

Applied Theology for the Retired Minister in Secular Employment (MSE)

Dorrie Johnson

Has the theological thinking applied in Ministry in Secular Employment, any relevance for the *retired* Minister in Secular Employment (MSE)? The MSE works by certain theological principles. These are applied to work, the organisation (or system) and the society in its widest sense, in which that organisation functions. For me, these principles were honed over many years. Over those years they changed their nature from the desire to work as well as I could – in George Herbert's words,¹ 'to do it as for God' – to wondering, questioning, not just the work itself but the rationale for it and its theology.

We claim, I think, as MSEs, that theology

- starts with our own experience;
- is something that affects all of our lives;
- should be active in what we know, feel or believe about the love of God and God's will for us or what we recognise as outside ourselves and to which we respond with our senses or feelings;
- should be something to do with a just, participatory and sustaining society;
- involves wholeness of self.

Elsewhere² I have spoken about the difficulties we face as Christians in starting with secular experiences and describing them firstly in secular language and only secondarily in traditional religious terms. A couple of examples will suffice: market forecasting, risk analysis, projecting, estimating, predicting, calculating, assessing are secular words but

the exercise is one of prophecy. This is a necessary activity if the organisation is to continue its business. A second example lies in mission statements, organisational principles, stance, tenets, policy, marketing strategies, memoranda of agreement; and these are credal. They are what the organisation believes in and in which, hopefully, the people working within that organisation also believe.³ How closely do these accord with what we believe to be the nature of the Kingdom of God?

Theologians are exploring the relationship between the working world and the Church, spirituality or the theology of work or the organisation. Bodies of like-minded people have formed around these issues. One such is MODEM which came into being in 1993. The acronym stands *for Managerial and Organisational Disciplines for the Enhancement of Ministry*. In its early days, however, it also was seen to stand for *Ministerial and Ontological Disciplines for the Enhancement of Management*. This was a welcome interpretation as it suggested a dialogue between Church and Management. Websites have been developed focusing on faith and work issues.⁴ Very few theologians, I believe, have explored the interpretation of secular words, beginning with the secular experience, to relate them to religious terminology,.

I spent years, while employed, trying to discern – and name – the signs of God through the secular – secular language, secular activity, secular beliefs. What interests me is that the manner in which our language is used can liberate or enslave us. This is seen in the working context. Discussion of titles, roles, status, name plates, who has access to passwords, how management structures are introduced and so on, are all linked in some way with our own self image. What boosts that image? What belittles it? On retirement such discussion can become irrelevant. With its passing, too, go all the virtual

accoutrements, the unspoken but recognised attributes that determined our public personae. What takes their place? How do we build and maintain a self image? Do we need to? Retirement, rather than obviating my need to ponder this, has enhanced it.

Retirement has been briefly considered in the Christians in Secular Ministry (CHRISM) Journal⁵ but what I have been considering is the relevance of the theological principles directed towards a work-based life when redirected to life in retirement. Are those principles still applicable?

During a long-past reflective CHRISM weekend, I was privileged to be leading on *Spirituality and Work*. That was its essence, though I may misremember its title. The group considered the subject through eight words: reflection, redemption, inspiration, aspiration, meditation, metanoia, contemplation and consecration. I revisit them but from the perspective of a retired MSE.

Reflection

There is much more time to *reminisce* when retired and, of course, more to reminisce over but that is not the same as reflection. Reflection is more about looking into, seeking a depth, going beyond the surface to understand the underlying meaning. Reflection needs stillness, quietness. In the deep of a pool there can be a reflection – the surface light does not blind, the reflection appears deep, appears dimensional. But it does need stillness – in moving water the images are unclear, unformed.

That call for depth of reflection does not cease with retirement. Its focus may change but living in new circumstances has a new relevance for reflection. People – men,

women, you, me, are, we are told, made in the image of God. When we look at own reflections in the mirror, even increasingly wrinkled reflections, then, we can dare to say we see God. God is seen in our own reflections – yes, the image is marred – we have yet to become whole and perfect, but . . . in the image of God and of infinite value.

Retirement is often portrayed, especially in some of the pre-retirement courses, as having time hanging heavily, the advice being that a hobby should be chosen before work ceases. There may be truth in that but I urge caution. Let time have its place. Take time to reflect. Be still a while. Let us hold our experience in that stillness.

In retirement the potentially-false self images are lost – manager, worker, secretary, miner, teacher or whatever. We make false images of ourselves and possibly we carry images of each other that we have made up. We can take time to reconsider those, too. There is loss but there may be, also, a deliberate and thoughtful ‘putting down’. As Christ accepted the Good Friday and Holy Saturday experience so too, may we. And after Holy Saturday comes Easter Sunday.

After the stillness, after the absorption of the experience, when we’ve had the courage to look at ourselves without any trappings, as indeed God may see us, then it may be that the time is right to discover a new activity or to continue in some form of the work one had, if that seems appropriate. Reflection goes on.

Redemption

I have said before⁶ that I believe that the word ‘redemption’ is often understood, religiously, as meaning only personal salvation. I want to challenge that concept and

suggest that it should be understood as a restoration to wholeness – the image of God made good – not just for the individual but also corporately. Not particularised salvation but a restoration of the whole of life which implies social justice, political and economic justice. Organisations can be redeemed from poor practices, introduced to new and life-enhancing policies.

If redemption means being redeemed – freed, liberated, then might this be a good word to apply to retirement? Retirement frees us from so many constraints. Obviously, retirement has its own enslaving, poverty, of course, but also in stereotypes, attitudes, expectations. These corrupt, deny, limit and, far from enhancing life, they can destroy it. The signs of God in redeemed retirement are in the voluntary activities, in the creative opportunities, in the intellectual pursuits previously prevented by lack of time. For many people retirement itself as a release from work, is a relief, a liberation.

Perhaps also, finding redemption in retirement is the *acceptance* of time as a *gift*. Can we forgive ourselves for enjoying it, lose the guilt that accompanies the pauses in the day? The newspaper headline – ‘55 year old rescued from accident! An elderly woman was today saved from further harm when . . .’ – demonstrates a prevalent belief of society (or at least the media) that chronological age can be used as a label for its own ends. In retirement, perhaps, we can be gracious and tolerant and work to deconstruct some of those assumptions – that indeed would be redeeming.

Inspiration

The biblical images of wind and fire are signs of the energising of the Spirit. Those touched by wind or fire, are moved, are not left unchanged. Those touched by the Spirit

are not left unchanged. I am sufficiently liberal to believe that the Spirit works outside the church environs. I believe that the creativity exhibited in, for example, architecture, music, dance, art, garden design, mathematics, demonstrates that. We are offered so much in the macroscopic and microscopic, in virtual worlds and possible alternative universes – it must be inspiring! Almost at the very beginning of *The God Delusion*⁷ (and I take it out of context) Richard Dawkins quotes Carl Sagan – ‘How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, “This is better than we thought . . .”.’

Some people are very fortunate and find awe and wonder within their working lives, their work is absorbing and exciting. Most of us, I suspect, might have odd moments like that but much of our work is inhibited by the work place policies and our roles within the organisation/system. Retirement offers choices! Limits may be determined by mobility, health or finance – they are outside this paper – but within those limits there are so many opportunities. So in retirement there is space and time for that energising, for imagination, for creativity, for vision, for relatedness. We can still be agents for change, use our ingenuity, be inventive and we need that resourcefulness.

Aspiration

Aspiration is the hope, the leaning towards things hoped for and unseen. It is a belief in things coming right, a transformation, and perhaps, a passion or desire to bring it about. We have the Spirit and the calling – we are offered an eschatology: the end time. What do we know about the end time? It was the mid 1800s, I believe, before the word eschatology hit ordinands’ ears. The Parousia trumpeted by Paul did not arrive as expected. Probably many of us have conducted funerals where the mourners have needed us to reassure that there is a place where all ills cease, where we are reunited with

those we loved and see no more, where we meet and worship the ever living God. We have also met those who have so dealt with the physical conundrums that the fact that the word 'heaven' generates 'there is something' is enough. And we have met those who just dismiss all that as rubbish.

I am not trying to, and I hope I don't, belittle any one's faith or beliefs. That is not my intention. What I want to point out is that we don't know. We can't know. Keith Ward⁸ has spoken of the mind of God of which, if I understand him correctly, our consciousness may be seen as an extension. This concept is one I find appealing and exciting and helps me to make sense of many things but it would not please everyone. But something in the human spirit looks to something more, something outside humanity's limitations, something beyond – whether perfection of this world or its attainment in the next or something else again.

So as an MSE I could find an eschatology of work. The hope of a just society, of sustainable and participatory ecological and environmental systems is all very well, but, in retirement? Is there only physical death as an eschatological expectation? I think that we can still have that same passion for justice, that same hope for things coming right, as much involvement as we desire and, indeed, an obligation to future generations to be living and playing to those ends. In Romans 8:24-25 Paul talks of the hope for what we do not see and that we wait for it in patience. Patience is not apathy. It is not merely sitting back and waiting. The Christian hope is focused not just on life after death, but the Kingdom here, now. In that optimism we should be saying thank you and looking for the signs of it. It may make demands on us but I am not yet ready for the sofa and afternoon TV.

Meditation

Is this only devout reflection or thinking about a chosen biblical passage or 'religious' book to glean topics for praise and thanksgiving? If you look up 'meditation' in the 1969 (that's the edition I bought – age showing?) *Dictionary of Christian Theology*⁹ it refers you to 'contemplation'. I would have liked a separate entry although I can understand why the two have been linked together. I have linked the two¹⁰ in a previous paper. Meditation is not an exclusively Christian practice. What I think is held in common, is the mental focusing onto some object, perhaps on holy writing, perhaps on a piece of art or music. The mind is stilled, concentrating on the attributes of the object, exploring it, 'letting it speak'.

I used to advocate such meditation in a work-based context when faced with a particularly knotty problem or, in a more religious sense, deliberately to bring that dilemma before God – letting God into our thinking. I have suggested that we could meditate upon our work to glean topics for praise and thanksgiving. What about in retirement?

There are still not only opportunities but requirements for thoughtful decision-making. Thinking is still the prelude to action and there can be more time for that. Thought mapping, usually a work-related activity, can be just as useful – meditation to mediation, to interceding (practical involvement not just handing over to God) for others. Perhaps we need to think about possibilities more carefully. We are still called upon to make value judgements and many of us continue to read and write.

Metanoia

I believe that there are two very similar Greek words – one for repent or repented and the one for repentance which carries the idea of turning from one direction to another, a conversion, a change from self-centred living to God-centred living. More than just being sorry about something it has an active sense of movement, of change, of a change occasioned by the sense of regret and wishing to do things differently or be different. A realisation of a situation that makes us pause and change course.

When were we last stopped in our tracks? The tracks along which we were rolling when employed have certainly come to an end. With different thinking, alternative action to follow that thinking is inevitable. Again, in retirement we have an element of control over this process. We really can take some responsibility for our own change, it is not necessarily imposed upon us. It is a time, maybe, for taking stock, for clearing the attic, for naming all those old photographs, for making that phone call, for the recognition that (society's assumptions about age apart), we have fewer years left than those that have passed. Let us use them well.

Contemplation

Contemplation. – the intuitive way of approaching God in prayer that is not necessarily rational or thought out. It is a more spiritual, or at least, a less intellectual activity. We know the most usual ways – revelation, prayer, scripture, a life of faith which bring people to a life of contemplation, of withdrawal. I used to speculate how this related to work. If one had to withdraw from work to contemplate did that mean work was beyond contemplation? But contemplation does have its place, I believe. My argument was that if time was so spent, then when faced with the need for immediate decisions or issues of conflict, the stillness and

preparation would have been completed, the benefits having been absorbed into our being.

How might it relate to retirement? There could be ample time to listen to music or poetry, to lose oneself in a picture or a landscape, free to let the holy, the unthinkable move in, letting be Retirement is often notorious for two things. One is that either we are asked to do many things by people who know that now we have so much time, or we do so many things quite voluntarily – for mixed motives. Weeks fly by and the list of things-to-do gets longer. The idea of sitting down and doing nothing becomes laughable. How does this happen? What happens to our contemplative time? Are there other ways in which that contemplation can take place – losing oneself into something that takes us out of ourselves be it poetry, music, art or icons – that links us with the transcendent? Shouldn't retirement be a time for that 'par excellence'?

Consecration

Consecration – something sacred, something special, finding the special in the ordinary. Identifying the holy things of God in the working context was both difficult and delightful. Alan Ecclestone¹¹ wrote:

A new look at the ground we stand on is a must if we are to know ourselves in the presence of God in the factory, laboratory, farm, city, all of which have their particular problems of right and ultimate purpose.

Seeking signs of inward and invisible grace in the working environment was an enlightening and worthwhile task.

Where are they in retirement? Can there be that particular consciousness of God when the parameters are less clear? We don't stop living when we retire, we change the context and we are freed from the strait-jacket of working systems. There is time, perhaps, for that speculative prayer which moves away from Daily Offices and becomes a growing relationship without the fear which comes from not knowing.

Looking through a telescope, a microscope, a kaleidoscope or placing a prism on my kitchen windowsill and seeing the refracted light play over the sink, create a humility in me that I can only associate with the sacred. Finding the special in the ordinary starts with our own experience; affects all our lives – seeking the special in the everyday. Within the mundane, the ordinary, lies the potential for the transformation, the miracle, the opportunity to see things differently, to recognise the possibility that God is transforming, is consecrating our retirement for a purpose outside our understanding.

I offer a definition of Grace. Grace is that love, stemming from God's love, which enhances life, giving it beauty and blessing, charity and dignity. That is the sacredness of life in work or in retirement. Grace be with you.

And as an afterthought for those still working I wrote the following::

The Future

By rights, this poem should remain a blank
for no-one can predict, describe, their fate.
But yet we have to live as if we can,
and use demography – that is, the date
and place of birth, the accident of genes,
the current policies and social norms.
They'll all, collectively, provide the means
by which the scientist foretells, informs.
Investments, unit trusts, insurance schemes,
forecasts of climate change, consumer trends,

depend on looking forward, acumen
to calculate the course for looked-for ends.
So we can't predict, but your intention
should be to make quite sure that you've a pension.

Dorrie Johnson

Notes

- ¹ George Herbert as in Hymn No. 240, *Hymns Ancient and Modern Standard Version* (London: Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. 1988).
- ² Dorrie Johnson, 'Mind your language', *Ministers-at-Work The Journal for Christians in secular ministry* No. 80 (CHRISM January 2002), p. 21.
- ³ I have designed an exercise to assist this association which was used in Coventry in a Lent course arranged by the local MSE group. For further information: Phil Aspinall, CHRISM Publicity Officer 02476467509.
- ⁴ www.easyforumsco.uk/clergytalk established by Hugh Valentine and the names of many others are listed in *Minsters-at-Work The Journal for Christians in secular ministry* No 90 (CHRISM July 2004,) p. 47.
- ⁵ Keith Holt, 'MSEs and Retirement' in *Minsters at Work Paper 5* (CHRISM 2001) and Jim Cummins 'When I'm 64', *Minsters at Work* No 88 (CHRISM January 2004), p. 21.
- ⁶ Dorrie Johnson, 'Ordained Ministers in Secular Employment', *Theology January/February 1998 Vol C1 No 799*, p. 26.
- ⁷ C. Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot* (1995) in Richard Dawson, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2006), p. 12.
- ⁸ Keith Ward, MCU Conference, 2005.
- ⁹ Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1969,) pp. 211 and 73.
- ¹⁰ Dorrie Johnson, 'Ordained Ministers in Secular Employment', p. 25.
- ¹¹ Alan Ecclestone, in *Spirituality and Human Wholeness* by A. Ecclestone, Y. Sheldrake, M. Walker and F.G. Wakefield (London: BCC 1986), p. 7.

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