INDUSTRIAL THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA:
PROBLEMS, PRIORITIES AND PROSPECTS[1]

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Abstract

This paper discusses the nature and role of industrial theology in South Africa against the broader theme of the vocation of the theologian in South Africa after ten years of democracy and its implications for teaching theology. I reflect on the state of theological reflection in South Africa on issues pertaining to the world of work, and identify what I contend to be problems and priorities confronting industrial theologians in South Africa. Then I highlight some ways in which the world of work can be integrated into the activities of theological training and ministerial formation.

Key Words: Industrial Theology, Theological vocation, Work

Introduction

The vocation of the theologian in South Africa must certainly apply to the world of work. In many quarters around the world, theologians are usually rebuked for apportioning far too little consideration and attention to an activity and realm of life that consumes most of our time, energy and concern. We live no longer in a "How do you do?" world, but more correctly in a "What do you do?" world. In this paper, therefore, I hope to offer some thoughts that help us understand the nature and role of the theologian's calling in South Africa as it relates to the world of work.

Theologians have had many important things to say about human labour and work in the context of a theology of work. Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work", 1981) offered a significant contribution in understanding the nature and meaning of work, the relationship between labour and capital, various rights of the worker, and the value labour brings. The spirituality of work as reflected in this encyclical is particularly insightful.[2]

On the Protestant side, the contributions are less impressive. North American theologian Gregory Baum (in Lossky et al 2002:1216) informs us that Christian theologians have been quite "slow to recognise the need for a theology of work", which is somewhat strange and unfortunate given the foundational import of a theology of work, which Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf (1991:74) describes as "a dogmatic reflection on the nature and consequences of human work" that "situates the questions of how one should work or should not work, and what one should produce, in the larger context of reflection on the meaning of work in the history of God with the world and on the place of work in human beings' rela-

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tion to their own nature, to their fellow human beings, and to the natural world."[3] In other words, taking the words of John Paul II and Volf seriously, the role of the theologian bears great public, universal and ethical import in society with respect to the world of work.

The inattention or tardiness of theologians in general to attend to deep and critical reflection on human work, while problematic, is understandable against what Australian theologian Robert Banks (1993:50ff) notes as the broader problem of integrating our faith with the mundane routines of life. It shows that dualistic or gnostic tendencies within theological thinking still prevail in certain quarters. In these cases, human preoccupations such as labour are viewed separately from the life of faith as something secular and 'other' to what concerns God and God's people. As Volf (1991:69) notes, "Given the paramount importance of work in both liberal and socialist economic and social theory, it is remarkable that in our world dominated by work a serious crisis in work had to strike before church bodies paid much attention to the problem of human work."[4]

Against these introductory remarks on theological engagement with human work in general, I now want to highlight several important past theological events in South Africa that focussed directly on the question of human labour and work. The importance of this overview is to introduce the nature and extent of engagement by theologians in South Africa with respect to world-of-work issues.

Some Theological Engagements with the World of Work in South Africa
In the last decade or two, South African theologians have increasingly reflected a veritable commitment to a more integrative theological engagement with world-of-work issues. The pervasive intrusion of apartheid in all its dimensions demanded that the churches and theological community relate their deepest beliefs to the ordinary and harsh realities of human life in South Africa, which continue to this day in post-apartheid South Africa, where workers in varying degrees contend with poverty, unemployment, discrimination, exploitation, etc.

James Cochrane and Gerald West (1991:2) offered one of the most substantial theological resources in South Africa on the question of human work and labour, in their volume of essays by various South African thinkers et al in 1991, entitled *The Three-Fold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour*.[5] The editors drew these contributions from a 1989 conference in Pietermaritzburg, which was called "to explore a variety of questions and concerns about

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[3] Incidentally, Volf features as one of the Protestant exceptions in respect to the dearth of theological engagement with world-of-work issues.

[4] Concerning the crisis of work, Volf has in mind here aspects such as child labour, unemployment, discrimination, dehumanisation, exploitation, and ecological predicaments (see 1991:35-45).

[5] Around the time of this publication, debates on this theme ensued on different levels and involving different audiences. Noteworthy publications include the following: WS Vorster (ed.), *Church and Industry: Proceedings of 7th Symposium of the Institute for Theological Research at UNISA* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1983); Klaus Nürnberger, *The Scourge of Unemployment in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Encounter Publications, 1990); Bosman, Gous & Spangenberg (eds.), *Plutocrats and Paupers – Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1991); WS Vorster (ed.), *On Being Unemployed and Religious – Papers from the 16th Symposium of the Institute for Theological Research at UNISA* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1992). Notable discourses include the following: In the circles of the Inter-denominational Commission on the Witwatersrand for Industrial Mission (ICWIM), a lively debate involved those involved in Industrial Mission Agencies in the country during the 1980s about industry and important work-related matters. In 1984, for example, ICWIM organised a conference on the campus of Potchefstroom University with the theme: "Theology steps into the industrial arena". In 1969 the DRC and in 1984 the DRC Family held congresses on "Church and Industry". The papers and decisions of 1969 were published as *Kerk en Industrie* (Pretoria: NG Kerk Boekhandel). The 1984 congress papers were published as *Mens en Masjien – die roeping en taak van die kerk in die industriële wêreld* (Pretoria: Kongres Reëlingskomitee).

work and labour among Christians who had been involved in one way or another in struggling against the repression and the damage done by Apartheid, particularly – in this case – to black working people in South Africa" who for the most part in "the entire history of industrialisation in South Africa [had] been doubly dispossessed of their dignity and the opportunity to participate in decisions about the political economy of this country..." (1991:1).[6]

A follow-up seminar occurred ten years later in 1999, entitled "Theology of Work Seminar: Three-Fold Cord Revisited". A series of essays appeared that same year in the *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Africa*, which sought to provide further reflection on the challenges within the world of work such as economic globalisation, unemployment, and HIV-Aids.[7]

Another significant contribution was offered by "Industrial Ministry of South Africa" in 2001, based on two consultations in 1998 and 1999, through its publication *Work as Calling and Worship*, edited by Johan Botha. It involved the input of six theologians – South Africans Dirkie Smit, Russel Botman, Johan Botha and Nico Koopman, along with North American ecumenist Geoffrey Wainwright and ethicist Douglas Schuurman – who concerned themselves with the questions of "*the industrial mission of the church* and *the ministry of the church regarding 'work'* and the complex ways in which believers experience paid work in the South African society" (Smit in Botha 2001:30).

In addition to these very specific theological attempts in recent years, numerous other contributions by theologians in South Africa exist in response to similar and related dimensions within the workplace world prior to and following these aforementioned events.[8] All

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6   The volume of essays gave attention to several contextual realities, theological and biblical reflections, practical challenges, and finally the conference's gains and its prospects for the future.

7   See the *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Africa*: Theology, Work and Labour, Vol. 6, No. 3 (September 1999), 63pp.

8   For example, see the following literature for their respective discussions that overlap directly or indirectly with the world of work: JR Cochrane, *The Church and Labour in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1987); Diakonia, *Worker's Rights: A Statement of Christian Commitment* (Durban: Diakonia, 1987); Harry Antonides, *A Christian perspective on church on work and labour relations*, Institute for Reformational Studies Pamphlet 254 (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1989); Klaus Nürnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution: Managing the Approaching Crisis* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1999); Klaus Nürnberger, *Beyond Marx and Market* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1999); Clint Le Bruyns, "Worshipping God in the Everyday Spaces of Life: The Liturgical Life as Territorial Adventure" in *The Big Picture: Our Gospel and Our Culture*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (Advent 2000), 5-9; Daniel J Louw, "A Practical Theological Ecclesiology of Relocalisation and Globalisation from *Below: Towards a Viable African Renaissance*" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 112 (March 2002), 69-87; Clint Le Bruyns, "The Church in the Workplace?" in *The Big Picture: Our Gospel and Our Culture* (June 2002), 1-4; EM Conradie & JC Pauw, "Dialogiese, ekologiese en teologiese perspektiewe ten opsigte van 'n verbruikerskultuur ("consumerism")" in *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif*, Vol. 43, No. 3 & 4 (September & December 2002), 407-22; Nico Koopman, "Christian ethics in post-apartheid South Africa – a Reformed perspective" in *Ibid.*, 443-54; M Olivier, "The South African Constitution and freedom of religion: some labour law imperatives and implications" in *Ibid.*, 530-42; Dirkie J Smit, "Openbare getuienis en publieke teologie vandag? Vrae oor verskeie vanselfsprekende vooronderstellings" in *Scriptura* 82 (2003:1), 39-48; Cornel du Toit, "Rethinking globalism after September 11: Paradoxes in the evolution of globalisation" in *Scriptura* 84 (2003:3), 368-80; Philippe Denis, "Sexuality and Aids in South Africa" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 115 (March 2003), 63-77; Steve de Gruchy, "Of Agency, Assets and Appreciation: Seeking Some Commonalities between Theology and Development" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 117 (November 2003), 20-39; Nico Koopman, "Some Comments on Public Theology Today" in *Ibid.*, 3-19; Njongonkulu Ndungane, *A World with a Human Face: A voice from Africa* (Kenilworth: David Philip, 2003), *passim*; H Russel Botman, "Human Dignity and Economic Globalisation" in Karin Sporre and H Russel Botman (eds.), *Building a Human Rights Culture: South African & Swedish Perspectives* (Falun: Institutionen för humaniora och språk, 2003), 20-34; Clint Le Bruyns and Christoff Pauw, "Looking in Two Ways: Poverty in South Africa and its Ecclesiological Implications" in *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Supplementum 2004), 202-213.

these engagements we observe, but assuming we introduced a quality assurance standard to these attempts, how resourceful are they? This is the question we must now confront.

A Theology that Works? Problems and Priorities on the South African Terrain

We need to bear in mind that our theology must work! According to West (1999:35), our responsibility as theologians in South Africa within the world of work is to become "the servants of workers." What does this entail? Cochrane (in Cochrane & West 1991:283) enquires, "Has our faith something to say to this world? Does it offer any solutions to the contradictions it bears? If not, if our historical faith has no word to this world, then it is past, a museum piece."

At this point I want to explore what I understand to be weaknesses or problems in the current theological attempts in South Africa to engage with the world of work. This exploration takes the form of a case study approach in which a scenario is outlined, followed by critical observations applicable to the question of theological import. While this is just one scenario situation, its usefulness in this exploration is the ways in which its emerging issues reflect other scenarios in the world of work in South Africa (and beyond).

Case Study

Dan was offered a job at a local non-profit training organisation, which he gladly accepted. For a year after this he finds himself extremely busy and stretched in regard to the workload and expectations to perform, yet finds a great degree of fulfillment in what he does insofar as his work contributes to the development of other young people from similar and other communities. He gets along well with most colleagues and is respected by all. He is regarded by the current leadership as an asset to the company in various ways in the light of his quality work, attitude and commitment to work, and people-skills. He is one of the only historically-disadvantaged workers, even though the company prides itself on its commitment to the 'new South Africa'.

He continues to work here even though he is only paid a half-salary against present-day market terms, and receives no benefits. He believes, however, in the 'cause' of the company as well as the reality of its financial constraints, not to mention the difficulty of finding gainful employment elsewhere in South Africa in the light of job uncertainty and scarcity and other broader processes impacting the world of work. The pressure to provide for his family does present a constant dilemma, though, as he wonders if the day will ever come for him to have greater financial stability, afford a house, own a reliable car, and raise his children with a sense of dignity and peace of mind.

Then, the company's leadership undergoes a dramatic change. A new CEO is appointed, actually a colleague with whom Dan has worked well with up to this point. Over time, however, the preoccupation with positional power on the part of the CEO and his closest circle of colleagues starts taking its toll on the rest of the staff, but especially on Dan. Issues of competition, slander, hostility, opposition, conflict, discrimination, exploitation, defamation, isolation, suspicion, and the like sets in – and worsen as the years go by. Dan struggles with hurt, low self-esteem, trust, powerlessness, declining motivation and fulfillment each day of his working life. Work shifts from a blessing with challenges to a necessary curse. He becomes miserable at home, struggles with fatigue and burnout, wrestles with unhealthy psychological thoughts, and grapples with what to do.

Dan finds very little interest from his church in his well-being at work; in fact, the affairs of the religious community seem so unrelated to his daily activities. Moreover, he

finds very little help from any theological literature he picks up concerning what it means to survive and thrive in the world of work. While the world does not revolve around his personal situation, surely his world of work is a central dimension of life. Surely there must be some way out.

In the end, Dan resigns and joins the company of the unemployed. A new struggle of another kind envelops him as he urgently seeks new employment.

Commentary

This scenario could have happened to any person anywhere whether well off or struggling, whether historically disadvantaged or -privileged, whether South African or not. Each one of the issues in Dan's case is an issue that has relevance to anyone at different times. It just means that people have different tensions that have to be confronted at different times. For some, the primary issue might be finding employment. For others, it might be dealing with difficult personalities in the workplace. Others might grapple with certain ethical predicaments. Some wrestle with motivation for work, or in the midst of phenomenal change and restructuring. Each person has a particular narrative in the world of work.

But, not unlike Dan's situation, the critical question is whether or not, or to what extent, the theological community is resourceful for one's experience and role in the world of work. To this particular question as applied to Dan's scenario, we now turn in relation to the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. By macro-level, I have in mind the broader and more complex global realities that impact on the world of work such as globalisation, job insecurity, poverty, etc. By meso-level, I have in mind the distinctively biblical-theological framework(s) for interpreting the world of work such as speaking about work as vocation, worship, witness, etc. By micro-level, I have in mind the more specific and personal dynamics at play between workers and their work and workplace environment such as ethical dilemmas, conflict, motivational problems, discrimination, employer-employee relationships, etc.

Within the Macro-domain (Systemic Dimension)

Industrial theology in South Africa provides a significant contribution to people within the world of work when it comes to macro-level issues. Notwithstanding the personal dynamics that Dan has wrestled with, Dan would learn much from the input and insights of such theologians in South Africa as James Cochrane and Klaus Nürnberger on the South African economy and unemployment; Russel Botman and Dirkie Smit on human dignity and economic globalisation; Ernst Conradie on matters ecological; Isabel Phiri and Denise Ackerman on gender relations and equality; John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio on justice and reconciliation; Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naudé on forgiveness and leadership; Etienne de Villiers, Neville Richardson and Nico Koopman on ethics and morality; and the list would certainly go on!

Each of these issues (and others) is playing a pivotal role in the world of work for each person as well as Dan. These broader processes usher in fast-paced changes, uncertainty, restructuring, and unpredictability. The world of work has become a "be prepared for anything" world. There are no guarantees for the future, just surviving and thriving one step at a time. Underlying each of these realities is a move towards greater complexity in the world of work, which inevitably has a profound effect on people at work. While the noted British sociologist Anthony Giddens (2001:376ff) outlines some of this, North American theologian R. Paul Stevens (1999:216) comments on its impact on Christians and others alike:

Ordinary Christians, like all citizens, in the world do not feel in control of the circumstances surrounding their service to God. They encounter unjust and unloving structures, principles of conformity (e.g. professionalism), cultural expectations, social patterns, law without moral foundations, customs and traditions, escalating pressures for performance, technology as master and not mere servant, intractable institutions, professionalism and careerism, images, the almighty dollar, red tape, spiritual forces, and spiritual personages. ... There is no escape from complexity in the church or the world.

The weakness in industrial theology as reflected in South Africa, however, is that of 'stuckness'. What I mean is that we have become so good at engaging at the public macro-level within the world of work that we do not venture beyond this level to the other similarly important dimensions within which workers work. According to pastoral theologian Kenneth Halstead (1998:4), "stuckness is primarily the result of well-intended attempted solutions built into the rules and structure" of a system. In other words, one's past successes can very often become problematic for making progress in the future. Life under apartheid called for this theological engagement at the macro-level and, after ten years of democracy in South Africa, the need still remains. The key point, however, is that our theological resourcefulness should be larger than narrower, in order that we best serve our co-workers at large. If not, the far-sighted state of industrial theology will continue to be appreciated for its big-picture social analysis, but will maintain far too much distance between the theologian and other workers.

Within the Meso-domain (Theoretical Dimension)

I would suggest that not sufficient work has been forthcoming on the part of most South African industrial theologians to renew or develop theological frameworks for interpreting the world of work. Theological engagement is either stuck at the macro-level issues or in quick-fix ethical responses to current issues. Volf (1991:76) laments, "Especially from Protestant pens, theologies of work are in short supply. Protestant publications on work as a rule ignore the dogmatic perspective on the question of work or assume that nothing more needs to be said about it." An exception rests, though, with various Reformed theologians who continue to assert the practical and theological import of the doctrine of *vocatio* (work as calling).

West (1999:34) rightly points out: "Each worker has a lived faith, a working theology, that enables them to survive each day in often difficult circumstances." For Dan, there is clearly a set of guiding principles that provides orientation, direction, perspective and motivation in his everyday life at work. Despite the meagre income, he worked. Despite the heavy workload, he worked. He has ideas about the role of his work. He has ideas about what work and the workplace environment ought to be. He is clearly aware of his experience of work. West draws our attention, moreover, to the reality of a basic working theology.

In this regard, West contends with the reality of the Church's failure to "affirm, nurture, articulate, and act upon the lived faith/working theologies of workers" (1999:35). Perhaps the theological community bears a fair share of the responsibility for this shortcoming here, since there is arguably insufficient consideration offered by theologians in South Africa to a comprehensive, coherent, critical theology of human work and labour (except when it relates to the macro-level world of work).

Albert Nolan (in Cochrane & West 1991:160) advises that one take cognisance of this existence of a worker's theology in so far as it prevails as "a theology that is constructed by workers and for workers, a theological reflection of workers upon their experience of work

and their experience of struggle." While there does not seem to have been a theological-pastoral support forum or structure in place to resource Dan in his situation, it would be important – assuming Dan is of the Christian faith in this regard – to gain insight into his experience of work and God in his particular context as part of the broader process of integration of faith and work.

In a recent article on the faith at work movement, David Miller (2003:306-309) advances what he calls 'the integration box' as a model to assist the church and the world of work in talking to one another. Reflecting on the different ways people seek to integrate faith and work, he suggests four ways that form four quadrants in his visual tool: Ethics, Experience, Enrichment, and Evangelisation. Miller (2003:308) argues that all four ways "are legitimate and valid ways of integrating faith and work" however flawed or insufficient the integration may be, and that "The goal is to 'get into the box'."[9]

Firstly, integration through ethics: Here people at work place emphasis on "internal ethics and broad questions of social and economic justice" (2003:306). Biblical teachings and principles for guidance in concrete situations are important. Secondly, integration through experience: Here people at work place emphasis on "meaning and purpose in and through work, where one's work has both intrinsic and extrinsic value" (2003:307). Work is thus not merely a job, but a vocation or something more than remunerated activity. Thirdly, integration through enrichment: Here people at work place emphasis on "spiritual nurture, focussing on prayer, meditation, daily devotionals, consciousness, healing, transformation, and self-actualisation" (2003:307). Miller (2003:307) adds: "These disciplines form an anchor ... in order to stay grounded and faithful amid downsizing, bad management, prolonged stress, competitive pressures, extended time away from home, emptiness, and ethical quandaries." Fourthly, integration through evangelisation: Here people at work place emphasis on "the workplace as a mission field for evangelising, witnessing, and proselytizing" (2003:307).

Given what I suggest to be a weakness in prevailing theological attempts at engaging the world of work in South Africa, 'the integration box' may offer what is intended to be "a theological and practical framework for all of these ways, thereby enabling constructive dialogue, analysis, critique, and support" (2003:308), which certainly applies to Dan's situation. Whether or not this model is complete or not – a caveat confronting all models – industrial theologians encounter here a basic framework for developing or renewing a comprehensive, coherent and critical theology of work by employing the longstanding notion of *vocatio* (cf. Smit in Botha 2001), or attempting the arguably propitious notion of *charisma* (cf. Volf 1991), or something more. In this way, the theological community can potentially provide workers with a theology of work that works in the complex world of work.

Within the Micro-domain (Personal-relational Dimension)
Industrial theology in South Africa is perhaps weakest at engaging with workers at the micro-level at which all personal and relational activities are located. Without calling on theologians to become business consultants or strategic coaches or simply interfering with a particular locus in the world of work that is unknown territory, theologians should arguably be resourceful for workers like Dan who struggle with motivation, conflict, financial diffi-

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[9]   Cf. Cochrane (in Cochrane & West 1991:279): "Where is this existing theology of work to be found?
       Wherever Christian workers give expression to their faith in a way which integrates their religious values with
       their life in the working world." Moreover, "Because it is a local theology of work, it will have many forms,
       each shaped by different kinds of experiences which in turn will inform the reflection of workers on their faith
       in relation to their work. In that sense there can be no one single theology of work."

culties, and other micro-level problems. At the very least, the theologian bears a responsibility to address issues of human dignity and human rights in the world of work as part of his/her partnership in contributing to a renewed earth in which the values of God's kingdom are discerned and experienced. In previous conferences on theology and work, various thinkers underlined the value of and demand for personal contact not only with the world of work, but especially with workers at work; such relational contact provides an apt and necessary setting for theological engagement at the micro-level.

Concluding Remarks

Prospects for the future engagement on the part of South African theologians concerning world-of-work issues rests to a large extent on the need to provide a theological curricula in theological institutions and faculties that take cognisance of the realities, problems and values within the world of work. Firstly, theological courses should reflect more integrative engagement with the world of work by, inter alia, employing relevant case studies that assist learners in grappling with the application of their theological systems to world-of-work issues. Secondly, theological courses should reflect outcomes that impact on the world of work, given the fact that most learners will likely be involved in the world of work (outside traditional church work) after completion of studies. Thirdly, theological programmes should not only include practica that expose them to community interaction opportunities, but also the broader world-of-work realms. Fourthly, theological research in South Africa should start giving more attention to problems and concerns at the meso- and micro-levels.

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