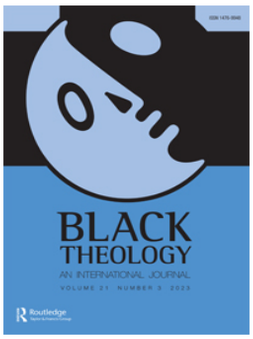

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Workers as Human Beings: Recognising the *imago Dei* in the Neoliberal Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary article reflects theologically on what it means to be treated ethically under regimes of Human Resource Management (HRM) in the neoliberal workplace. In replacing older models of personnel management, HRM has achieved a position of dominance that raises important pastoral and ethical questions about recognition of the personhood of workers. This article contends that because critical work on HRM within the social sciences has failed to fully engage with these fundamental questions, a turn to Black theological anthropology is invaluable in understanding the ethico-political implications of HRM. Arguing that lived experiences of "the worker" are commonly missing from theological reflection on work, it advocates the interdisciplinary use of empirical research methods from the social sciences to populate the theology of work with real workers.

KEYWORDS

Human resource management; *imago Dei*; theology of work; visual methods

1. Introduction: From Theology of Work to Theology of the Worker

The lowest point of Philippa's working life was the period following a reorganisation of the Further Education college where she taught. Philippa was "redeployed," and her new manager operated a "traffic-light" system where staff were identified as green, amber or red according to the manager's perceptions of their performance. Philippa was coded a "red", which she described as "the most dehumanising thing in my whole experience," as "reds" were assigned the most difficult teaching, given the worst roles, and "treated with contempt." She depicted a work situation where she was not regarded as a person, where people did not want to get to know her, and where she was unable to meet managers to discuss the situation. Her treatment eventually led her to resign, and she has subsequently succeeded at finding work in a more prestigious institution. "I'm not a 'resource', I'm a person – a person who has chosen to come and work," she reflected, saying that she needs a manager who "makes the connection with you as a human first, not as a resource at their disposal."

This article uses empirical research to reflect theologically on the question that Philippa raises: what does it mean to be treated under neoliberal regimes of Human Resource Management (HRM) in a way that properly recognises our personhood?

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Human understandings of work have always being viewed through ideological lenses.[1] In opposition to the laissez-faire attitude epitomised by Milton Friedman in his (in)famous argument that the only "social responsibility of business is to increase its profits,"[2] the "theology of work" has insisted, with Pope John-Paul II in his landmark 1981 *Laborem Exercens* encyclical, that "A policy is correct when the objective rights of the workers are fully respected."[3] John-Paul's statement that "The church considers it her task always to call attention to the dignity and rights of those who work"[4] was reiterated by Benedict XVI's valorisation of "decent work" in his *Caritas in Veritae*.[5] Hughes's 2007 book *The End of Work* likewise resists accounts of work as simply utilitarian, using a range of theological perspectives to consider it in terms of responsibility, creativity, ethics, transcendence, sacrament and liturgy.[6] Volf's influential *Work in the Spirit* seeks to correct what he argues is Luther's misreading of work as vocation and instead ground "work in the Spirit" as "cooperation with God in the eschatological transformation of the world."[7]

This scholarship has made an important contribution to thinking ethically about work and how people like Philippa are (or are not) treated properly as human beings in the workplace, but it remains underdeveloped in two ways. First, it has not comprehensively got to grips with changed conditions of work under the relatively new workplace management technology of HRM. In 1970 Mason Haire argued that in order to challenge the power of trade unions, companies needed to ditch older approaches to personnel management and adopt "more powerful techniques for managing human resources."[8] Upon this foundation HRM rose to prominence in the 1980s US and UK, displacing "personnel" or "industrial relations" units. Although some commentators dismissed it as a fad of Reagan-Thatcher era economics, it has spread not only worldwide in business but also into the public sector and charities, and even some churches. HRM encompasses personnel issues such as recruitment, payroll, sick-leave, and disciplinary procedures, but goes beyond this in seeking to align individual working practices to an institution's "vision" or "strategic objectives" set by managers in the belief that this will enhance performance. As Legge argues, HRM models "emphasise the management of the organisation's culture as the central activity for senior management."[9]

The school of "critical HRM," as represented by Legge has rendered a valuable service in problematising HRM as a regime of power that seeks to remake human subjectivities. This scholarship has raised ethical questions about how people are treated if they are commodified as "resources," with Bowie articulating a Kantian categorical imperative to treat people as ends in themselves rather than, as HRM has it, as means.[10] In a compelling intervention theologian Richard Roberts suggests that this Kantian critique of HRM "is inadequate because it fails to recognise that HRM has a potency that not

[1]Anthony, *The Ideology of Work*.
[2]Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business."
[3]John-Paul II, *Encyclical Letter*.
[4]Ibid., 3.
[5]Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritae*.
[6]Hughes, *The End of Work*, 230–1.
[7]Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 119.
[8]Haire, "A New Look at Human Resources," 19.
[9]Legge, *Human Resource Management*, 113.
[10]Bowie, "A Kantian Theory."

merely treats human beings as means rather than ends, but seeks to break and remake human identity itself."[11] Beyond the mere commodification of people, he argues, "there is a deeper problem that concerns the ontology of the self and the identity of the person."[12]

The work of Roberts, Rogers-Vaughan and others provides a direct theological challenge to the commodification of the human under HRM that is missing in the mainstream theology of work literature. It insists that we ask what it means to be treated as a proper human being, an ontological question that contemporary scholarship evades. However, this body of scholarship itself often shares with the earlier work a second flaw: *Philippa isn't there*. That is to say, apart from occasional anecdotal insertions, this writing generally discusses work without sight of the lives and struggles of real, actually-existing workers. For example, it is only in the very final paragraph of his long book on the theology of work that Hughes mentions "the lives of individual workers."[13] I contend that the lives of real workers under neoliberal HRM should not be used to *illustrate* an argument, but to *inform* one. This requires qualitative research in the workplace.

Here I find common cause with Jeremy Kidwell's study of temple and tabernacle craftmanship and sacrifice. Kidwell spotlights the craft worker in developing a theology of work.[14] This article pushes Kidwell's approach further, arguing for a movement from a *theology of work in* general, to a *theology of the worker* under regimes of HRM. It proceeds as follows. It first turns to theological anthropology as a way to consider the treatment of humans under HRM. However, it faults dominant traditions of White theology (both Protestant and Catholic) for failing to properly grasp the ethico-political implications of the meaning of humans as created *imago Dei* (in the image of God). Instead, it turns to Black Christian theological writing, which places these ethico-political imperatives central to analysis. Following this, it explains the research methods and then presents the main findings, identifying key aspects of being treated in ways that recognise the fundamental personhood of workers under HRM.

2. A Theological Anthropology of HRM

The above discussion has critiqued mainstream scholarship on the theology of work for failing to get to grips with HRM as an ontological project. I follow Frémeaux and Michelson when they argue that a theological contribution to this problem should aim to "radically shift the focus and give privilege to the 'human' in human resource management."[15] In this section I suggest that the tradition of theological anthropology, in particular reflection on the examination of the idea that humans are created *imago Dei*, is an ideal way to do that.

The Biblical idea that humans are created in the *imago Dei* has been very important in Christian theology. Because scripture doesn't clearly explain what this means, it has been interpreted in a variety of ways (for a good summary, see Nigerian theologian Ezekiel

[11]Roberts, "Contemplation and the Performative Absolute."
[12]Ibid., 5.
[13]Hughes, *The End of Work*, 232.
[14]Kidwell, "The Theology of Craft."
[15]Frémeaux and Michelson, "Human Resource Management," 39.

Nihinlola),[16] which often reflect contemporary intellectual trends.[17] These discussions, however, generally do not give enough attention to the ethical questions of what it means to treat people created in the *imago Dei* in certain ways in concrete socio-political contexts. This may be due to a preoccupation with Genesis chapter 1. The ethical implication of how people are treated are foregrounded in the postdiluvian reiteration of the *imago Dei* (Genesis 9), and in New Testament passages such as James 3:9. Whatever the reasons, it is striking that, for instance, the five chapters on the *imago* in the recent *Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology* have almost nothing to say on the ethical implications of being created in the image of God.[18]

This oversight can be corrected, I suggest, by drawing on a body of scholarship often overlooked in White European and North American theology – the Black Christian theological tradition of reflection on the meaning of *imago Dei*. Black theology is heterogenous, Ware observing that "several ways exist for doing black theology"[19] which he groups into what he terms the hermeneutical, philosophical, and social science approaches. He suggests that whilst all of these schools "accept the black experience as a source of black theology," not all of them place liberation as their central theme.[20] Notwithstanding this nuance, it is fair to say that liberation is a crucial theme for much black theology.[21] For anti-apartheid activist, pastor and theologian Allan Boesak, in his landmark text *Farewell to Innocence,* "Black Theology is the theological reflection of black Christians on the situation in which they live and on their struggle for liberation."[22] In the UK, Anthony Reddie asserts that "Black theology's 'dominant reason' for being is to espouse the theme of liberation."[23] That is to say, Black theology has developed out of reflection on and resistance to the oppression of Black slave populations and their descendants, and to colonialism (including Apartheid). It draws upon real experience, but seeks to change the injustices of those experienced realities.

For the purposes of this article, I focus particularly on the deployment of the *imago Dei* across a range of Black theologies. Here – in contrast to much dominant White theological anthropology – political ethics are front and centre. For example, in his 1843 "Call to Rebellion", Henry Garnet Highland proclaimed that "Unless the image of God be obliterated from the soul, all men cherish the love of Liberty."[24] McKanan argues that "identifying the Image of God" was a crucial literary device in radical Christian opposition to slavery and racism in the antebellum United States.[25] Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became a leading abolitionist, insisted in his 1850 essay "*The nature of slavery*" that "The slave is a man, 'the image of God.'" For Douglass, this was what made slavery so abominable because, "It is *such* a being that is smitten and blasted."[26]

[16]Nihinlola, *Human Being, Being Human*.
[17]Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 15; Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.
[18]Farris and Talifiaferro, *Companion to Theological Anthropology*.
[19]Ware, *Methodologies*, 145.
[20]Ibid., 149.
[21]Hopkins, "A Black Theology of Liberation."
[22]Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 1.
[23]Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 1.
[24]Garnet, "Call to Rebellion."
[25]McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God.*
[26]Douglass, "The Nature of Slavery."

In the same tradition James Cone wrote in his germinal 1969 book *Black Theology and Black Power* that "The crucial question, then, for the black man is, "How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?"" Cone's answer was to translate the *imago Dei* into ethical-political action: "To be for God by responding creatively to the *imago Dei* means that man cannot allow others to make him an It."[27] More recently Henry-Robinson explores emancipation struggles in Trinidad and Tobago, insisting that "reclaiming and reframing lost identity is essentially demanding the right to present ourselves just as we are, as made in the image of God" which is an "important component in the fight for justice."[28] Thomas, likewise, in an African context, insists that because "All African women are made in the image of God," it follows that "Oppression of African women is oppression of God's own image and energy."[29]

Arguably Martin Luther King provides the clearest exposition amongst any theologian of the ethical implications of *imago Dei*. Wills argues that a theology of the *imago Dei* was the central facet of King's thought, life and work.[30] In typical lyrical eloquence, King wrote how the fact of *imago Dei* inevitably leads to an ethical demand for integration:

> Our Hebraic-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term *the image of God*. This innate worth referred to in the phrase the image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.[31]

King argued that segregation was wrong because every person is made in God's image – a reality that segregation ignores by viewing Black Americans as mere tools.[32] King's preoccupation with *imago Dei* as the basis of the inherent dignity – or "somebodyness" – of all humans, characterised his entire life.[33] This interest was evident from an A-graded paper he wrote as a student on "How Christians should think of man" for Davis' class on "Christian Theology for Today,"[34] to a sermon preached at his final (1967) Christmas where the *imago Dei* informed a critique of war and an expansive vision of the interconnectedness and unity of humanity as the basis of global peace.[35]

I contend that this tradition of Black theological anthropology is a powerful lens with which to view "Human Resource Management" in the modern workplace. This is because it inevitably raises ethical and political questions about the proper treatment of "the human" who is being managed as a resource, and demands changes to social and institutional structures that deform the image.

3. Methodological Considerations

I have argued that Black theological anthropology insists that it is impossible to inquire "what does it mean to be human?" without asking that as an ethico-political question in

[27]Cone, *Black Theology*, Cone, 137–8.
[28]Henry-Robinson, "Blackness, Black Power, and God Talk," 123.
[29]Thomas, "Anthopology, Mission, and the African Woman," 13–14.
[30]Wills, *Martin Luther King Jr.*
[31]King, "The Ethical Demands for Integration," 118.
[32]King, "Man in a Revolutionary World," 5.
[33]Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness.*
[34]King, "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man."
[35]King, "A Christmas Sermon on Peace."

the concrete situations in which humans live and work. With this in mind, this section outlines the approach taken to repopulate the theology of work with actual workers.

Whilst this article adopts a rigorous research method, that is not to pretend that the work is not rooted in the author's personal context: as Reddie shows in his landmark book on Black theology for modern Britain, the intellectual approaches that we adopt as scholars are inseparable from our personal life stories and therefore reflecting on these is important.[36] This is particularly the case for me, as a White scholar, engaging with Black theology.[37]

I first encountered Black theology through Martin Luther King at a time of existential crisis, when his work painted a compelling approach to life and politics based on his radical reading of Christian nonviolence in the gospels. This informed a sense of calling to embark on the vocation of a Christian, critical scholar of new nationalist regimes in the former Soviet Union.[38] This bringing together of faith and critical scholarship was shaken for me by the post-2001 US and UK "global war on terror." Churches' support of (or confusion about) this new regime of violence raised very difficult questions for me as a left-wing peace activist/scholar on the one hand and an evangelical Christian on the other. It was at this time that I came across the writings of South African theologian Allan Boesak (see above). His remarkable use of apocalyptic scripture to dismantle and rebut the apartheid state's pretensions allowed me to bridge my twin commitments to progressive nonviolent politics and evangelical Christianity.[39]

The more immediate driver of the present research was a disturbing juxtaposition of events at my employer, Newcastle University. In 1967 Newcastle became the only UK university to award Martin Luther King an honorary degree. The half-centenary of his visit was due to be celebrated by "Freedom City 2017" (FC2017) – a series of events culminating with the unveiling by veteran civil rights activist Andrew Young of a new statue of King. At the same time as this preparation was under way, the university's management unleashed a coercive, targets-based performance-management system on its academic staff called "Raising-The-Bar" (RTB). Driven by a desire to rise up neoliberal competitive league tables, it set targets on grant capture, publications, and the like, with draconian threats to staff who failed to meet them.[40]

At that time, I was working with local progressive schoolteachers to create teaching resources to help schools mark FC2017, and read Wills' book on the centrality of a theology of the *imago Dei* for King's life and work. The incongruity of the university's slick media operation to use King's legacy to promote itself externally in a positive and progressive way, whilst treating its staff in such a dehumanising manner, was a glaring example of what Harding describes as the mainstream White cynical reappropriation of King's legacy.[41] Harding's critique in part inspired subsequent industrial action that led to the successful defeat of RTB at Newcastle.[42] This research project arose out of that incongruity: anger at these double standards, and a desire to unpack the tension between King's humanising conviction that all people (including academics) are

[36]Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 1–5.
[37]See for example Considine, "To Resist the Gravity of Whiteness."
[38]See for example Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia*.
[39]Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*; see also Megoran, "Radical Politics and the Apocalypse."
[40]Morris and The Analogue University, "Academic Identities in the Managed University."
[41]Harding, *An Inconvenient Hero*.
[42]The Analogue University, "Correlation in the Data University." NB: The author is part of this writing collective.

created *imago Dei* and should be treated as such and the university management's dehumanising belief that they are just "Human Resources" to be deployed to further its warped "strategic" goals.

To explore how interviewees experienced work as humanising or dehumanising, I used a research method developed in management studies called "Visual Timeline Methodology" (VTM). Drawing on earlier studies of how workplaces function,[43] VTM was developed to enable a focus "on significant life events that could be compared across participants."[44] For this research, interviewees were asked to tell the stories of their working lives, drawing particular attention to high and low points. They were invited to do this by drawing a timeline constructed, as far as possible, using visual metaphors. Following this, interviewees were then asked to mark on their timelines moments or periods when they felt treated – or not – as proper human beings at work, and to explain and reflect on these. To prevent leading bias, the research was introduced and explained in terms of the general experience of the workplace, not issues of humanisation/dehumanisation. In order to allow openness and build trust, and to maintain the focus on the visual element of the research, the interviews were not recorded. All quotations used were subsequently checked with respondents. This may be an unusual research method in theology, but as Pain observes: "Visual methods are accepted tools for qualitative research and are increasingly used in a wide range of disciplines" and are valuable because they enable "the expression of emotions and tacit knowledge, and encouraging reflection."[45]

Fifty-five such interviews were conducted, each lasting between 1½ and 4 h. Interviewees were drawn from three sectors across North East England traditionally marked by a strong sense of vocation: church leaders (Anglican and Baptist ministers of congregations), secondary-school teachers, and university lecturers. For subsequent analysis I collated all experiences marked as humanising or dehumanising, and sought to identify the key themes which then structured and organised the substantive material of part three of this article. This approach enabled me to build an inductive understanding of experiences of humanisation or dehumanisation in the workplace under HRM.

As interviewees were often fiercely critical of their employers, it was important to build trust and to protect their anonymity. Therefore, the interviews were not audio-recorded (which would be unsuitable for visual methods research anyway), transcripts were not created or made available in a public repository, and respondents cited here were given pseudonyms. All quotations were checked with respondents to ensure accuracy and to protect anonymity.

Table 1 shows sectoral and gender distribution of interviewees. Only two were identifiable as members of BAME groups, indexing both lower levels of migration to North East England as well as structural racism.[46] Although these two respondents discussed their family's migration to the UK, neither referred to race as an issue in their working lives. It might strike the reader as unusual that a research programme using Black theology did not purposively sample BAME participants or explicitly interrogate race. This was, in part, due to the inductive approach taken, but such an objection might imply that Black theology is only of relevance to understanding racial issues. As the theoretical section above argues, although it

[43]Flanagan, "The Critical Incident Technique"; Chell, "Critical Incident Technique."
[44]Mazzetti and Blenkinsopp, "Evaluating a Visual Timeline Methodology," 652.
[45]Pain, "A Literature Review to Evaluate the Choice and Use of Visual Methods," 304, 313.
[46]Okoye, "Supervising Black Geography PhD Researchers in the UK."

Table 1. Interviewees by employment sector and gender.

	Male	Female	Total
Higher Education	7	11	18
Secondary Education	7	13	20
Church	14	3	17
Overall total			55

was derived in the particular contexts of the African-American freedom struggle the insights of Black theology have far wider relevance. Reddie suggests that King's "timeless interpretation" of the *imago Dei* speaks to a society desensitised by forms of violence as diverse as gang-related knife crime or interstate war.[47] I concur with that assessment and would add that they offer more general resources to help rethink the study of HRM as yet another form of structural violence.

4. Findings: imago Dei under HRM

By analysing the timelines, I identified eight common characteristics of workplaces that they marked as humanising if present or dehumanising if absent. These are outlined elsewhere.[48] For the purpose of this substantive section of the article, I explore four of these: the ability to make a difference; freedom, autonomy and trust; the quality of working relationships; and contractual affirmation. The presentation of material is constructed around the extended presentation of personal narratives, as this reflects my argument that the *worker* should be given more prominence in discussions of the theology of work. In repeating narratives presented to me, I am not endorsing them as accurate accounts of particular events, nor of how certain institutions work, overall. Rather, I am interested in how individuals in these workplaces experience work in them as humanity-affirming or dehumanising. Respondents have been anonymised.

4.1. The Ability to Make a Difference

As a teenager, Jessica was struggling at school while her parents went through a divorce. Her form tutor, Sandy, carefully built a relationship of trust and support with her. When Jessica fell pregnant, the first adult she told was not her parents but Sandy. For Sandy this felt like a great privilege, and she worked hard to support Jessica and her family in life and in her studies. Jessica kept the baby, carried on her studies, and was subsequently able to establish a career in healthcare. A decade and a half on, that baby is now a pupil at the school, and when Jessica comes for parents' evening, she and Sandy hug each other. "I am a true believer in this as a vocation," Sandy reflected.

Sandy reported this relationship with Jessica as one of the most humanity-affirming moments of her working life. It illustrates that the *ability to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, communities and society at large* was one of the most frequently-identified humanity-affirming themes for teachers, ministers and academics alike.

Francis, a design teacher, spoke with pride about a former student who was now working as a Lego designer in Denmark, and who had said that this career success was in part because

[47]Reddie, "Richard Wayne Wills" review, 247.
[48]Megoran, *Human Resources?*.

of the help that Francis had given him. Another teacher recalled a student, Kevin, a boy who was on the verge of exclusion in years seven and eight for "outrageous" behaviour, but they had kept him in the school and worked with him. The teacher recounted that "I remember at his prom, he hung back right until the end, after everyone had gone, and shook my hand for a whole minute, thanking me." Similarly Damien, a church leader, told me about his experiences with Vera, a women who was experiencing serious depression. He met up with her for an hour and a half every fortnight over an 18-month period. He recounted that he found himself out of his depth initially, but "She came out of it a different person." He became very interested in mental-health work after this, studied the topic and eventually co-authored a book on it. "I feel affirmed by people whose lives are touched, and where relationships are formed," he concluded.

As with teachers, many academics also drew my attention to evidence that they had been able to make a difference in students' lives. One academic recalled that an undergraduate, a mature student, wrote to her to thank her for her support. She had got a first-class degree and said she wouldn't have done this without her help, and is now doing a postgraduate course to qualify as a schoolteacher: "so you have helped me secure my future and secure a better standard of living for my children." Being researchers as well as teachers, many academics note key humanity-affirming events as the ability to contribute creatively to society more broadly: the licensing of a new drug to treat cancer, the production of new artwork, the recognition of contributions made by the bestowing of a national award. Strikingly, Steven, a highly-successful fine arts academic did not identify promotions and similar recognition of career success as the key humanity-affirming moments, but rather giving major exhibitions and talks on his work: it is more about the production of art, the "here's my baby!" moments, and the collaborative experiences of producing that with others, he said.

Sometimes those personal and societal changes came together in powerfully-humanising experiences. Simone spoke about how her research had led her to being involved in campaigning to help asylum seekers access education. "This is what makes me feel more complete", trying to "bring about change for people who have been marginalised," she explained. "It goes against everything that is corporate and horrible within the university" and "it gets me connected into the values that are part of me as an academic."

In contrast, respondents marked as dehumanising events or processes that prevented them from having impacts on people with whom they were working. Pete, a schoolteacher, had developed his school's work with excluded or marginalised kids, helping them develop broader thinking and employability skills and was proud to have seen many of them overcome chaotic or otherwise difficult backgrounds to establish themselves as independent wage earners with their own stable families. In 2009, working with a national children's charity, he had set up a non-profit company to train kids in the renewable energy industry and was on the verge of establishing a pioneering schools-based apprenticeship scheme. Then in 2010, as he put it, "The Tories got elected and all our funding was cut overnight", so it didn't happen.

A recent but small body of scholarship has emerged that explores "meaningful work" and its implications for the managing the modern workplace[49] and for senses of

[49]Dyck and Schroeder, "Management, Theology and Moral Points of View"; Frémeaux and Michelson, "Human Resource Management."

wellbeing, job satisfaction and good mental health.[50] Similarly, the ability to make a difference, and to be in a workplace where this was enabled rather than restricted, was a recurring theme in reflection on what it means to be properly treated as a human being at work.

4.2. Freedom and Trust

Damien described his contrasting experiences of leading two churches, one in the north and the other in the midlands. In the north, he said that "an eldership cartel wanted to direct everything." He described an established leadership of two elected elders who overruled all his suggestions and ideas, such that "I was always in a minority of two to one." They dominated congregational life and prevented him from properly exercising his role, so that he had to leave. This he regarded as extremely dehumanising. In contrast, at a subsequent incumbency in the Midlands, the congregation gave him the freedom to take some risks and develop alternative forms of worship service around coffee tables, videos and discussion, which reached out to a demographic who had not previously engaged with the church. Damien's contrasting examples demonstrate the single factor that was flagged most commonly and most strongly by church leaders, teachers and academics alike when asked to reflect on humanity-affirming or denying experiences of work: *freedom* and *trust*.

This was marked most strongly amongst church leaders, who often have unparalleled leeway in choosing how they will spend their time in working with their congregation and other sections of local or wider community. "At the moment I can do anything I like so long as I turn up on Sunday and take communion," as one vicar put it. He has chosen to devote time into working with children and young people and facilitate wider community life, as well as conducting part-time doctoral research. He found this freedom extremely humanity-affirming, and regarded potential threats to it through standardised church training programmes as alarming.

As with church leaders, for academics freedom and trust were often the lynchpin of their reflections on humanisation/dehumanisation. Indeed, "academic freedom", or the autonomy to choose which topics to research and what to say about them, is a principle enshrined in university charters. Academics spoke in general terms of their pleasure at being able to use their time in ways they chose to pursue topics they thought were interesting and important. Thus, Jasmine emphasised how humanising she found her "autonomy" in being able to choose to locate herself simultaneously within a particular academic unit of the university, a certain research centre, a certain teaching sphere, and a hospitals trust: "I do have a line manager, but I'm pretty much allowed to do it my own way."

It was commonly the sense that being trusted to initiate changes to working practices and activities was identified as humanity-affirming. Andrea, an academic, spoke about the freedom to "make room for my individual interests," such as setting up small reading groups to create networks of people, with whom to talk about her research, as research interests change over time. This was humanity affirming, in contrast to the example of another academic who had set up a reading group that he enjoyed and

[50]Bunderson and Thompson, "The Call of the Wild."

found interesting. He said, however, that when a new head came into the unit, she made it quite clear that this didn't fit in with the direction she wanted to take, so this group was stopped – an erosion of autonomy that he found dehumanising. Likewise, the imposition of a technology of dashboard-driven micromanagement in universities was identified as dehumanising by Alicia. She described how task lists, deadlines etc come up on the dashboard management panel, representing "more surveillance, and that makes me feel less human."

For secondary school teachers working within the national curriculum and tighter audit cultures, freedom of manoeuvre is more curtailed. But it was, nonetheless, immensely important to teachers, termed by one as "leeway" which he defined as this message: "get off my case and let me do what works in helping kids move on." Carrie, a music teacher, spoke of how her subject easily gets devalued in relation to those like Maths and English, but recounted how valued it – and therefore she – was made to feel in one school. In this school, request for additional time and resources for workshops, residential theatre trips, choirs, Saturday rehearsals and the like were warmly endorsed. This had seen many more kids "given the opportunity to try music", and a significant increase in children learning instruments. In Carrie's experience support by the senior management "made you feel a bit valued."

In my interviews, trusting people to do the work to which they felt called and were committed, and giving them the freedom to make decisions about how to do that work, was correlated closely to a high sense of humanisation. In contrast, the denial of autonomy was linked to strong senses of dehumanisation.

4.4. Contractual Affirmation

From childhood onwards Ariana had always wanted to be a teacher: "seeing what school has done in my life … as I grew up, I wanted to be part of that in other people's lives," she said. Following training, she was eventually offered a job at a school where she really wanted to work. She recalls it as a very humanity-affirming moment, saying "I was speechless, so happy" when she was offered it. This was underlined by the fact that she was given a permanent contract, when previously they had had five different teachers in that role over five years.

The conditions of employment that interviewees experienced were one of the most important factors correlated to humanisation or dehumanisation that came up in the interviews. I term this *contractual affirmation.* Many of us will be able to identify with Ariana's elation: to be given jobs, promotions and awards was marked as affirming. But some of us won't be able to express that sense of elation, possibly like the unnamed temporary staff, whom she succeeded. Poor employment conditions – in particular constructive dismissal, temporary work, and maternity-related issues – were amongst the most dehumanising aspects of the modern workplace identified by my interviewees.

Following the offer of a job itself, promotion was marked by many people as humanising. Andrea described her promotion to Senior Lecturer as a "restoration of balance." She felt she had been looked down on by some colleagues who thought she could teach but not do research, and so had "crap" administrative roles dumped on her. Suddenly, she said, those colleagues didn't treat her with the same disrespect. Similarly, for teacher

Stan, getting a promotion "felt as if somebody was saying 'you have a valuable role to play'". Within work, what schoolteacher Leia described as "I'm worth it moments" stuck out for many interviewees: an article being accepted for publication by a good journal, the bestowing of an award by a scholarly society, and the like.

Ongoing support within work was also affirming. One church leader, Daphne, recounted the time when someone in her congregation began "kicking off against me," as she put it, and made a complaint about her. Daphne sought advice and help from her denominational leaders who decided there was no case against her. What Daphne found particularly humanity-affirming was that she felt trusted and supported through the process. The denominational leader, Daphne told me, didn't say, "we'll do this" but "what do you need? we'll make it happen" and helped Daphne put a barrier in between her and this person so that she could continue to do her other work.

Such experiences were related by most interviewees. They spoke more positively about the affirmation that came from postings and promotions than they did about the pecuniary benefits. Similarly, the denial of hoped-for promotion was interpreted as the institution not valuing what they could offer and who they were – the two being inseparable. This section will look in example at the most commonly encountered topics for each of the workplaces studied.

4.4.1. Churches – Toxic Congregations, Constructive Dismissal

Damien is the church leader whom we met above who found his autonomy to act in a new pastorate circumscribed by "an eldership cartel [that] wanted to direct everything." These two men, who had had a long-standing role in the church, led what he described as "an attempt to assassinate my character over a period of time by attacking my character and credibility." One of them made an accusation against him to the police that turned out to be unfounded, the minister relaying that he was "completely exonerated" by the investigation. Nonetheless, he was suspended during the investigation, and ultimately felt he could no longer stay at the church. He resigned, having to do other work for a period of time to support his family before later finding another – and much happier – pastorate.

In churches, it was more commonly the environment created by congregations (rather than formal denominational structures) that equated with constructive dismissal or the attempt to achieve it. Andrew provided another, sobering account of how elements of his congregation treated him. Coming to the parish, he wanted to make the church more inclusive by improving access for disabled people so mobility scooters and wheelchairs could reach the altar rail for communion. For this to happen, a pew needed to be shortened. At a church meeting where this was discussed, one man stood up and said, "You f***ing b*****d if you move that pew I'll punch yer face out!"

This is a shocking story, but more insidious were the actions, according to this leader's narrative, of a small clique of people who held a certain amount of power within the church, running activities such as Sunday school, Guides, and annual youth camps. The key member of this group worked as part of the teaching staff at the local school, so knew many young people in the parish. However, the new church leader developed a number of concerns about these activities, which he described as being run as their "little domain." He was worried at a lack of transparency about how decisions were made to allocate funding for summer-camp participation, and was also concerned at

shouting, bullying and controlling behaviour towards children. So, he asked her for a meeting to discuss the children's work. She didn't come, but instead left the church telling people she had been "forced out." She moved her Guide pack away, and spread what the church leader described as "libel" about him in the school and parish. "She was essentially trying to drive me out of the parish," he reasoned, not because of theological differences "but because she had her control and little territory and didn't want anyone encroaching on it or challenging her." He noted how the family in question would not even use his name, but referred to the vicar as "him." The apparent attempt to hound him out (effectively to seek constructive dismissal) failed and he has been able to exercise a significant role in community organisation. He reports that people in the congregation had become better at thinking more of what the impact of what they say and do might have on him, but the whole experience was very dehumanising: "they didn't care about the collateral damage on my family."

4.4.2. Universities – Casualisation

UK academia has become increasingly reliant upon the proliferation of people on temporary, or casualised, contracts.[51] A number of my interviewees were either on such contracts now or had been on them prior to securing permanent positions, and spoke of these employment conditions as dehumanising.[52] We earlier encountered Amelia, who found the lack of freedom and trust afforded her on such contracts dehumanising. She had worked a number of temporary or part-time jobs over half a decade, sometimes in 2 or 3 different universities at once. She described them as dehumanising because they rendered her less visible. In one of these she was given slightly better conditions than the others, and said, "I was a real person, an office all to myself, with my name on the door": seeing her name written with the title "Dr." in front moved her, as it made her feel like "an academic."

This is telling that her extended experience of casualised labour was dehumanising. She gave an example of one place where was given a six-month contract to fill in teaching for someone who had got a grant. She was given this without interview, training or vetting, and simply told to read out verbatim notes the lecturer had left. It was not, she reported, a great module and students were unhappy, but "No one wanted to give me anything in terms of training or emotional support." Because I was just seen as a stop-gap, she continued, she was barely visible to the system – "you never met HR". "People rarely see you, they don't think about you, and they don't care about you, because you're only ever temporary." This invisibility continued from start to finish. "No one ever says farewell" – those in the most vulnerable temporary roles, such as the hourly paid, "are never introduced to anybody so why should you be given a farewell?"

Richard Sennett wrote that new patterns of "flexible working" that emerged with 1980s neoliberal economic restructuring and HRM regimes were deeply corrosive of character because they prevented people from rendering a long-term narrative of their lives that can provide meaning.[53] Temporary staff are amongst the most marginal and invisible,

[51]University and College Union, "Counting the Costs of Casualisation."
[52]For a deeper exploration of this topic, see Mason and Megoran, "Precarity and Dehumanisation in Higher Education."
[53]Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*.

and institutions can all too readily mistreat them by failing to recognise their equal personhood.

4.4.3. Schools – Return from Maternity Leave

Bryony, the only woman in her secondary-school department, returned to work part time after giving birth. She remarked on two dehumanising aspects of her treatment. First, she was only given lower ability sets to teach (unlike previously) and second, she was the only person not given her own key to the store cupboard. When asked why she was told, "you've had a baby, you may take time off." The poor treatment of women returning from maternity leave was a major source of dehumanisation reported by interviewees.

More subtle than these egregious examples was that it became harder for female teachers going part-time after childcare to pursue or continue leadership roles in their schools. I became "a part-time nobody," reflected one teacher on giving up her previous leadership role after returning to work part-time post maternity leave. She noted how strange it was to be at a meeting and no longer looked to as a meeting leader with something to contribute, as she had previously. She was not able to apply for "lower middle or middle management" roles, as these were only advertised as full time. Tina felt she had done a good job in her head of year role, and when she wrote informing the school that she would like maternity leave she said she would still like to be involved in this type of work when she returned. However, upon coming back part-time this was never mentioned, and she was given no classes in her preferred subject. She described the attitude as, "well, you're here for just 3 days, you'll have to do what's left." On top of this, no longer having the leadership role she lost her former office: "I felt I'd lost everything." "Do you mind just being a teacher?" people asked, "as if I were a different person."

Another teacher who went part-time after returning to work from maternity leave later tried to apply for an Assistant Headship. However, the head teacher said that he wouldn't even physically accept her application letter. This dehumanising loss of identity was unfortunately, common place amongst schoolteachers. The Department of Education recognises that flexible-employment arrangements (such as job shares or part time work) can work well for senior leadership in schools, but are considerably less common in teaching than other professions.[54] As one senior leader said in an interview, "if you want to go part-time in school, the assumption is you lose your leadership role."

Analysis of the visual timelines allowed the production of an inductive account of what it means to be treated in humanity-affirming or dehumanising ways in the concrete conditions of treatment in the modern workplace. This can map onto elements of more traditional substantive or relational accounts of the *imago Dei*, but, unlike them, insists that this cannot be done outside of the ethico-political contexts; in this case, the modern workplace and how it deforms or enables the expression of our essential humanity created *imago Dei*.

5. Conclusion

In an important intervention, Rogers-Vaughan writes that "As a discipline that takes its cue from human suffering, pastoral theology risks a crisis of legitimacy unless it increases

[54]Department of Education, "Flexible Working in Schools."

its attention to the global consequences of contemporary capitalism."[55] This article suggests that this is a challenge not simply to pastoral theology but to other theological fields and academic disciplines, more generally, and has sought to advance Rogers-Vaughan's important project in two ways.

First, it argues that a productive way to interrogate the harmful effects of neoliberal capitalism is through the lens of theological anthropology and its core questions of humanisation and dehumanisation in the workplace. In particular, it draws on the insistence in Black theological anthropological scholarship that reflection on the content of *imago Dei* only makes sense in trying to understand and challenge concrete contexts of unequal power relations, a point ably made by Vincent Lloyd's recent interrogation of King's concept of love.[56] Sidetracked by metaphysical speculation, general theological reflection has been woefully neglectful of the primacy of the ethical purpose of the *imago Dei*. It could usefully be reworked by drawing on the insights of Black theology in this regard.

Second, it suggests that *empirical research* is a fruitful avenue to further this goal. Rogers-Vaughan suggests that constructing a "post-capitalist pastoral theology will mean attending to what human emotions suggest about what has gone wrong" in the workplace.[57] In order to do this, I argue, deductive theological reflection about the meaning of *imago Dei* can be complemented usefully by fieldwork-based, inductive, qualitative research interrogating the actual conditions under which the personhood of workers is respected or negated under neoliberal HRM regimes. This interdisciplinary approach will help answer the crucial question posed two decades ago by Barbara Rumscheidt: "What does it mean to do pastoral theology in a world where people have been reduced to 'human resources'?"[58] In so doing, it seeks to challenge the capitalist mode of the commodification of bodies and labour as epitomised by HRM. People are beings made in God's image, not resources.

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[55]Rogers-Vaughan, "Powers and Principalities," 71.
[56]Lloyd, "What Love is Not."
[57]Rogers-Vaughan, "Powers and Principalities," 88.
[58]Rumscheidt, *No Room for Grace*, X.

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