

Bound or Belonging?

Phil Jump explores issues around Modern-Day Slavery [fibq – January 2018]



Black has very much been the order of the day at this year's big screen award ceremonies as Hollywood A-listers joined the growing protest against sexual harassment and exploitation in their particular workplace. This was the latest response to a catalogue of claims and accusations triggered by initial revelations about the behaviour of Miramax producer Harvey Weinstein.

Stories like this raise significant and disturbing questions about the nature of the society as a whole, but also reflect some unavoidable realities about participation in the world of work. What has particularly caused outrage is the way in which workplace cultures and structures made it difficult for people to openly challenge what was happening, or convinced certain individuals that they had a right to act in ways that would be unthinkable in any other context.

No-one would deny that it is utterly wrong for any human being, male or female, to be placed in a situation where they feel somehow compelled to accept behaviours

and advances that are so unwelcome and deplorable. But why is it that workplaces in particular seem to create such realities?

The two might not initially seem related, but it was while this storm was raging, that I found myself in a management discussion about "intellectual property." The concern was that employees who had been paid to develop a particular suite of resources, could not fully claim these as their own, because they had been operating at the time under the auspices of their employer. The organisation in question would be considered unquestionably honourable, yet the conversation still veered towards assessing people, their time, talents and attributes in terms of them being property that potentially belonged to someone else. I could not help but sense a chilling parallel with some of the narratives that have emerged from the Weinstein scandal about the way in which young, attractive, aspiring actors were considered to be the "property" of those with the power to make them famous.

And while we might rightly protest at such ideas, the reality remains that workplaces often rely on being locations where people are willing to do things that they might otherwise not. Most of the time, this will be nothing more innocuous than putting up with tasks that are mundane and repetitive because it "pays the bills", wearing a suit when we would probably be more comfortable sporting a baggy jumper and a pair of jeans or dragging ourselves out of bed when we would rather stay put for another hour or so. Work inevitably exposes us to a level of compliance to which we surrender a measure of free will in return for suitable remuneration, or perhaps out of a basic loyalty to the organisation of which we are a part.

And even if we promote work as an end in itself rather than a means of economic gain, it is still able to exercise control over us. The keen gardener is unlikely to relish the task of

weeding, or the back-breaking slog of double digging, but will be willing to put up with it for the sake of the eventual results later in the growing season. And here we return to the basic dynamic of employment – if I find such tasks sufficiently monotonous or beyond my physical capability, I can pay another human being to undertake them for me. Work creates an environment where lots of people do what they ordinarily wouldn't do.

Where then does the boundary lie between this basic dynamic of human enterprise and the abuse and exploitation that is now being exposed? But before considering that, I want to highlight another aspect of this reality that appears as widespread, but does not have its celebrity survivors to stand up and speak against it.

The umbrella term “Modern Day Slavery” is one that is applied to the plight of an estimated 40 million people around the world. Its forms vary from migrant workers held in economic servitude, people tricked into being trafficked for sexual exploitation to women forced into marriages without consent. One in four people held in its grip are believed to be children and the UK and other western nations are being increasingly recognised as places where such practices prevail. **

Much is being done to combat this widespread evil, with recent legislation requiring any UK company with annual revenues of £36 million or more to report on the transparency of their supply chains in relation to slavery and forced labour. This is to be commended, along with initiatives supported by faith groups and others to identify and expose modern slavery whenever it is found.

Yet we cannot escape the reality that work, the need of work, the offer of work and the potential rewards of work seem to be key instruments in this heinous trade. That same dynamic that causes aspiring Hollywood stars to put up with the sexual advances of

powerful, middle-aged men, causes others to allow themselves to be transported across borders, surrender their personal freedoms and identities and become too entrapped to have any means of escape once true reality becomes apparent.

Publications like this one seek to promote an understanding of work as an expression of human creativity and combined endeavour. We should never lose sight of its potential in this respect, yet have to acknowledge that it can also be used for far more sinister ends. We might trace the parallels here with that basic theological concept of human fallenness – we have the potential to mar any aspect of God's creation. When we pray “deliver us from evil” we are not simply seeking protection from the evils that might be inflicted upon us, but those that we might inflict on others through the thoughtless abuse of the gifts and opportunities that God has given us.

Yet for all of this, one of the accusations that is squared against the Christian faith, is the Bible's apparent tolerance of slavery. In places it could be read as commending slavery, and at the very least seems, at times, content to leave it unchallenged. But as we reflect on recent events and the connections that can be forged between them, they perhaps offer the key to a better understanding of the Biblical narratives, and through them the proper status of workplace relationships.

At one level it is difficult to compare the plight of glamorous Hollywood celebrities with that of trafficked sex workers or child labourers in the world's sweat shops. The celebs attract vast financial rewards and enjoy a jet-setting lifestyle that most people simply read about in the pages of gossip magazines. They can hardly be described as “slaves” in terms of being of the lowest social order, yet they seem susceptible to a level of abuse that does not seem to have been automatically the case for those the Bible describes with this term.

What then is “slavery”? Is it simply a matter of whether or not an individual is considered to be the legal property of another or the degree to which power and influence in any context is abused? So while our Scriptures may leave unchallenged the possibility that one individual can become the “slave” of another, they have much to say that protects this basic dynamic from being the source of abuse and exploitation. The fact that “slaves” are overtly included in the basic rights and dignities that are to be extended to others could be cited as a “zero tolerance” attitude to the kind of behaviours that seem to have infected almost every workplace context.

It is also useful to consider how we understand this basic reality of belonging. While rightly raising concerns when any human being is reduced to being “property”, we can also acknowledge that in many situations this can represent a very positive reality. Individuals might describe themselves as finding a “sense of belonging” within a particular community, or indeed cite a failure to belong as a key source of social isolation and despair. “Belonging” in this respect is also a key element in the Covenant relationship between YHWH and the nation of Israel. “I will be their God and they will be my people” (Deuteronomy 9.4) goes so far as to describe the people of Israel as God’s possession, but this is certainly not perceived as an abusive or oppressive reality, but one of dignity and privilege.

This relationship between God and people is the defining element in the Old Testament nation of Israel. The various law codes and regulations are the practical outworking of being those who “Love the Lord Your God with all your heart . . . “ In this context, to take someone as your possession is to extend towards them that same sense of responsibility and care that God extends to his people. If slavery is tolerated in the Biblical narratives, might this be because it is assumed to provide the same sense of refuge

and shelter that the people of Israel found in their God?

Modern concepts of employment seem to have largely abandoned the idea of the employer taking responsibility for the care and wellbeing of their workforce, in favour of simply extracting the maximum return from the industry of a “human resource”. Perhaps the unpalatable extremes highlighted by #metoo or modern day slavery campaigners, indicate a need to reclaim this element in our wider experience of the world of work.

** Modern Day Slavery statistics from https://www.alliance87.org/global_estimates_of_modern_slavery-forced_labour_and_forced_marriage-executive_summary.pdf