

Decent work and social justice: a spiritual perspective

How do different religious traditions view the world of work and can they play a part in promoting ILO core values? A new publication entitled “Convergences: decent work and social justice in religious traditions”, explains the positions of various religious traditions regarding social justice and decent work issues. The ILO’s special adviser for socio-religious affairs, Pierre Martinot-Lagarde spoke to ILO Online. FTR/Convergence

What is the purpose of this handbook?

The Handbook entitled, “[Convergences: decent work and social justice in religious traditions](#)” is aimed at contributing to a better understanding of the meaning of work across various religious traditions--Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. The ILO is built on the principle that labour is not a commodity and upholds work done in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. For this reason the ILO promotes not just work or employment but “decent work”. Yet the evolution of the global economy has been such that work is too often not worthy of the human person and we hope that this volume can help to stimulate discussions of ethics and decency in the world of work. The publication also explores the specific contribution and commitments of some religious traditions to social justice, dignity at work and economic rights.

Why focus on work and religion?

These two areas are central to the lives of many people. Work is an integral part of life and there are references to the world of work in all main religious traditions. It is generally seen in a positive light. However, there are situations when work can also be viewed negatively by religious traditions. These include forced or child labour, for example, or when a job does not respect minimal standards, basic human rights or may be seen as degrading.

How can religion influence the promotion of ILO core values and approaches?

ILO core values such as peace, social justice, equity, solidarity within and among nations, security and protection for workers and people, human dignity, are not just intellectual concepts. They are linked to essential human values which are also part of religious traditions. For instance, the peaceful resolution of conflicts is a recurrent theme in many religious traditions. This can certainly be an incentive to promote social dialogue, which is both a means and an end in the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda.

Certain spiritual values that mesh with decent work are also relevant to the quest for a fair globalization. The volume shows that in different religions and spiritual traditions, there is a convergence of values about decent work, even though these can be expressed in different ways.

Can you give us an example?

A good example is social protection, with its two main pillars: social security and labour protection. The ILO’s approach to social protection is based on solidarity. It advocates the extension of social security to all and that it include measures regulating basic income protection. Labour protection should entail healthy and safe working conditions as well as wage protection and decent working hours. Even though the approach may be somewhat different, such a perspective on social protection can be easily found in different religious traditions. However, convergence means respecting each tradition. This is why we decided to avoid a general synthesis and present the views of each tradition in its own words and from its own perspective.

Does this imply that the ILO is engaged in inter-religious dialogue?

The ILO is not initiating dialogue as such with religious groups as this is not our remit. Such dialogue already takes place through a variety of mechanisms and we can tap this opportunity to promote common objectives shared by the ILO and faith-based organizations around the goal of decent work for all.

What is the ILO doing to promote knowledge about the Decent Work Agenda among faith-based organizations?

Our first international seminar on faith-based and spiritual perspectives on decent work was held in 2002. That led to the release of a joint ILO-World Council of Churches publication entitled "Philosophical and Spiritual Perspectives on Decent Work" in 2004.

Since then we have continued to build a network of partners interested in contributing to an ongoing comparative religious and philosophical discussion on work. We held another seminar in 2011 and recently we have been moving this dialogue out of our Geneva headquarters into various regions of the world, with seminars and meetings in Dakar (Senegal), Santiago (Chile) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia).

Finally, how can the ILO support further knowledge sharing and study on such concepts as decent work and social justice?

We have assembled a repository of information on religious, philosophical and spiritual perspectives on work and social justice. It has been instrumental in facilitating the comparison of faith-based responses to the issues and pinpointing philosophical convergences and differences on areas of common concern such as child labour, minimum wages, forced labour and maternity rights.

The ILO has also been collaborating with research and faith centres to produce academic papers, data and research accessible to scholars who are concerned with social justice and devoted to interreligious dialogue. We have close contacts with the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), as well as with scholars from Jewish and Buddhist organizations such as the Yeshiva University and the European Buddhist Union (EBU).

More religious traditions will be invited to join the discussion. I believe this dialogue is making a real contribution to promoting ILO objectives and the core values they embody, as shown in the Handbook. However, this is only the first step, as we plan to broaden and intensify our contacts and common work.