as the *typical* Christian theology of work is partly because we are also the intellectual heirs of secular theorists of work, who for polemical reasons found it expedient to take up certain themes in the theologies of Calvin and his disciples in Europe and North America. I am referring especially to Max Weber, to whom we owe that baneful phrase 'the Protestant work ethic', which in popular usage has become a kind of catch-all term for what is supposedly wrong with the way that Christians think about work.

I mention the phrase here to stress that dispensing with it is helpful in recovering those aspects of our tradition – Catholic *and* Protestant – which allow a more positive theology of work. Indeed, the notion of a 'Protestant work ethic' is not of much relevance outside the context of the anti-Marxist polemic in which Weber developed it. Weber wanted to refute historical materialism, and thought he had done so by a kind of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argument based on the success of industrial capitalism in Protestant countries.

The argument is highly selective in its use of historical evidence (what about the vigorous capitalist economies in the Catholic city states of Renaissance Italy?) and, even in the Protestant context, Weber failed to show any *direct* link between Reformation theology and later capitalist ideology. (If he had, he might actually have strengthened the sort of vulgar Marxism he thought he was undermining. For arguments of this kind to be persuasive, there needs to be the kind of distinction between economic base and ideological 'superstructure' that is posited by Marx – a view that is as hard to sustain as Weber's.)

So, if you clear away the litter left by a debate in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social theory, a debate that has caused us to interpret the Christian tradition in a particular way, does that tradition look any different? I believe that it does, and that it is easier to see not only how the more positive theology of work that I have contrasted with Augustine's has always been present, but how it has been held in tension with the Augustinian view.

The development of this alternative theology of work can be traced from the two creation accounts in the Book of Genesis, through Paul's meditation on the new creation in the Letter to the Romans; in the unification of prayer and work found in the Benedictine Rule, and the impetus given to lay spirituality by the Protestant and Catholic Reforms; and, in the middle decades of our own century, in the attempts of Cardinal Cardijn and the *Jeunesse Ouvrières Chrétiennes* ('Jocists') in Belgium, and the worker priests in France, to reaffirm human dignity in the face of industrial blight and oppression.

As I have just sketched this development, two moments deserve special note: the kind of attitude towards work fostered by the Rule of St Benedict, and the growth of a distinctively lay spirituality in the late Middle Ages and during the Reformation. In other ecclesiastical contexts, the monastic and lay mentalities are sometimes seen as mutually opposed; in the theology of work, however, they might better be understood as mirror images of each other.

In the monastic ideal proposed by Benedict, *Opus manus* (the work of one's hands, which gradually came to include intellectual work as well as manual work in the modern sense) was seen as continuous with the chief work of a monk, the celebration of the liturgy or *Opus Dei*. It was not a matter of human work being something that merely provided for the physical needs of the monks, or filled in time between the various offices of the monastic day. Human work, whether manual or intellectual, together with the divine work constituted by the successive liturgical offices, formed a continuous act of prayer: essentially, the monk's daily routine was an ordered form of co-operation with God in the sanctification of time.

This is not a vision of human work that sits easily with the theological understanding of work as a penalty for the Fall. (In fact, of course, many people did accept both views and perhaps some still do. But that merely says that the development of doctrine is a piecemeal process.) Implicitly, this Benedictine view seeks to recover the sense of stewardship, of human responsibility for creation, that is part of the Yahwist account of the man and the woman in the garden before the Fall. On that account, human work has been deformed by the fact of sin, so that it is experienced as *toil*. But work *itself* is not brought about by sin.

The lay spiritualities of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation turned the monastic view inside out by proclaiming the sanctity of 'ordinary' life. The emphasis varied – Protestants took the view that there was *no* special monastic task, and Catholics the view that the incorporation of prayer into daily life was *not only* a project for monks. But the effect on mentalities was ultimately similar – closer, at least, than the polemicists of the time would have been prepared to admit.

There is an aside to the story of Benedict and his monasteries that is interesting in the light of present attitudes towards work. When ecological movements first began to organize politically, in the late sixties and early seventies, it was briefly fashionable to blame Christianity for the world's ecological strife because it arrogantly placed human beings at the centre of creation. Those associated with this view, notably Lynn White, thought it possible to chart the progress of Europe's environmen-

tal degradation against the progress of Christian evangelism on that continent. The extension of Christian civilization to other continents was, consequently, an extension of the damage.

The thesis did not last long, because there are so many counter-examples to it – most obviously, in the reclamation of waste land practised on the farms connected to the great monasteries. The fragile rural environment that green enthusiasts like White wished to preserve was itself a product of human work, i.e. of an act of transformation. It is not surprising if some of those now advocating an understanding of work as a sharing in God's creative activity are Christians involved in the ecological movement.

This view of work has also found favour among contemporary Christian feminists who address themselves to the differing evaluations that patriarchal societies have placed on the paid work of industrial production and exchange, and the unpaid work of the home. In this, they are echoing some of the concerns of the Jocists and worker priests. Feminists, Christian or not, will point out that patriarchy can hardly be presented as an invention of the Industrial Revolution. But the question of our differing attitudes towards paid and unpaid work has been made more acute, I think, by the kinds of social change that have been consequent upon industrialism.

As the Jocists found, it is not easy to affirm the dignity of work and the worker when the characteristic form of work in an industrial society is that symbolized by the assembly line. When the working day amounts to the repetitive carrying out of a mechanical task, with little conception of the total process, then the image of the worker as a sharer in God's creative activity remains a faint one.

This is so regardless of prosperity: the appeal of Marx's theory of alienated labour as an explanation of the human condition was never so strong as in the heyday of Henry Ford, who reduced his employees to virtual automata while paying them substantially more than they could have earned working for his competitors. After all, the working class had also to be a consuming class if Henry was to sell the end products of his assembly lines.

To speak in frankly commercial terms that Henry might have relished, it is much easier to sell the Christian vision of labour in a pre-industrial society, where the dominant form of work is essentially what would now be termed 'craft'. In other words, where the worker – whether subsistence farmer, blacksmith, carpenter, baker, scribe or whatever – is involved in the total process of production, so that at some stage it is possible to stand back and say, 'I did *that*'.

Yet clearly, as industrial capitalism unfolded in its first two centuries, that model of work became progressively implausible. In the cities, the craft mentality was gradually confined to a domestic residue, the unpaid labour of the home, and 'real' work came to mean something paid for, and done away from home in factories, offices and shops.

Modernists of various kinds, therefore, were able to taunt the Christian critics of industrial civilization with being peddlars of nostalgia. But modernity has its discontents, and one need not share all the assumptions of those who style themselves postmodernist to concede that industrial society is now a different beast from that which faced the early Jocists and worker priests.

As a trade unionist who has been a workplace organizer during a period of rapid technological change, I know from experience that the new work structures offer an opportunity as well as a challenge. The assembly-line automaton is as much an image of the past as is Henry Ford's Model T, and if Henry's entrepreneurial successors are no more likely to be moved by the fraternal feelings towards their employees than he was, they nonetheless are less able to treat those employees as mere cogs in the machine.

This is not to minimize the cost of technological change: it invariably means a shedding of jobs, and the non-managerial jobs that remain are more likely to be casual or part-time. But unionists who have tried to build new forms of solidarity to match the new work structures know that it is possible to do so – often, ironically, precisely because of the diffuse, decentralized nature of the contemporary workplace.

Workers who are required to perform a variety of tasks, 'skilled' or otherwise, necessarily have to form some conception of how these tasks relate to one another. And, if the new managerialism finds that preaching shared responsibility boosts productivity, it is also true that the sense of interdependence which shared responsibility requires is the root of solidarity.

To be efficient, the new workplace requires workers to have a pride in their work and in each other – and promoting such feelings can be a double-edged sword for any manager. They may foster loyalty towards 'the firm' but, equally, they may foster a loyalty towards one's work-mates that in turn prompts a questioning of how the firm deals with them. It all depends, as Josef Cardijn would have advised his Jocist cells, on the right person asking the right question at the right time.

I refer to these practical problems of union organization not because I think unions ought to claim any special Christian endorsement for what they do, but because I think their experience of building solidarity

vindicates a traditional Christian understanding of the dignity of human work. And I suspect that it will be easier for latter-day Jocists to sketch out the implications of that understanding in today's workplaces than it was for Cardijn in his Belgian steelworks.

The changes taking place in industrial civilization are sometimes described as a fragmentation of work, but that way of speaking is perhaps a legacy of the older, assembly-lines-and-timecards way of organizing things. What is being fragmented is not work, but workplaces. It is true that it is increasingly common for people to be employed in several part-time jobs, but, like the new management practices, this can have the effect of forcing workers to be more aware of the tasks they perform than was possible on one of Henry's assembly lines. These tasks will still be integrated, but in the context of the worker's own life rather than as a set of internal procedures in a particular workplace.

This way of looking at the worker's relationship to his or her work – focusing on the task in its entirety – is connected to two other aspects of our changing working lives. One is a consequence of the kinds of technological change I have been discussing: that industrial societies probably will have to endure higher jobless rates than has hitherto been considered acceptable. The other I have alluded to as a consequence of feminism: the collapsing of the once-accepted distinction between the private world of the home and the public world of paid work.

Both these developments are, I think, unavoidable, and the second of them is desirable. I do not argue for a 'homemaker's wage' – for one thing, I think feminists are right to fear that the existence of such payments may be used to deter some women from seeking work outside the home. But if the new organization of work makes the old public-private division untenable, then it may have the positive result of forcing a re-evaluation of unpaid work. I am not sanguine about whether this would come about easily, but the kinds of task associated with the home, or with voluntary work of various kinds, are surely as much a sharing in divine creative activity as anything that earns a fortnightly pay packet.

I have referred to an alternative tradition of theological reflection to that which I am advocating, one which presents work as a penalty for sin. The seeds of it, as I have indicated, perhaps lie in the Yahwist creation account in Genesis and the associated story of the Fall. 'Perhaps', because the notion of labour *itself* as a penalty for the Fall is something that comes later in this tradition.

But in the Yahwist narrative, of course, responsibility 'to care for and cultivate the garden' comes *before* the Fall. Expulsion from the garden turns work into toil, but does not invent it. And, from a Christian

perspective, the renewal of creation brought about in the risen Christ does not abolish work either. The complete renewal of creation, at the Parousia, would mean the end of *toil*. But to argue that labour, the human participation in God's creative activity, would cease is rather like arguing that God's sustaining of creation would cease. 'My Father works even now, and I work' (Jn 5:17).

Given my earlier remarks about how the tradition has held the Augustinian and anti-Augustinian views in tension, and my doubts about Weber's 'Protestant work ethic', it may be wondered why so many Christians continue to *experience* work as a penalty. My answer may sound evasive, but I do not think there is a specifically *theological* reason for this other than the persistence, in some quarters, of a relentlessly Augustinian theology of sin. The *experiential* problem is one of pastoral initiative rather than of theological innovation: it is a matter of trying to harness the anti-Augustinian view to existing social circumstances. The information-technology revolution needs its Cardijn, though where he or she (or they?) may be found, I do not know.

I can only offer a postscript, prompted by two thoughts, one biblical and one liturgical.

First, when Paul tells the church at Corinth about the gifts of the Spirit, he reminds them that there are many different gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). Paul is speaking in a specifically ecclesial context, but the same thing could be said about work in general, for the building of the new creation. All work – paid or unpaid, manual or intellectual – is sanctifying, no matter what our finite human estimation of particular kinds of work may be.

Second, the place that work has in our sanctification is declared in the central act of Christian worship, the celebration of the eucharist. We offer bread *which earth has given and human hands have made*, and wine that is *fruit of the vine and work of human hands*. It is under these signs that we meet the eucharistic presence of Christ – and all of the foregoing, from reflections on trade union organization to movie-induced reverie, is simply an elaboration of those two italicized phrases.