

Work, self-esteem and vocation. Beyond an economy of the gift

Jan van der Stoep

Endowed professor of Christian philosophy, Theological University Utrecht, Wageningen University & Research

Abstract

In theology, the meaning of work has long been debated. Miroslav Volf emphasizes that work should not be made too important and therefore focuses mainly on the instrumental function of work. David Cosden, on the other hand, distinguishes between an instrumental, a relational and an ontological dimension of work.

In this paper, I want to deepen the theological debate by including Pierre Bourdieu's reflections on the economy of the gift. This is relevant to the debate because work is often understood as serving others with your talents or gifts. Unlike Claude Levi-Strauss, sociologist Bourdieu emphasizes that a gift is more than a deferred economic transaction. According to him, it is a way to increase symbolic capital (prestige, self-esteem, a sense of dignity). To understand why people are motivated to work it is important to view work as a means to acquiring both economic and symbolic capital. A strong focus on symbolic capital can lead to auto-exploitation, according to Bourdieu.

In addition, I will use the work of sociologist and political economist Andrew Sayer. He interprets work and self-esteem not only sociologically, as Bourdieu is doing, but also morally. In Sayer's analysis, vulnerability, responsibility and human dignity are central concepts. I will raise the question of what theology can learn from Bourdieu and Sayer about work, self-esteem and human dignity. At the same time, I will explore which notions can be found in the theology of work that can be brought into the political-economic debate. My hypothesis is that the notion of vocation is indispensable to fully understand the meaning of work. However, such a vocational model of work is not uncontroversial, even in theology.

Literature

Bourdieu, Pierre, 2008. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press.

Cosden, Darrell. 2004. *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.

Hardy, Lee. 1990. *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans.

Sayer, Andrew. 2011. *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*. Cambridge UK, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Volf, Miroslav. 2001. *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock.