

WORK, LIFE-STYLE AND GOSPEL

By CLIVE WRIGHT

MANY CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS experience some unease and discomfort when they seek to relate their faith to the world of work, especially the work of wealth creation in commerce and industry. There seems to be a discontinuity between what they profess at church on Sunday and what they do at work on Monday. The workplace is perceived as a godless and even immoral part of the human condition. Certainly the institutional churches show reluctance to affirm the wealth creation process, to pray as frequently for those engaged in commerce and industry as we do for those engaged in, say, education or medicine, or to recognize that the workplace is where most of us spend most of our time. As a Christian who has worked in manufacturing industry since leaving university, I have felt it necessary to find consistency between my work and the rest of my life. However, within the churches the search for a holistic view encounters not just indifference but often downright hostility. A few years ago I attended at St Paul's Cathedral a rare event: a special service to mark the contribution of industry to the community. But the preacher took the occasion to question, in the strongest terms, the creation of wealth in Britain whilst there remained so much poverty in the Third World. This proper concern for the poor and for inequalities became the basis for an expression of disapproval of the very activity in which most of the congregation engaged from Monday to Friday. I left the cathedral puzzled and disappointed that the preacher so obviously felt that work – and especially my kind of work – was a dubious part of God's world and not something he was able to affirm.

The reluctance to affirm that I have described is not, in my experience, unusual. It is my opinion that Christians should be affirmed in their work as a central part of the human condition. My particular concern is for the work of wealth creation, but the same support should, of course, be extended to every Christian in his or her place of work.

Until very recently, there has not been much guidance in the way of written material for the seeker after some kind of theology of work related to the modern world of wealth creation. There is, of course, the core teaching contained in the series of papal encyclicals that have

followed the publication of *Rerum novarum* in 1891. *Centesimus annus* of 1991, the most recent of these encyclicals, contains much profound thinking to which I shall return. Interestingly enough, several other publications on wealth creation and the workplace¹ have appeared in recent years, a contrast with the preceding indifference to the subject. It may be that the Christian in his or her workplace will become a focus for concern, for prayer and for support from the wider Church.

Why should one be concerned with the relationship between faith, work and the world of wealth creation? As I have already said, work is where most of us spend a great deal, if not most, of our time. That, in itself, is a sufficient reason why Christians, who worship the God of all creation, should address the matter. The creation of wealth, furthermore, is the process whereby we all survive on this earth since it serves to satisfy our needs and wants.

But the most important reason why we should address this issue lies in a unique Christian truth and revelation: the Incarnation. Christians believe that in Jesus God became human at a particular moment in time and lived on this same earth that we inhabit. Because he was human Jesus did the same sort of thing that we all do. He talked, he ate, he walked, he got tired, he slept . . . he also worked. In St Mark's Gospel we read that the people who heard his teaching in the synagogue said 'Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?' (Mk 6:3).

Indeed, Jesus was very much in the world of work of his day. Many of his stories and parables, like those about the labourers in the vineyard, the talents, the houses built upon rock or sand or the unjust steward, are concerned with the everyday workplace. Jesus also had a great deal to say about money. And many of his friends were workers: Simon, Andrew, James and John, for example, were fishermen (Mk 1:16-19).

The world of work and of wealth creation are very clearly part of God's creation. Moreover, God took part in these very activities. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider them, to relate them to our Christian beliefs and to face up to any unease or discomfort that we may perceive or feel in doing so.

In this article, therefore, I would like to structure my remarks into three main sections:

- an examination of some of the reasons why Christians are uncomfortable with the world of work;
- some consideration of the tensions and paradoxes that are inherent in our efforts to create wealth and to satisfy our needs and wants;
- a look at the evolution of work and the opportunities that are offered for Christian insight, reflection and input.

Our Christian faith provides a context, a framework into which we fit our different activities and pursuits. What it does not do is provide a detailed textbook or procedure for going about work or any other activity.

The church has no models to present; models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic, political and cultural aspects, as these interact with one another.²

What follows are some personal reflections, based on my experience as a Christian in the workplace.

My working life has been in two industries where wealth creation is a primary feature – the petroleum and chemical industries. In exploring some reasons why Christians are uncomfortable with the world of work I shall concentrate (though not exclusively) upon that process of work which is concerned with the creation of wealth rather than, for example, artistic or academic work.

The creation of wealth takes place when an individual or corporation employs the potential labour and capital resources available and uses these to produce something (production is taken in the most general sense of the term) which has greater value than the resources used.³

Value exists when things are useful, that is, when they meet our needs or wants. If they do not meet a need or a want they are deemed to have little value. In a free market with free choice, there is no objective definition of value: the process of valuation is a subjective one, related to the needs or wants that are met.

Once we begin to use terms like ‘wealth’ or ‘added value’ or ‘needs’ or ‘wants’ we are employing a vocabulary that most Christians will recognize as emotive and fraught with possible misunderstanding. This is part of the background to our problem of unease and discomfort, but the world of work is inescapably involved with these concepts, since work originated as the way in which we meet our basic requirements:

God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of its members without excluding or favouring anyone . . . But the earth does not yield its fruits without a particular human response to God’s gift, that is to say, without work.⁴

I would like to suggest four aspects as to why many Christians experience difficulty in relating their faith to their work in today’s commerce and industry.

It is a truism that our use of reason, the experimental and scientific method, has transformed our understanding of the world in which we live. This growth in understanding has been most uncomfortable for the Church. Only recently was the Roman Catholic Church able to bring itself to forgive Galileo for being right after all. The Copernican revolution, the work of Darwin, and other steps forward in our understanding were perceived as threats, as though the increase in our knowledge is somehow a diminution of the role of God. Some scientists, like Richard Dawkins, militantly claim that evolutionary theory has disposed of God altogether.⁵ Many other scientists, however, such as Paul Davis and John Polkinghorne, show how scientific knowledge can enrich theological explanation.

The dynamic of the modern wealth creation process is inescapably linked to the scientific and experimental method, and our ability to develop the resources of the world would not be possible without it. The disciplines of reason and order inherent in the processes of an oil refinery, a chemical plant or a computer are the same as those used by the scientist exploring cosmic order.

So there is, at the very root of the modern industrial and commercial activity, a methodology with which Christianity and the churches have had great difficulty in coming to terms. As a consequence many Christians feel that advances in the fields of science and of business are made at the expense of God and religion.

My Christian understanding was, I think, deepened by my work years ago as a computer programmer. Far from finding it a depersonalized exercise in cold reason, I learned about humankind's capacity for creative achievement and our capacity for error. I found that the logic of a computer programme was agonizing in its requirements. A false step, trivial in itself, would bring the complete system to a halt. Each part of the computer system is dependent upon other parts. This is a paradigm of the wider creation, where we continue to learn about the interdependence of the separate parts – as well as a representation of the interdependence of human beings. Technology and learning have moved on since I wrote programmes: higher-level languages have reduced the potential for the sort of elementary errors that I made. Nevertheless, for me, computing – which is one of the triumphs of our use of reason – is a deep manifestation of our part in the creative process which we share in.

Today I work in the chemical industry which in the last forty or fifty years has developed products and processes that are essential to our way of life and which ease toil, illness, discomfort and so on. At the same

time as we recognize these benefits we also question some of their other impacts – for example upon the environment. Technical competence enables us to control and reduce these adverse effects. As a Christian I am glad to be involved with this activity: firstly for the benefits it brings and secondly because, where there is a falling short, there is also a will to correct and to improve. In Christian terms we serve our fellow human beings and we redeem and make new that which has gone astray.

A second cause of discomfort with the world of work may lie in what is popularly referred to as ‘the Protestant work ethic’. The sociologist Max Weber developed his analysis of an emerging secular society at the beginning of this century.⁶ He linked capitalism to the Protestant emphasis upon self-discipline, industry, thrift and stewardship. Hard work and the accumulation of wealth were the route to salvation. Whether Protestantism was a formative influence upon capitalism or vice versa is a matter for debate. What is important for our purpose is the influence which the notion of the protestant work ethic has had upon modern Christian thinking about work. The idea that overwork is desirable, that the devil finds work for idle hands, that rest and recreation are somehow reprehensible – all this has been held to contribute to the exploitation, workaholism and degradation that accompanied the industrial and commercial development of western Europe, and hence to the popular perception of wealth creation as strongly linked to these evils. Where Christian thinking today fails is in providing the vision that the wealth creation process can also be liberating, that unremitting manual toil is not unavoidable in the industrial process. Much commercial and industrial work no longer conforms to the stereotype embedded in Christian social thinking on work in the first fifty years of this century.

We are entering a period of commercial and industrial activity which opens up exciting prospects for renewed Christian insight. It is possible to identify at least three stages in the wealth creation activity. In our early economic development humankind was at, or close to, subsistence. Activity was directed towards meeting physical wants: food, warmth, shelter. The basic elements of capital were the land and what it produced together with humankind’s labour, primarily manual labour. The Industrial Revolution introduced capital in the form of mechanization and, later, automation but still with a substantial element of human labour – for example in coal mining to extract the raw material to provide energy for the machinery. Although physical work was reduced by mechanization, the industrial process still called for large numbers of people to be engaged in manual effort.

What we are now witnessing is a transformation: physical and material capital are replaced by the capital of intellect and mind. In saying this I am conscious that my remarks apply mainly to the advanced economies of the world. Nevertheless the rapid changes in the Far East, in countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia, show how the wealth creation of technology can rapidly be grafted onto an older economy.

The shift to intellectual capital has profound implications for all aspects of the wealth creation process. For those accustomed to think of value added as the transformation of raw materials like metal into ships, the enormous increments of value added in the microchip or the derivatives of the financial market are initially difficult to comprehend. The thinking conditioned by the tangible wealth of bridges or roads, for example, has difficulty in grasping the huge added value of, say, computer calculations.

But predictably enough the change from physical to intellectual capital and the associated changes – for example the easing of manual toil – is not always welcomed. Many Christians and others dislike change and react against it. The renewal or replacement of old manpower-intensive industries changes or eliminates thousands of jobs. The benefits of eliminating manual toil by automation are offset by job losses. The faster and more effective utilization of limited resources that is facilitated by electronic dealing by anonymous people sitting in front of screens disturbs us because we see no tangible wealth.

The process of change is not itself new. New ways of doing things, the displacement of old materials by new, the loss of jobs and the creation of new ones – all this has happened for centuries. Money has always moved around. Much of our present discomfort, however, arises from the speed and the scale of what happens today.

In my career I have been involved continuously with this kind of change. Like many others I have not found it easy to handle. But invariably the alternative to change was worse than change itself. There is a true Christian vocation to be involved in the change process, to guide it, to understand it and to help to manage it. I cannot accept that the Christian response to change in the workplace is to turn one's back upon it. And if change is to be managed in a responsible and caring way, this in itself is a demand on the resources of Christian stewardship.

The conflict between personal interest and the interests of society is inherent in the critique of commerce and industry that flowed from the perception of the world of work as one of servitude. This point is addressed in *Centesimus annus*:

The social order will be all the more stable, the more it . . . does not place in opposition personal interest and the interests of society as a whole, but rather seeks ways to bring them into fruitful harmony.⁷

It has been my experience that the wealth-creating sector can fruitfully participate in wider service to the community. The concept that companies serve several 'stakeholders' – employees, customers, shareholders, the community – is now widely accepted. The involvement of companies in the community through the Business in the Community approach whereby organizations put resources into tackling social and community issues is also widely accepted. I firmly believe that this concept of service to the community has profoundly Christian roots.

The first two problems I have mentioned are comparatively recent in Christian thinking. There is, however, a much older concern about the world of work. Christianity has always wrestled with the spiritual and material dimensions of existence and how to bring them together not least in the world of work. Another related thread of Christian thought has been with the reconciliation of the contemplative life with the life of everyday action. The contrast between these two modes often featured in medieval painting: the Virgin peacefully contemplates the infant Jesus, whilst through a window we see the continuing bustle of daily life as peasants and noblemen go about their business. Later, these distinctions were to some degree institutionalized.

. . . the church provided an explanation of the universe, norms of behaviour for rich and poor, and justified the social system in terms which continued to be used throughout the Ancien Régime, namely that God had divided mankind into three – those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked. The interdependence of these groups was the basis of social and political order.⁸

In the sixth century, St Benedict created small communities as a Christian family to live, work and pray together. *Laborare est orare* – 'to work is to pray' was St Benedict's famous dictum and in his Rule he gave an important place to daily work. 'Idleness', he says in Rule 48, 'is the enemy of the soul. For this reason the brethren should be occupied at certain times in manual labour and at other times in sacred reading.' One monastic ideal was to bring work and prayer as close together as possible.

In our own time, the discomfort involved in bringing together the spiritual and the material, the contemplative and the active, was a problem addressed by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *Le milieu divin*.

'Perfection consists in detachment; the world around us is vanity and ashes.' The believer is constantly reading or hearing these austere words. How can he reconcile them with the other counsel, usually coming from the same master and in any case written in his heart by nature, that he must be an example unto the Gentiles in devotion to duty, in energy, and even in leadership in all the spheres opened up by man's activity?⁹

Teilhard explores the two parts of our lives – what he calls the active and the passive – and the tension between them. He perceives that there is a tendency for Christians to regard the active life as in some way inferior to the passive or spiritual. In a celebrated passage he writes:

'I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that nine out of ten practising Christians feel that man's work is always at the level of "a spiritual encumbrance." In spite of the practice of right intentions and the day offered every morning to God, the general run of the faithful . . . feel that time spent at the office or in the studio, in the fields or in the factory, is time taken away from prayer and adoration'.¹⁰

Teilhard found this distinction unacceptable and looked for a general sanctification of human endeavour in all its aspects. In other words he rejected any notion that the active life is inherently inferior to the passive life and he unequivocally affirmed the worth of endeavour in the fields of industry and commerce. In a letter to a businessman friend, he wrote: 'Because your enterprise . . . is going well, a little more health is being spread in the human mass and in consequence a little more liberty to act, to think and to love.'¹¹

So the Christian engaged in business is contributing as positively to God's world as when he or she engages in prayer.

The fourth cause for discomfort with the world of work and the process of wealth creation lies in dominical and church teaching. We have already noted that Jesus was a worker, had a great deal to say about money and wealth and drew upon the contemporary world of work and wealth creation for many of his parables and stories. We must also note that he had some very hard things to say about the dangers of material goods and excessive attachment to riches. In St Mark's Gospel (chapter 10) he tells the man who had great possessions to 'sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor' and for good measure adds, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God' (Lk 10:25). The story of Dives and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31) offers bleak prospects for the selfish rich. We are enjoined:

'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth' (Mk 6:19). The Christian gospel in traditional teaching emphasizes 'the preferential option for the poor' and the obligation upon those who are better off to care for the poor. These teachings undoubtedly are a strong warning to the Christian about the temptations posed by wealth.

Nowhere, however, do we find in the Gospels or the teaching of the Church any suggestion that the process of wealth creation (which, as we have already seen, is the process of meeting our needs and wants) is itself reprehensible or to be condemned. Indeed, only by means of wealth creation can we alleviate poverty itself. By the creation of surplus we will generate the wherewithal for schools, hospitals and other necessities of life. The way in which we conduct the wealth creation process may be open to question, the distribution of the wealth that is created may require correction, but the basic process of creating that wealth upon which we all depend is the vehicle for addressing the preferential option for the poor.

In looking at some of the factors which lie underneath the discomforts that a Christian may experience about his or her work in commerce or industry, we have by no means found complete solutions to the problems that are posed. Within this field lie a number of tensions and paradoxes and it is to this that I would now like to turn.

The encyclical *Centesimus annus* identifies tension between the role of the individual in the wealth creation process and the need for community. It warns that 'the system' must not overwhelm the individual:

At times it seems as though he (the individual) exists only as a producer and consumer of goods, or as an object of State administration . . . life in society has neither the market nor the State as its final purpose . . .¹²

We must nevertheless recognize limits upon private wealth. 'Of its nature private property also has a social function which is based on the law of the *common purpose of goods*.'¹³

If the Christian verity is full of paradoxes such as a benevolent God and suffering, death and resurrection, free will but an omnipotent God, it is not surprising that we find paradoxes in the basic activities by which we sustain our daily lives. But in the case of the world of work, of wealth creation, there seems to be an inability to live with the tensions. It is my plea that a balanced Christian perspective would live more easily with the tensions of wealth creation and our religious beliefs if we recognize that tensions are inherent in the whole of existence. Let us try to accommodate and find ways through what may appear contradictory. It is better to affirm than to deny. In the context of the world of work we

should emphasize the positive instead of polarizing the elements of paradox; we would thus avoid accentuating the negative.

Let me be more specific on this point. Christians know that human beings are weak and fall short of their ideals and aspirations. The doctrine of redemption helps us not to despair about our falling short. Failings usually are better publicized than successes where human behaviour is concerned and it is a fact that some famous wealth creators are known for their greed or ruthlessness. But we should not fall into the trap of characterizing all wealth creators as being like that.

The field of business ethics is one where I believe that there is a major opportunity for Christian input and insight. If Christians stand aside from the process of helping to develop guidelines with regard to such issues as financial prosperity and ethical dealing, we are running away from the true implications of the Incarnation.

It is a commonplace to say that we live in a world of rapid change: we all know that. What is less commonplace is a constructive Christian perspective on these changes in the workplace and an appreciation of the opportunities that they offer. Many Christians, for example, have reacted very negatively to the renaissance of market economics: a blanket disapproval of 'the system' and an aspiration towards some kind of society in which things are ordered indifferently. For believers in an incarnational religion it borders on the unacceptable to hanker for a world that does not exist. Our faith calls us to live out our witness to the gospel in the world as it is, not in some utopian world that does not exist. Nor should we look back to a past 'Golden Age' which never existed.

The starting point for a Christian perspective on the world of work must be to look for what Teilhard called 'the divinisation of human activity'.¹⁴ The Incarnation, as we have seen, substantially strengthens that perception. And as we have also seen, tension and paradox being a part of the human condition will also be present in our working lives. These considerations should be sufficient to enable us to overcome ambivalence in Christian attitudes towards the creation of wealth. If Jesus himself can take ordinary bread and wine and add value in the Eucharist, we should not be equivocal in adding value in God's world ourselves. We are called to serve and to do so by meeting needs and wants – which is in some large part creating wealth and adding value – is consistent with the divinization of our activities. We must, of course, be alert to the note of caution sounded in *Centesimus annus*.

. . . of itself, an economic system does not possess criteria for correctly distinguishing new and higher forms of satisfying human needs from artificial new needs which hinder the formation of a mature personality.¹⁵

Satisfying desires for drugs or pornography, for example, is a distortion of the process, bringing to 'a one-sided and inadequate conclusion' the innovative capacity of a free economy.¹⁶ As the encyclical goes on to say, this requires a great deal of educational and cultural work. And this is where the Christian at work has a special role to play. If we consider our long-standing Christian concern – the challenge of unifying the active and the contemplative – we have a new opportunity in relation to the intellectual capital that is now being developed. It is ironical that we hear many Christian leaders regretting the shift away from labour-intensive practices and industries.

This is not the place to develop the implications for Christian thinking on the world of work that are raised by the shift from physical to intellectual capital. For many reasons we should welcome it since it is a startling jump forward in humankind's participation in the creative process. If we look at a great artefact of the past – Chartres Cathedral – and endeavour to understand how its designers and builders sought to add spiritual value to material things, we should be consumed with excitement at the potential for the even greater added value that information technology offers, without the backbreaking effort involved in building the cathedral.

Further opportunities for Christian insight are provided by other changes in our working environment. The importance of physical capital had consequences in the way commerce and industry were organized, in large and relatively inflexible entities, often structured with well-defined hierarchies. These organizations are changing rapidly: intellectual capital can be located anywhere; the place and time of work is much more fluid; hierarchies are succeeded by matrix management. In all these changes there are opportunities for individual initiative and development.

Such shifts are to be welcomed by the thinking Christian. The Christian emphasis upon individual as well as community responsibility holds new potential for fulfilment. New opportunities to define the meaning of vocation present themselves both to the individual in his or her workplace and to the theologian seeking to find God's purpose in the wider context.

In conclusion I would like to point to another consideration which the changing world of work opens up. Limited as we are by the constraints of time and space, we sometimes have difficulty in grasping the plenitude of God's gifts to humankind. As the potential of the new wealth-creation process unfolds we can have a glimpse of the infinity of the creative process. There is no limit to the wants and needs that can be met

although this process is, in the wider context, inevitably linked to other processes, also contributed to by Christians, such as systems of wealth distribution and social justice.

Of course, we must be extremely careful in handling this issue. As *Centesimus annus* emphasizes, the use of drugs or pornography bring to 'a one-sided and inadequate conclusion' the innovative capacity of a free economy.¹⁶

The world of wealth creation and the associated work are an integral part of the human condition, a condition visited by God in the Incarnation. As we all know the economic process, the mechanism through which wealth is created, is critically dependent upon confidence. Similarly our Christian belief is built upon faith. And so we have it: confidence and faith, the essentials to sustain two fundamentals of our life here on earth.

NOTES

¹ Amongst the publications that have appeared in recent years on the broad subject of Christianity, work and wealth creation are: Brian Griffiths, *Morality and the market place* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982); Brian Griffiths, *The creation of wealth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984); Andrew Stokes, *Working with God* (London: SPCK, 1992); Peter Sedgwick, *The enterprise culture* (London: SPCK, 1992); John Atherton, *Christianity and the market* (London: SPCK, 1992); Malcolm Grundy, *An unholy conspiracy* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1992); Adrian Mann, *No small change* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1992); Richard Harries, *Is there a gospel for the rich?* (London: Mowbray, 1992); Jon Davies (ed), *God and the marketplace: essays on the morality of wealth creation* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1993); Richard Higginson, *Called to account* (Guildford: Eagle, 1993).

² *Centesimus annus* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1991), p 31, no 43.

³ Brian Griffiths, *The creation of wealth*, p 21.

⁴ *Centesimus annus*, pp 23–24, no 31.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The blind watchmaker* (London: Penguin, 1986).

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1905).

⁷ *Centesimus annus*, p 19, no 25.

⁸ Roger Price, *A concise history of France* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp 38–39.

⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le milieu divin* (Collins, Fontana Books, 1964), p 51.

¹⁰ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *op. cit.*, p 65.

¹¹ Quoted by Fr Pierre Leroy SJ in his preface to *Le milieu divin*, p 36.

¹² *Centesimus annus*, p 36, no 49.

¹³ *Centesimus annus*, p 23, no 30.

¹⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, *Le milieu divin*, p 49.

¹⁵ *Centesimus annus*, p 27, no 36.

¹⁶ *Centesimus annus*, p 27, no 36.