Towards a new theology of work

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Alan Johnson
Social Policy Analyst
Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit
New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa Territory
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A better than real life discussion is said to have occurred in the 1950’s between Henry Ford II the president of the Ford Motor Company and Walter Reuther – a leader of the United Auto Workers Union. The two were said to have been visiting a recently completed car making plant which was highly automated and Ford asked Reuther ‘Walter, how are you going to get those robots to pay your union dues’. Quickly Reuther replied ‘Henry, how are you going to get them to buy your cars?’

There are perhaps several ironies in this story although the greatest one is that Henry Ford II had (if this story is remotely true) forgotten a lesson offered by his grandfather around the relationship between production and consumption.

One of Henry Ford’s most important innovations was what has become known as Fordism – that is the idea that mass production goes alongside mass consumption and that such consumption is only possible if those people producing things are paid well enough to be able to afford to buy them.

Through his relentless quest for efficiency Henry Ford reduced the cost of his Model T from $850 in 1908 to $360 in 1916 and by doing so brought cars and motoring into the lives of the Middle Class. But he also helped create the Middle Class when in 1914 he began paying his skilled mechanics $5 per day and in 1926 he introduced a five day 40 hour working week.

Fordism was one of the key ideas which brought about the widespread prosperity which a vast majority of people in western countries experienced during the post-War boom from the mid 1950’s probably through until the early 1980’s. Also associated with this boom and prosperity was the ascendancy of Keynesianism and the expansion of the welfare state under various forms of social democratic government.

Fordism also had a dark side which was in part around the discipline of the assembly line and with this the routinisation and de-skilling of work - changes which were argued were de-humanising. Subsequently of course this problem disappeared because robots replaced many of the workers in car plants - and other areas of manufacturing. This shift to robotics and automation more generally has meant a massive decline in
employment in industrial manufacturing and in some case the exporting of the remaining jobs to low-wage economies. This was the process of de-industrialisation and impacted particularly hard on communities which had been reliant on industrial manufacturing for employment and prosperity.

Much of this de-industrialisation occurred in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s around the same time as newly elected neo-liberal governments embarked on a programme which involved the liberalisation of the economy, the de-regulation of the finance sector and the privatisation of state assets and functions. The result of these changes has been the re-emergence of poverty as a permanent feature of our social landscape alongside the financialisation of the economy and rising indebtedness.

But the political economy of work is changing again. With emergent technologies around artificial intelligence, robotics and cognitive computing there is a significant risk of rising unemployment and with this the dislocation and alienation which often attends this. This paper is an attempt to build an new, and somewhat alternative ‘theology of work’ which might provide a moral basis for influencing or at least interpreting these changes.

THE VIRTUE OF WORK AND THE DIGNITY OF WORKERS

The theology of work might be seen to draw from two traditions – one Protestant and the other Catholic. On the Protestant side we have the much vaunted Protestant Ethic or Protestant Work Ethic which is said to have been derived from the teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin amongst others. On the Catholic side we have Rerum Novarum (The Condition of Labour) the first papal encyclical published in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII and Laborem Exercens (On Human Work) from Pope John Paul II in 1981.

The idea of the Protestant Ethic or Protestant Work Ethic was promoted by Max Weber in his book The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. ‘Weber famously argued that the Protestant Reformation—with John Calvin’s and Martin Luther’s emphasis on individual responsibility, hard work, thrift, providence, honesty, and deferred gratification at its center—shaped the spirit of capitalism and helped it succeed. Calvinism and the sects that grew out of it, especially Puritanism and John Wesley’s Methodism in England, were religions chiefly of the middle and working classes, and the virtues they promoted led to a new kind of affluence and upward mobility, based
It is difficult finding in Luther’s or Calvin’s theologies explicit reference to the need for personal responsibility and hard work although it is perhaps easier to see where such associations have evolved out of these theologies. Luther proposed a more personal relationship with God and one which was not mediated by the Church. This subsequently inspired or at least emboldened the German Peasant Wars of 1524 to 1526 and the publication of the Twelve Articles – one of the first expositions of human and civil rights. To these events Luther responded in his unequivocally titled essay Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants in which he claims:

‘baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who, of their own free will, do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4:38’.

Luther – despite his revolutionary talk was squarely on the side of the powerful and wealthy.

Both Luther and Calvin subscribed to Sola fide – the idea that justification, or the removal of guilt and sin, is entirely an act of God and that it is based on faith. Catholics on the other hand generally believe that justification is achieved initially through baptism and subsequently through acts or works which fulfill the will of God. Such acts include charity. For Protestants, and particularly Calvanists, such acts were unnecessary – just faith is needed. What is more, the acts of those who had been justified or gained salvation were simply demonstrations of this faith. It is easy then to see how behaviours such hard work, thrift and deferred gratification can be interpreted as demonstrations of faith and so defined as virtues in themselves.

While Weber’s thesis that capitalism was the fruit of Protestantism has some intellectual appeal – especially for wealthy Protestants, his claims are just plain wrong as historical facts. For example capitalism pre-dated the Reformation by several centuries - even in Northern Europe where Weber would have us believe modern capitalism was born. Capitalism and especially the ideas of monetised trade, credit and economic specialisation grew out of the Italian city-states from the 14th Century onwards. By the ninth century Catholic monastic orders had successfully built an ascetic tradition based both on work and spiritual reflection and from this enterprises which have been
described as examples of ‘religious capitalism’ iii. It is out of this monastic tradition that early examples of framing work as a virtue emerge. For example Saint Benedict in the sixth century offered in his famous rule:

’Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as prayerful reading. . . . When they live by the labour of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks’ iv

Saint Benedict’s instruction has echoes of the old adage that the devil makes work for idle hands. This adage appears to have originated from a famous directive from fourth century theologian Saint Jerome who suggested that we ‘do something so that the Devil may always find you busy’. But whatever its motivation Benedict’s elevation of work as a virtuous thing stands in strong contrast with the framing of work as a burden and punishment in Genesis 3

17 To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

This is grim stuff.

Catholic Social Teaching more or less began with Rerum Novarum (of new things). It seems from its opening comments that the main purpose of this encyclical was to undermine support for socialism and the increasing radicalism of trade unions while at the same restating the importance of private property, the limits of state power and the primacy of family life and of faith. Reference to the dignity of labour does however emerge as a key idea such as in the following paragraph:

’As for those who possess not the gifts of fortune, they are taught by the Church that in God’s sight poverty is no disgrace, and that there is nothing to be ashamed of in earning their bread by labor. This is enforced by what we see in Christ Himself, who, “whereas He was rich, for our sakes became poor” and who, being the Son of God, and God Himself, chose to seem and to be considered the son of a carpenter - nay, did not disdain to spend a great part of His life as a carpenter Himself. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?”’
Reference here is made to 2 Corinthians 8:9 and it is worth noting too that Jesus himself was a manual worker. Elsewhere of course (Luke 4:18 for example) Jesus makes very clear his preference for the poor and we can probably safely assume here that such a preference was also for manual workers given that most would have been poor as well.

The tone in Rerum Novarum is however somewhat patronising, more-or-less saying ‘Oh well it’s not so bad being a poor worker – after all Jesus was as well’

Laborem Exercens while coming 90 years after Rerum Novarum now appears dated in its argument. Laborem Exercens addresses issues such as the dignity of work and the Gospel of Work vi although one its reference points is awkward especially in light of our growing ecological crisis. The dignity or work and of workers according to Laborem Exercens rests firstly on the dignity of humans made as they are in God’s image and through God’s favour (Genesis 1:27) and secondly on the idea that God grants dominion over the earth to humans (Gen 1:28). In Section 9 the encyclical starts

‘It is now appropriate to touch upon, at least in a summary way, certain problems that more closely define the dignity of human work, in that they make it possible to characterize more fully its specific moral value. In doing this we must always keep in mind the biblical calling to “subdue the earth”, in which is expressed the will of the Creator that work should enable man to achieve that “dominion” in the visible world that is proper to him. …

Work is a good thing for man-a good thing for his humanity-because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being”.

As noted below Catholic Social Teaching makes amends for the anthropocentric view with the beautifully written Laudato si’ which was issued by Pope Francis in 2015

In summary then the theology of work – either from a Protestant or Catholic perspective is not particularly compelling. The idea of the Protestant work ethic can be seen as an ideological manifestation borne of a desire by people such as Weber to privilege some cultural values which are conducive to capitalism by framing these as exclusively Protestant values. That certain behaviours or traits such as perseverance, temperance and frugality have been identified with Protestantism and particularly Calvinism may be due to a convenient tautology. This tautology is based on an
acceptance that justification is entirely due to faith and that the behaviours of these faithful are indicative of their grace and salvation. Thus any behaviours which were commonplace amongst the believers can be held to be virtuous and a sign of God’s work.

However the idea of work as virtuous preceded this tautology by a millennia and may have been couched in ideas of temptation and sinfulness rather than anything innate in work itself.

The Catholic pedigree of work is equally un-compelling. The dignity of workers began as something of an afterthought in attempts by the 18th century Catholic Church to refute socialism and to legitimise wealth and private property. Ninety years later Catholic social teaching argued that the dignity of work was related to the beliefs that humans are made in God’s image and granted dominion over God’s creation.

While such an interpretation of the theology of work may be partial and ignorant of the contexts of the times, the opportunities for a more considered and better informed theology emerges as we contemplate the future of work and the role which theology can play in framing this future

**THE FUTURE OF WORK**

It has been argued that we have entered a second machine age – a period where machines themselves do the thinking through such devices as artificial intelligence and machine learning. This second machine age poses undeniable threats to the current distribution of occupations and skills within labour markets. As Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee argue in their book *The Second Machine Age*

‘(R)apid and accelerating digitization is likely to bring economic rather than environmental disruption, stemming from the fact that as computers get more powerful, companies have less need for some kinds of workers. Technological progress is going to leave behind some people, perhaps even a lot of people, as it races ahead. As we’ll demonstrate, there’s never been a better time to be a worker with special skills or the right education, because these people can use technology to create and capture value. However, there’s never been a worse time to be a worker with only ‘ordinary’ skills and abilities to offer, because computers, robots, and other digital technologies are acquiring these skills and abilities at an extraordinary rate.’

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Such dire warnings are not new in history although the prospect that machines are now able to think intelligently poses a uniquely new set of threats for workers – both skilled and unskilled. For example the idea of machine learning now means that computers are able to acquire knowledge in the same way in which babies do by receiving large volumes of data such as images, impressions or experiences and to learn from these. This means that computers no longer need to be programmed to perform certain tasks but can increasingly learn these tasks – more or less independently.

However some futurists argue that the future is not as bleak as all that for workers and 'that the interplay between machine and human comparative advantage allows computers to substitute for workers in performing routine, codifiable tasks while amplifying the comparative advantage workers in supplying problem-solving skills, adaptability, and creativity. The frontier of automation is rapidly advancing, and the challenges to substituting machines workers in tasks requiring flexibility, judgment, and common sense remain immense. In many cases, machines both substitute for and complement human labor. Focusing only on what is lost misses a central economic mechanism by which automation affects the demand for labor: raising the value of the tasks that workers supply uniquely’

Essentially the argument runs that technology saves people from doing routine or mundane and compliments labour and its skills where it cannot replace it. This means that in considering the future of work we may be unwise to focus on occupations which might be replaced by technology but on how occupations will be changed by technology. Chui, Manyika and Miremadi suggest that:

'Very few occupations will be automated in their entirety in the near or medium term. Rather, certain activities are more likely to be automated, requiring entire business processes to be transformed, and jobs performed by people to be redefined, much like the bank teller’s job was redefined with the advent of ATMs’

However, that technology has not in the past created widespread and permanent so-called technological unemployment does not mean that it will not do so in the future. It is not necessary to believe in technological determinism – the idea that society is shaped by technology rather than society shaping technology, to accept that many of the drivers of technology development and application are about saving labour, reducing productions costs and increasing profits. There is a risk then the emerging technologies will not be as benign as it is suggested by the some futurists. This risk
may mean that society is shaped to be more materialistic and perhaps more polarised by these technologies. There is perhaps a role for theology to assist in shaping an alternative future.

A THEOLOGY OF WORK AS A NEW MORAL COMPASS

A new theology of work may be useful in offering society a moral compass for its journey to an alternative future which involves and perhaps embraces emergent technologies such as artificial intelligence, cognitive computing and machine learning. It is however a challenge to offer theology as the foundation for a moral compass within a secular society. This means that some overall ideas may need to have both a theological and a secular face where by well-considered theological positions are expressed in a summary way as secular values.

A new theology of work which addresses the moral challenges posed by emergent technologies especially as they affect work might have the following three areas of focus:

- The common good
- Human dignity
- The responsibility of wealth

The common good.

Paragraph 229 of Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato si* beautifully sets out the need for a renewed focus on the common good as the basis for addressing ecological and societal challenges.

*We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good. When the foundations of social life are corroded, what ensues are battles over conflicting interests, new forms of violence and brutality, and obstacles to the growth of a genuine culture of care for the environment.*

Scripturally references to the common good are a little mixed and there is perhaps a need to distinguish between what might be seen to be contributions to community –
such as in Acts 2: 44-45 where the disciples are encouraged to live communally, as opposed to generosity to strangers/foreigners as in Leviticus 19:9 (reaping a complete harvest from your land) or Luke 10:25-37 (the good Samaritan) and the contribution to a common resource as is set out in Genesis 1.

**Human dignity**

The idea of human dignity sits well within Christian teaching given the starting idea in Genesis 1:26 that humans are made in God’s image and in Leviticus 11:45 that we are made holy because God is holy. Jesus’ preference for the poor and vulnerable such as in Matthew 19:14 and 25:40-45 is worth emphasising also given that these technological changes will, at least initially produce further unemployment and perhaps a polarisation of incomes and wealth.

**The responsibility of wealth**

Technological change which is driven by a desire to reduce costs and increase profits will – at least initially result in a further concentration of wealth. Such a concentration poses challenges around who will pay taxes if on one hand there are fewer employed workers and on the other hand the new technologies are owned by foreign owned interests. A new narrative around the responsibilities of wealth perhaps needs to be created. While there are several biblical references to the spiritual risks and burdens of wealth, such as Matthew 19:23 (the rich young man) Matthew 6:24 (serving two masters) and Leviticus 25: 35-37 (usury), it may be best to frame wealth and its ownership as having moral responsibilities associated with them. Perhaps references such as Matthew 25:1430 (the parable of the talents) may be best for this

**CONCLUSION**

The emergent technologies around artificial intelligence, robotics and increasing computer power pose a number of social risks. Prominent amongst these risks are those around rising unemployment and further polarisation of wealth and income. Without some moral compass to influence or at least interpret these changes, societies such as Australia and New Zealand will simply be buffered by a form of technological determinism where important social and economic choices are made more or less by default by those who own the technologies. There may not be widespread popular or political support for such a direction but without alternatives such a future may be difficult to avoid.
While Christian values and frameworks cannot really be used explicitly in an attempt to reshape this direction - these values do have appeal in a secular world albeit that the scriptural references may not be widely popular. Use of important Christian values around human dignity, the common good and the responsible use of wealth have some secular appeal. These could usefully be offered as a basis for critiquing and perhaps reframing debate on the direction and purpose of these emerging technologies.

Bibliography


iv The Rule of Saint Benedict – Chapter 48

v Rerum Novarum para 23.


