

The Moral Obligation of Work: Confucian and Christian Perspectives

(An abstract)

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This paper attempts to explore the moral obligation of work in the teachings of Confucianism and Christianity. The ethos of the Confucian school is that a person should transform himself into a sage who follows *Dao* — the moral mission from heaven. The priority of life lies not in acquiring the techniques of any trade, but in faithfully fulfilling one's role in the society. The value of life overrides in importance the performance of the specific duties in life. Confucius and Mencius see the role of upper class men as more important than that of ordinary workers. They maintain that those who labor with their mind (the learned persons) govern those who labor with their strength (the manual workers), and those who are governed by others should support their superiors. Those who labor with mind are carrying out the mission of *Dao*.

However, in the later stage of the Warring States period (403–220 B.C.), the lives of learned persons became very difficult. They sometimes had to give up the moral mission by selling their knowledge for a living. *Dao* became a sort of technical knowledge. For a long period, the ideals of the Confucian school has vanished from history.

From a Christian perspective, theology provides the meaning of work. God continues his work up to the present. Work can be analyzed as an instrument, a relation, a calling or an enterprise. The meaning of work is positive in the sense that there are intrinsic values in all kind of works. To do a good work is to fulfill the calling of God to an individual. There should be no division of social classes among various kinds of work.

However, the meaning of work is distorted when people become the slaves of work. In modern capitalism, work becomes profit-making activities as workers are often exploited by their employers. Pope Leo XIII reasserted the dignity of the working class by pointing out that all men are free and responsible to God. No one has the right to enslave others. Employers should treat their workers under a sense of moral mission. Meanwhile, Max Weber pointed out that the moral vision of the Puritans might fade out in early 20th century. The capitalistic society should rebuild the centrality of the moral mission of work again so that we will not dishonor the products of human labor with our selfishness.