

The Relevance of Calvin's View of Work and Calling to Christians in Newly Industrialized Countries

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Abstract

In the context of the economies of Newly Industrialized Countries, this article surveys the understanding of work in Islam and Hinduism and contrasts them with John Calvin's notion of work and calling. The author analyzes Islamic traditions, classic Hindu texts, and Calvin's *Institutes* and *Commentaries*. While Islam puts a premium on religious work, and Hinduism defines work in light of its caste system, in a Reformed worldview, God values all types of work, and workers are God's stewards. This notion is of particular relevance to those involved in economic development.

In recent years a group of nations has been recognized as Newly Industrialized Countries. These countries are moving from agrarian to industrialized economies, and they are successfully harnessing the strengths of their workforces to produce and export products, thereby improving both their economies and standards of living. Some of these countries, such as India and China, may have an overall low *per capita* income due to their large populations, yet they have thriving economies.

In the late twentieth century, the sudden industrial expansion of Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan led to their being described as

Newly Industrialized Countries. Other countries, such as Turkey, Thailand, Malaysia, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Indonesia, China, and India, whose industries grew in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, also came to be considered in this category.¹ This phenomenon of industrialization brings with it great opportunities for people in all sectors of work, as industry impacts every area of labor.

In such contexts the issue of work becomes prominent. More jobs are created, and a new understanding of work and the dignity of labor arises. In class- and caste-conscious India, for example, Japanese investment in various industrial sectors, such as automobile manufacturing, brings a new understanding of the dignity of labor. There is a conscious attempt to make blue-collar workers understand that their role in the production process is crucial. This breaks down the feeling that the working class is not as important as the management sector.²

In Newly Industrialized Country economies the question may arise whether a person engaged in a particular work is doing something that is God-honoring, especially in Asian contexts, where there is a clear distinction between secular and sacred, the common and the holy, and laity and priests. A clear understanding of work, as a calling approved by God, is vital for the Christian.

John Calvin's contribution to the understanding of work and Christian calling can be applied to the growing industrial economies around the world, some of which have a significant Christian presence. Though generally remembered as a theologian, his view of the Christian life was not limited to spiritual issues; it encompassed all areas of life and society.

We propose broad surveys, first of work, its hierarchical features, and its relation to slavery; second, work in Islam and Hinduism; third, Calvin's understanding of Christian calling as it relates to all occupations and not just ecclesiastical calling; and finally, some evaluation.

I. The Understanding of Work

The hierarchical aspects of work in ancient times are best considered against the background of slavery. In the Old Testament, the Israelites became slaves

¹ "Newly Industrialized Country (NIC)," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/newly-industrialized-country>.

² The many multinational corporations that are coming into the country with the liberalization of its economy have brought with them a new understanding of the importance of work. The best known of these are the American fast food chains such as McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Domino's Pizza.

in Egypt as a result of political changes, in which the rulers saw them as a threat to their nation. Conditions were increasingly difficult for them (Exod 1:8–22). In the Pentateuch, Moses warned the Israelites to treat slaves humanly. They were to remember that they too were slaves in Egypt. There were situations in which Israelites would become slaves to their own people. In such cases, there was an onus on masters to treat their slaves in a dignified and God-honoring manner (Lev 25:39–46; Deut 15:12–18).

In the New Testament, the presence of slavery is accepted, and no attempt was made to abolish it as part of the social order. Paul writes to slaves and masters about their responsibility to each other. The slave ought to obey as unto the Lord (Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:22–25), and the master needs to treat the slave kindly, as he himself is under God, the greater Master (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1).

Slavery and work went together in ancient times. Slaves were often spoils of war and made to work for their captors. As slavery became a recognized institution, the professions of slaves underwent complex changes. Slaves were not merely engaged in physical labor; some were literate and skilled and held different professions despite their social status.³ The different abilities, gifts, and learning of slaves gradually led to a hierarchy in occupations.⁴ Manual labor was on the lowest rank, while priestly, mental, and martial “work” occupied higher positions. This hierarchy is found in both religion and society.

The idea of priests being set apart for religious duties is common in most religions. A good example is the change that took place in the Roman Empire after Constantine became emperor. Jacob Burckhardt considers the exaltation of Christian martyrs as a force that challenged the imperial edicts, and with this came the organization of the church with hierarchical distinctions. “The choice of spiritual leaders or at least their confirmation remained in the hands of the communities, but these became more and more definitely to be distinguished from the *laity* as *clergy*.”⁵ This feudalistic structure is seen in ancient religion as well as society in medieval times. Medieval society was divided horizontally, with the king at the top followed by priests, knights, and peasants.⁶

³ “Slavery, Serfdom, and Forced Labour,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1974), 16:857.

⁴ An example is Tiro (who died in 4 B.C.); he was Marcus Tullius Cicero’s slave and freedman, and as his secretary helped to publish his works.

⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 113.

⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Middle Ages*, vol. 5 of *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1907), 45–47.

II. *Work in Islam and Hinduism*

1. *Islam*

Islam claims to have a positive view of work. However, the 113 references to “work” in 108 verses of the Quran in the Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation refer primarily to work in the sense of righteousness or good work.⁷ In order to see “work” as an action it is necessary to go to the Hadith, or Islamic tradition that records the sayings and practices of the prophet Mohammed gathered by followers; of these the most authentic traditions are by Sahih Al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, and it is these that will be considered. The following examples reveal Islam’s understanding of work.

Work is closely connected with charity or good works. For example, in response to a statement that every Muslim should give charity, a tradition answers that they should engage in work.⁸ The emphasis is not so much on work itself but work as a means of performing charitable deeds. A similar reference speaks about the necessity for every Muslim to give *sadaqa*, which is “voluntary charity.” The importance of *sadaqa* is shown in that one who cannot work can still give his share of charity by passive abstinence from evil. Even if one cannot work, he may acquire merit by passive abstinence.⁹ Similarly,

Narrated Al-Miqdam: The Prophet said, “Nobody has ever eaten a better meal than that which one has earned by working with one’s own hands. The Prophet of Allah, David, used to eat from the earnings of his manual labor.”¹⁰

Rather than good works, the accent here is on “working with one’s own hands.” Although the reference to David is cryptic, the point is that one may

⁷ Quran, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, <https://www.searchtruth.com/search.php?keyword=work&translator=2>.

⁸ “Narrated Abu Burda: from his father from his grandfather that the Prophet said, ‘Every Muslim has to give in charity.’ The people asked, ‘O Allah’s Prophet! If someone has nothing to give, what will he do?’ He said, ‘He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity (from what he earns).’ The people further asked, ‘If he cannot find even that?’ He replied, ‘He should help the needy who appeal for help.’ Then the people asked, ‘If he cannot do that?’ He replied, ‘Then he should perform good deeds and keep away from evil deeds and this will be regarded as charitable deeds.’” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Book 24, Hadith 524, https://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=24&translator=1&start=40).

⁹ Sahih Muslim, Book 5, Hadith 2202, https://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=5&translator=2&start=60.

¹⁰ Sahih Al-Bukhari, Book 34, Hadith 286, https://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=34&translator=1&start=20.

enjoy the blessings of his labor. Another reference to work in general is this:

Narrated Al-Aswad bin Yazid: "I asked, 'Aisha, What did the Prophet use to do at home?' She said, 'He used to work for his family, and when he heard the Adhan (call for prayer), he would go out.'"¹¹

History tells us that Mohammed was the founder of Islam as well as a warrior. If this hadith is authentic, it shows that he did not shun work that was not in keeping with his identity as a warrior and that prayer takes precedence over work, which is suspended during times of prayer.

Islamic tradition holds that even work done for religious purposes can be remunerated. A duty performed towards God is entitled to a reward.¹² When payment is made, the receiver may use it or give it in charity; this is a call to share what was received. For example, Fatima is advised to perform religious duties instead of being given additional assistance for her housework.

Abu Huraira reported that Fatima came to Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) and asked for a servant and told him of the hardship of household work. He said, "You would not be able to get a servant from us. May I not direct you to what is better than the servant for you? Recite Subhaana Allah thirty-three times, al-Hamdu li-Allah thirty-three times and Allah-o-Akbar thirty-four times as you go to bed." This hadith has been narrated on the authority of Suhail with the same chain of transmitters.¹³

This implies that work assigned to a person has to be done. The recitation expected of Fatima is puzzling, as it does not lighten her work in any way. As in the above instances, religious duties are more important than ordinary chores, and they in some way ease the burden of physical labor, although it is not clear how this is accomplished.

¹¹ Sahih Al-Bukhari, Book 64, Hadith 276, https://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=64&translator=1&start=10.

¹² "Ibn al-Sa'di Maliki reported: 'Umar b. Khattab (Allah be pleased with him) appointed me as a collector of *Sadaqa*. When I had finished that (the task assigned to me) and I handed over that to him (to 'Umar), he commanded me to (accept) some remuneration (for the work). I said: I performed this duty for Allah and my reward is with Allah. He said: Take whatever has been given to you, for I also performed this duty during the time of the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him). He assigned me the task of a collector and I said as you say, and the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said to me: When you are given anything without your begging for it, (then accept it), eat it and give it in charity." Sahih Muslim, Book 5, Hadith 2275, https://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=5&translator=2&start=140.

¹³ Sahih Muslim, Book 35, Hadith 6580, https://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=35&translator=2&start=100.

2. Hinduism

The Hindu religious tradition in India is the soil in which the complex social order of the rigid caste system is rooted.¹⁴ This caste system led to the prosperity and happiness of the higher castes and the oppression of the lower. Robert Antoine describes caste as

a theocracy ruled by divinely appointed kings (*Kṣatriya*), who were assisted by priestly ministers and interpreters of the traditional code of behavior (*Brāhmins*), while cultivation and trade were in the hands of a third class (*Vaiśyas*). These three upper classes were the ruling classes of invaders who reduced the original settlers (*Sūdras*) to the state of serfdom.¹⁵

Though the last statement is debated, caste and its implications for Indian society have continued for millennia. The fourth servant caste of *Sudras* is oppressed in many ways, and their duties are spelled out in the ancient law book of the Hindus, *Manusmṛti* or the Laws of Manu:

IX.334. To serve brahmins who are learned in the Vedas, householders, and famous for virtue, is the highest duty of a sudra, which leads to beatitude.

IX.335. A sudra who is pure, the servant of his betters, gentle in his speech, and free from pride, and always seeks a refuge with brahmins, attains a higher caste.

IX.413. But a sudra ... may [be compelled] to do servile work; for he was created by the Self-existent [Lord] to be the slave of a brahmin.

IX.414. A sudra, though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it!¹⁶

From these laws it appears that the *sudras* are forever trapped in a hopeless situation. Even though IX.335 seems to imply that there is a way out

¹⁴ “Caste is a very complex reality which it is difficult to define. The best we can do is to try to enumerate the distinctive characters which may be said to apply to all castes: (i) A caste is a closed social group theoretically based on heredity; everyone belongs to the caste in which he is born. (ii) It possesses an independent organization, a head and a council, which may meet on special occasions. (iii) It has common festivals and common usages particularly in matters of marriage and food. (iv) Its members usually practice the same profession or trade, or at least related profession. (v) It has power to impose penalties on its members, the most grievous being expulsion from the caste.” Robert Antoine, “Hindu Ethics: Special Ethics,” in *Religious Hinduism: A Presentation and Appraisal*, by Jesuit Scholars, 2nd rev. ed. (Allahabad: St. Paul’s Publications, 1964), 114.

¹⁵ Antoine, “Hindu Ethics,” 115.

¹⁶ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), quoted in “The Laws of Manu, c. 1500 B.C.E.,” Hanover College History Department, <http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/261manu.html>. See also *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty and Brian Smith (New York: Penguin, 1991).

for them, in reality it seems improbable. Though other castes do have to do some work, the *sudras*' fate seems sealed, and work is a perpetual, hereditary yoke. The *sudras* are fortunate compared to the *dalits*, who fall outside the four principal castes. *Dalit* is a word meaning downtrodden or oppressed, and *dalits* until recently were termed "untouchable" because of the menial work that they did but that no one else would do. When religion segregates human beings into classes according to tradition, and identity is bound with the kind of work done, there is no idea of dignity of labor.

In chapter 3 of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, written later than the *Laws of Manu*, work appears as a means of salvation. Work is not physical, but the performance of duty for salvation, presented as *Karma Yoga*, one of the paths of salvation in Hinduism.¹⁷

In Hinduism work has negative connotations viewed in terms of the caste system. Whereas the three ruling castes enjoyed the benefits of respectability in their occupations, the *sudras* had to serve the others. The plight of the untouchables is greater. These unfortunates were (and still are, in some places) compelled to work in subhuman conditions because of heredity. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi tried to elevate their social standing by calling them "children of God," or *harijan*, but, unfortunately, this term became another means of identifying them as inferior.

The oppressive caste system continues to have a bearing on India as a nation. The government, in its desire to accommodate the caste system, has introduced social benefits to some lower castes in the form of reserved jobs and study opportunities. This has brought unrest and dissatisfaction among the other castes. There are occasional cases of higher castes trying to pass as low caste in order to receive government benefits. A dire fact is that even today, after decades of independence, lower castes are prohibited from worshipping in Hindu temples or drawing water from village wells. Caste clashes often result in sporadic violence, including murder, rape, and arson.

In recent years the Christian church has begun to address the issue of caste by fighting for the cause of the *dalits* and the oppressed classes in Hindu society.

III. *Calvin's Understanding of Calling and Work*

During his second stay in Geneva, from 1541–1564, Calvin applied some of his experiences in Strasbourg "to address the issue of Christianity in the

¹⁷ A. C. Bhaktivendanta Swami Prabhupada, ed., *Bhagavad-Gita: As it Is*, rev. ed. (1872; repr., Mumbai: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1986), 163–213.

public arena.”¹⁸ His thought on calling and work is significant. Work was not to be shunned for something higher, such as monastic life and meditation. In his understanding, work and calling are closely related. We work because God has called us to work.

Both Martin Luther and the Genevan Reformer saw work as something positive, though with differences.¹⁹ For instance, Luther believed that a person called to a particular occupation should remain in it for life. Calvin, however, provided for learning another trade and changing occupation.²⁰ Ian Hart observes that for Calvin, “the purpose of calling was that each one should serve his fellowmen, and in turn be served by them. ... Work there is a bond which unites a man to his neighbors; work provides mutual contact and communication.”²¹ This notion provides a foundation for an ideal community. Another major area of difference was usury. While Luther rejected interest and trade itself, Calvin had a positive view of business and lending of money on interest, with safeguards. He made a distinction between the prohibition of taking interest in the Old Testament and the taking and giving loans in Geneva. Whereas the former was because of poverty, in Geneva, loans were taken for investing in business and making a profit. Calvin says, “I conclude that it is necessary to judge usuries not according to some certain and particular statement of God, but according to the rule of fairness.”²²

Calvin was so broadminded in his understanding of the importance of trade and economic progress that he transformed Geneva into a model city, not simply as a haven for refugees, but as a hub for business and banking. Philip Schaff writes,

Efforts were made to give useful employment to every man that could work. Calvin urged the Council in a long speech, Dec. 29, 1544, to introduce the cloth and silk industry The factories were forthwith established and soon reached the highest degree of prosperity. The cloth and silk of Geneva were highly prized in Switzerland and France, and laid the foundation for the temporal wealth of the city. When Lyons ... surpassed the little Republic in the manufacture of silk, Geneva had already begun to make up for the loss by the manufacture of watches.²³

¹⁸ Alister McGrath, “Calvin and the Christian Calling,” *First Things* 94 (June/July 1999): 31–35, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1999/06/calvin-and-the-christian-calling>.

¹⁹ Ian Hart, “The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work: 2. John Calvin,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 67.2 (1995): 121–35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²² John H. Leith, *John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), 191–92, quoted in Hart, “The Teaching of Luther and Calvin,” 131.

²³ Philip Schaff, *The Swiss Reformation*, vol. 8 of *History of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 516–17. For a purely sociological explanation of the

Here was a Reformer who was willing to view life holistically. Many followers of Calvin have caught this vision.

Despite the trials he endured in Geneva, Calvin sees a “high calling” before him and writes to Sadolet,

I readily agree with you that, after this sanctification, we ought not to propose to ourselves any other object in life than to hasten towards that high calling; for God has set it before us as the constant aim of all our thoughts, and words, and actions.²⁴

This high calling is to be with Christ and is expressed in a prayer for suffering Christians in Europe:

In a particular manner, we commend unto thee our unhappy brethren who live dispersed under the tyranny of Antichrist, and deprived of the liberty of openly calling upon thy name ... that thou wouldst deign, O most indulgent Father, to support them ... so that they may never despond, but constantly persevere in thy holy calling.²⁵

The “holy calling” is faithfulness to God. However, calling is also to Christian living: “Now, although being called to do good works, we produce the fruits of our calling, as it is said, (Luke 1:75), that we have been redeemed in order to serve God in holiness and righteousness, we are however always encompassed with many infirmities while we live in this world.”²⁶

Calvin sees a general calling of God for all Christians, but also the role of pastor as a specific call to the task of the ministry. In discussing auricular confession from a biblical perspective, he writes,

Now I say that they [pastors] are better fitted than the others because the Lord has appointed them by the very calling of the ministry to instruct us by word of mouth to overcome and correct our sins, and also to give us consolation through assurance of pardon (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23).²⁷

flourishing trade and commerce in Protestant Europe, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958).

²⁴ John Calvin, “Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva,” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 1:99.

²⁵ John Calvin, “Forms of Prayer for the Church / Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 2:101.

²⁶ John Calvin, “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith, for the Use of Those who Desire to have a Compendium of the Christian Religion Always at Hand,” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 2:139.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis

A pastor, by virtue of his call, is “better fitted” for the ministry.

Nevertheless, Calvin criticized monks for considering their calling unique and leading to perfection. Commenting on 2 Thessalonians 3:9, he states,

Indeed, in giving it this name [a state of acquiring perfection] they distinguish it from other ways of life as by a special mark. And who can bear such a great honor being given to an institution nowhere approved by even one syllable; and that all other callings of God are regarded as unworthy by comparison, though they have not only been commanded by his own sacred lips, but adorned with noble titles? And how great an injury, I beg of you, is done to God when some such forgery is preferred to all the kinds of life ordained by him and praised by his own testimony?²⁸

This judgment is to be viewed against the inordinate importance given to monastic orders and ascetic practices, which had a special place in the Roman Catholic Church and whose practitioners were honored for their seemingly meritorious actions. Calvin opposed the idea that monks have a superior calling compared to other people.

Similarly, referring to the admonishing of the lazy in Thessalonica (2 Thess 3:10), he says that there are different ways of working:

For whoever aids the society of men by his industry, either by ruling his family, or by administering public or private affairs, or by counseling, or by teaching, or in any other way, is not to be reckoned among the idle. For Paul censures those lazy drones who lived by the sweat of others. ... Of this sort are our monks and priests.²⁹

This is clarified when he explains the incident of Mary and Martha and the visit of Jesus recorded in Luke 10:38–42. Jesus commends Mary’s devotional attitude in contrast to Martha’s fretting over hospitality:

As this passage has been basely distorted into the commendation of what is called a Contemplative life, we must inquire into its true meaning, from which it will appear, that nothing was farther from the design of Christ, than to encourage his disciples to indulge in indolence, or in useless speculations.³⁰

He goes on to explain:

Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1940), 3.4.12 (1:535–36).

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.13.11 (2:1265–66).

²⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Thessalonians*, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 44.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 2:104.

Luke says that *Mary sat at the feet of Jesus*. Does he mean that she did nothing else throughout her whole life? On the contrary, the Lord enjoins his followers to make such a distribution of their time, that he who desires to make proficiency in the school of Christ shall not always be an idle hearer ... for there is a time to hear, and a time to act.³¹

He then points out Martha's two mistakes: she went beyond what was necessary to entertain the Lord, who would have been satisfied with a simple meal, and by her actions she forfeited the opportunity to benefit from Jesus's visit, being distracted by "much serving."³² Once again, the distinction between contemplation and action is distinguished. If it appears that the Lord approves contemplation and devotion, he chides Martha for overdoing hospitality.

As far as common calling and work are concerned, Calvin refers to Genesis to show that work is an expectation of God. Commenting on Genesis 2:15, he writes,

Whence it follows that men were created to employ themselves in some work, and not to lie down in inactivity and idleness. This labor, truly, was pleasant, and full of delight, entirely exempt from all trouble and weariness; since however God ordained that man should be exercised in the culture of the ground, he condemned in his person, all indolent repose. Wherefore, nothing is more contrary to the order of nature, than to consume life in eating, drinking, and sleeping, while in the meantime we propose nothing to ourselves to do.³³

Ordinary work is essential for Calvin. God is the source of our gifts, and there is no place for considering spiritual callings superior to ordinary work:

Even the artisan with the humblest trade is good at it only because the Spirit of God works in him. For though these gifts are diverse, they all come from the one Spirit; it pleased God to distribute them to each one (I Cor. 12:4). This does not refer only spiritual gifts, which follow regeneration, but to all the sciences which concern our use of the common life.³⁴

Concerning the practical outworking of the knowledge of the call of God, Calvin says,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 2:105.

³³ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 66–67.

³⁴ Calvin commenting on Exodus 31:2, quoted in Hart, "The Teaching of Luther and Calvin," 127. Exodus 31:2 refers to the Bezalel to whom the Holy Spirit gives skill to produce artisan works. Though 1 Corinthians 12:4 seems to point to spiritual gifts, Calvin applies it to all callings and gifts.

The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.³⁵

For Calvin, knowledge of the call of God ought to help a person perform work faithfully and sincerely. This is relevant to working in industrial situations. Often there is a tendency to downplay the role and importance of those who work in blue-collar contexts; when such an attitude is present, payment tends to be lower than reasonable. Calvin believed in honest dealings and was opposed to the exploitation of labor, especially taking advantage when there is high unemployment and a significant number of people trying to find a means of sustenance. In another passage, Calvin writes,

When a man works in his labour to earn his living, when a woman does her household work, and when a servant does his duty, one thinks that God does not pay attention to such things, and one says they are secular affairs. ... If a chamber-maid sweeps the floor, if a servant goes to fetch water, and they do these things well, it is not thought to be of much importance. Nevertheless, when they do it offering themselves to God ... such labour is accepted from them as a holy and pure oblation.³⁶

This has particular reference to those whose service involves serving others. In a broad sense, all occupations involve service to others. When Calvin refers to chambermaids and water-fetchers, he extends the application to all walks of life, not just privileged callings such as those of magistrates, businesspeople, landlords, and other influential callings. This is particularly applicable to societies with hereditary categorization of labor, such as in the Indian caste system. It does not mean that those from castes marked for service to others are barred from a different category of work. Calvin elsewhere makes provision for even them to advance.

In his exhaustive study on Calvin's economic and social thought, André Biéler makes some critical observations on work. For Calvin, there is an intrinsic connection between man's work and God's work: "God's providential activity does not suppress man's free activity but on the contrary provides the foundation for it. Working freely is what God himself does."³⁷

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.10.6 (1:725).

³⁶ Calvin, "Sermon on 1 Cor 10:31–11:1" quoted in Hart, "The Teaching of Luther and Calvin," 128.

³⁷ André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, trans. James Greig, ed. Edward Dommen (1961; repr., Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches / World Council of Churches, 2005), 347.

Biéler finds a further link between the two by asserting that to fully understand work, we need “to grasp the profound meaning of the day of rest offered to human beings so that they may realize the meaning of God’s work and God’s forgiveness, apart from which no work is effective in God’s sight.”³⁸ This profound interrelationship between divine initiative and human response extends even to the salvific dimension. Commenting on Calvin’s thoughts on Exodus 20:8 (“remember the Sabbath day”), Biéler concludes, “The institution of the Sabbath therefore has as its aim not the stopping of human work first and foremost, but man’s sharing in divine sanctification—his involving himself in the activity through which God guides and saves the world.”³⁹ He concludes from Calvin’s observations,

Liberation from the yoke of oppression that weighs heavily in labour relations is a religious—not merely a social question. As reflecting God’s work, in which it is embodied, human work must be a labour of love, a labour of service and sacrifice, not work that enslaves.⁴⁰

Similarly, Biéler observes that “Calvin points out that the curse does not wholly do away with the blessing that was attached to work in the beginning. ‘Signs’ remain that give man the taste for work.”⁴¹ Calvin sees work as a calling:

Scripture uses this word “vocation” to show that a way of living can only be good and approved if God is its author. And this word “vocation” also means a calling, and the calling carries with it that God is beckoning with his finger and saying to each and every individual, “I want you to live in this way or that.” This is what we call “stations in life”—that is to say that one is not to work at what God condemns through his Word.⁴²

The close relationship between God’s work and man’s instills believers with confidence that God himself endorses their calling. Moreover, God’s example of work and rest reminds believers they can emulate this pattern.

For Calvin, there is no dichotomy between secular and sacred callings. Writing on divine providence and secondary causes, he observes, “Joab, though recognizing the outcome of the battle to be in God’s hand, has yielded not to idleness, but diligently carries out the duties of his calling.”⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., 346–47.

³⁹ Ibid., 347.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 349.

⁴¹ Ibid., 354.

⁴² Calvin, Sermons LXI on *Deuteronomy* 8:14–20, *Calvini opera* 26:360, quoted in Biéler, *Economic and Social Thought*, 357.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.9 (1:222).

Calvin sees the identity of Joab as a soldier as a calling of God. Calling for Calvin is not restricted to spiritual callings; it extends to all occupations.

Writing to the Duchess of Ferrara the year of his death (1564), Calvin tries to clarify David's sentiments for his enemies:

But when he [King David] says he holds the reprobate in mortal aversion, it cannot be doubted that he glories in an upright, pure, and well-regulated zeal, for which three things are requisite: first, that we should have no regard for ourselves nor our private interests; next, that we should possess prudence and discretion not to judge at random; and finally, that we observe moderation not to exceed the bounds of our calling.⁴⁴

Calvin's use of calling here is inclusive; the king should observe the limits of his calling as king of Israel. Similarly, in discussing man's natural endowments not being completely erased, he writes, "For why is one person more excellent than another? Is it not to display in common nature God's special grace which, in passing many by, declares itself bound to none? Besides this, God inspires special activities, in accordance with each man's calling."⁴⁵ When he says "each man's calling," he refers to every person having a divine calling.

Writing about the eighth commandment, "Thou shall not steal," Calvin comments, "For he who does not carry out what he owes to others according to the responsibility of his own calling both withholds and appropriates what is another's."⁴⁶ Here again, "calling" is used to describe any occupation that is done by men and women.

In a passage discussing the need to fulfill our callings, Calvin writes,

Finally, this point is to be noted: the Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling. ... And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of living "callings." Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.⁴⁷

Knowing the call of God keeps us from vacillating, as it gives us confidence to fulfill our calling, knowing that it is God who has called us. William Bouwsma writes, "His doctrine of the calling contributed in various ways to the efficiency of work, notably as it promoted the division of labor."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ John Calvin, "Letter 664, to the Duchess of Ferrara," in John Calvin, *Letters 1559–1564*, vol. 7 of *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, John Calvin Collection, version 1.0 (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 366.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.17 (1:276).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.8.45 (1:409).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.10.6 (1:724).

⁴⁸ William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199.

In discussing the views of Philipp Melanchthon and Calvin on the role of the civil magistrate, Steinmetz writes, “While Melanchthon grounds the state in both human reason and divine ordination, Calvin stresses divine ordination alone. ... Rulers must be obeyed, not on the grounds of human necessity, but on the grounds of obedience to God.”⁴⁹ John McNeil observes that “among the vocations, none is more honorable than that of the magistrate.”⁵⁰

Calvin sees the success of work as being due to God’s blessings. However much we put effort into work, it is of no use unless God blesses it. Hart refers to Calvin’s commentary on Psalm 127:1, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain”:

The Lord does not want us to be like logs of wood, or to sit idle. He expects us to put to use whatever abilities we may have But ... he warns them that hard work wins success only so far as God blesses our labour. ... Whatever they attempt will quickly come to nothing, unless the grace of God alone sustains it and makes it to prosper.⁵¹

Similarly, in Calvin’s Genevan Catechism, in answer to why Christians should ask God to “Give us this day our daily bread” (question 276), he writes,

Though we are to labour, and even sweat in providing food, we are not nourished either by our own labour, or our own industry, or our own diligence, but by the blessing of God by which the labour of our hands, that would otherwise be in vain, prospers. Moreover, we should understand that even when abundance of food is supplied to our hand, and we eat it, we are not nourished by its substance, but by the virtue of God alone. It has not any inherent efficacy in its own nature, but God supplies it from heaven as the instrument of his own beneficence.⁵²

This understanding of daily provision as coming primarily from God gives calling and work a different perspective, since the blessing of God makes our labor fruitful. Hart believes that this idea flows from “Calvin’s belief in providence which is active not just in a general way but even in the smallest details of each person’s activities.”⁵³ On the unfaithful steward in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:26–30), Calvin comments,

⁴⁹ David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 204–5.

⁵⁰ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 224.

⁵¹ Quoted in Hart, “The Teaching of Luther and Calvin,” 129–30.

⁵² John Calvin, *Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Being a Form for the Instruction for Children*, http://www.reformed.org/documents/calvin/geneva_catechism/geneva_catechism.html.

⁵³ Hart, “The Teaching of Luther and Calvin,” 130.

Christ means that there will be no excuse for the indolence of those who both conceal the gifts of God, and waste their time in idleness. Hence also we infer that no manner of life is more praiseworthy in the sight of God, than that which yields some advantage to human society.⁵⁴

IV. Evaluation

The idea of work in Islam and Hinduism is contingent on each religion's understanding of the future life. Islam has a linear idea of history: humans live in submission to Allah because they have to give account to him on the last day, and this is why work in Islam is oriented to attaining spiritual merit. Prayer and religious duties take precedence over work. Although Islam does not have a clear-cut understanding of work, Islamic societies have produced some outstanding examples of art, calligraphy, and architecture. In many ways, Islam equates work with deeds of righteousness. There are descriptive references to work, but there is no philosophy of work and its necessity for daily living. Prayer and other religious duties take precedence over work. The goal of all work is spiritual, to please Allah. However, work may be substituted with passive abstinence from evil to achieve merit, and it is closely linked with voluntary charity or *sadaqa*.

Hinduism, unlike Islam, has a cyclic philosophy of life with its teaching of transmigration, the cycle of birth and death, from which humankind can be free when *moksha* (release from the cycle of rebirth) is attained. This idea offers another chance in the hereafter to make good what was lacking in this life, but in theory, only the three higher castes are closer to liberation than others.

In contrast, calling and work go together in Calvin's understanding. He uses the word "calling" in different ways, referring to spiritual matters but also to God calling believers to their occupations. It is wrong to exalt religious callings over the secular callings in society. The exaltation of contemplative religion as superior to ordinary calling, so prevalent in the sixteenth century, is unbiblical. Ordinary work is vital because God has called people to do it. When he blesses humans, they become good stewards. There are various callings, some of which are higher than others, but each plays a unique role in society. The success of work depends not on the labor of humankind but on the blessing of God.

Calvin's understanding of calling and work is relevant to Newly Developing Countries. In these economies, Christians find themselves taking employment opportunities ranging from investment, management, administration,

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*, 2:331.

and human resources to skilled and unskilled labor. The question is often asked, “What is the importance of my occupation in the wider scheme of God’s work in the world today—especially in my country and in my society?” Calvin provides a fresh prism through which to view work. God calls his people to a variety of occupations in which they serve the common cause of glorifying God. Each person has a calling to a particular occupation by God, yet there is room for changing from one occupation to another. Ordinary work of any kind takes on new importance, as it is *God* who has called the Christian to the task. No amount of hard work will produce any result unless God blesses it.

Such an understanding of work transforms Christians’ attitudes toward their occupations, and Christians who have this understanding will work harder, be more faithful to their employers, have a positive attitude to work, seek to be a positive influence in society, and actively be part of it. They will understand this once they understand that God has indeed called everyone to work irrespective of the nature of that work. Henry Van Til rightly states, “Every man has a divine calling to fulfill the cultural mandate, for all things are ours, but we are Christ’s. However, we must exercise moderation, patience, and fidelity in our daily vocation, working as unto the Lord before the face of God (*Coram Deo*).”⁵⁵

This vision transmits a message of hope to each person in God’s plan. Anyone serving in any industry, commerce, or business, in whatever profession, benefits from knowing God calls them to their work. The church should emphasize that work and rest go together. Moreover, work should not be viewed as something to be done slavishly but as something that believers engage in wholeheartedly. Realizing this truth, they will work diligently and discover their important calling in the higher purpose of the kingdom of God.

⁵⁵ Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 109.