

RELIGION AND LABOUR

by Bob Goudzwaard Ph.D.

Many people consider it ridiculous to make a link between religion and labour. After all, religion and business don't mix.

Partly, this conviction stems from the very peculiar but widespread notion that religion is restricted to the so-called sacred things of life. The moment we adopt such a conclusion, we must admit the difficulty of seeing any connection between the celebration of a solemn mass and the hostile atmosphere so often prevalent at the bargaining table.

We would do well to remember that such a narrow notion of religion results not only from the secret desire to behave a little less solemnly in the "non-sacred" areas of life, but also from the urge to consider ourselves masters and law-givers in those areas.

However, there is more. The relationship between religion and labour is frequently obscured by the prevailing notion about the role and character of the trade union. The trade union is commonly considered to be a power organization designed only to further the material group interests of its members. Its work is generally regarded as a well-organized, relentless drive for more and more. It is obvious that such a view of the trade union has nothing to do with religion, i.e. service of God. (The unlimited drive for more material gain is, of course, by no means irreligious, driven as it is by service of self.) Within such a framework of thought a Christian trade union is a contradiction in terms, an unattainable ideal.

The reduction of man to animal

Essentially, we are dealing here with an animalistic view of life, a view which we meet almost everywhere. It is a view which tries to convince us that *ultimately* politics is nothing but a power struggle, that *ultimately* the wife-husband relationship is purely a matter of sex, and that *ultimately* work is only a means of making money. In such a vision the trade union as a mere power-machine fits very well.

Why do we call this vision animalistic? Because all norms for *human* relationships have been ignored and eliminated. We are confronted here with a view in which human personality is truncated, cut down to its barest animal-like interests. To put it differently, in this conception the totality of social life has been reduced to the sum total of its founding functions. I use the term "founding function", together with the qualifying function, to describe the character of human relations. As a matter of illustration, the state is founded on the power of the sword. Similarly, a business enterprise is founded on the power to combine and correlate the production factors. The founding function of marriage is organic-biotic, for a marriage presupposes a physical unity of man and woman. However, does this mean that these founding functions exhaust the deepest meaning of state, marriage and enterprise? Of course not. The power of the state is not an end in itself. It serves to

make *justice* triumph in all public relationships. Sexuality, too, is not an end in itself. It serves to deepen the *love* between husband and wife. And a business enterprise can only reach its purpose if the productive powers within it are used not for the self-satisfaction of investors, but for the creation of the enterprise as an institute of *stewardship*.

Founding functions call for disclosure and development — what we technically refer to as an "opening-up" direction. Political power must open the way to justice, sexuality to love, and economic power to stewardship.

Therefore, the animalistic and truncating mentality which confines social life to money, sex and power is a deadly danger. It destroys life, eliminates meaning, and is, in the final analysis, nihilistic. In short, society becomes a wasteland, a prison with closed doors instead of an open vista.

The same also applies to the labour movement. It is quite easy to truncate, to reduce the trade union to an institution of workers who are only concerned about financial gain. It is ironic that many employers accuse the unions of such base motives, yet never cease to praise the profit motive as the leading principle of the corporation.

An appeal to both companies and unions for a more Christian, normative approach is often very difficult. Yet, it is of utmost importance, since such an approach shatters the myth of neutrality. As the idea of a normative development of society gains acceptance, the pseudo-neutrality belief will lose its dominant position in our culture.

How can a trade union movement stimulate and concretize such a normative development? I would like to give two examples.

- a) the appreciation of the "factor" labour within the enterprise and in society.
- b) the place and task of the trade union movement in today's social development.

Appreciation of the "factor" labour

The trade union movement is sometimes called the emancipation movement of the production factor of labour. Undoubtedly, there is much truth in



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When the enterprise is reduced to a mere object of the class struggle, and when men are blindly divided into two warring production factors, the Christian concept of communal responsibility of employers and employees cannot take root. Instead of communal responsibility, we are left with a brute class solidarity. Then life is indeed reduced to its founding functions: power pitted against power.

such a description. To illustrate this, we should go back for a moment to the animalistic view mentioned earlier in which the enterprise is not regarded as an institution of stewardship, but as a vehicle of commercial gain for the providers of capital. This characteristically orthodox-conservative view considers the private enterprise as a) an object of private property and as b) an organization with a *closed* purpose, namely the acquisition of a maximum return on invested capital. Such a view of the enterprise - in which labour can only be one of the production factors - is still as common as it is repugnant. Countless people still maintain that the enterprise *belongs* to the shareholders. Is there in such a view any room for the idea that the enterprise is a *human community* called to responsible stewardship? Of course not. Just as individual people cannot be owned, a community of people cannot be owned. Anyone who believes in the "ownership of the enterprise" obviously does not consider the enterprise as a human community. Instead, such a person inevitably regards the enterprise as a workshop with different production factors, of which labour is but one, next to capital, the machine, and raw materials. Workers, rather than being responsible subjects, are relegated to a position of mere objects in the production process.

At this point it is important to re-state the motive of the Christian trade union movement. This movement has stressed that the worker, as God's image bearer, is **not** just an economic production factor, but is called to be an integral partner in the enterprise.

Perhaps it would be correct to state that the issue at stake here concerns our view of the enterprise rather than our view of the worker. For it is especially the enterprise which, in our culture, has often been reduced to an object of ownership, established for the *restricted* purpose of gaining maximum returns on investments. Within such a conception the worker as *human being* can at best be allotted a marginal place. However, as soon as the enterprise is regarded as an institution in which stewardship is central, the integral partnership of the worker automatically receives its proper emphasis.

At this point the reader might pose the question: what is the difference between this idea of the worker and the enterprise, and the socialist approach? After all, the socialists, too, speak of "emancipation of labour" and the right to co-determination and workers' participation.

Anyone who takes the trouble to study the deeper motives of the socialist movement will discover a fundamental difference which reveals itself also in the practical aspects of the issue. Socialists, too, operate with a closed, restricted view of man and society, albeit a different view than the one espoused by orthodox, traditional capitalism.

What is the view of orthodox socialism? It is a concept in which the enterprise consists of two economic powers representing the *production factor of labour* and the *production factor of capital*, struggling against each other for supremacy. The existing order is considered a capitalistic one which sees to it that the production factor capital constantly triumphs over the interests of the exploited worker class. It is remarkable that the traditional socialist idea also views the enterprise as an object.

Its criticism is not that the enterprise can not be owned, but rather, that it is owned by the wrong people. As a small fraction of the total working class, the worker must wait for the liberation of his life which can only come about with the overthrow of the capitalist system.

It is for this reason that true emancipation of Labour cannot be realized by the socialist approach. When the enterprise is reduced to a mere object of the class struggle, and when men are blindly divided into two warring production factors, the Christian concept of *communal* responsibility of employers and employees cannot take root. Instead of communal responsibility, we are left with a brute class solidarity. Then life is indeed reduced to its founding functions: power pitted against power.

Trade unionism and societal development

In our modern society the labour movement possesses significant econo-

mic power. By means of wage demands, strikes and boycotts, the labour movement is able to force certain economic developments. Labour's power calls for a responsible use in accordance with the calling toward stewardship. At times, this calling requires the union to make certain wage demands. When the profits of an enterprise climb steadily, a wage increase is often the best corrective of the income distribution pattern, especially when such an increase benefits those falling in the lower income brackets. But the reverse is true as well. Certain wage increases conflict with the calling of stewardship. I am thinking, for instance, of wage increases which do not correspond with increased production. Such increases are inflationary. Inflation is a very unjust form of income re-distribution inflicting the greatest harm to the economically weak among us. Inflationary wage increases, rather than being an exercise in responsible stewardship, result from a brute power struggle. One may rightfully expect that every trade union, and especially the Christian one, realizes the need for a responsible exercise of its economic power. Usually, this is a difficult task which will not gain the union much popularity. Let's not fool ourselves. Too many union leaders and members refuse to realize these matters and insist that the union under all circumstances must demand more and more. It should be clear that we are faced here with a deadly danger. This danger becomes even greater in a time in which we slowly begin to realize the shocking results of our neglected stewardship towards the environment and the limited resources of energy and minerals. Our sense of stewardship will gradually have to lead us, westerners, to the acceptance of stable or even declining income levels.

Will the labour movement, especially the Christian labour movement, be able to stand the test? That is a question of central importance for the CLAC and its entire membership. It will depend on whether we reduce the labour movement to a materialistic power institution, or whether we will support it in its difficult task to develop into a genuine institution of stewardship. •