

Peccoud. D. (ed.)

Philosophical and Spiritual perspectives on Decent work

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With the advent of globalisation this book is clearly very timely and important. One wonders if the English word "Decent" in the title is strong enough, though it has the advantage of not being commonly used in this context, and is not easy to replace. Alternatives might be "Just", "Ethical", "Moral", even "Theological". The phrase 'recovering the spiritual dimension of work' might be useful. At any rate, the 'Decent Work Agenda' resulted from a one year consultation and a seminar in Geneva (Feb. 2002). This was achieved by cooperation between the ILO and the WCC. Communities the participants belonged to included Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, Confucianism, Humanism and Atheism. Part I discusses the issues at stake; Part II presents a synthesis of the common points of view; Part III presents opinions of participants in separate articles relating to local issues, philosophical views of economic and human rights issues and finally papers connected with specific traditions.

In Part I, Juan Somavia insists that it is absolutely essential that the world becomes aware of the importance of values, ethics and spiritual references in politics, human rights and social issues, with poverty and social exclusion being the dominant problems. But in a UN Summit on Social Questions (1995), the spiritual dimension of these issues was largely ignored, hence the need for this 'Decent Work Agenda' (DWA). Konrad Raiser then looks at the dialogue between cultures and the DWA. He calls for the formulation of a 'global ethic' lifting out compatible core values from the different religious and cultural traditions. Religions with an exclusive claim to truth will have to learn to live with plurality.

In Part II, three paradigms of human work are discussed. In the 'Material Paradigm' the worth of a human being is measured in terms of profit or as a consumer. The 'Neo-Human Paradigm, despite the inclusion of human rights, still has the material paradigm as the main frame of reference. It is with the 'Holistic' paradigm that the spiritual dimension

of these issues is recognised. In this holistic agenda, the worker is entitled to BE someone, whereas in the material paradigm he/she is entitled only to HAVE something. The links between work and various theologies are explored, with emphasis on the positive view of work which sees God as the archetypal worker. The traditional caste system would be an example of the negative scenario. Work has a solidarity dimension as a link between the individual and society, so work is at the root of community. There is a profound study of work with relation to all the major spiritual traditions.

In Part III an array of authoritative experts have been assembled from the communities listed above. They were asked to produce a written contribution (2000 words), taking into account a series of issues relevant to DWA. These articles show a most interesting insight into the response of these faith communities to the DWA. A Brazilian reflection is a moving analysis of a typical South American situation. In India, a contributor admits that the National Movement for Freedom has resulted in only minimal erosion of caste and gender inequality. The whole situation exposed engenders both depression and anger. India has the largest number of people in forced labour and in bonded and child labour. The chapter on Reformed Protestant and Presbyterian churches does read as though they are solely responsible for all the progress on work. One thought triumphalism was a weakness of conservative and fundamentalist Catholics! The Protestant contribution does admit some drawbacks in the Protestant traditions. No doubt feminists might find some in the Catholic traditions. Clearly this area must be an essential component of interfaith dialogue, if it is to get beyond social pleasantries. A proposal to form a Permanent Forum on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is discussed. The implementation of economic, social and cultural rights requires a more coordinated effort at the local, national and global level. This book is an essential read for those involved in the social sciences and interfaith matters.