

WORK AND MAN

By PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

SOMETIME IN 1966 Pope Paul emerged from the Vatican to bless a new dust-cart in the service of the municipality of Rome. It was an outstandingly modern dust-cart with electrically operated carriers which sped the canisters to the top of the cart and returned them empty. It made it possible to collect rubbish without actually getting dirty. Progress. But there was only one such dust-cart and the dustmen went on strike a few days later. One needs to remember that dust-cart throughout any discussion of work. Much of the talk about work has been done by frenchmen and has been conducted on a high level of generality where the actual features of work – the sweat, the dust in the eyes, the boredom, the routine, the plodding – disappear in a cloud of resounding verbiage. The dust-cart will remain the test of extravagant theories. ‘Anglo-saxon’ approaches to work have been less lofty. Bertrand Russell is not untypical: ‘Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter on or near the earth’s surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so’.¹

There is a preliminary question to be raised before anything useful can be said about work. How seriously do we take the world and human history? Is the world an accidental backdrop against which the real drama, the drama of salvation, is played? Could the backdrop be changed without affecting the players who strut their brief hour upon the stage before heading for their true home, the *patria*? One trend in christian spirituality has seemed to say *yes* to both these questions. Armed with maxims like *quid ad aeternitatem?* and *aeterna non caduca*, it has suggested that what you do does not matter in the least compared with how you do it.² Work and human life generally are no more than an ascetical training, a transient way of filling in the time in this ‘vale of tears’.

In this position – which requires a certain amount of caricature

¹ *In Praise of Idleness* (London, 1922).

² The following edifying story is told of the english jesuit preacher, Fr. Bernard Vaughan. He said that if he were a street-sweeper, he would sweep the streets so well that everyone would say: ‘Come and see Vaughan’s crossing’.

to bring it out – the meaning of a human life and human activity is to be sought and found in something extrinsic to human life and work, rather than through and in the work itself. It can be ‘consecrated’ from without by a good intention or a blessing. It can be rewarded in the future life. But it has no meaning within itself. The disadvantage of this position is that it provides us with no principle of choice between works and no reason for doing this work rather than that: provided the work undertaken is not sinful, it does not really matter what we do, since work merely provides a convenient occasion to exercise the virtues of patience and humility. After all, we are only practising scales for heaven. One recognizes here a rigid – and false – notion of indifference based on a *simpliste* view of eschatology.

We can show the inadequacy of this view and provide an alternative in which work is positively justified by considering human work in the light of creation and redemption. Then, but only then, we can see how this positive evaluation of work is qualified but not destroyed by eschatology and christian hope.

Creation and work

The christian doctrine of creation is a religious truth, not a philosophic truth. It asserts that man has status and a task in the world. His status stems from the fact that he is the vice-regent of creation, that he can name the beasts – to name is to have power over – and that he is, in some sense, ‘in the image of God’.¹ His nature is to grow in freedom and responsibility. Freedom is as much a goal as a starting-point; and responsibility means not only moral responsibility but the capacity to enter into fruitful dialogue with others. His task is to humanize the world, to turn it into a *cosmos*, an ordered world, to place upon it a human stamp and, as the sole articulate priest of creation, to refer the whole of nature to the creator Lord.

It is significant that the story of Adam is set in a garden. In the ancient world the typical ‘sacred places’ were woods, groves or caves. In them oracles might dwell or epiphanies occur. A garden is not especially a ‘sacred place’: it is nature humanized, nature which man has ordered. Here one can see what may be called the *secular* meaning of the story of creation. This status and this task of man are the ground of his dignity. But he is not alone in the world.

¹ Gen 1, 27.

In his work of transforming and humanizing nature, he is collaborating with the Lord. This theme was taken up by the Council:

Man, created in God's image, was commanded to subdue the earth and everything in it, to rule the world in justice and holiness, to refer all things to God as his acknowledged creator, so that through man's mastery the name of God should be honoured over the whole earth.¹

Hence the Council did not interpret man's transformation of the world as though it were necessarily a promethean attempt to rival and oust God:

Christians, then, far from supposing that the achievements of man's skill and power are opposed to the power of God, as though the rational creature were a rival of his creator, are convinced rather that mankind's triumphs are signs of God's greatness and the fruit of his sublime plan.²

It is good to have this positive and welcoming approach to a scientific humanism which, historically, has often been opposed to christianity. But it might be objected that the idea of man as collaborator with God has little relevance to the real world of work in the twentieth century. It can contribute little in a world of mass-production, automation and computerized technology. It might just do for a Ruskin-type craftsman, working directly on his materials, learning respect for matter and discovering joy in creativity. Eric Gill only made his splendid ideas on work plausible by turning his back on the twentieth century. From the first industrial revolution onwards, it has been increasingly difficult to see the individual worker as co-creator, transforming nature in a human way. The one-operation worker standing by the conveyor-belt would just guffaw at the idea.

The only way out of the difficulty is to abandon an individualistic point of view. There are not just two elements in work: the individual worker and what he works upon. There is always a third element: the human community in which and for which he works. As Raymond Williams put it:

From almost every account of work . . . we come to see that there is never only a work process, of the kind that is usually abstracted: a set of operations on things. There is also,

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 34.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

whether recognized or not, a set of social relationships, which in experience are quite inextricable from the work.¹

Further, in a vast and increasing range of occupations, there is no product at all: the distributive trades, transport and communications employ more and more people and sometimes they are revealingly called 'services'. A view which speaks of work as co-creation has little to say to them. But their work begins to make christian sense when one remembers that they are constantly dealing with people and that therefore, whether or not they are particularly conscious of the fact, they are either building up human communities or pulling them down. There is no work which does not involve contact and communication and collaboration with others. In its chapter on culture, the pastoral constitution shows its awareness that the work is more than 'transforming nature':

For when man by his handiwork and technical skill cultivates the earth to make it yield fruit and become a fit place for living in, and when he consciously takes part in various forms of social life, he carries out the design of God, manifested from the beginning, that he should subdue the earth and perfect the work of creation as he perfects himself; at the same time he observes the great commandment of Christ that he should spend himself in the service of his fellows.²

Redemption and Work

If creation is a religious truth with secular implications, the same can be said of redemption. Indeed creation and redemption are two aspects of the same divine plan (the *propositum Dei*), two phases in a process that is one. This does not mean that we could ever deduce redemption from creation. But it does mean that we should see redemption as the completion of creation. *Gaudium et Spes* insists not only that all men have one, divine vocation,³ but brings out the ordering of creation to redemption:

God the creator established men in the society of other men, intelligent and free, but chiefly (*sed praesertim*) he is called as a son to communion with God and to participation in God's happiness.⁴

¹ Fraser, Ronald, ed., *Work* (London, 1968), p 292.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

Redemption in Christ manifests more clearly, in a more concentrated way, the divine plan. Christ is not only the agent of revelation, he is also its content.¹ he is *truth* as well as *way*. Moreover, what he reveals is the last truth about man himself.² What we have to do then, in this second part, is to look at some titles of Christ – they are also functions – to see what light they throw on work.³

Christ is second Adam. This title is presented at the end of the first chapter of *Gaudium et Spes*, which has sketched out a complete, integral view of man as a body-spirit unity characterized by freedom, intelligence, responsibility, conscience and sociability. But the meaning of man, the chapter asserts, is not found within man himself. Christ, as the man according to the mind of the Father, as second Adam, is the key which unlocks the mystery of man. He reveals not only God to man but man to man himself.⁴ For this reason, our contemplation of Christ as ‘the image of the invisible God’⁵ should not blind us to its implications for human activity. The Council makes a brief reference to work at this point:

For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands. He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart.⁶

Much christian spirituality has drawn profit from this kind of statement. All men and all work are intrinsically related to Christ, and this Christ-reference can be pondered and lived. How is not precisely stated, but we can certainly say that the laborious aspect of work, of any work, can be conjoined to the passion of Christ in which, as St Ignatius put it, he labours for us. Something of the same spirit was behind the principle of benedictine monasticism: *laborare est orare*.

But once again, if this was all we had to go on, any work would be potentially redemptive (as indeed it is). But we would not have a principle of choice and comparison. From the point of view of *laborare est orare*, it little matters whether you are bee-keeping or book-keeping provided you do the first competently and the second honestly. The next title of Christ takes us a stage further.

¹ *Dei Verbum*, 2. ‘Christ . . . is the one Mediator and at the same time the fulness of revelation’.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, 38, 40.

³ In the structure of *Gaudium et Spes* these titles are important: they conclude each of the first three chapters of part I.

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

⁵ Col 1, 15.

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

Christ is called 'our elder brother', 'the first-born of many brethren':

As the first-born of many brethren and through the gift of his Spirit, he founded after his death and resurrection a new brotherly community composed of all those who receive him in faith and in love. This he did through his body, which is the Church. There everyone, as members one of the other, would render mutual service according to the different gifts bestowed on each.¹

This 'new and fraternal community' has as its natural base the human communities which already exist, particularly the community of work. There is a brief hint on the solidarity of Christ with the workers of his own day: 'No less willingly he lived the life of a workman of his period and place'.² Other things being equal, work is valuable in so far as it builds up the human community.

But it is the third chapter which is really decisive on our subject. It is directly concerned with 'human activity in the world' (*navitas humana*). By this is meant work in the most general sense, but especially the growing mastery over nature through science and technology, as a result of which 'man now gets by his industry many benefits for which at one time he looked mainly to heavenly powers'.³ This is one way of describing the process of secularization. As a dutch humanist put it, one of the greatest causes of unbelief was the discovery of artificial fertilisers: they proved an effective substitute for a combination of manuring, prayer and hope.

Of course, not everyone who benefits from the 'increasing mastery over nature' knows what is happening. Many of us press the button and the machine works. If it doesn't, we can either kick it (irrational) or send for the man (rational). But the growing complexity of industrial processes affects us whether we understand it or not. It means an increasingly inextricable enmeshment of interests and therefore a growing inter-dependence which exhortation alone failed to produce: it was said, for example, that after the creation of the Iron and Steel Community, France and Germany could never go to war again. Ought one therefore to speak of progress? This question must arise not only because our age makes claims to it but because work necessarily takes place in time. It has a history. It is a history. And so we can ask whether it is simply unceasing

¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

repetition, whether it is moving forward anywhere, and what that would mean. The Council sees progress in the sense of technical progress as subordinate to man:

Man is more valuable for what he is than what he does. Equally, everything he does to further justice, brotherhood, and a common social order is more valuable than technical progress. This last can provide the means for human progress but can never by itself bring it about¹.

This is in no way a lollard invitation to go out and start wrecking the machines. It is simply a question mark placed against the equation of technical progress with progress *tout court*. Along with its magnificent achievements, modern society especially in its urban concentrations has a lot to answer for in terms of human wear and tear, loneliness and neurosis. Violence often stirs below the surface of a 'clean, well-lighted place'. Nevertheless, technical progress is the ground in which human progress can grow. *Populorum Progressio* makes it clear that one cannot use the alibis of a false spirituality to deny this and maintain inequalities between rich and poor nations. But human progress is qualitatively distinct from technical progress: human progress is measured by the growth of responsibility and real participation, both of which can be undermined by the dominance of technical experts. Though opposed to any idea of 'human engineering' – which involves the manipulation of men and therefore their degradation – the Council knew that man can only fulfil himself in society and that increasing inter-dependence can be a *praeparatio evangelica*, 'for here there is growing that body, the new human family, which in some degree foreshadows the world to come'.² That is why it can trace the highest aspiration of man (which in practice can also be the humblest) to the holy Spirit:

Christ still works in the hearts of men by the power of the holy Spirit, and he does not merely rouse our desire of the world to come; at the same time he stimulates, purifies, reinforces those generous aspirations by which the human family bends its energies to make its own life more humane and to subdue the earth to this purpose.³

The consequence is that although we cannot simply identify human progress and the building up of the Kingdom, the two are related.⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

Human work, therefore, is intrinsically related to the building up of the Kingdom. The Council here accepted implicitly the thesis of Teilhard de Chardin in *Le Milieu Divin* on the insufficiency of a spirituality of work based simply on 'having a pure intention'.

We have already seen Christ as second Adam and first-born of many brethren. Now in this chapter he is presented as liberator:

To all Christ brings liberation, that, setting aside self-interest and putting all earth's purposes to human purposes, they may reach out towards a future in which humanity itself will become an offering acceptable to God.¹

And work itself is 'liberated' because its two inner laws are unveiled in Christ. First the social context and implications of human work can make it an expression of the conviction that 'the way of love is open to all men and that the effort to establish human brotherhood is not a vain effort'². And, secondly, the frustrations, the patience, the sheer slog that work can involve are illumined through the cross of Christ.³ We have to take up the cross daily as we go to our daily work. And both aspects of work, love and death to self, require nothing extraordinary. Their raw material is what lies nearest at hand. In this way the most traditional maxims of spirituality are set in a wider context.

Eschatology and Work

Christian man, as he works, works in faith and love. But he also works in hope. The salvation and redemption of man and therefore of his work are really inaugurated in this world but not completed. We have here no abiding city. The Church has 'an eschatological purpose'. She points to 'the next world'⁴ in which salvation will be fully realized. That is the object of christian hope, which is something more than a Micawber-like disposition to believe that 'something will turn up'. Christian hope has God for its object and the risen Christ as the guarantee that the promises will be fulfilled. Do these other-worldly considerations cancel out what has already been said? Must we now withdraw what was said about the positive value of work in the world? Are we back again to the theme of the worthlessness of the things of this world compared with *aeterna non caduca*?

Such a conclusion would be a complete misunderstanding of christian hope. It is a theological virtue, that is, God-prompted and

¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

God-tending; and since man is constituted by his relationship to God, it throws light on man too. 'One only knows who God is and who man is when one hopes', wrote Karl Rahner.¹ God is he whom we cannot manipulate, cannot exploit for our own purposes, cannot dispose of as we will: and hope is the expression of our abandonment to (or towards) God, who is our future as well as the source and the ground of our being. But – and here we reach the crucial point – this hope is not just a private consolation: it is hope for the world, for others. Moreover, far from dispensing us from worldly tasks, hope impels up towards them. A passage from *Lumen Gentium* makes this clear. Speaking of laypeople, it says that their eschatological hope is not hidden simply within the heart (*in interioritate animi*), but should be expressed through the structures of profane life (*per structuram vitae saecularis*).² The attitude recommended here is the contrary of opting out. Hope, far from confirming Christians in the passive acceptance of the *status quo*, leads them to question existing structures and conditions of work, so that they will be a less inadequate expression of justice and charity. One has to use the cautious phrase 'a less inadequate expression', because the attempt to transform structures is unceasing and permanent. To give up the effort of perpetual transformation and renewal would be despair, the extinction of hope. Seen from this point of view, the Church is the 'sacrament of hope for the whole world' and can be considered as 'an institution for the creative criticism of society'.³

Back to Work

From all this we can conclude that 'Christian spirituality' is not something which the Christian does in his spare time, nor does it consist simply in adding intentions from the outside to his daily work. It is found in the work itself or not at all. (This does not mean that 'work' will be the whole of his spirituality.) The difficulty about going further than this lies in the diversity of work. The collection of essays already cited⁴ is concerned with the following jobs: sub-editor, nightwatchman, clerk, solicitor, unemployed, factory worker, scientist, croupier, policeman, panel beater, surgeon, salesman, bus driver, copywriter, programmer, accountant, housewife, technician, warehouseman. Obviously this is a very limited

¹ 'Zur Theologie der Hoffnung', in *Schriften zur Theologie*, VIII (Benziger, 1967), p 574.

² *Lumen Gentium*, 35.

³ Cf Johann Baptist Metz, reported in *The Month*, June, 1967.

⁴ Under the general title *Work*: ed. Fraser, Ronald (London, 1968).

selection of human occupations. Equally obviously, one cannot speak to all these occupations at once without falling into immediate absurdity. It is a significant fact that if we tried to break down even this brief list into categories, we would probably do so on a class-basis (and the same holds for 'socialist' countries too). We would probably assume that the solicitor and the surgeon would get on together (they might have been to the same school), and that the bus driver would have something in common with the factory worker. We may not be wholly wrong in our hunches. But the real differences between different forms of work cannot be ironed out of existence. The truth is that we know very little about each other's work and do not communicate about it. We are reluctant to 'talk shop'. The real business of living starts after the green baize door (which cuts us off from the 'shop' whatever it may be) has been closed.

Yet all the time we are presumptuous enough to define (i.e. limit) people by the work they do. The question which comes after 'Where do you come from?' is usually 'What do you do for a living?' There are a whole series of role-expectations based on work done. People can be imprisoned in them. (Once upon a time, domestic servants were not supposed to rise 'above their station'.) Though we always have to remember that the man or woman is more than the worker, we also have to recognize that for better or worse people are modified and shaped by the work they do. It is astonishing, therefore, that we should know so very little about how people get their jobs. There is a certain relation between education and work done, but this only provides a general guide, excluding some forms of work or making others possible. But for most people, finding a job is a chancy compromise between vaguely formulated desires, what other people suggest and immediate opportunities. One of the tasks of a school retreat could be to help young people to see the work they might do in the light of creation, redemption and eschatology. It will always be a matter of individual discernment.

But there is one thing which should be common to all the diverse forms of work: a desire for it to have some meaning, however minimal. One of the writers in the book just mentioned pours cold water on this idea. He says, bluntly:

People who speak grandiosely of the 'meaning of work' should spend a year or two in a factory. The modern worker neither gives anything to work nor expects anything from it

(apart from his wages). Work, at factory level, has no inherent value. The worker's one interest is in his pay-packet. The accent on money is understandable – after all, we are shorter of it than most.¹

One cannot quarrel with experience, but one can point out that it is an individual experience. One should also note that the 'justification' of work here is parallel to that in a 'vale of tears' spirituality. It is extrinsic. Both are saying that 'it does not really matter what you do' provided you get your earthly or heavenly pay-off. Work is a necessary chore. Nothing else. But even here, work still has an indirect social value and therefore meaning: the man earns *for* his family, he is the 'bread-winner', he would have to take literally the question 'What do you do for a living?' But this is only the most meagre justification of work. It implies a radical and total alienation. It is intolerable for long. Most people can get beyond it if only they can have some sense of usefulness in their work. Doctors and nurses are the prototypes of this social usefulness (though they too know the grind of work); but the same sense of usefulness can be found in the 'services' and in industry. It is true that it will rarely be found all the time, except in the special cases where work and vocation or work and creativity coincide. Much more common will be the uncertainties and ambivalencies found in the following text (from someone who was 'on the dole' at the time of writing):

Frankly, I hate work. Of course I could also say with equal truth that I love work; that it is a supremely interesting activity; that it is often fascinating; that I wish I didn't have to do it; that I wish I had a job at which I could earn a decent wage. That makes six subjective statements about work and all of them are true for me.²

And for many others.

That may seem a dispiriting conclusion after the previous theological discussion. But it is a useful reminder that syntheses which exist only on paper are not much use to anyone. The human condition involves work and though automation will eventually reduce the time needed for it and bring new problems of leisure, work will remain. If christianity provides a theological interpreta-

¹ *Ibid.*, p 12.

² *Ibid.*, p 273.

tion of human existence (without being reducible to it), it ought to have something to say about work and from the inside. But we are only at the beginning of a theology of work. No theology could emerge as long as work was thought of merely as a painful human necessity. What can be said about work in faith has been sketched out in the first three parts of this article: what it means in practice can only be discovered through real people in real situations. If christians are committed to their work and to improving its conditions, and if theologians are prepared to collaborate with sociologists, then much new light will be thrown on the theology of work. For the moment, all theology can do is to provide a framework and a few hints about the human conditions of work. But that is a much-needed contribution and not insignificant.