

## FROM THE BIBLE TO A HISTORY OF NON-WORK

*Editorial note:* This article originally appeared as the first of a series of seven on the theme of work in *Foi et Vie* (July, 1980), a journal edited by Ellul. The second article, "Travail et vocation," attributed to the pseudonym of Y. Veoulay, had previously been published in English as "Work and Calling," *Katallagete: Be Recon-ciled* 4, nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1972), pp. 8-16. The series contains four more articles by Ellul, three of them under pseudonyms: "Ideology of Work," "Technical Possibilities and Work," "Work and Attitudes Toward Work in 1990," and "Why, Why Do We Work?" The list of books "by the same author" at the end of *La Parole humiliée* labels this special issue of *Foi et Vie* "the equivalent of a book" on the "theology of work and the modern world."

I scarcely know a biblical text which presents work as valuable, good, or virtuous. It is necessary to be clear on this. In the Bible work is a necessity, a constraint, a punishment, except in a few, unusual texts. Of course, everyone knows the story of Genesis 2, in which humanity, before the break with God, was called to cultivate and to guard the Garden of Eden. Hence, the whole battery of theologians who find in this text the origins of work and who thus claim to have proof that work is part of human "nature." What I would like to point out, however, is the paradox that this original notion includes none of the characteristics of work! True, cultivation is required, but it has little utility, because the Garden already flourishes on its own without any particular human help. Also, it is necessary "to guard" the Garden, but from whom? We will not enter into a debate on the pre-existence of evil in creation; of this evil I find no trace in the Bible. There is no enemy there, no "principle of evil," no Satan. There is only the serpent, not a mythical or meta-physical serpent, just a simple animal. Nevertheless, Adam is told to cultivate and to guard, to concern himself with functions perfectly useless and unnecessary. This is neither law, constraint, nor necessity. At the same time the distinction between these activities and play does not yet exist. One is not able to speak of *work* in the ordinary sense.

After the break between God and humanity work as such appears, that is, as something necessary and harsh. The character of harshness is generally insisted upon (“By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread” — and, further, it should be recalled that the related word “labor” traditionally refers to childbirth, and that this “work” of the woman also becomes harsh). Therefore, work in the biblical narrative is never presented as a joyous accomplishment, a human blossoming, but as a reality which is difficult, exhausting, and painful. Also, in my interpretation of the Bible, work is necessary because a person cannot live without working. It is not a “natural law” but a constraint of the precarious condition in which human beings find themselves. It becomes impossible to live without constraint, to live spontaneously, playfully. The activity of work is neither free nor pleasant, and is fundamentally different from play. When we speak of “necessity” we imply the opposite of liberty. One must reject the sense of necessity which is assimilated to the good or the legitimate (a sense, for example, which leads to the notion of legitimate defense or to a just war in which the idea of necessity becomes an excuse or justification). Work that is inevitable is not a free creativity, a meaning I hardly find in the biblical texts on work.

Of course, for example in Proverbs, there are texts which urge one to work; there we find a condemnation of laziness, but looking carefully, there is also an awareness that it is a necessity for survival to which we are condemned. And what of Paul’s famous words — “Those who do not work should not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10) — which are always triumphantly cited to prove the excellence of work? This is exactly a necessity: to eat, it is necessary to work. That is the point. No virtue, no value is involved. Also, it is much better for peace to work rather than to steal, live in disorder, and be occupied with foolishness. Further, there is reference to *another* value (the peace among us) and not to that of work. By contrast, we are able to find numerous texts, especially in Ecclesiastes, in which work is miserable, prostrating, foolishness, something which engenders jealousy, and goes on forever. But it is not this I want to consider.

In fact, two theological points need to be noticed. On one side, work is not in itself an obedience to God but, as in all things, is able to be done for the glory of God. The other point is more decisive. Work, biblically speaking, does not in itself, by itself, or in some mechanical cause-and-effect way bring about results, money, rewards, profit. The biblical teaching is radical: You should work. Simply that. And God, if he wants, will grant the rewards, the results. The product of work is always a *gift*, freely given, not obligatory, coming from God alone. And it is on this condition that all of the sacrifices and offerings are made. Work remains, therefore, chancy and uncertain; it is not automatically gratifying. Further, God is able to give to those who do nothing, to those whose

work does not necessarily yield tangible results. We are here very far from any enthusiasm for work!

This biblical perspective, which some would understand as the Word of God, is often considered to reflect a momentary stage of civilization or of the written text. Now I believe it necessary to dispel a common mistake. Primitive human beings are habitually regarded as living in perpetual famine, as spending all their time attempting to survive (from which view derives the *constraining* and *uncertain* character of work). However, more and more studies demonstrate the contrary. Economists studying primitive cultures, ethnographers, and historians of ancient civilizations now argue that those in prehistoric times, like people in many traditional societies, lived in a certain natural abundance. The human population was very sparse and scattered, with a superabundant supply of fruit, fish, game, etc., and human beings had to spend relatively little time finding nourishment. Not only was survival not precarious, but the work was light.<sup>1</sup> It was in this way that traditional societies were sustained throughout history.

Moreover, we should not allow ourselves to be misled by the question of slave labor. Slaves in antiquity had nothing in common with the blacks of the West Indies in the 17th and 18th centuries, whose condition was atrocious. By contrast, Greek and Roman slaves were not weighted down with work. Their chores were generally light, and they had a great deal of leisure time. Slavery was more a condition of the deprivation of liberty or citizenship than of work. Considering the number of slaves needed to work a piece of land, it is easy to understand the low productivity. Further, current scholarship emphasizes that slaves, since they represented capital, were used carefully and sparingly. And many slaves practiced important professions (lawyers, doctors, teachers, businessmen) and had access to upper administrative levels. But I do not want to paint a general portrait of the condition of slaves. It is enough to emphasize that slaves were not crushed with work, any more than were free artisans. The “average” work difference between those who did nothing and slaves was negligible in ancient societies. Of course, there were exceptional cases like galley slaves and slaves in the mines (salt mines and those at Laurium, for example), but it must be remembered that these slaves were condemned criminals and that it was only as offenders that they carried out dangerous or exhausting work.

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<sup>1</sup>See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972); Marvin Harris, *Culture, People, Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology*, 4th edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); Lizet, *L'Economie primitive* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978); E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer, A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (London: Oxford, 1974); and Georges Hubert de Radkowski, *Les Jeux du désir, de la techniques à l'économie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979).

Finally, these societies had periods of crisis, of famine, of limited resources, but such periods were exceptional, often occurring at times of sudden change in climate, over-population, or ravaging war. On the whole, people in primitive societies were not permanently threatened by famine. Marx's conception of the human being as above all a worker, obligated to work for survival, merely reflects the belief of his own time, which was dazzled by the progress from the 17th to the 19th centuries in stemming famine and suffering through human work in the previous centuries. I am not here falling into the opposite error of believing that these past times were pleasant. I know the evils, the abuses, the tortures, the epidemics, etc. I am speaking here only of work, and I say that work as we understand it existed to a small degree. In the most general terms, the ideal human life involved the total absence of work. Work was not invested with any moral value. On the contrary, it was the mark of an inferior condition, of degradation (in that it was negation of liberty, being of the order of necessity!). The ideal of the free Roman, not just of the patrician, or the rich, but of all citizens, was leisure — not laziness or rest, but a certain conception of life. Leisure [*otium*] is not an emptiness but involves human relations, conversation, discussion of political issues, participation in numerous assemblies, societies and associations — therefore, a life dedicated to the social and political, not absorbed by work. Work was a negative quality — a “non-leisure” [*neg-otium*] the absence of leisure, the absence of a free life. This idea of work as harsh, difficult, and degrading we find over and over again, in varying degrees, in different times and places. No society was ever dedicated to work. Of course, work was an ever-present reality. But work did not cease to appear heavy and unbalanced until the town grew to be of great importance. With the development of urban life, work becomes more indispensable and, ironically, less and less rewarding.

But it is useful to consider the theological perspective of the Middle Ages. Of course, among the numerous theologians, one is able to find texts praising work. But I do not believe these are typical or that they express the common viewpoint. It seems that work was habitually considered from two points of view. First, there is the idea that humanity has been sentenced to work which preserves the traditional judgment (harsh, enslaving, etc. . . .),<sup>2</sup> but as a just condemnation from God. Therefore, it is necessary to work in order to accept the human condition decreed by God, that is the natural condition. Further, this is written into the theology of suffering, of the mystical union with the suffering of Christ and the redemptive value of human suffering. It is, essen-

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<sup>2</sup>Let us remember that the French word “travail” (work) comes from the low Latin: *tripalium*. “three stakes.” Some have understood this as referring to an instrument of torture. But nothing confirms such an interpretation. It seems, rather, that it was a space to contain and to lock up recalcitrant horses, cows, etc.

tially, from this perspective that work is considered something positive. It is painful, prostrating, exhausting, and *the cause of this* must be received positively because, just like sickness, infirmity, etc., it is an occasion to be in communion with the sufferings of Jesus and a way for a person to work out his salvation. When examining theological texts favorable to work, it is necessary to remember such a dimension. The other aspect suggests that, in all cases, lowly work may be ennobled if it is offered directly to God. And if people are put to work constructing cathedrals or in monasteries by rules imposing work on all, this is nevertheless a suffering that one accepts for the glory of God.

In other words, when work is considered *in itself*, in its natural reality, it is always something evil, to be suffered, disagreeable. But as part of a total life before God, it is invested with a value external to itself and was able to take on a positive role in the Christian life, in which all that we make is offered to the glory of God. Still, no society before ours was dedicated to work.

Ours is at once an age of great creativity and of poverty. This looks like a paradox because we hold onto the opposite idea, believing that in the past human beings lacked everything and that technical development produces abundance, although it is actually necessary to look at things otherwise. The science of economics produces scarcity or poverty. We are a society which has been from its origins a creator manqué. Clearly, our industrial production has been massive, but at the same time we have exhausted natural resources such as the air, water, and other primary elements. It is important to evaluate these relations. The more we work, the more we exhaust the spontaneous wealth of nature, and the more we want to consume ever more complex and glorious goods. And this demands that new forces of work become engaged in new processes of production. The history of human society, as I have said, was the history of non-work, which our age has abandoned. The choices regarding work may be consciously formulated as follows: to work more and to consume more, or to consume less and to rest, play, pass time in conversation. Typically, traditional societies adopted the latter orientation. We are the first society to have dedicated ourselves totally to work, which calls for more and more primary resources and their consumption, with the result that an apparent abundance becomes an organization of scarcity, immediately or in the future (through exhaustion of the soil and its resources).

As an initial impact of this excess of work, we moved to take over foreign countries. Their fragile economies, which required careful handling, we habitually destroyed. Because of the need to expand our work (often referred to as capitalism and technique, which is not wrong, although the whole is organized around the two poles of work and money), we have replaced mixed farming, food producing cultures, etc., with single-crop farming, monocultures. This was profitable for sustain-

ing our own industries but catastrophic for the people of those cultures (who were forced, for example, to import the goods needed to sustain their lives). Or, if we did not disrupt their cultural integrity, we destroyed their basic resources, which were superabundant for their small populations — as was the case with the seals and the whales for the Eskimos and all the peoples of the arctic. In these cultures we were in the presence of a minutely organized life with an admirable economic equilibrium (which had, further, produced very refined social institutions) founded on exact proportions of consumption and reproduction, with the greatest possible economy of effort. Having been brought to birth like a kind of “miracle of civilization,” we came into these countries like bulldozers, turning everything upside down in the name of work, industry, and progress. The history of humanity had been one of moderation, sometimes of defiance, of work. We have wholly changed that. We have become devoted to work and to our works.

*Translated by* DAVID LOVEKIN

#### **TEMPLE** (continued from page 42)

Karl Barth: No, it's one or the other. If you want to spell out what the hymn means, it takes at least thirteen volumes.

Then, at the end of his chapter on “Study” in *Evangelical Theology*, Barth writes:

In conclusion, one marginal comment is needed about the entire theme of study. All those on the left or on the right, whose spirits are all too cheerful and naive, may and should repeatedly discover anew in that study of theology that everything theological is somewhat more *complicated* than they would like it to be. But these spirits who are all too melancholic and hypercritical should discover and rediscover that everything here is also much more *simple* than they, with furrowed hope, thought necessary to suppose.<sup>14</sup>

To my mind, therein lies the greatness of Jacques Ellul and the lesson for those who read him.

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<sup>14</sup>Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1964), pp. 162-163.