



**Working**, Darby Kathleen Ray, Fortress Press, 2011 (ISBN 978-0-8006-9810-2), xii + 140 pp., pb \$15/£10.99

The current economic crisis has rarely made a book more timely. The context of the book's appearance, not to mention the content itself, makes this one a gem. In 130 pages of text, across four chapters of roughly equal length, Ray provides as thorough and helpful a survey and analysis of Christian approaches to work as one could expect in such a small space. She does so in a stimulating, practically engaged way, fully in keeping with the series of books (*Compass: Christian Explorations of Daily Living*) to which the volume contributes. An opening chapter places the later discussion in the context of contemporary experiences of, and approaches to, the reality of work and employment. If there is the slight danger in Ray's survey of concluding that things were easier in the past, or at least that theological understandings of work were easier to make, there is no escaping the force of Ray's basic questions here: why are so many in the West now working so hard, being unable to 'switch off', when many other people have no opportunity to undertake meaningful work to support themselves and contribute to society? Here Ray recognizes the extent to which work patterns now feed addictive forms of consumerism, and also the way in which flexible forms of working which could aid more humane working practices frequently do not. Her discussion of the ease with which the 'emotional labor' entailed in many forms of work in the service industries and many other professions too easily compromises natural human relations is especially insightful (pp. 32–4).

Chapter 2 is devoted to the Bible. Ray places her survey of relevant Hebrew and Christian scriptures in the context of Greek (Platonic and

Aristotelian) approaches to work, urging the reader not to read the Bible with Greek philosophical lenses. A sharp disjuncture is seen between Greek devaluing of the body, along with prioritizing of intellectual labor, and the more earthy, incarnate approaches to work within Hebrew and Christian traditions. A telling and helpful quote here is: 'Perhaps the most important insight into work in biblical tradition is that it must stop' (p. 49).

Chapter 3 turns to some significant examples of discussions of work in Christian history. Ray offers a distinctly Protestant take on this history, noting how Luther and Calvin in different ways re-shaped their medieval inheritance. Perhaps not all scholars of medieval theology would be happy here. To that Ray adds discussion of the Social Gospel and more recent Catholic teaching on the subject of work. If the conclusion that 'a clear and strong consensus exists' (p. 98) may seem just a little too neat, in a book of this scale it is understandable that Ray wants to conclude that the general tenor of Christian believing and thinking about work issues in major challenges to the way we organize and understand work and employment today.

These challenges are taken up in the final chapter, where work is understood as subsistence, selfhood, and service. The chapter begins with the suggestion that work can be understood 'as a kind of sacrament' (p. 102). Ray herself would accept that it is easier for one who is paid to write books to come to such a conclusion than it would be for many in less well-paid, less-fulfilling roles. That said, the resources Christian tradition provides for understanding and thinking about work are, at their best, life-enhancing. The continuation by Christians of the Jewish principle of Sabbath is, for example, vital as a counter to the culture of over-work (pp. 120–3). Perhaps the chapter does underestimate the sheer difficulty in the present economic climate of bringing such insights to bear in public discussion, though there is awareness here that religious people are often themselves caught up in an over-working, consumer-led culture to such an extent that they may not be using the resources of their own traditions to think about their practice.

I have a few quibbles of detail. Rauschenbusch was a Baptist ('congregational minister', p.87, is not untrue but may mislead). 'Jesus and his comrades were working-class people' (p. 105) – well, yes, but much more needs to be said, and perhaps even in a book this short, so that we do not read too much back into the first century. There are also Americanisms of a kind which pertain not simply to language, but to understanding (what is a 'car note' [p. 2]?).

All in all, though, this is an excellent book, in an extremely useful series, and is to be warmly recommended to church discussion groups and to seminary and early-level university courses alike. It is written in a style which makes its content easily accessible, or it could be 'talked

to' by group-leaders in settings where the reading of such texts may not be common practice. I do hope that it gains a wide readership.

Clive Marsh  
University of Leicester

