Pro Rege

Volume 19 | Number 2 Article 4

December 1990

Fabric of This World (Book Review)

Charles C. Adams
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Adams, Charles C. (1990) "Fabric of This World (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*:
Vol. 19: No. 2, 27 - 28.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol19/iss2/4

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Book Reviews

The Fabric of This World, by Lee Hardy (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans) 1990. 213 pp. $12.95. Reviewed by Charles C. Adams, Associate Professor of Engineering.

> The garbage collector performs an infinitely more valuable social service than the advertising executive about to launch a campaign to convince the American homemaker that Pink Froth dish detergent is indispensable to gracious living. But the latter, for reasons difficult to fathom, enjoys more social status. (90)

Unfortunately most people, including confessing Christians, do not find this difficult to fathom. That is because most people—again, confessing Christians included—*do not* understand the biblical notion of *vocation*. Lee Hardy's book is a long overdue effort to change that. As he writes in his introduction:

> *The Fabric of This World* might be read as an attempt to help revitalize the concept of work as vocation—or calling—at least within the professing Christian community, where it should have some force. My primary intent is to flesh out the concept of vocation, to delineate its historical background, to mark out its place in the array of possible attitudes towards the meaning of work in human life, to illuminate its full religious content, and to explore its practical implications, both personal and social. (xv)

The title of the book has been aptly chosen. It alludes to the Calvinist belief that work is an integral part of the divinely intended order for human society, that we are not created as autonomous creatures, but instead are mutually dependent, both in terms of our individual needs and the needs of society. Like the fabric of a tapestry, our vocations are interwoven for our mutual support. My work, then, is never *my career* in the individualist sense in which the word *career* is used today. Rather, it is the unique way I've been called to contribute to the common good—to serve my neighbor. As you read this book, you are moved from the self-centered notions of work as a necessary evil that individuals endure for the purpose of *earning a living* or as the ultimate vehicle for their self-fulfillment, to a notion of work as the way in which people can join with others in reducing the suffering and increasing the joy in the world.

But that's not all. The message of this book applies to the corporation with at least as much reforming punch as it does to the individual. Instead of viewing workers simply as tools to use efficiently in the production process, or as complex psychological entities to stroke for maximum productivity, the obedient corporation sees them as integral and valuable parts of its task to serve the common good. To use language borrowed from education, the message of Hardy's book for corporations is that business ought not be either profit-centered or worker-centered. Rather, a business exists to strengthen the fabric of this world. It does this by enabling God's creatures (including itself) to better be the creatures they have been called to be. Neither profit nor worker contentment can be the proper *goals* of business. Rather they are the *fruits* of a corporation that is functioning normatively.

Divided into four chapters, the book begins reflecting on the modern, Western, and highly ambivalent attitude regarding work: it is both a necessary evil—at least when compared to weekends, vacations, and the *dream* of retirement—and it is an addiction, its alternative being the feared state of unemployment. Hardy traces this modern view from its Greek sources through medieval, Renaissance, Marxian, and Freudian stages, to the point where we find it today.

In the second chapter Hardy examines the Christian concept of vocation. He begins with Luther's view that our vocation comes to us through our *station*. While dangerously static and tending almost to a kind of determinism, Luther's view nonetheless liberated vocation from the medieval shackles of a nature-grace dualism. Hardy notes that, "According to Luther, virtually all occupations are modes of 'full-time Christian service'—except those of the usurer, the prostitute, and the monk" (51). Hardy then shows how the Calvinist modification of Luther's view eliminated the notion of station by its recognition "that the institutional shape of our earthly occupations is also a product of human culture" (64) and hence subject to ongoing reformation. The Calvinist view, therefore, included a call to reform fallen societal structures as well as individual lives.

The last part of this second chapter briefly but effectively examines the contemporary Roman Catholic position on work. Especially enlightening is Hardy's

discussion of the Catholic attitude toward private property:

> [W]hile maintaining that private property is an inalienable natural right, Catholics call attention to the social obligations correlative to that right. For the right to private property is not "absolute," but relative to the right of "common use," that is, the right that all people have to the goods of creation which are required to meet their basic human needs.
>
> . . . No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities. (69)

Hardy concludes that "we are witnessing a remarkable ecumenical convergence in the practical theology of work" (76). His is an encouraging call to a Christian view of vocation which ought to find support not only among thinking Calvinists, but among Catholics as well.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute "Part Two" of the book, the part titled *Applications*. This is where Hardy gets practical. Chapter 3 deals with choosing a career. Unlike typical job-placement manuals, which orient career guidance around "self-fulfillment" and "job satisfaction," Hardy calls us to be who the Lord intends for us to be.

> I was placed here for a purpose, and that purpose is one which I am, in part, to discover, not invent. The facts about me are indicators of the divine intent for my life, indicators which are to be interpreted in the light of God's revealed Word. (83)

The criterion for selecting a vocation shifts then from self-fulfillment to serving my neighbor. But this requires us, according to Hardy, to judge priorities in the various vocations.

> Because of the effects of sin upon the institutional shape and social direction of work, we cannot automatically assume that all existing occupations are equally legitimate, nor can we assume that the highest paying ones are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs. (98)
>
> In some jobs my neighbor is less well served than others. My neighbor is less well served by the production of diamond-studded eyebrow pencils than in the production of prescription eyeglasses; my neighbor is less well served by the production of another TV game show than a drama which locates and explores significant issues in human life. (95)

As one might expect, Hardy rejects both materialism and workaholism. What is rare is to find such articulate and uncompromising rejections in the context of a chapter on career choice.

Having dealt with the individual in Chapter 3, Hardy turns to the corporation in Chapter 4. Countering the pessimism of Jacques Ellul regarding the sociological and psychological brokenness that characterizes the modern industrial workplace, he quotes Emil Brunner:

> "The Christian community," writes Brunner, "has a specific task . . . to work out a concrete doctrine of vocation through its lay members who know the jobs and their threat to working morale, and to demand and to create such technical and psychological conditions as are necessary to regain the lost sense of work as a divine calling." (127)

The remainder of Chapter 4 is perhaps the unique part of the book. Here, using the perspectival tools so well fashioned in the first three chapters, Hardy analyzes the management theory of a number of influential industrial engineers. He begins with Frederick Taylor and his theory of "scientific management." Pinpointing the reductionism inherent in Taylor's approach, Hardy writes:

> The problem with Taylorism is not the analysis of work, but the synthesis of work. After having analyzed the process of work into its basic elements, identified the most efficient methods and eliminated the unnecessary elements, Taylor recombined those components as if machines, not human beings, were to perform the work. (139)

Hardy then discusses the thinking of Elton Mayo, Chris Argyris, Frederick Herzberg, and Douglas McGregor, who, using Maslow's needs-hierarchy theory, developed his "Theory X-Theory Y" approach to industrial management. Especially revealing is Hardy's probing into the almost universal (and uncritically held) goal of management to promote productivity. As long as profitability and growth are the chief ends of industry, personnel management will always be a way of manipulating people into the service of economic objectives. In this connection, Hardy gives a somewhat favorable review of the work of Peter Drucker and his concern for respecting persons.

Near the end of the book a section tantalizes us with the title *The Bottom Line: Must We Choose Between People and Profits?* This is perhaps the only disappointing part of the book, not because of what Hardy says, but because of what goes unsaid. With the ammunition developed up to this point, the opportunity is ripe for developing a biblical view of "profits." But, alas, that is left to the reader.

Hardy's book treats vocation uniquely. It ought to be read widely, perhaps even required reading for Christians between the ages of 17 and 22 who are choosing a career for the first time. In addition, it is mandatory reading for those Christians (for example, business managers and engineers) who are called to the reformation of industry. It does not show how to manage an obedient industrial enterprise, but takes us a step closer to realizing such a signpost of the Kingdom.