

Giving meaning to work: the spiritual challenge of our time

Ingeborg Gabriel, Institute for Social Ethics

University of Vienna, Faculty of Catholic Theology

ingeborg.gerda.gabriel@univie.ac.at

***Abstract:* We experience in our social as well as our working life increasingly a drying out of those sources which give meaning and sense. The paper argues that this is the final stage of the process of rationalization as described by Max Weber. The ends modern man as the agent of business life pursues are narrowed down to efficiency values and success. Spiritual and social values, which ultimately give meaning to life, are relegated to the background. But can those remnant values survive if they are not embedded in a wider framework of sense and meaning? This was also the question of Weber's contemporary P. Teilhard de Chardin. He shows in his work that only if we are able to give a new and personalized meaning to progress and see our own lives in a wide framework of sense, will we continue to work for the betterment and sanctification of the world. It is the role of religion to keep open the sources of life and give a framework of meaning to man. This should also be the intention of a modern spirituality of work.**

Introduction

At the end of this century our world is undergoing drastic transformations, which leave no area of our lives unaffected. They can particularly be felt in the world of business and affect our attitude towards work as such. Consequences of this development are a growing competition which tends to erode moral values, an exaggerated pressure to succeed which may become destructive for the physical, moral and spiritual integrity of the person and an increasing instability and insecurity of working conditions which negatively affect the working motivation. It is to these and similar problems that a spirituality of work has to give an answer.

There is, however, an even more profound question with which our contemporary societies and working life are confronted: the drying up of sources of meaning, the loss of a knowledge of man's whereabouts and whereto, which deeply affects our social fabric as a whole and our lives as acting persons. The technical and material changes which take place at an ever growing speed are no longer connected with socially accepted ultimate goals giving orientation to these developments. This means that individuals have to "produce" their own meaning and to motivate themselves. They have to choose which goals they want to pursue, which type of happiness they want to strive for. The answer of the leading ideologies, which see man mainly as a pleasure or utility maximizer are of little help. 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. But to become truly creative man needs a deeply-rooted belief that what he is doing is good not only for his material well-being, but for his development as a person and beyond this for others and the progress of society as a whole? O. Höffe has in this context spoken of a "hedonistic paradox": 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 the 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 part of this century the question of what will happen to our work ethos when the remaining meaning - partly religious, partly secular - which is still present in our societies will have evaporated. Teilhard de Chardin as one of the eminent mystics and religious thinkers of our century was preoccupied with 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?

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 which was grounded in religion and which gave sense and meaning to his life. As Max Weber has demonstrated in the three volumes of "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen" the main doctrines of the great world religions - protestantism, confucianism, hinduism, buddhism, ancient judaism and islam respectively - formed the life-styles, institutions and the way men perceived their work in a rather distinctive way. The question which 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? Through this he wanted to find an answer to the more existential question: What will be the future of modern man and society? More concretely: What will happen to our culture and economic organisation when the religious frameworks which have generated it collapse, e.g. when the culturally and religiously given sources of meaning evaporate?

Weber's answer to these questions was conceived as an implicit critique of Marx. This shows already 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 which 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 Calvinism) were the precondition for the development of the specific work ethos needed to bring about the dynamics of capitalism. It rested on three pillars: the religious calling of each Christian to a specific status and work, the ascetism this calling demanded and the emphasis that was placed on material wealth and success gained through this work.

1) In medieval Christianity a religious calling had been limited to the members of the religious orders. Protestantism asserted that every Christian was to work to honour God and thus gave the highest possible dignity to all forms of work. 2) Not only the idea of the calling was extended to all Christians also the ascetic demands originally associated with it in the monastic tradition. Weber speaks of an innerworldly asceticism which was the motivating force for the rationalization of the life-style constituting the basis of capitalism. However, in this process also a shift of emphasis took place. The basic rule of the monastic ethos, the Benedictine rule "ora et labora" 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 to an ever more one-sided emphasis on a rationalization of lifestyle 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 which grows out of the same time within the Catholic tradition newly defines the relationship between the mystic and work dimensions through the famous formulas "contemplativus in actione" or: to find God in all things.

3) The third notion which Weber sees as central for the work ethos of capitalism is the emphasis it places on material success. The hypothesis he developed to explain this is somewhat daring: According to the Calvinist doctrine the individual cannot contribute anything to his salvation which - just as condemnation - depends on the unfathomable will of God who saves and condemns *sola gratia*. This leads to an existential insecurity which places 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.

Three insights may be drawn from this Weberian analysis: 1) The forms of religiosity which influenced modern society most are already characterized by a drastic thinning out of the spiritual dimension which 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. It is replaced by an overemphasis on the rationalization of behaviour, on efficiency values and success which tend to become the ultimate goal. 2) An individualistic approach tends to neglect the social dimension and with it values of justice and love. In Calvinism this may even lead to an utterly un-Christian attitude towards the poor whose poverty is regarded as a consequence of the sin of laziness, e.g. of the vice directly opposed to its highest values: 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 - leads to the instrumentalization of the individual himself. Moreover there lurks the question whether the Puritan efficiency values which are at the basis of our social and economic systems can long survive once they lose their religious basis. The outcome of this

thinning out of meaning are 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 pessimist view of modernity corresponds in many ways with the reality of our working life. This becomes even more so after the great theories have lost their plausibility and attraction. Whereas F.W.Hegel and K.Marx, whose thinking formed the 19th and the 20th 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 our situation as that of a cultural crisis. It is this fundamental crisis of meaning which is the challenge for the spirituality of work for our time. The Weberian analysis shows that the answer to the crisis has to be the rediscovery and appropriation of spiritual and personality values, and with them as 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 the center of the philosophical and spiritual reflections of P. Teilhard de Chardin. Especially from his early writings it becomes evident that it is an existential concern which constitutes the basis of his later highly differentiated intellectual system. Just as Max Weber (who was seventeen years his elder) the question that preoccupied him was: what is the future of man in modern society? The answer he gives could not have been given by Max Weber due to his secular background: Man will only have a future if he can find again a universal framework of meaning. This requires a new integral vision of man which encompasses all dimensions of the human being particularly the spiritual one, e.g. the acknowledgement 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 telos

In "Le phenomene humaine" (1938/40) Teilhard describes the situation of modern man as one of fundamental uncertainty. The discovery of the gigantic dimensions of the universe by modern science - which methodologically excludes questions of its telos - leaves man in a universe without meaning. It is in this context that the question has to be asked: How can man continue to regard his life and actions as meaningful and valuable in a meaningless universe? "Ce qui, tout à la racine, inquiète le monde moderne, puis-je ajouter maintenant, c'est de ne pas être sûr, et de ne pas voir comment il pourrait jamais être sûr, qu'il y a une issue, - l'issue convenable -, à cette Evolution." The reason for the unrest of modern society is an uncertainty or a total lack of ultimate goals. But without goals to motivate him, will man be able to accomplish the task for which he has been created? "A la tâche remise en nos mains de pousser plus loin la Noogénèse nous ne plierons jamais plus sinon à une condition : c'est que l'effort qu'on nous demande ait des chances de réussir et de nous mener aussi loin que possible. ... L'Homme ne fera jamais un pas dans une direction qu'il sait être bouchée. Et voilà précisément le mal qui nous trouble." The evil from which we suffer is that without goals man will not carry on the evolution God has entrusted him with. He will rather fall into a nihilistic attitude which ultimately will paralyse his 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 must lose his orientation in the world. It is not material energy which makes man continue his work but a basic trust and love which is only possible on the basis of a belief in its goodness and meaningfulness: "Même sur des monceaux d'énergie matérielle, même sous l'aiguillon de la peur ou d'un désir immédiats, l'Humanité, *sans le goût de vivre*, cesserait bientôt d'inventer et de créer pour une oeuvre qu'elle saurait d'avance condamnée. Et, atteinte à la source même de l'élan qui la soutient, de nausée ou par révolte, elle se désagrègerait et tomberait en poussière."

It is in this context that Teilhard's notion of progress - often misinterpreted in a deterministic way - has to be understood. The belief in progress is an existential postulate for man to continue his action. "Je crois que nous bougeons, que nous avançons....Je crois que c'est une foi nécessaire à notre action." 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 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 a value for eternity, e.g. that it transcends time.

This is an important insight in a time when the euphoric belief in progress which 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 disillusion and discouragement in our culture. The idea of enlightenment that man progresses towards more humanity - a secularized version of Christian eschatology - lost its plausibility in view of the deep tensions in global society and the perversions of mankind has proved capable of in this century. What we need is a re-humanized version of progress which complements and transcends material and technical progress: "Le progrès - être plus, ou bien il ne signifie rien." The notion of progress has to be re-personalized and de-secularized so that its ultimate measure becomes the growth of the human person, his/her "being more". In the Teilhardian terminology: the kosmogogenesis and biogenesis are to culminate in an anthropogenesis which means the full development of the human potential of each and every man. Because of the social nature of man this personalization is inseparably linked to socialization, e.g. the growing together of all human beings in cooperation and love. But what human means is not self-evident: the personalization process has to take its measure in Christ as the perfect image of man. The anthropogenesis is linked back to and is to culminate in the Christogenesis, e.g. in a Christianization of the world in the full sense of the word. The ultimate aim of progress which is deeply rooted in the transcendental dimension is Christ becoming all in all in the end of time.

Work as sanctification of the world

The development of the human person, e.g. personalization, is inseparably linked to man's work. Through work man not only becomes himself but also communicates with the world - and with God. He becomes co-creator in a dynamically evolving world. Each

of his works albeit the most profane contributes to a transformation process the ultimate aim of which is the mystic totality in Christ. This belief is echoed by Gaudium and spes which 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 it by its creator and at the same time to 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, e.g. a transitory occupation to satisfy material needs.

The pitfall which constitutes the prevalent deformation of the Christian work ethos is an attitude which concentrates on the ascetic value of work. It is an attitude of ultimate contempt for the world which C. J. Murray described in his article: Is it basket weaving as being opposed to Christian humanism. It is important to note that at the heart of the Teilhardian analysis lies a very wide concept of work. It means outer work, through which the material world is transformed through the human mind and energy, as well as 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 nature. Thus it is not only and primarily our outer activities which constitute work in the full sense, a thought which is a forceful corrective to the one-sidedness of our culture and is apt to give meaning to life as a whole beyond the more narrow realm of working life. Hermeneutically this wide view of work is grounded in Teilhard's Christian faith: there is a telos of the universe because God is its creator whose sanctity is communicated to all of creation. "... le Monde ... est un lieu sacré, et nous ne le savions pas ..." Because this is so we may as co-creators take part in its sanctification, e.g. its plenification in Christ. "Tout accroissement que je me donne, ou que je donne aux choses, se chiffre par quelque augmentation de mon pouvoir d'aimer, et quelque progrès dans la bienheureuse mainmise du Christ sur l'Univers." 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 this way the evolution as continuous creation is continued 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 they were 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 needed not only to further creative engagement but even more to protect the integrity of the person at stake because of the growing demands of working life. Once more it is instructive to come back to Teilhard de Chardin for whom the role of religion and contemplation were twofold: to keep man in contact with the ultimate aim of his 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 *elan vitale* in the depth of human beings, and to nurture and develop the forces on which universal evolution depends. If Marx called religion an opium, a sedative for the people, this is a social 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*" (*gout de vivre*) or alternatively a "*gout de l'action*" (*gout d'agir*) ou de l'action: Meaning and the belief in the future of man are not abstract, intellectual notions. They deeply influence man's attitude towards life as a whole. The belief in the meaningfulness of life is to lead to a joy of life which finds its expression in a joy of acting - an element 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 - is the case in modernity and often correspond 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 as interesting and good. It is a dynamic, constructive and adventurous attitude towards life and the motor of evolution. "Un Goût de vivre, LE Goût de vivre, tel serait donc, en dernière analyse, le ressort de fond qui meut et dirige l'Univers sur son axe principal de Complexité-Conscience."

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 St. Thomas Aquinas. It is the force which gives coherence on all levels of being: "C'est l'amour qui construit physiquement l'Univers." In its highest form love as a universal energy becomes the energy of personalization in communion. In this sense the future of the thinking world is organically linked to the transformation of the forces of hatred into forces of love. It is contemplation which brings us in contact with these forces of love and of life constructing the universe in its unity and goodness and which give it ultimate sense and meaning. This "*Communion par l'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 little room for reflections which transcend immediate necessities. On the other hand there is a growing awareness that life becomes more and more empty and meaningless where these ultimate questions are excluded. Job satisfaction may for certain periods of one's working life be guaranteed through the thrill of success, power and activity as such. But everybody knows that the newness of these goods wears off. When this happens the experienced frustration is a clear sign that there is a need for new goals and meaning. A spirituality of work should give an answer to these questions and it should show a way how the

personal vacuum experienced can effectively be filled. As the Weberian analysis shows the means that our culture and society have to offer to accomplish this task have become ever more thin and rudimentary. What is needed is an encompassing framework of meaning which may serve as the basis of the development of mature persons. Maturity thereby needs dedication to goals which transcend personal need satisfaction. These goals together with the integrity and inner unity of the person are also a precondition for long-range success and creative work. Here a spirituality of work which reflects on these frameworks and helps leaders to internalize them in their everyday life, e.g. that gives practical spiritual guidance is ultimately demanded.