

The end of work?

A brief report of Canon Dr. John Atherton's presentation at the November 2006 ICF Annual lecture

first appeared in ICF Newsletter – December 2006



What is the overarching purpose of this mass human enterprise that we call work? Although not expressed exactly in these terms, this was one of the questions that Revd. Canon Dr John Atherton invited his audience to explore as he presented the 2006 ICF lecture “**The Happiness Hypothesis** - Reflections from the religion and capitalism debate.” It is our intention to publish the full text of his lecture in due course, but in the meantime this report offers a flavour of the evening.

Capitalism, he suggested, has long justified its existence by the belief that global generation of wealth is the most effective means of achieving human well-being. The debate continues to rage as whether such a perspective is justified, but what is clear is that there are significant circumstances in which wealth creation does not achieve this end or in fact mitigates against it.

In particular Dr. Atherton cited the reality of our own society in which wealth creation is at an all time high, yet general dissatisfaction within the population seems to have similarly increased. What has fascinated the speaker is the increasing significance of what he describes as the happiness hypothesis, in response to this reality.

Put simply, the purpose of human endeavour can largely be described as human happiness, which rather than being assumed as the automatic outcome of wealth creation, is something that can be measured and influenced by a whole range of factors.

In analysing these factors, Canon Atherton enthusiastically points out that he is able to make a convincing case for the nurture of faith not on the basis of theological argument or religious apologetic, but founded on what would usually be described as secular research.

The ability to work was particularly identified as one of those factors, not simply as a means to wealth creation, but as an entity in its own right. In reinforcing this point he referred back to the writer's own contribution earlier in the evening when the desire and capacity to work was identified as an aspect of what it means to be created in the image of God. Faith itself though stood out as a key contributor to human happiness - as the speaker so succinctly put it “If you want to be happy, believe in God”

All of this raises some significant questions for a society in which economic drivers have pretty much enjoyed an unrivalled ascendancy when it comes to setting just about every aspect of policy. If religious faith is a key contributor to the public good, it seems pretty hard to argue against investment in its promotion and development.

We can but offer the briefest of sketches of what was a profound and fascinating presentation. Dr Atherton's research continues and we look forward to its completion in due course.

In the question and answer session that followed, ICF members demonstrated their usual ability to engage in robust academic and theological argument and debate. One contributor highlighted that the “end of work” is increasingly being recognised as the destruction of the environment and the exhaustion of the earth's resources - surely the achievement of human happiness was under serious threat from the inability of the

earth's resources to sustain its population. Dr. Atherton acknowledged this reality, and invited the audience to recognise that these issues are of key importance but outside the scope of his own particular research.

Another participant expressed enthusiasm for the arguments that had been forwarded but asked the poignant question as to whether people of power and influence were hearing this message. In response Dr. Atherton pointed to significant shifts in public policy that increasingly recognised the place of faith communities and the role of faith as a contributor to wellbeing in the community at large. The ensuing discussion explored the concept of "religious capital" and speculated the degree to which it might become an increasingly recognised commodity.

The issue of "risk" was also raised with one participant recognising both from history and his own experience that Capitalism tends to involve a major risk factor, Whether risk contributes to or mitigates against human happiness was the subject of some discussion, but the speaker pointed out that the degree to which a society might be described as "religious" has a significant impact on the existence and impact of risk. Mention was also made of the significant growth in the advertising industry, questioning the degree to which human happiness is impacted by our widespread exposure to advertising in its many forms.

We are deeply grateful to John Atherton for sparing the time to provide us with a stimulating and informative evening. We wish him well with his continuing research.

Phil Jump