



# God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement

by David W. Miller

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■ reviewed by Richard Higginson

**D**avid Miller is ideally situated to write this book. He is a businessman turned academic, who for five years (before recently moving to Princeton) was Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture at Yale Divinity School. His book charts the huge burgeoning of organisations seeking to integrate faith and work in the USA which has taken place over the last two decades. It traces the historical and theological roots of this movement, proposes a framework for understanding it and outlines how he would like to see the movement develop.

In his opening chapter, Miller justifies 'Faith at Work' as the most helpful term for the movement, because it has the mediating and overarching possibilities of transcending 'the tired debate of religion versus spirituality' (p.17). It is a decentralised movement, with

loosely networked clusters of lay-initiated and lay-led activities that include study groups, conferences, magazines and internet sites, and has developed in defiance of a church which often seems very critical of business, the sphere in which so many people work. Miller acknowledges that 'responsible and ethical criticism of immoral business structures, practices and people is certainly in order. But the often presumptive and pervasive suspicion shown by religious professionals blocks consideration of the theological and practical possibility that there could be redemptive, creative, productive, ministerial and transformative possibilities in the world of business ...' (p.10).

Nevertheless, the Faith at Work movement in the USA can be linked to a long and rich theological tradition that has engaged with the spiritual-material relationship and the place of human work in God's purposes. Miller devotes chapter 2 to the Social Gospel Era (c.1890s-1945), which he sees as

largely polarised between premillennialist Christians who emphasised saving the individual soul and postmillennialists who emphasised saving society. (Unfortunately, he doesn't clarify how beliefs about the millennium led in one direction or the other). Walter Rauschenbusch came close to arguing for both individual and social transformation, but his emphasis on the realised kingdom of God was later criticised by Reinhold Niebuhr for too high a doctrine of humanity and too low a view of sin; Miller also thinks Rauschenbusch had limited impact on the laity in the pews. In the next, Ministry of the Laity Era (c.1946-1985), three notable theologians, J.H. Oldham, Hendrik Kraemer and Hans-Ruedi Weber, took daily work seriously in championing a theology of the laity. They were major figures in the World Council of Churches, but their impact too was limited. In the 1960s and 70s the emphasis on the laity was eclipsed by liberation theology, which indicted rather than encouraged the work of business

professionals, and a clericalised understanding of lay ministry which relegated it to increased participation in church committees and functions.

The main thrust of chapters two and three actually features the work of 'special purpose groups': organisations and people who in Miller's view *were* more influential. In the pre-war era these included Frank Buchman and Moral Re-Armament, Samuel Shoemaker and the Pittsburgh Experiment, the Gideons and the Christian Business Men's Committee. In the post-war period notable contributions were made by theologically literate laymen such as Mark Gibbs (Vesper Society), William Diehl (Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life) and Howard E. Butt (Laity Lodge). So Miller sees the present era where such organisations have grown and flourished as essentially a continuation of valuable work done in previous eras.

Miller sees the overriding theme of the Faith at Work movement as the quest for integration. 'People in the workplace of all levels and types no longer seem to be willing to leave their soul with the car in the parking lot' (p.74). The quest for integration avoids the naivety of expecting the kingdom of God to be realised here on earth, but rejects the alternative extreme of despair and cynicism. One might say it steers a middle way between Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr, though the movement's theological diversity is such that this would be a bold assertion! Miller recognises different emphases within the movement, but thinks they reflect

not so much the old liberal and conservative, pre- and postmillennialist divisions as a varied emphasis about the focus of where integration is sought. His analytical framework comprises an 'integration box' with four quadrants. Some faith and work groups emphasise Ethics (improving business practice), some Evangelism (converting fellow-workers), some Experience (finding meaning in their work as a calling) and others Enrichment (seeking God's power as a resource for healing, spiritual nurturance and personal transformation). Miller regards all four emphases as valid but is most affirmative of groups which unite all four. He therefore revises his integration box in favour of integration circles where the four Es overlap.

I think these integration circles are potentially helpful, and discovered considerable interest in this categorisation when I shared it recently with people involved in marketplace ministry in Hong Kong. However, I have two reservations. Although evangelism is important, my experience is that Christians who emphasise it in a workplace context are often weak at actually integrating their faith with their work; evangelism can be at the expense of integration. I also think enhancement would be a better word than enrichment, which has unhelpful connotations of the Prosperity Gospel, and I was surprised that Miller didn't have more to say about corporate and social transformation alongside personal transformation.

Although positive overall about current developments, Miller remains disappointed with the response of the denominational churches and theological academies. With a few notable exceptions, they continue to display indifference, suspicion or hostility to the business world. His final chapter is a clarion call largely directed towards clergy and trainers of clergy: that they would recognise anew the theological, practical and pastoral importance of the workplace through a ministry of presence, listening, preaching, teaching, prayer and spiritual integration. He also calls for companies to practise 'faith-friendly' policies which honour and respect employees' spiritual dimension in the same way that over successive decades they have become sensitive to the needs of blacks, women, single parents and gay people.

Over the last 20 years many of us have observed a similar phenomenon in the UK: a growth of faith and work organisations, while the church remains resistant to change at both institutional and local levels. Indeed, I was surprised that, having worked as a businessman in London for several years, Miller had so little to say about the British scene! But though theologically a little lightweight, his account of the American scene is informative and insightful. I hope that the people who need to read it will heed his recommendations. ■

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