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God in the Workplace

Eamonn Conway

It is a challenging time in which to work in education. The educational system is undergoing major reform. Reform is badly needed: the Irish educational system fails far too many people.¹ Recent studies have shown, for instance, that, '17 per cent of all Irish fifteen year olds and almost one in four teenage boys lack the literacy skills to function effectively in today's society'. And we find that those who make it to college have to be 'detoxed' from a mindless form of rote learning, generated by their second-level education and fuelled by the points system.

This commoditisation of knowledge into discrete bits and bytes is perpetuated at third-level by modularisation which all too easily allows information to be acquired for a few months and then dispensed with without any real depth formation in the discipline being acquired.

Our educational system needs radical reform if it is to achieve much of what we claim about it as educating creative and innovative thinkers,² active and committed citizens, and so on.

For the foreseeable future our workplaces are going to be places of change and transformation. Maybe this is no bad thing in itself. In the world in which we live it is important to be comfortable with uncertainty and continuing change. Indeed, people of faith, of trust in God, should be more comfortable than most with change and uncertainty.

However, changes are not always necessarily for the best, and 'bigger is not necessarily better'. In contrast to the current moves to close smaller colleges, for instance, I wonder in a few years'

1. See 'Literacy and numeracy for learning and life. The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People' 2011-2020, 13ff. <http://www.education.ie/admin/servlet/blobServlet/litnumstrat.pdf> accessed 25 Feb 2012.

2. See Irish Department of Foreign Affairs webpage <http://www.dfa.ie/home/index.aspx?id=86456> accessed 25 Feb 2012.

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time if some civil servant or minister in the Department of Education will suggest the founding of boutique-type colleges, like the trendy boutique hotels, to provide students with a more personal and customised learning experience!

While reform is needed, the principles driving reform, as well as the underlying motivation and vision, need to be carefully examined and discerned.

MARKETISATION

There are serious concerns about the way that market forces are affecting education. For instance, the Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve has commented on 'the growing marketisation in the public and individual spheres, a process whereby the logic of economy threatens to pervade education in universities completely.'³

He traces the marketisation of education in Europe back to the marketisation of the European project of unification. He argues that despite the rhetoric with regard to a political, cultural and spiritual Europe, the driving force behind the European Union has been and remains the market. Thus, education becomes 'a service to be located within the dynamic of supply and demand, producer and consumer, costs and benefits'.

In his address last year to young university professors in Madrid, Pope Benedict XVI raised similar concerns. He spoke about how the emphasis in third-level on producing people with technical ability for the labour market leads to a 'reductionist and curtailed vision of humanity.'⁴

The market-driven nature of contemporary education is only a symptom of the much more deeply-rooted postmodern denial of 'the truth proper to the human person⁵ but it would take us too far afield to diagnose here in any depth its full causes and effects.'⁶

However, as chaplains you are in a unique position to judge whether or not what the education people are giving and getting is really adequate to the full measure of what it is to be human. You

3. Lieven Boeve, 'The Identity of a Catholic University in Post-Christian European Societies: Four Models', *Louvain Studies* 31 (2006), 238-240. See also Dermot Lane, *Challenges facing religious education in contemporary Ireland*, Dublin: Veritas, 2008, 15.

4. Pope Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with young university professors. Address of His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI', Basilica of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Friday, 19 August 2011.

5. op. cit.

6. See Michael Paul Gallagher, 'University and Culture: towards a retrieval of humanism'. *Gregorianum* 85 (2004) 149-171; Eamonn Conway, 'The Future of Catholic Higher Education in Ireland', *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 3:2, 158-169.

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are exposed, perhaps more than anyone else in the educational system, to the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the members of the college community.⁷ You get to see students and colleagues at their most open and vulnerable because of your responsibility for their pastoral care. You know, better than most, whether what the education students receive is really sufficient to help them negotiate the complexities of everyday life, and furthermore, find meaning and even joy in it.

A FUNDAMENTAL TENSION

What Newman and Pope Benedict put before us as the model may seem very idealistic to us, and perhaps even anachronistic. But this is because the fragmented and commoditised way in which we deal with knowledge and information tends to eclipse questions of ultimate meaning and value. So much so, in fact, that enquiry about the essential human questions can be missing on our campuses and not even missed. This can make our work as chaplains at third-level more difficult because it is our task to respond to such questions from the perspective of ultimate meaning.

I raise this at the outset because it highlights that there is a fundamental tension between the service we provide at third-level, and the culture in which we find ourselves working, and I think this tension may get worse in the years ahead. In fact, if we are not experiencing a tension then we may have to ask ourselves if we are conforming too easily to the culture of our workplace and are not sufficiently challenging of it.

A good place to begin to speak about God in the workplace is with the Judaeo-Christian understanding of work. Towards the end I will relate this back to our particular workplace, higher education, and suggest, in the light of what I have sketched, what I believe are important emphases for chaplaincy at third-level at this time.

WORK AS DRUDGERY: THE CONSEQUENCES OF ORIGINAL SIN

We have two creation stories in Genesis. The first, Genesis 1, is the story of creation in seven days. The second, Genesis 2 -3, which is in fact the earlier creation account, tells the story of Adam and Eve, and the Fall. When we think of Genesis it is the account of the Fall that springs most readily to mind. In this account, work is presented in a negative light. It is 'by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread' (Gen 3: 19).

And there is more than a suggestion that human effort will

7. *Gaudium et Spes*, n.1

always be disproportionate to the fruit it bears; and that ultimately it will be in vain. For instance, regardless of how diligently the farmer tills the land, he is told that 'thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you' (Gen 3:16).

The sheer drudgery of work, the fact that it is often less than satisfying, perhaps even experienced as fruitless and unproductive, is one of the many woes, according to this (earlier, Yahwist) account of creation, inflicted upon humans after the fall and as a consequence of human disobedience.

WORK AS IT IS MEANT TO BE

We see just how out-of-sync work experienced as sheer drudgery is with what God intended for us when we consider how the work of God is presented in these creation stories.⁸

In Genesis 1, God says 'let there be ...' and we are told 'it was so.' God's word breathes life into what is otherwise a formless and chaotic void. God blesses God's creation: 'be fruitful and multiply'. It flourishes: the waters teem; the earth bears fruit in abundance and produces seedbearing plants. God makes things that are themselves life-producing. 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good' (Gen 1:31).

Although humans are to have dominion and to rule (Gen 1: 26-28), this is to be done as God does it, in the same life-giving, enabling and empowering way. The power given to humans is best understood as power for, not power over, in the likeness of God's power.⁹

The pattern of God's work is presented not as drudgery but as self-giving life, which gives form and purpose to creation. God's approach to work is also presented as leisurely. God is presented as calm, confident, content and measured, freely giving of self from the depths of his goodness.

'... (A)nd he rested ...' (Gen 2:2) At the end of all this creating activity, or perhaps more accurately we should say at the end of its beginning, because creation is on-going, there is a sense not of idleness but of justified rest, the kind of rest that follows only after fruitful and satisfying labour.

Isn't the difference between 'rest' and 'idleness' interesting? I can get up in the morning and lounge around in front of the TV for a few hours. Or I can come in after a few hours in the garden and stretch out on that same couch for a couple of hours. In both cases I will be inactive. But the sense of genuine rest, of a deep-sense of earned self-satisfaction will come to me only after activity and productivity.

8. I am indebted to my colleague Dr Jessie Rogers, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, for assistance with this part of the paper.

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THE WORKER MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE WORK

Genesis 2 is also worth considering. Humans, themselves 'of the earth', are given a garden planted by God 'to tend and care for'. The work of tending the garden is seen as a gift from God, as are the birds and the animals and eventually the gift of a partner, flesh of his flesh. Biblical scholars suggest that the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 might be a deliberate counterpoint to a Babylonian creation myth where humans, instead of being gifted with a superabundant garden to tend and care for in freedom, are presented as the slaves of the gods who have been put to work digging the Tigris and the Euphrates.⁹ In the Babylonian myth the work comes first; in that of Genesis 2, the workers are endowed with an inalienable dignity which is not dependent upon their productivity. We can see here the radical value which is bestowed upon the human person from the very beginning.

AS GOD WORKS

What does this consideration of God's work as Creator tell us about how work should be experienced by us? According to the Book of Genesis, God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness' (Gen 1:26).¹⁰ We use the terms image and likeness as though they were interchangeable but as the original Hebrew makes clear, both are needed to show the uniqueness of the relationship that exists between God and human beings. To be in God's image is to be God's representative. To be made 'according to God's likeness' pushes this further: it is to have an internal relationship with God such that we are defined and determined by this relationship.¹¹

Our engagement with work, then, should represent and reflect how God works: it should be creative, life-giving, calm, assured, bringing order and form out of chaos and void. It should also be leisurely. Leisurely work is not a contradiction in terms.¹² Work is leisurely when it holds meaning for us. Devoid of inherent meaning, our work merely achieves the purpose of providing us with the financial wherewithal to pursue meaning in our lives elsewhere.

As chaplains one would hope that balancing meaning and pur-

9. John R Sachs, *The Christian vision of humanity. Basic Christian anthropology*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 17.

10. See <http://www.livius.org/as-at/atrahasis/atrahasis.html> accessed 28 February 2012 accessed 28 Feb 2012.

11. John R Sachs, *The Christian vision of humanity. Basic Christian anthropology*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 12.

12. See David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness: the heart of prayer*, NJ: Paulist, 1984, 73ff.

pose would come easy to us; it would be very hard to be involved in any caring profession unless one's work had meaning. Nonetheless we are not exempt from the more than occasional drudgery, the sheer graft, and the often senseless tasks with which we find ourselves preoccupied: the tedious talk-shops, the time-consuming committees, not to mention the petty and ultimately time-wasting disagreements which can take up so much of our energy.

In Genesis 3, we see that work experienced as sweat and tears is presented as the consequence of the Fall. So also the imbalances and disorder in relationships: 'enmity' and 'ruling over' (Gen 3: 15-16); the tendency towards domination, subordination and power abuse; experiences we sadly often find in the workplace.

None of these belongs to God's image and likeness; they are not part of how God works and relates; they are not part of God's plan for human beings. They are evidence, as Newman put it, that 'the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator'.¹³

The Good News is that in Christ, the new Adam, human work, human creativity and interaction, as it is intended for us, is made possible again. In and through Christ human beings are restored to the dignity of God's co-operators in the continuing task of creating the world.

WORK REDEEMED IN CHRIST

As *Gaudium et Spes* states, 'all human activity, constantly imperilled by man's pride and deranged self-love, must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection'.¹⁴ Because of redemption, according to John Paul II, 'every human being reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe'.¹⁵

Gaudium et Spes refers to the power of the cross. It has been said that 'the Gospel story redefines the power of God'.¹⁶ In his book *Jesus before Christianity*, Albert Nolan characterises the power of faith as the power of goodness and truth, which is the power of God. He also says that Jesus made truth his authority, and not authority his truth.¹⁷ It is this kind of power and authority which we should seek to exercise in the workplace, and the fact that chaplains are not formally in authority in a college, and so are

13. John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, (Ed.) M. Svalgic, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967, 217.

14. n. 37

15. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* n. 4, 1981. See also *Gaudium et Spes* n. 34.

16. Daniel Migliore, *The power of God and the gods of power*, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 75.

17. *Jesus before Christianity*, London: DIT, 1976, 121-124.

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not generally involved in the business of passing and failing people or hiring and firing them, means that they can witness more readily to this distinctively Christian form of power and authority.

Even though, as the Church teaches, the effects of Original Sin remain, if we are in a state of discipleship then this redeemed understanding of work can be operative in us. We can see our daily tasks as the gift of participation in God's powerful creative and life-giving activity.

ALL WORK CAN HAVE MEANING IN CHRIST

There is another important difference that redemption in Christ makes to our understanding of work. In Christ, even the most menial and meaningless task can become an expression of our redeemed state because in and through it we can demonstrate our faith, hope and love.¹⁸

With the right disposition our work, regardless of what it is or involves, can have profound dignity and value. 'The basis for determining the value of human work', Pope John Paul II wrote, 'is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person,'¹⁹ a person loved and redeemed by God who can turn all we do to the good.

Our work, regardless of what it is, can also become a form of prayer. We recognise this most fully in the celebration of the Eucharist when symbols of the work of human hands, bread and wine, become the body and blood of Our Lord.

Lastly, we need to remember that we are co-operators and co-creators – emphasis here on the prefix, 'co-'. Our work remains the work of the Lord in which we are participators. We need to remember our relative place in the scheme of salvation, and the best way to do this is to be as consciously in a state of discipleship as we can. This can be important in minimising our stress and retaining our perspective in times of difficulty.

THIRD-LEVEL COLLEGES: BABYLON OR EDEN

In my opening remarks I expressed concern about how the logic of the economy pervades policy-making in higher education, and that lurking behind this, in the words of Pope Benedict, is a truncated and reductionist understanding of what it is to be a human person. In light of this, I suggested that as chaplains we should experience a tension between our working environment and the Christian vision we seek to represent. It could be argued that as

18. See Karl Rahner, 'Von der Arbeit, *Theologische Meditationen: Alltägliche Dinge*, Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1966, 10-11.

19. *Laborem Exercens*, 6

workplaces, higher education campuses resemble more the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates as portrayed in the Babylonian creation myth, where the gods put humans to work for them as their slaves, than they do the Garden of Eden.

First, we should remain steadfast and confident in the Christian vision of the dignity of the human person and realise that this has infinitely more depth and breadth to it than the latest think-tank or quango policy which seeks to adapt education further to the current exigencies of the labour market.

Within our own domain we need to be consciously counter-cultural and enable students to be counter-cultural as well. What the university is no longer prepared or able to do in terms of educating students to explore the essential human questions, chaplaincies can do instead. We need to awaken in students the innate yearning to explore transcendental questions and capitalise on the fact that there are now so few spaces on campus where these matters can be explored and expressed. Our chaplaincies can become exciting and dynamic centres of dialogue and encounter on faith and culture issues. They could, in fact become the most profoundly formative places on campus.

Chaplaincies should not, however, be only places of dialogue. They should also be places of discernment and of invitation to Christian discipleship. I remain convinced that far more third level students are open to exploring and expressing Christian faith than we give credit for, and we need to legitimise this and create a culture which is supportive of it.

Any attempts to stifle such efforts on the basis that publicly funded campuses are secular and must therefore remain 'neutral' when it comes to religious matters must be resisted. Neutrality is never neutral; the secular is not neutral; it is one particular ethos among others. A genuinely plural context will allow for the particularity of faith to be explored and to find expression.