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## **GIVING MEANING TO WORK: THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE OF OUR TIME**

INGEBORG GABRIEL

Since the beginning of this millennium our world has been undergoing drastic transformations, which leave no area of our lives unaffected. This can particularly be felt in the world of business and affects our attitude toward work as such. A consequence of this development is a growing competition that tends to erode moral values, an exaggerated pressure to succeed, which becomes destructive with regard to physical, moral, and spiritual health and integrity of the person, as well as an increasing instability and insecurity of working conditions which negatively affect the motivation to work. It is to these and similar problems that a spirituality of work has to give an answer to. There is, however, an even more profound question with which contemporary societies and working life are confronted with: the drying up of the sources of meaning, the loss of knowledge with regard to man's whereabouts and whereto, which deeply affect our social fabric as a whole and our lives as acting and therefore also working persons. The technical and material changes that take place at an ever-growing pace are no longer connected to socially accepted ultimate goals giving orientation to these developments. This means that individuals have to "produce" their own meaning and sense of life and motivate themselves to follow this path. They have to choose which goals they want to pursue, which type of happiness they want to strive for and which risks and hardship, also of work, they are ready to accept. The answers of the dominant ideologies, which see man mainly as a pleasure or utility maximizer, are of little help there. If man's self-interest is understood in a purely material sense it leaves no perspectives for the social and even less for the spiritual realm and personal fulfilment. But to be truly creative man needs a deeply rooted belief that what he/she is doing is good not only for his/her material well-being, but also for his/her development as a person and, beyond of this, for others and the progress of society as a whole. Otfried Höffe, a German philosopher, has in this context spoken of a "hedonistic paradoxon": the more man strives for happiness in a purely egoistic sense the more happiness evades him and the more frustrated he becomes. The answer to the question of meaning of work is thereby not only of importance for the life of the individual but also for our culture as a whole. It is from this cultural perspective that Max Weber asked in the early decades of the past century the question of what will happen to our work ethos when the remaining resources of meaning- partly religious, partly secular - still present in our societies will evaporate. Teilhard de Chardin, one of the eminent mystics and religious thinkers of our century was preoccupied by the same question: In which way does

the loss of a framework of meaning influence man's motivation to work? And: which type of spirituality do we need to reopen the sources of meaning for our societies? Since without an answer to these questions, there remains a lack of perspective for the working lives in societies, in which work – as Hannah Arendt wrote – has become the main, or even only source of sense and meaning.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Modern Work Ethos and its Limitations**

In all societies of human history before modernity the individual found himself embedded in a dense cultural framework that was grounded in religion and that gave sense and meaning to his/her life. As Max Weber demonstrated in the three volumes of his "Economic Ethics of the World Religions" the main doctrines of the world religions Protestant Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Judaism and Islam formed the lifestyles, institutions, and the way men perceived their work in a rather distinctive way. The basic question that motivated this impressive sociological enterprise was: why did capitalism as the most efficient and rationalized form of business organization develop within the European cultural framework and not elsewhere? By this question he wanted to find an answer to the more existential question: What is the future of modern man and society? More concretely: What will happen to our culture and economic organization when the religious frameworks that have generated it collapse and the culturally and religiously given sources of meaning evaporate? Weber's answer to these questions was conceived as an implicit critique of Marx's materialism. This is already shown in his terminology: When Marx speaks of capitalism this is a devastating critic of modern society as a whole in the name of justice and the quasi-prophetic proclamation of the doomsday of this society. In Weber the term capitalism simply describes the highly rational way of business organization that came about as a result of wider rationalization processes in the European cultural context. His study on the "Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism" (which led to the studies on the other religions) is a congenial attempt to show that the socially influential doctrines of Protestantism (mainly of Calvinism) constituted the precondition for the development of a specific work ethos needed to bring about the dynamics of capitalism. This ethos rested on three pillars: the religious calling of each Christian to a specific status and work, the ascetic attitudes this demanded, and the emphasis placed on material wealth and success gained through personal work. This was a

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<sup>1</sup> H. Arendt, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, 4. Aufl., München 1985, 11 f.

breach of earlier ideas: 1) In medieval Christianity religious callings had been limited to the members of religious orders. Protestantism asserted that every Christian was to work for the honour of God and thus gave the highest possible dignity to all forms of work. 2) Not only was the idea of the calling extended to all Christians but also to the ascetic demands originally associated with it in the monastic traditions. Weber speaks of an inner-worldly asceticism as the motivating force for the rationalization of the lifestyle constituting the basis of capitalism. However, in this process also a shift of emphasis took place. The basic rule of the monastic ethos, the Benedictian rule "ora et labora" was changed into a "labora et ora" work becoming predominant over contemplation. It is first and foremost through and in work that God is glorified. The mystical dimension of faith is thus relegated to the background and work becomes important in itself. Without expounding the complex cultural reasons for this development it leads according to Weber to an ever more one-sided emphasis on the rationalization of lifestyles for which individual efficiency values like thriftiness in the use of time and material resources have priority over spiritual and social values. The latter are weakened because of the inherent individualism of the Protestant traditions. It should be noted here that Ignatian spirituality that grows out of the Catholic tradition at about the same time also newly defines the relationship between the mystic and work dimensions of faith through the famous "contemplative in action" (*contemplativus in actione*). 3) The third notion that Weber regards as central to the work ethos of capitalism is the emphasis placed on material success. The hypothesis he developed to explain this is somewhat daring theologically: According to the Calvinist doctrine the individual cannot contribute to his/her salvation. Condemnation and salvation both depend on the unfathomable will of God who saves and condemns *sola gratia*. This leads to an existential insecurity placing an unbearable burden on ordinary men. The popularized version, however, of the doctrine sees in material wealth accumulated through honest work a solid basis on which to answer the central question, whether one belongs to those elected or those damned and thus places a very high value on material wealth, which becomes – as also in the Old Testament – a sign of divine grace.

Three insights may be drawn from this Weberian analysis: 1) Forms of religiosity that influenced modern societies are characterized by a thinning out of the spiritual dimension that gives life and work an ultimate meaning and orientation allowing us to see them in the wider context of the goodness and unity of the creation. They are replaced by an emphasis on the rationalization of behaviour, on efficiency values, and success, which tend to become the ultimate goal of work. 2) An individualistic approach tends to neglect the social dimension of work and with it values of justice and love. This may even lead to an unchristian attitude

toward the poor, whose poverty is regarded as a consequence of their laziness and as a vice opposed to its high values of industriousness and efficiency. 3) (Material) success gained through work becomes a value in itself. Thereby, the more the originally religious values become secularized the more the individual himself is "thinned out": Individualism weakens his social life, and the emphasis on material wealth, which is regarded as a sign of election—not any more in God's but in the world's eyes, which is no less severe a judge will lead to the instrumentalization of the individual himself. Moreover, there lurks the question as to whether the Puritan efficiency values that are at the basis of our social and economic systems can survive once they lose their religious basis. The outcome of this thinning out of meaning is according to Weber's famous doctrine: "Technocrats without spirit, hedonists without heart, who in their nothingness think that they have reached, a never before attained level of humanity." We cannot but admit that Weber's rather pessimistic view of modernity corresponds in many ways with the reality of working life today. It is not without reason that the idea of a work-life-balance has become so prominent. This becomes even more so after the great theories have lost their plausibility and attraction. Whereas as G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, whose thinking formed the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, in their grand philosophies, still attributed an ultimate meaning to history in insisting on its good outcome, we are left with Weber's diagnosis of a situation that is one of a cultural crisis. It is this crisis of meaning that is the challenge to the spirituality of work for our time. The Weberian analysis shows that the answer has to be a rediscovery and appropriation of spiritual, social and personality values, basing them in an overall framework of meaning.

### **A Framework of Meaning as the Basis of a Spirituality of Work**

The question of the future of modern man and his work ethos is also at the center of the philosophical and spiritual reflections of the Jesuit and palaeontologist P. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Especially from his early writings it becomes evident that it is this existential concern that constitutes the basis of his later, highly differentiated intellectual system. Just as Max Weber (who was 17 years his elder) the question that preoccupied him was: What is the future of man in modern society? His answer could not have been given by Max Weber due to his secular background: Man will only have a future if he can find a universal framework of meaning. If he does not know the direction, he is to go he will not take any path further. "Man will never take a step forward in a direction which he knows to be closed. And it is exactly

this evil that troubles us.”<sup>2</sup> This diagnosis requires a new integral vision of man that encompasses all dimensions of the human being, particularly the spiritual one, i. e. that the meaning of human life is ultimately rooted in God as its creator. The precariousness of human activity in a universe and a history without an aim is the main concern of P. Teilhard de Chardins. In "Le phenomene humaine" (1938/40) he describes the situation of modern man as one off fundamental uncertainty. The discovery of the gigantic dimensions of the universe by modern science - which at the same time methodologically excludes questions of its telos - leaves man in a huge space without meaning. It is in this context the question arises: How can man continue to regard his life and actions as meaningful and valuable in a meaningless universe? The reason for the unrest of modern society is an uncertainty or a total lack of ultimate goals. But without such goals to motivate him/her, he/she will not be able to accomplish the task b for which he has been created. The evil from which we suffer is that without ultimate aims man will not carry on the evolution God has entrusted him with. He will rather fall into a nihilistic attitude that ultimately will paralyze life and actions. The belief in the evolution of the universe therefore is not first and foremost a scientific hypothesis, but an existential necessity: Without the belief that life has an ultimate goal man loses his orientation in the world. It is not material energy that makes him/her continue his work but a basic trust and love which are only possible on the basis of a belief in the goodness and meaningfulness of the whole of the world. It is in this context that Teilhard 's notion of progress – which has often been misinterpreted in a deterministic way - has to be understood. The belief in progress is an existential postulate so that man to continue his actions. It constitutes meaning in the medium of time and is the precondition for hope. If we are no more able to believe that what we do is valuable for the future of mankind and ourselves we will ultimately be discouraged: Teilhard goes so far as to suggest that to truly be creative man needs the certainty that his work has value for eternity, that it transcends time. This is an important insight in a time when the euphoric belief in progress that characterized the past two centuries is giving way to an attitude of growing scepticism. The hope in a golden age, in which scientific progress and the brotherhood of all men would go together, has not been realized and what remains is a deep sense of disillusionment and discouragement in our culture. The idea of enlightenment that man progresses toward more humanity - a secularized version of Christian eschatology – has lost its plausibility at the latest during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its barbaric backside and in view of the deep tensions in global society and the

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<sup>2</sup> L' Homme ne fera jamais un pas dans une direction qu' il sait etre bouchee. Et voila precisement le mal qui nous trouble." P. Teilhard de Chardin, Le phenomene humain (volume I des Oevres), Edition du Seuil, Paris 1955, 255f.

perversions that mankind has proved to be capable. What we need is a re-humanized version of progress that complements and transcends material and technical progress. The notion of progress has thus to be re-personalized and de-secularized so that its ultimate measure becomes the growth of the human person, his/her "being more" and not only having more (a notion Pope Paul VI has taken up in his encyclical *Populorum progressio*). In the Teilhardian terminology: the cosmogenesis and the biogenesis are to culminate in an anthropogenesis that means in the full development of the human potential of each and every man and woman. Because of the social nature of man this personalization is inseparably linked to socialization, the growing together of all human beings in cooperation and love. But what this humanization means is not self-evident: the personalization process has to take its measure in Christ as the perfect image of man. The anthropogenesis is thus backed and is to culminate in the Christigenesis, that is, in a Christianization of the world in the full sense of the word. The ultimate aim of progress that is deeply rooted in the transcendental dimension is Christ becoming all in all in the end of time. This truly Ignatian vision crowns the work of P. Teilhard de Chardin. But even without a personal Christian belief, the analysis itself as well as the idea of humanization remain valid answers to today's predicaments.

### **Work as Sanctification of the World**

The development of the human person and personalization are inseparably linked to man's work. Through work man not only becomes himself but also communicates with the world and with God. He thus becomes a co-creator in a dynamically evolving world. Each of his works and actions, albeit the most profane, contributes to a transformation of the world the ultimate aim of which is the mystic totality in Christ. This belief is echoed by the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II *Gaudium and Spes* that says that "man through his work... contributes to the completion of the work of creation and unites himself with the work of salvation of Jesus Christ" (GS 67). Work thus is a creative process of communication through which man, with all his passion, is to develop the potential of the world given to him by its creator and at the same time contribute to the humanization of himself and all men. To regain this wide and spiritual perspective of work seems a challenge in a time when through inner and outer conditions work is more and more seen as a job, a transitory occupation to satisfy material needs. The pitfall and prevalent deformation of the Christian work ethos is an attitude that concentrates on the ascetic value of work alone. It is an attitude of contempt for the world which John J. Murray has described in an article with the telling title: *Is it basket weaving?*

Such an attitude would be opposed to a Christian humanism which sees man as a co-creator of the world.

It is important to note that at the heart of the Teilhardian analysis lies a very wide concept of work. Work for him are outer actions, through which the material world is being transformed through the human mind and energy, as well as an inner work, through which we transform ourselves as persons as well as our social relations in the direction of greater humanness and goodness. Both kinds of work are intimately connected with suffering, brought about by inner and outer obstacles as well as by the failures which are part of our human lot. Thus it is not only and primarily our outer activities that constitute work as is the view of modern philosophy. This thought constitutes a forceful corrective to a one-sidedness view of work prevalent in the modern culture. Through this it is apt to give meaning to life as a whole beyond the narrow realm of working life. It corresponds to a notion of work that is also used e. g. in psychology when we talk of grief work. Hermeneutically, this wide view of work is grounded in Teilhard's Christian faith: there is a tale of the universe because God is its creator whose sanctity is communicated to all of creation. Because this is so we may act as co-creators and take part in its sanctification. Progress in the sense of Christianization of the world means the growth of the human being as a person and of the world through work in all its dimensions of activity. In this way the evolution as a continuous creation is prolonged until its ultimate completion and sanctification in God who in this process is himself in evolution.

### **The Role of Religion and Contemplation**

In modernity, religion and especially its mystic component expressed in contemplation and prayer have for a long time been neglected. Through an emphasis on work as outer activity only they have been regarded as irrelevant or even as an *Überbau*, which tends to hamper rather than strengthen active engagement in the transformation of the world. There is, however, a growing awareness that a sound spirituality is a help not a detriment to creative engagement and helps to protect the integrity of the person in view of the growing demands of working life. Once more it is instructive to turn back to Teilhard de Chardin for whom the role of religion and contemplation is twofold: to keep in contact with the ultimate aim of life and even more important to stimulate in him the energy and joy of life as a precondition for creative action. Religion is thus to maintain and reopen the sources of the value in the depth of human beings, and to nurture and develop these forces on which universal evolution depends. If Marx called religion an opium, a sedative for the people, this is a deformation, the real function of religion being to carry and stimulate the progress of life: The true religious



experiences of all religions lead to an ever-deeper communion with the world and the sources of life and love. Contemplation is to and can renew the energies of joy of life and action as well as of meaning. Teilhard de Chardin here, speaks, of a "gout de vie" (or gout. de vivre) or alternatively of a "gout de l'action (un gout de l'agir). that is, the meaning and the belief in the future of man being no abstract and intellectual notions. They rather deeply influence man's attitude toward life as a whole. The belief in the meaningfulness of life is to lead to a joy of life that finds its expression in the joy of acting – a notion practically disregarded in the modern analysis of work. Creative work has primarily to be motivated by joy and sense, not by fear or competition, which - as the Weberian analysis suggests – lie at the heart of modernity and often corresponds with the experience of present working life. The "gout de vie" as an inner disposition, physical as well as intellectual and affective, motivates a person to actively participate in the realization of human progress. It makes life appear interesting and good. It is a dynamic, constructive, and adventurous attitude toward life and thus also a motor for true human evolution. The gout de vie and de l'action can also be regarded as a synonym for love as an ultimate affirmation of the goodness of creation. Teilhard's vision of love strongly corresponds with that of Thomas Aquinas. It is the force that gives coherence to and on all levels of being. In its highest form, love as universal energy becomes the energy of personalization. In this sense the future of the world is organically linked to the transformation of the forces of hatred into forces of love. It is contemplation that brings us in contact with these forces of love and of life, contributing to the construction of the universe in its unity and goodness and giving it ultimate sense and meaning. This "Communion par l'action" (communion in action) finds its densest expression in the Eucharistic celebration, where the perichoresis of adoration and work, of sanctification and personalization, become tangible.

## **Conclusion**

The scope of questions described and the answers hinted at seem at first sight only marginally applicable to the everyday problems of working life. The day-to-day routine and the need to act and react at a considerable speed normally leave too little room for reflections that transcend immediate necessities. On the other hand, there is a growing awareness that life becomes more and more empty and meaningless when these ultimate questions are no longer asked. Job satisfaction may for certain periods of one's working life be guaranteed by the thrill of success, power, and activity as such. But everybody knows that the newness of these goods wears off. When this happens the experience of frustration is a clear sign that there is a need

for new goals and meaning. This holds true for the individual but also for whole societies. A spirituality of work should give answers to these questions and show how the personal vacuum experienced can be filled. As the Weberian analysis shows, the means that our culture and society have to offer to accomplish this, have become ever more thin and rudimentary. What is needed is an encompassing framework of meaning that can serve as the basis of the development of mature persons. Maturity thereby requires a dedication to goals that transcend humans and his/her personal needs and satisfaction. These goals together with the integrity and inner unity of the person are also a precondition for creative work. Here a spirituality of work that reflects on these frameworks and helps to internalize them in everyday life is ultimately needed.