

CO-WORKERS IN HIS DESIGN

By FRANCIS TURNER

IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *Middlemarch* the irresponsible and spend-thrift Fred Vincy loves Mary Garth and, aware of being disdained by her, considers becoming apprenticed to her father Caleb, a builder and surveyor. Could Fred become successful in such a trade?

'That depends', said Caleb, turning his head on one side and lowering his voice, with the air of a man who felt himself to be saying something deeply religious. 'You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not be always looking over the end of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is, you must not be ashamed of your work, and think it would be more honourable to you to be doing something else. . . . No matter what a man is — I wouldn't give twopence for him' — here Caleb's mouth looked bitter, and he snapped his fingers — 'whether he was the prime minister or the rick-thatcher, if he didn't do well what he undertook to do' (ch 56).

Compare with this Simone Weil's account of her experience of a Renault factory in the 1930s:

The very conditions of the work exclude the intervention of all motivations except those of the fear of being 'bawled out' or fired, of the eagerness to fatten one's pay envelope, and, in some cases, an interest in speed records.

Weil drew a chilling conclusion from her experience:

No society can be stable in which a whole stratum of the population labours daily with a heartfelt loathing. This loathing for their work colours their whole view of life, all their life. . . . The dreary exhaustion from factory work leaves a gaping void that clamours to be filled. It can only be filled by rapid, violent gratifications, the resulting corruption of which is contagious for all classes of society.¹

Caleb Garth and Simone Weil refer to two quite different modes of activity. Hannah Arendt has termed what Caleb Garth does 'work'

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and what Simone Weil did 'labour'. One might posit a neat dichotomy: work is a great good, labour a serious, though possibly ineradicable, evil.

Such a conclusion would be too simple. Marx, for example, denounced factory conditions as passionately as did Simone Weil, but he attributed their evil not to the intrinsic requirements of the industrial process, but to the mode of social organization which deprived labourers of the fruits of their labour. For Marx, in fact, industrial labour is the *privileged* area in which human liberation can be achieved. Conversely, much pre-industrial work negated or undermined human dignity. So one cannot simply postulate a progressive temporal degeneration of work, or a sudden lurch into soullessness caused by mass production and excessive division of labour. Work can never be assessed apart from its purpose, its effects, and its social setting. This should be confirmed by a brief survey of the judaeo-christian tradition in scripture, in ethical and theological reflection and in spirituality.

Work in scripture

According to M-D. Chenu, a distinction akin to Hannah Arendt's is found in the hebrew scriptures themselves:

Two terms are used: *melakha*, denoting God's creative work and defining his presence in history as carrying out the plan drawn up on the first day; *avoda*, which means the work of a slave or servitude. . . . But the words overlap, and work has the paradoxical connotations of inexorable constraint and joyful expansiveness, unremitting compulsion and liberating self-fulfilment.²

In the priestly account of creation in Genesis (1,27ff) male and female are created in the image of God, blessed, and granted dominion over the rest of creation, which is nevertheless to be respected, as itself good in the eyes of God. The plants grow at the command of God (2,9), but require human work to provide sustenance. After the fall, this work entails 'the sweat of your face'; but it remains what St Thomas Aquinas calls a *bonum arduum*, for the serpent and the ground are cursed, but not the man and woman or the work itself (3,14-19). So the great creation hymn, Psalm 104, proclaims the purpose of God's creation to be human rejoicing, a gift received through active co-operation (vv 14-15).

Work in the Babel story constitutes defiance of divine providence and denial of human creatureliness, rather than collaboration with

God's creativity, and as such is inherently futile. But the fundamental perversion of work in the bible is that of enslavement. 'The Egyptians forced the sons of Israel into slavery, and made their lives unbearable with hard labour, work with clay and with brick, all kinds of work in the fields: they forced on them every kind of labour' (Exod 1,13-14). Such work causes not joy but desperation (2,23). The liberation promised by Yahweh is to grant to the Israelites land *for their own*, but they are so crushed that they cannot believe in such a deliverance (6,8-9).

The deprivation of leisure also debases work. In ancient Greece the free citizen's leisure and capacity for wise judgment are rooted in the unremitting menial labour of the slave (though even in Greece the poet Hesiod was a manual worker). But Deuteronomy repudiates such a distribution of work and leisure. All, including servants and foreigners, are called to share in both the creative work and the *rest* of Yahweh (Deut 5,13-14; cf Exod 20,11).

The hebrew scriptures allow no depreciation of manual in favour of intellectual work. On the contrary, Yahweh is seen as a craftsman, though to master and cultivate the earth requires mental as well as physical effort. Only in the greek wisdom literature does the activity of scholars and philosophers merit special respect.

If we turn to the gospels we find that Jesus works under pressure throughout his public ministry. He is constantly accessible to those in need, and he must rise 'long before dawn' to pray (Mk 1,29-39). His parables assume the socio-economic life of his time, the labour of shepherds, sowers, merchants. He is essentially a servant (e.g. Mk 10,41-45), one who works arduously, without recognition or consideration (Lk 17,7-10). But it cannot be said that there emerges from the gospels a specific *ethos* of work. Economic activity is not a worthy human *end*; it is fatally stupid when 'a man stores up treasure for himself in place of making himself rich in the sight of God' (Lk 12,16ff). And this parable is followed by the warning against pre-occupation with one's food, body, clothing. Similarly, the story of Mary and Martha (Lk 10,38-42) identifies material activity as of secondary value. And the expulsion of the traders from the Temple reveals Jesus's hostility to that economic activity which dislocates community by excluding the poor from worshipping God publicly.

The parable of the talents (Mt 25,14-30; Lk 19,12-27) is sometimes taken as a counterweight to the above, when glossed as an encouragement to entrepreneurial single-mindedness. But of course, the parable has little to do with self-aggrandizement, or even

self-improvement. Jesus is proclaiming the Kingdom. The parable is probably directed against those who *refused* enrichment, being so anxious to guard the *Torah* against all innovation. True, it stresses that gifts atrophy when neglected; but this applies to gifts of friendship, reflection and prayer as well as of business adroitness.

The interpretation of such johannine sayings as 'My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work' (Jn 4,34; cf 17,4) is by no means straightforward. In 5,17, accused of curing a man on the sabbath, Jesus replies 'My Father goes on working and so do I'. Lesslie Newbigin comments, 'It seems to have been accepted by the rabbis that God's sabbath rest did not mean that he had ceased to give life — for babies are born on the sabbath and rain falls'.³ Therefore the work of *giving life* is legitimate on the sabbath for Jesus, too. In 6,27-29 Jesus is asked what it is to do 'the works that God wants'; his answer is to '*believe* in the one whom he has sent', and, significantly, to stop pursuing ephemeral goals. And Jesus's commitment to work while day lasts because 'the night will soon be here when no one can work' (9,4), occurs in the context of Jesus's healing the blind man and claiming to be himself 'the light of the world'. 'Day' is conducive not to socio-economic assiduity but to *enlightenment*.

Work in the christian tradition

There is little theological reflection about work in the Church Fathers' writings. The age took work for granted. The early Christians were predominantly artisans and slaves, so manual work is not depreciated. But a persecuted minority would be almost excluded from civic and economic life.

For the Desert Fathers, work was an ascetical discipline. The worker must tread a narrow path between luxury and idleness, and idleness was the more immediate danger! So in the *Verba seniorum* a brother asks the Abbot Pistameron, 'If I have enough for my needs from elsewhere, dost think that I need not trouble about working with my hands?' The abbot's answer is 'Whatever thou hast, neglect not to work, and do as much as thou canst, but without perturbation of spirit'.⁴ To retire from all social obligation was suspect; as Basil the Great wrote, 'If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?'

Augustine rejects any facile analogy between human work and God's work, because 'God works without ceasing from rest' (*Commentary* on Ps 92); even Adam's work only became painful after his sin. As for ourselves, 'A few years you labour, and even in your

labours you do not lack all consolation, there is no lack of daily gladness. But do not find your joy in this world' (*Sermon* 130,5). His preference was for manual work, since mental work distracted one's attention from God by diverting it to 'the turmoil and confusion of other people's business'. But it is not safe to generalize from Augustine's rueful awareness of his own former vanities. Humble service has its place even in the City of God.

Perhaps the most important christian validation of work was the monastic tradition, in which manual work is at once a form of prayer and a complement to prayer, and in which glory is rendered to God by the all-embracing rhythm of work, contemplation and rest. Church teaching, such as that of Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* (2a,2ae,187,3) is not a universal social prescription, but is addressed to religious, with their specific obligations.

But medieval spirituality commonly distinguished sharply between the duties of the active and the contemplative life. Those in the world must perform good works and carry out their duties zealously, those who 'forsake all worldly riches, honours and outward affairs' are called to contemplation.⁵ *The Imitation of Christ* recommends manual work when deprived of spiritual consolation (Bk III, ch 51), but this is hardly the ideal of the integrated life which inspired Benedict. The assumption, which often becomes explicit, is that perfection is for recluses: 'The further from the world's din, the more intimacy with the world's Creator. . . . Why do you stand looking in at the shop window, when you can't go inside? The world and its gratifications pass away' (Bk I, ch 20c).

The common people must simply have known that the idle went hungry; but *Piers Plowman* affirms different types of work without assigning to them a hierarchy of value: 'It is common sense that every man must work, either by ditching and digging, or by travelling in prayer — the active or the contemplative life — for such is God's will' (Bk VI, modernized by J. F. Goodridge).

The well-known reaction to this undervaluing of work embraced both catholic and protestant thought. De Caussade's teaching that holiness was open to all, whatever their state of life, provided their hearts were changed, is paralleled by the Reformers' insistence that to labour assiduously in one's 'calling' was to conform oneself to God's providence. The danger lay in the insidiously easy inference that financial success indicated faithfulness to one's calling. It is then an obvious step to the claim that affluence is the legitimate (immediate) *end* of work; every formally honest gain is justifiable.

Contemporary church teaching on work has developed in one major respect, exemplified in *Le milieu divin* of Teilhard de Chardin: 'God awaits us in every instant, in our action, in the work of the moment. There is a sense in which he is at the tip of my pen, my spade, my brush, my needle — of my heart and of my thoughts' (p 64). But Teilhard insists that purity of intention, though indispensable, is not enough: 'The divinization of our endeavour by the value of the intention put into it, pours a priceless *soul* into all our actions; but *it does not confer the hope of resurrection upon our bodies*. Yet that hope is what we need if our joy is to be complete' (p 55). Teilhard's emphasis has become the staple of contemporary papal and conciliar documents. To cite the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church in the modern world*, 'the achievements of the human race are a sign of God's greatness and the fulfilment of his ineffable design' (n 34).

The danger of this kind of statement is that it glosses over the harsh exploitation imposed on many workers. *Laborem Exercens*, reiterating the affirmative doctrine, is consistently more sober in acknowledging and condemning violations of human dignity and freedom, whether through brutal work conditions or through the complacent condemnation of millions to unemployment (cf secs 1 and 18). It describes the priority typically given to capital and land over labour as 'a threat to the right order of values' denying the status of the worker as 'a conscious and free subject'.

The encyclical is unhappy about conditions which erode human rights, but I believe two qualifications must be made: (i) it asserts that 'the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one doing it is a person' (sec 6). But the condition for work to have an ethical value, namely the priority of labour, is rarely fulfilled in big business; as some commentators would say, by the very logic of industrialism. The letter's affirmations of work can therefore appear remote and insubstantial; (ii) 'human work is a *key*, probably the *essential* key, to the whole social question' (sec 3). But it sometimes seems, as for example in the discussion of family structures and the role of women (sec 19), that 'work' is identified with 'paid work outside the home'. The encyclical apparently regards as normative a culturally specific family structure, and *therefore* a particular and dubious mode of dividing domestic from public involvement by sex. Such social arrangements, if rigid, exacerbate the crisis of work by circumscribing vocational choice.

Reflections and conclusions

We have our own particular social problems, in some measure unprecedented, and we can misuse the tradition I have outlined either by regarding it disdainfully or by accepting it passively. It is a resource which can illumine and judge contemporary practices, but it is itself plural and conflicting, so cannot be accepted indiscriminately. I make five brief points.

(I) Work falls under the curse of sin, and the effects of sin go beyond the change of congenial tasks into onerous ones. What is properly mutual service and support becomes the theatre for oppression and exploitation. But sin is to be opposed, not merely lamented; and Christians take their hope from Christ's definitive victory over sin, a victory that is yet to be made fully effective in our personal and societal life. Work is good, and the positive view of work embodied in current Church teaching is primary. Application to a recalcitrant material world or to an incipient spiritual entity (as in artistic activity) can be selfless and ennobling. But if we accept this elevated conception of work we must also oppose whatever *degrades* work — relationships of domination and servility, the payment of grossly inadequate wages, the easy acceptance of mass unemployment, and the devastation of the environment. Otherwise, christian teaching might merely underwrite injustice. In the nineteenth century the merchants of Liverpool could make huge profits on the voyages they financed only because dockers could be found to load the ships for starvation wages, because seamen, after months without work, were compelled to be hired for long voyages, leaving their families destitute at home. Who would dare speak to the merchants or the seamen of 'collaborating in God's design'? What was true of the nineteenth century, that fortunes were built on the misery of the poor, *remains* true; even if the economic mechanisms are now more complex.

It is true that in the last thirty years or so, relatively full employment and increased trades union power have mitigated many hardships. But as unemployment soars again, this gain is at risk. In October 1982, the *Sunday Times* quoted the President of the Confederation of British Industry as saying that those who were 'lucky enough to be employed' must put their backs into the job as never before: 'We must ensure that there is no skiving, no striking, no long lunches or long week-ends'. The unemployed can thus be used as a weapon against the employed. Further, the gross hardships have merely been exported, by the kind of company executives who

roam the world seeking cheap and non-unionized labour forces and conveniently repressive governments, and can thereby lay off those whose expectations make them 'uncompetitive'.

In practice, the satisfying and extravagantly paid work goes to the rich or educated, in the name of 'incentive', and the demeaning and precarious work to the poor. The reality of work is usually determined not by respect for human dignity, but by power; and resistance to the sharing of power is expressed in such slogans as 'let management manage'. Let us, by all means, have a 'work ethic' — so long as it is an ethic, and not an ideology of subjection.

(II) With reference to the title of this essay, we are to be co-workers in *his* design. God's design is expressed biblically in the Magnificat, and in the proclamation that 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full' (Jn 10,10). We owe no allegiance to the designs of those companies which find it remunerative to export to the third world medicines declared unsafe in the West, or to those politicians for whom the building of missiles is as productive as the building of houses or hospitals. This means both that dehumanized work *must not* be affirmed, and that the genuine 'co-workers' will include many who are rejected by present social arrangements or seek to overturn them. The categories of 'co-workers' and 'paid employees' by no means coincide. The problem of work needs to be re-defined: how do we award social and financial recognition to those who *sustain* life, and cease to bestow eminence and honour on those who mutilate our lives and environment?

(III) Just as God's creation is ordained to the incarnation, so human participation in creation is mysteriously caught up in the advancement of the Kingdom, in building up humanity to become, by grace, the Body of Christ. If work does *not* build up the Body it is useless. An adequate spirituality of work, therefore, must promote community and solidarity. But many of our socio-economic values are individualistic: by 'success' we mean only promotion over the heads of colleagues, and we believe that economic salvation will come about through a 'meritocracy'. Within this framework of assumptions, sudden political appeals to 'national unity', usually addressed to the low-paid, are unsurprisingly regarded as self-interested. We have not yet sloughed the skin of Enlightenment thought, according to which the idea of community gave way to that of *contract*. Already present in Thomas Hobbes, this image came to dominate social thought in the period of the Industrial Revolution, which it facilitated. The sociologist Robert Nisbet has noted that:

behind the rationalist image of society in this period there was always the prior image of naturally free individuals who had rationally bound themselves into a specified and limited mode of association. Man was primary; relationships were secondary. . . . Guild, corporation, monastery, commune, kindred, village community — all these were regarded as without foundation in natural law.⁶

Industrialism presupposes and foments a competitive mentality. The businessman, as Chesterton remarked, is one who minds other people's business. Such an ethos collides with that of the gospel.

(IV) Any spirituality includes an asceticism, and the relevant asceticism in the sphere of work is to refrain from what is useless. It is needless to stress the extent to which industrial production requires the slick management of public taste, to ensure, for example, swift changes of fashion in clothes and cars: 'There is no way to redeem such work by enriching it or restructuring it, by socializing it or nationalizing it, by making it 'small' or decentralized or democratic. It is a sow's ear that will yield no silk purses'.⁷ There is much work that is neither honest nor useful, and which *corrupts* us as we absorb its values. Our need is for an alternative (and *alternate*) conception of work freed from the constraints of 'productivity' which distort both tasks and relationships in industry. Tasks are degraded by the undue specialization, demanded in productive and service industries alike, which consistently frustrates each person's drive towards wholeness; relationships are vitiated by the subservience imposed on the unemployed and the precariously employed. Both traumas can be healed if people have opportunities to contribute to society which escape the restrictive logic of industry.

(V) *Laborem Exercens*, speaking of work as a 'basic dimension of human existence' (sec 1), then goes further, *too far*: 'man's life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity'. Even when one grants that by 'work' here is meant not merely the material instrumentality by which we earn our subsistence, but any activity by which we arduously transform our environment, such a statement is dangerously exclusive. Work in this second sense has an inherent value, but becomes an idol unless taken up into a rhythm of life which transcends it. As Giannino Piana writes:

the meaning of work must be sought through a constant dialectic between work time and non-working time, between liberation *of* work and liberation *from* work. . . . On the one hand we must recognize the irreplaceable value of work for human growth but we

must also realize that the moment of rest, relaxation, worship is just as essential for our humanization.⁸

The work week without the sabbath is uncouth and graceless; and the sabbath can transmute the consciousness we bring to work; as Dr Johnson said, 'Sunday should be different from another day. People may walk, but not throw stones at birds'. Work is healthy only when it promotes an enhanced life outside work, for others *and* for oneself. This principle is contravened when, for example, a businessman must uproot his family to suit his company's convenience. The women's movement offers a profound hope to the modern world, as it challenges the destructive norm by which the father of a family is 'exonerated' from an equitable share of the burdens (and joys) of nurturing, while the mother's social role is curtailed and her financial dependence ensured. The majority of people build community, and therefore prepare for the Kingdom, *less* in their employment than in their attentiveness to those they love, in the expression of their sexuality, in the enjoyment of their friendships and their recreation. Our human dignity is rooted not in our work or our own effort, but in our very humanity, the gift of God.

NOTES

¹ 'Factory Work', reprinted in *Cross currents*, vol XXV, no 4 (1976), pp 376-82.

² *Sacramentum mundi*, Karl Rahner, ed, vol VI (London, 1970), p 369.

³ Newbiggin, Leslie: *The Light has come* (Edinburgh, 1982), p 65.

⁴ Waddell, Helen: *The desert Fathers* (London, 1936), p 120.

⁵ Hilton, Walter: *The ladder of perfection*, Bk I, chs 2-3.

⁶ Nisbet, Robert: *The sociological tradition* (New York, 1966).

⁷ Rosak, Theodore: *Person/planet* (New York, 1979), p 220.

⁸ Piana, G.: 'Human work: blessing and/or curse?', in *Unemployment and the right to work*, Jacques Pohier and Dietmar Mieth, eds (1982), p 70.