

Work and Worth

‘God saw everything he had made and indeed it was very good. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done’ (Gen 2:2). At the beginning of the Bible we are given a story (which didn’t really happen!) presenting an ideal of work. Here we have work as creativity, work as delight, self-expression ‘out of the fullness of your being’, with love, with spirit.

On the other hand, our three main speakers at the SOF Annual Conference in Leicester – Professor Harriet Bradley, Professor Femi Oyeboode and Martin Morgan – speak about the deteriorating conditions of work in Britain, the erosion of workers’ rights, mounting work-place stress. This Conference issue of *Sofia* contains (edited, shortened versions of) all three talks.

Harriet Bradley discusses the rise of the ‘*precariat*’ – ill-paid, insecure, unskilled, non-unionised, dead end jobs. If they find work at all, many young people now end up in such jobs. And, she says, women have long been associated with lower pay, particularly in the ‘caring professions’. But: ‘I have talked with women in caring professions, and, like others researching in this area, I have found how strongly committed these workers are to their ill-paid jobs, because of the value they put on what they are doing: helping those less fortunate, making a difference.’ This self-giving work with love, with spirit, is half expected to be its own reward. But unlike God in the Genesis story, these women are not infinitely rich and their generosity may leave them poor.

Then as Martin Morgan, who works in Mental Health, says: ‘You can’t really talk about health and well-being at work unless you talk about people who are not at work.’ He describes Workfare and the ‘disastrous anxiety’ being caused by the Welfare to Work Programme, which ‘really is being very poorly managed. I’ve seen people in absolute floods of tears, practically suicidal...’

Our fourth speaker, vicar Tony Windross, invited to give an ‘ethical-theological’ reflection on the situation, points out that his clerical stipend at £22k per year is six times what people receive on Job Seekers’ Allowance, but that top bankers receive *six thousand times* more. He goes on to spell out why that should bother us, why it really *does* matter. I remembered the findings of Wilkinson and Pickett in *The Spirit Level*: Britain is one of the most unequal developed countries (after the USA) – with the widest gap between the income of rich and poor. Such unequal countries do worse on a whole range of social

indicators – worse for everyone (for example, because of higher crime levels), not just for the poor.

Femi Oyeboode looks at work in terms of ‘time-energy budgets’ and compares us with some other animals. I was surprised to learn that honey-bees only spend about one third of their time on work. This reminded me of a futuristic essay, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, by John Maynard Keynes, published in 1930, in which he guesses that, by our time, people would only have to work 15 hours a week to secure a reasonable standard of living, and could then devote the rest of their time to the arts, leisure pursuits or voluntary work. William Morris raised similar ideas in his essay of 1887, *How We Live and How We Might Live*. He noted that in his day ‘no worker works under the present system an hour less on account of those labour-saving machines, so called’ but that this absurd situation need not continue.

Unfortunately, as our speakers point out, it has continued into the 21st century – even with our advanced technology people are working longer and longer hours. Morris imagined society’s *necessary* work becoming ‘merry parties of men and maids ... enjoying themselves over their work, rather than the grumpy weariness it mostly is now’. Fat chance! Now, says Morgan, ‘work-place stress levels are going through the roof’.

Oyeboode also talks about the importance of play and idleness, agreeing with Morris that work should include play and pleasure. I thought of the poet Keats’s ‘delicious diligent idleness’, so important for poetry and all creativity. To return to a later version of our Genesis story, in Proverbs (8:30) Wisdom says that at the creation: ‘I was with him arranging everything and *playing* in his sight’.

Mammon is the only idol mentioned by name in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:24). Another name for Mammon is the Market, if it becomes our Master. Idols demand human sacrifice. Idols are not human: ‘They have hands and do not feel... they do not cry in their throats’ (Ps 115:7). They *dehumanise, de-personalise people*. That is why it is dangerous to worship idols. In his cosmic epic, Christ is God become human, and the place Christ can be found today is in our fellow human beings. ‘What you did to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did to me’ (Mt 25:40). That mythical vision truly brings home to us that what we *should* respect are abundant life and common humanity.