

Work in the Spirit

AN EVALUATION OF VOLFF'S
PNEUMATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades the volume of material dedicated to the theology of work has significantly increased and Miroslav Volf's contribution is one of the most important and theologically rigorous in his book *Work in the Spirit*. Given his history with Jürgen Moltmann, it is no surprise that his entry point is eschatologically oriented—that we are part of the shaping of 'effective history' rather than simply immersed in an 'expendable history' leading up to the eschaton. Volf sees us therefore as co-creating with God through the power of the Spirit toward a new creation. As Volf explicitly puts it:

Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new creation or it is not Christian life at all.

He challenges us to move beyond a simplified Reformation perspective on work as vocation (a divine calling to a Station i.e. a single profession for life) as he considers this as an outdated model that was developed in a society fundamentally differently shaped to ours. A simple vocational understanding is inadequate as "work is ceasing to be a physical reality and is becoming more and more a mental activity" and that vocational mobility has become a prevalent value in western culture of the early nineties. If we are to remain within the Reformation framework it would only lead us to a crisis of internal alienation. In departing from Luther, Volf reopens the question of 'the meaning of work' and, while some say that Volf goes too far, I think at the very least he succeeds in breaking us free from an inherited vocational understanding and swings the pendulum as far away as he can to allow for fresh conversation.

In this essay we will evaluate his arguments and method, and interact specifically with the significance of a pneumatological framework for understanding work where I will express some reservations and identify what I perceive to be some loose ends.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

In chapter 1 Volf begins with the fundamental questions of "what is work? And what is our relationship with work meant to be like?" He defines work as:

. . . honest, purposeful, and methodologically specified social activity whose primary goal is the creation of products or states of affairs that can satisfy the needs of working individuals or their co-creatures, or (if primarily an end in itself) activity that is necessary in order for acting individuals to self-satisfy their needs apart from the need for the activity itself.

As far as definitions go, it is hardly succinct, but it does cover the bases and its cumbersome nature is a pointer to the difficult task ahead of him. Work is intrinsic to what it means to be human inasmuch as "we not only live from what we do, but to a large extent,

we also are what we do.” Although he concedes that this oversimplifies the matter he does say that we cannot understand who we are as human beings and how our societies are structured without considering “how we go about our work.” Work comes from an intrinsic drive or quality that is part of what makes us human and for Volf, to be human is to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of economic theory contrasting the philosophies of Adam Smith and Karl Marx. One of the critical issues Volf sees here is whether work is for the end goal of consumption (Smith), or for the end goal of satisfaction (Marx). For Smith “work did not have human dignity, only usefulness” where a worker is indifferent to the product and vice versa. One may find satisfaction in the production, but satisfaction is not necessary for work to have meaning and if one finds it alienating this is the price to pay for advancement. Marx however says that the product is about satisfying “the concrete needs of one’s fellow human beings”. That human beings should work “not only because they have to, but because they like to.” Marx also ties work inextricably with identity where “human beings have a need to work because work is their ‘life expression.’”

Volf identifies that both philosophies are open to producing internal alienation in a worker and determines that it is imperative to “discuss which forms of work are incompatible with the dignity of human beings as God’s free and responsible creatures, and which forms of work develop their personality and which stifle it.” Hence one of the projects that Volf is embarking on is to redeem work as a dignifying component of life.

In chapter 3 Volf begins to construct a Theology of Work and critiques the inherited traditional theological approaches. Classically, two priorities of activity that seem to be at odds with each other in human beings: *vita activa* (life of action) and *vita contemplativa* (life of contemplation). Thomas Aquinas developed a view that the purpose of work is to provide for the necessities in order to make the contemplation of God possible which has carried over through the Reformation into much contemporary thinking about work. Volf suggests this prioritisation is “an illegitimate intrusion of Greek anthropology into Christian theology” where the Greek depreciate work as a necessary evil. Volf proposes that “we treat [via activa and via contemplativa] as two basic, alternating aspects of the Christian life that may differ in importance but that cannot be reduced one to another, and that form an inseparable unity.” He allows for worship to require continual conscious awareness of God and for it to be a much more comprehensive activity encompassing everything in life.

This then raises again the question that Aquinas was trying to answer: “What is the value of work?” Does it possess an inherent value as opposed to instrumental value? Volf argues that Aquinas’ view that meaningful life is pursuing *vita contemplativa* over and above *vita activa*, is a departure from the church fathers before him. In spite of the Hellenistic backdrop, the early Church Fathers affirmed the nobility of work by appealing to texts where Paul urges us to work with our own hands (1 Thess 4:11, 2 Thess 3:10). They

saw that work should be for the benefit of the community as well as the individual; that it should not be about amassing wealth; that work could be for atonement or penitence. If we return to some of these insights, we can see that work therefore has an intrinsic value even if it is ambiguous to explain.

In terms of method, Volf critiques developing a theology of work “by analysing and combining individual passages of the Bible that speak about human beings and their daily work.” This method creates three major problems. First that the New Testament only occasionally addresses the topic of work and only “as a subordinate theme at that.” Second, “a deep divide separates the world of work in biblical times from work in present industrial and information societies.” Third, that it is not obvious what significance should be ascribed to each biblical statement especially given how different theological and philosophical frameworks affect the importance of each verse—a communist will respond differently to the a capitalist when reading Amos’ denunciation of the exploitation of workers. Volf concludes that the “inductive approach to developing a theology of work is inadequate.” Giving himself the space to operate within an deductive framework allows him to approach the problem from within a much broader paradigm that accesses overarching principles of biblical narrative—like pneumatology and eschatology.

From within the eschatological framework Volf claims that his theology of work purports to be normative, transformative and comprehensive.

New creation is the end of all God’s purposes with the universe, and as such, either explicitly or implicitly is the necessary criterion of all human action that can be considered good.

Our work becomes part of God’s transformation of personal, social, just and ethical dimensions of our world. The comprehensive theology of work will “answer the question of how human work is related to all reality: God, human beings and their non-human environment.” It needs also to be a global theology, appropriate in any setting. He concludes “that a theology of work adequate to the modern world of work must be cross-cultural and cross-historical, a pan-human theology of work.” The challenge for how his theology of work will be different to historical approaches will be in trying to address a much more comprehensive set of parameters.

In chapters 4 and 5 he begins to develop his theology of work by assessing the two views of eschatology: the *annihilatio mundi* (the current world will be destroyed in a sharp discontinuity with the current historical trajectory) and the *transformatio mundi* (the world is transformed in continuity with the current historical trajectory). In the first, what we do now has little eternal consequence except in a salvific sense, in the latter what we do now contributes to the future history.

According to Volf, *annihilatio mundi* cannot believe in the goodness of creation:

“what God will annihilate must be either so bad that it is not possible to be redeemed, or so insignificant that it is not worth being redeemed.” This speaks directly to a submerged existential crisis inherent in many a Christian’s life—the ‘so what’ for living doesn’t make much sense if it’s all going to be erased anyway. “What is the point for life, if what we have after is completely and discontinuous with what we have now?” “Does my art hold significance after the eschaton?” We cannot separate ourselves from the trajectory of history even one that culminates in the eschaton. Volf concludes that “since much of the present order is the result of human work, if the present order will be transformed, then human work necessarily has ultimate significance.”

In addressing questions such as those just mentioned, the *transformatio mundi* imbues work with cosmic significance for it introduces a co-creative responsibility to our existence. We effectively fall into step with the fundamental creative work of the Spirit. If we are co-creating towards the end, then eschatology provides the pneumatological framework that Volf builds his theology within.

He returns to the original issues by asking the question “What does the Spirit of God have to do with mundane work?” Luther is not comprehensive enough for Volf, where if “even the ‘lifting of a single straw’ is a ‘completely divine’ work there is no reason why the same description could not apply to the most degrading types of work in industrial and information societies.” And his point is valid where the rabid dehumanisation that occurs in such ‘jobs’ like brick breaking in Bangladesh cannot be seen as divinely ordained. The weakness of Luther’s position is that there is no recourse or even directive for moving out of these alienating work situations and transforming them into more dignified situations. Indeed the traditional vocational interpretation of 1 Cor 7:20 implies that this is the Pauline understanding. This problem is exacerbated when we consider that much of Protestant theology limits the Spirit’s activity to salvation of one’s spirit only and separates the Spirit from the rest of our activity which in turn implies that the Spirit is unconcerned with the alienation we experience in work unless it is directly contravening God’s moral law. Furthermore, a vocational framework as too limiting for a career-mobile world. Single vocations have receded into the past as consumerism has hit the job market.

In response to these inadequacies, and using his pneumatological framework, Volf proposes a theology of charisms, where he broaden the understanding of spiritual gifts and first fruits of the Spirit to encompass all facets of work. His argument for a pneumatological understanding of work flows from this premise because charisms inherently necessitate their out-work-ing to be cooperatio Dei. Therefore as “Christians do their mundane work, the Spirit enables them to co-operate with God in the kingdom of God that ‘completes creation and renews heaven and earth.’” All humans find fulfilment in an eschatological/pneumatological framework “since human beings were created to live on earth as God’s co-workers in anticipation of the new creation, the Spirit imparted to them various gifts

to accomplish that task.” These gifts should be developed in consultation with God and in understanding what he has imparted to us.

If this theology of work is to be comprehensive and global (according to his own criteria) then how does this this understanding of charisms apply to non-christians? Are they unwittingly participating in the project of *creatio mundi*? Basically yes as he says ‘the goal of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the world is the same: the Spirit strives to lead both the realm of nature (*regnum naturæ*) and the realm of grace (*regnum gratiæ*) toward their final glorification in the new creation (*regnum gloriæ*).’ The implication is that because the Spirit is at work at all times, all people are agents in some capacity of that work—which I think raises issues regarding the special effects claimed in ‘being filled with the Spirit.’ I suspect that in this framework ‘being filled’ means being aware and therefore acutely oriented by the work of the Spirit.

In Chapter 6 Volf’s looks the problem of alienation in work. As his argument has unfolded Volf demonstrates that work must be considered a central aspect of Christian living, since charisms can only be exercised through ‘doing work.’ It follows then that we are empowered to work through these giftings. “When a person does her secular tasks in grateful obedience for the new life God has given her, she also works out of the experience of God’s grace . . . Grace only ‘compels’ her to act, but it still stands at the heart of her world.” Though not fully absent, the sense of duty gives way to the sense of inspiration. One of the beauties of viewing charisms in this manner is that it allows those not in employment to feel included in the theology “since the presence of the Spirit is the key to human identity, there is no fear that by not working human beings may lose themselves.” Charisms are present even in those who are not formally working in a job or vocation.

A pneumatological understanding of work is better equipped to deal with the situation [of unemployment] because [a person] has not been deprived of all charisms . . . he is not left without a divinely appointed, significant activity.

Using the theology of charisms then opens up a comprehensive paradigm where all can find some sense of meaning in their work.

Alienating work is a very strong theme in the latter parts of the book and according to Volf is work that “does not correspond to God’s intent for human nature.” Work is a fundamental dimension to human existence but in spite of Marx, “for sixteen or more hours a day it stupefied people’s minds and ravaged their bodies.”

One of the most significant causes of this alienation is the lack of clarity that we have about what we do, what we need, and how we manufacture for a consumer society. Volf contends that if we were to strip back to our basic needs then we would be better able to ground ourselves.

“The first thing at issue in all fields of human work is human’s need to earn their daily

bread and a little more.” But the words “a little more” have become much more loaded in the developed world. He observes that the ‘dynamic character of needs’ is a human phenomenon. “Today’s desires glide into tomorrow’s needs...insatiability seems inseparable from modernity.” Cutting back our needs requires distilling felt need into absolute need and Volf lists 5 needs he sees as essential for humans:

- 1) need for communion with God,
- 2) need for solidarity with nature,
- 3) tending for the well-being of one another,
- 4) need for human development,
- 5) the need for new creation, *which is the kingdom of freedom.*

He thus concludes that “the need for the new creation is the broadest context in which the expansion and limitation of product-needs should be placed.” If product needs fulfil these needs, then they will not contribute to the alienation so endemic in a consumer society.

If the consumer society dominates then workers will inevitably be of secondary concern to product output. Alienation will be experience through technological advances or acute division of labour through work study (Taylorism and its derivatives).

Volf considers it imperative that humans be treated as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end, primarily because of the sanctity of the imago Dei. It is implicit in the nature of imago Dei that we are created to have personal fellowship with God through the Spirit.

Because of the communal dimension to the imago Dei, where “The spirit of God calls and equips people precisely in order to serve their fellow human beings.”

He draws on the Pauline metaphor of the Body of Christ to show that charisms link us to the greater body, a larger community, “a whole in which the charisms of each are a contribution to the good of all.” This will in turn minimise the alienation one will experience in work.

He also addresses our alienation from the environment and the problems that lie within. With the view that humans are co-creators with the Spirit he suggests that the primeval injunction for dominion over nature has been misused. The connection of this to the pneumatological framework is “the presence of God’s Spirit in both of them” i.e. animals and humankind. God’s Spirit is present in non-human creation and as such we co-operate under the guidance of the Spirit to care for it. We are responsible for helping nature “grow into an ever greater correspondence with the state into which it will be transformed”.

It is a reasonable assumption that animals and nature can all be lumped together when talking about dominion. The doctrine of imago Dei gives insight into how we are to “rule over the earth in a way that God rules over the world”. In other words, we are to bless rather than destroy and he cites Luther where only “upright humans can exercise true dominion.”

Imago Dei is fundamental to the discussion of alienation in work, and is quite a different approach to Luther in dealing with vocation.

OTHER CRITIQUE

Volf is a difficult theologian to critique as not only is he so comprehensive and detailed in his method but his manner is so amicable that readers are not critiquing on the defensive.

It is a difficult task to draw all of the strands together to formulate one comprehensive theology of work. Such a task is so complex that it makes sense at the methodological level to apply a comprehensive multifaceted subject of theology such as pneumatology. Because pneumatology is so critical to life itself it is a fitting framework for understanding work in our lives. The Holy Spirit as creative sustainer of all life, that dwells within the “temple of the Spirit” (1 Cor 3:16) and empowers individuals in that temple to perform acts of the divine wherever they are present, gives us a new perspective on meaning for anything we do, whether it be work, leisure or contemplation.

To tackle the issue of alienation at the root by tending to issues surrounding the imago Dei is essential as it strikes at the heart of any cause of alienation i.e. internal disconnect and spiritual estrangement from oneself and from God. Through reinvigorating a positive attitude to exposing imago Dei we can make sense of Gal 2.20 where “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” The Spirit is the agent of this work and as we overcome the internal disconnect, we also overcome the external alienation and vice versa. Work therefore should be an operative paradigm for this reconnection; it should be not only via activa, but also via contemplativa.

However, the main concern that I have with Volf’s work is that there is little room for a pneumatological view of work in the Spirit that embraces *annihilatio mundi*. Although Volf concedes that there is compatibility, he is so taken with an eschatological view of the transformation of creation that for those of us who do not see eschatological continuity, we are left wanting. What is a pneumatological understanding of work if all things will be erased? If indeed we are not co-creators then is there any implicit value in what we do? It can only be reconciled if work satisfaction is seen as a means to an end in a person. But the main issue that could be taken with Volf here is that not all evangelicals subscribe to the *transformatio mundi*. Without getting into a debate over why some believe in a cataclysmic destruction and a second *creatio ex nihilo*, the main concern is whether we can still hold a pneumatological understanding of work or is it too entwined with Volf’s eschatology? This question I would suggest only requires that we address the fundamental meaning of work at a fairly removed level since the benefits of a pneumatological framework are easily experienced in their outworking. Ultimately I think everything is spiritual and this framework allows us to embrace that reality more comprehensively.

Finally, there is a profound beauty in letting charisms take on a more comprehensive

role outside of a church worship service and into the world. Fundamentally it can offer hope to those who struggle with their 8.30am–5.00pm existence. However, there is not much to delineate between what certainly seems to be special empowerment of the Holy Spirit for Christians and those in a non-Christian paradigm. According to Volf, both are operating out of charisms, both are being used by the Spirit, both are co-creating and the explicit difference between the believer and non-believer does not seem apparent. This in some sense seems abusive in that it is utilitarian.

While his case for continuity is exceptional, I still am a pessimist when it comes to the big picture. What also of the liberal traditions where this life is it? This also provides a framework for making sure that work is important. I would imagine that it comes down to the priorities of the conditions one finds themselves in. It is easy to justify on one level, the mundane when the end is the ability to love by providing for your loved ones. In that very sacrifice there is dignity and value and worth. In that sense work is given value independently from the actual production but instead by another overarching principle of love. Which leads me to second consideration, that the kenotic event of the cross is not seen as relevant to kenotic expressions of the servant. Indeed much of Volf's work doesn't consider the emptying of self, the servant metaphors and the like. He implies that it is dehumanising to be a slave on a production line, when in fact the kenotic act itself could bring about a sense of human dignity.

CONCLUSION

As the previous generations' positivism waned in the developed world attitudes toward work in the nineties took cynical turn. Generation X began to pioneer a perspective toward work where it was held lightly and as an ever-changing means to an end, rather than a constant reference point or routine that defined the self. The act of working became merely facilitative rather than formative of people's self-actualisation. In many respects working became a necessary evil—identity had to be found outside of a job.

Movies like *Fight Club* and *Office Space* (and more recently in *Wanted*), followed by the success of the *Office* series cynically portrayed the angst of working in mundane office environments. *Office Space* is a strong voice against dehumanising, *Fight Club* is strong for setting yourself free from its trapping. Co-incidentally both include violent destroying work environments as a means of emancipation. In contrast, the *Office* has its characters trapped in a meaningless diorama making its characters unbearably familiar to much of the white collar population. Perhaps this is why the idea of an eschatological new creation is so appealing in Volf's work. A violent end to 'all that is' giving way to a new order is much more appealing than the slow and methodical disintegration we experience in the malaise of 'what actually is'.

But the eschatological emphasis seems a little weak. Volf doesn't answer the issue of how much of what we do actually makes an impact on the final product at the end of time.

Volf doesn't deal adequately with why God would want to use us to co-create when it seems apparent that we fail so bad at this. I'm not convinced that my work has any more meaning within *transformatio mundi* than within *annihilatio mundi*. In the former, it's not clear how much of what we do contributes to the new creation, and in that uncertainty, we are no better off than if we thought we made no difference.

In spite of how Volf arrives here, the pneumatological framework is very useful in engaging our mundane, our apparently un-spiritual actions, with spirituality. We can re-orient ourselves to being participants in the much greater task of being co-creators in the sense that we are creating room for redemption in this world, for humanity as a whole, for our communities and for our environment. The Spirit empowers us to do this not just because it is righteousness, but because it is an expression of that most divine of all human qualities—love.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Volf states that ‘the purpose of this book is to develop a new—pneumatological—theology of work.’ Mirsoslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2001). 76.

² Moltmann was Volf’s supervisor for his doctorate in 1986 at he University of Tübingen.

³ Volf states that “I am following the basic insight of Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* that at its very core, Christian faith is eschatological.” Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 79.

⁴ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 79.

⁵ The vocational understanding of work was developed and refined in the context of fairly static feudalist and early capitalist societies on the basis of a static theological concept of vocatio . . . a dynamic society requires a dynamic understanding of work. Ibid. vii.

⁶ Ibid. 35.

⁷ Ibid. 36.

⁸ we do well to remember that this work is 16 years old and was produced before the internet was mainstream.

⁹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 11.

¹⁰ Ibid. 26.

¹¹ Ibid. 26.

¹² Dr. Kenman Wong, “Work in the Spirit,” Seattle Pacific University School of Business and Economics, <http://www.spu.edu/depts/sbe/cib/scholarship/workinspirit.asp>.

¹³ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 59.

¹⁴ Ibid. 74.

¹⁵ Ibid. 70.

¹⁶ Alistair McKenzie, “Faith at Work: Vocation, the Theology of Work and the Pastoral Implications” (University of Otago 1997). 13.

¹⁷ “. . . because of the scarcity of biblical materials, their limited relevance to the modern world of work, and their ambiguous nature.” Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 79.

¹⁸ Ibid. 85.

¹⁹ Ibid. 85.

²⁰ Ibid. 86.

²¹ Ibid. 91.

²² Ibid. 94.

²³ Ibid. 102.

²⁴ Ibid. 107.

²⁵ Of course now that we are entering a recession, our choices are going to be somewhat limited.

²⁶ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 110.

²⁷ ‘When people work exhibiting the values of the new creation (as expressed in what Paul calls

“the fruit of the Spirit”) then the Spirit works in them and through them.’ Ibid. 114.

²⁸ Ibid. 115. Volf is quoting Moltmann.

²⁹ Ibid. 173.

³⁰ “The pneumatological understanding of work . . . Revolves around the individual’s gifts (its other foci being God’s call and the community’s good). Ibid. 190.

³¹ Ibid. 119.

³² Ibid. 125.

³³ Ibid. 133.

³⁴ Ibid. 156.

³⁵ Ibid. 160.

³⁶ Ibid. 157.

³⁷ Ibid. 149.

³⁸ Ibid. 150.

³⁹ Ibid. 153-154.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 154.

⁴¹ Volf comments that “like all results of human activity, technology shares the basic human contradiction caused by sin. Technology is not only a noble product of human ingenuity; it is also a dangerous instrument of humans’ ignoble ambitions.” Ibid. 182.

⁴² He draws on Immanuel Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.” Ibid., 172.

⁴³ Ibid. 190.

⁴⁴ “No doubt *dominium terrae* played a significant role in *justifying* modern striving to conquer nature, with all its calamitous consequences.” Specifically, the text of Genesis 1:26–28 is seen as the “*locus classicus* for a Christian understanding of work in general and for the relationship between work and nature in particular.” Ibid. 142.

⁴⁵ “What unites human beings and the non-human [animal] creation is, however, not only their common material creatureliness, but even more significantly, the presence of God’s Spirit in both of them.” (Citing Job 34:14f (cf. Ps 104:29–30) and Rom 8:19–22.) Ibid. 144.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 146.

⁴⁷ “If nature has independent value, then it can be treated neither as merely a resource from which material wealth is created (as Smith implied), nor as something that can achieve its goal only if humanised by work (as Marx maintained). Human beings are responsible for respecting nature in its specific creatureliness.” Ibid. 145.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 147.

⁴⁹ “Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Volf’s career as a theologian is that there are no fights between Volfians and anti-Volfians. There don’t even seem to be any anti-Volfians.” Mark Oppenheimer, “Miroslav Volf Spans Conflicting Worlds “ Christian Century, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_1_120/ai_96555083/print?tag=artBody;coll.

⁵⁰ “It is a strength of the understanding of work based on the Pauline teaching of charisms that it takes into account the moral character of the context of work and specific gifts of the individual as well.” Volf, *Work in the Spirit*. 199.

⁵¹ I am somewhat agnostic on this issue.

⁵² McKenzie, “Faith at Work”.

⁵³ Which is a disaster of a movie really, but needed to be mentioned as a current expression of this cultural problem.