

## **Labor, Capital, and Production in a Globalized World: A Reappraisal through Miroslav Volf's Theology of Work**

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### **Abstract**

This article offers a theological and ethical reappraisal of labor, capital, and production within the context of globalized economic systems through Miroslav Volf's theology of work. Rather than treating labor merely as an economic input, the study interprets work as participation in God's creative and redemptive activity through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Employing a qualitative normative-theological approach, the article examines biblical teachings on work, justice, stewardship, and communal responsibility in dialogue with Volf's concept of work in the Spirit. The study argues that globalization intensifies ethical distortions when labor is reduced to a commodity, capital is detached from moral accountability, and production is governed primarily by profit maximization. In response, Volf's theology offers a constructive framework for understanding work as the expression of Spirit-given charisms that participate in God's ongoing work of creation and new creation, capital as an instrument for human flourishing and responsible stewardship, and production as a moral practice oriented toward justice, solidarity, and the common good. The article concludes that churches, Christian professionals, and faith-based institutions should cultivate marketplace ministry, ethical entrepreneurship, and labor advocacy as concrete expressions of Spirit-empowered economic discipleship in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** economic justice; marketplace ministry; Spirit-given charisms; theology of work; work in the Spirit

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini menawarkan telaah teologis dan etis terhadap relasi antara tenaga kerja, modal, dan produksi dalam konteks sistem ekonomi global melalui perspektif teologi kerja Miroslav Volf. Berbeda dari pendekatan ekonomi yang memandang tenaga kerja semata-mata sebagai faktor produksi, penelitian ini memahami kerja sebagai partisipasi manusia dalam karya penciptaan dan penebusan Allah melalui pemberdayaan Roh Kudus. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif normatif-teologis, penelitian ini mengkaji ajaran-ajaran Alkitab mengenai kerja, keadilan, penatalayanan, dan tanggung jawab komunal dalam dialog dengan konsep *work in the Spirit* yang dikembangkan oleh Volf. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa globalisasi memperdalam berbagai distorsi etis ketika tenaga kerja direduksi menjadi komoditas, modal dilepaskan dari tanggung jawab moral, dan produksi didominasi oleh orientasi maksimalisasi keuntungan. Sebagai respons terhadap kondisi tersebut, teologi Volf menawarkan suatu kerangka konstruktif yang memahami kerja sebagai perwujudan karunia-karunia Roh Kudus (*Spirit-given charisms*) yang memungkinkan manusia berpartisipasi dalam karya Allah yang terus berlangsung menuju penciptaan baru, memandang modal sebagai sarana bagi kesejahteraan manusia dan penatalayanan yang bertanggung jawab, serta menempatkan produksi sebagai praktik moral yang berorientasi pada keadilan, solidaritas, dan kesejahteraan bersama (*common good*). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa gereja, para profesional Kristen, dan berbagai institusi berbasis iman perlu mengembangkan pelayanan di marketplace, kewirausahaan yang beretika, serta advokasi bagi pekerja sebagai wujud nyata pemuridan ekonomi yang diberdayakan oleh Roh Kudus di tengah masyarakat kontemporer.

**Kata kunci:** karunia Roh; keadilan ekonomi; pelayanan dunia kerja; teologi kerja; *work in the Spirit*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid acceleration of globalization has redefined the structure and meaning of economic life, disembedding capital from moral and geographic boundaries and transforming labor into a fragmented and often precarious reality.<sup>1</sup> Capital, once embedded in localized communities and subject to ethical norms, now moves transnationally with unprecedented freedom. In contrast, labor remains tethered to geographic and socio-political constraints, subjected to the volatility of global markets and the pressures of deregulated production networks.<sup>2</sup> This disjunction has intensified inequalities, obscured ethical responsibility across supply chains, and contributed to what widely regarded as a moral crisis in global economic practices.<sup>3</sup>

Concurrently, the contemporary business environment is characterized by a growing separation between faith and work, whereby theological and ethical considerations are relegated to the private sphere, while the market is treated as a neutral or autonomous domain.<sup>4</sup> Though increasingly institutionalized, business ethics often lack the metaphysical and moral depth necessary to address the systemic injustices produced by neoliberal globalization. As a result, ethical tension arises individuals are compelled to operate within economic systems that conflict with their religious or ethical convictions.<sup>5</sup>

Although Christian theology offers rich resources for reflecting on work, justice, and the ethical use of capital, existing theological discourse tends to focus either on vocational identity or pastoral guidance, seldom engaging directly with the structural and ethical complexities of global production.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, mainstream economic ethics often neglects the theological anthropology that undergirds concepts like human dignity, stewardship, and solidarity.<sup>7</sup> This reveals a critical research gap: the need for an integrative theological-ethical analysis that addresses both individual moral agency and structural dimensions of global economic life.

Although numerous theological studies have examined work, vocation, and economic justice, many remain either narrowly focused on individual spirituality or broadly descriptive of Christian social ethics. As a result, insufficient attention has been given to how a coherent theological framework can address the structural challenges of globalization, including labor precarity, capital mobility, and market-driven production systems. This study addresses that gap by employing Miroslav Volf's theology of work as its primary analytical framework. Volf's concept of work in the Spirit offers a distinctive theological vision in which human labor

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<sup>1</sup> Paresh Chattopadhyay, "Marx on the Global Reach of Capital," *Marx, Engels, and Marxisms*, 2016, 97 – 109; Daniel Fleming and Henrik Søborg, "The Debate on Globalization and International Revitalization of Labor. A Critical Review," *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 53 – 68.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Arnold and Martin Hess, "Governmentalizing Gramsci: Topologies of Power and Passive Revolution in Cambodia's Garment Production Network," *Environment and Planning A* 49, no. 10 (2017): 2183 – 2202.

<sup>3</sup> Nicola Phillips, "Labour in Global Production: Reflections on Coxian Insights in a World of Global Value Chains," *Globalizations* 13, no. 5 (2016): 594 – 607; Giovanni Mari, "Work and Leisure in European Culture in the Era of Globalization," *Italian Culture* 29, no. 2 (2011): 107 – 117.

<sup>4</sup> W Michael Hoffman and Robert E Mc Nulty, *Can Corporate Capitalism Be Redeemed? Business Ethics and the Search for a Renewed Faith in Work, Philosophical Faith and the Future of Humanity*, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasia Sofia Alexiadou, "Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility: Translating Theory into Action," *Contributions to Management Science Part F1957* (2023): 353 – 377.

<sup>6</sup> John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism, The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism*, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470694169>; Max L Stackhouse, *Globalization and Christian Ethics, The Globalization of Ethics: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Finn, "Human Work in Catholic Social Thought," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 4 (2012): 874 – 885; Angelo Nicolaidis, "Ethics and the Dignity of Work: An Orthodox Christian Perspective," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 101 (2020).

participates in God's creative and redemptive activity while simultaneously engaging social, economic, and institutional realities.<sup>8</sup>

The choice of Volf is significant because his theology bridges the often-separated domains of faith and economic life. Unlike approaches that focus exclusively on personal vocation or macroeconomic ethics, Volf develops a theological understanding of work that integrates spirituality, social responsibility, and economic participation. His framework provides a constructive basis for evaluating contemporary globalization while also offering practical insights for churches, Christian professionals, and faith-based institutions seeking to engage economic life ethically.

Therefore, this study aims to reappraise labor, capital, and production in the context of globalization through Miroslav Volf's theology of work. Specifically, it examines how Volf's theological understanding of work as participation in God's creative and redemptive purposes can provide an ethical response to labor exploitation, the autonomy of capital, and the moral challenges of contemporary production systems. The study further explores the implications of this framework for economic justice, workplace ethics, and Christian engagement in the marketplace.

By focusing on Volf's theology of work, this article argues that labor should be understood as the expression of Spirit-given charisms and participation in God's creative and redemptive activity rather than merely a commodity, capital as a means rather than an ultimate end, and production as a moral practice rather than a purely technical or economic process. Such a perspective enables a more integrated understanding of faith and economic life while providing theological resources for addressing inequality, labor injustice, and ecological concerns within a globalized economy.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative normative-theological research design to examine labor, capital, and production within the context of globalization through Miroslav Volf's theology of work. The study seeks to explore how Volf's theological understanding of work as participation in God's creative and redemptive activity can provide an ethical framework for evaluating contemporary economic structures. Theology is therefore used not merely as a descriptive lens but as a normative framework through which socio-economic realities are assessed in light of biblical teaching, human dignity, justice, and the common good.

The primary theological source for this study is Miroslav Volf's *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. Volf's theology serves as the principal analytical framework for interpreting the relationship between labor, capital, and production. To support and contextualize this framework, the study also engages selected relevant scholarship in theology, labor studies, globalization, and business ethics. These supporting sources are used to illuminate and evaluate the contemporary relevance of Volf's theological insights rather than to provide competing theoretical frameworks.

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, Volf's major theological arguments concerning work, charisms, pneumatology, human flourishing, and participation in God's mission were identified and examined through close textual analysis. Second, these theological themes were brought into dialogue with selected biblical passages to establish their scriptural foundations and ethical implications. Third, the resulting theological framework was applied to contemporary issues associated with globalization, including labor precarity, capital mobility, economic inequality, and the separation of faith from economic life. Through this

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<sup>8</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, Wipf and Stock, 2001.

process, the study develops a constructive theological interpretation of economic activity that is both biblically grounded and socially relevant.

Methodological rigor was maintained through theological coherence, textual consistency, and critical engagement with both primary and secondary sources. In normative-theological research, validity is evaluated not through statistical generalization but through the coherence of theological reasoning, fidelity to scriptural and theological sources, and the practical relevance of the resulting ethical framework. This approach enables the study to generate constructive theological insights that address contemporary economic challenges in a globalized world.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Miroslav Volf's Theology of Work: A Theological Foundation

The ethical challenges generated by globalization require more than economic analysis. They require a theological framework capable of explaining the meaning of work, the role of economic activity, and the moral responsibilities of human beings within contemporary production systems. This study employs Miroslav Volf's theology of work as its primary analytical framework because Volf offers one of the most comprehensive theological engagements with modern economic life.<sup>9</sup>

In *Work in the Spirit*, Volf argues that human work should not be understood merely as an economic necessity or a means of personal survival. Rather, work is participation in God's ongoing activity in the world. Human beings, created in the image of God, are called to cooperate with God's creative and redemptive purposes through their daily labor. Consequently, work possesses intrinsic dignity that cannot be reduced to market value, productivity indicators, or financial outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

For Volf, the Holy Spirit is not merely the divine presence accompanying human work. The Spirit actively equips believers with diverse charisms that enable creative, cooperative, and socially transformative work. Consequently, work becomes a pneumatological reality through which Christians participate in God's continuing activity in the world. Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the coming new creation, Christian work possesses an inherently eschatological character. Human labor does not establish God's Kingdom by its own power, yet work performed in the Spirit anticipates God's promised renewal of creation. This eschatological horizon grants ordinary labor enduring theological significance beyond its immediate economic outcomes.

Volf further challenges the dualistic separation between spiritual life and economic life that characterizes much of modern society. According to him, Christian discipleship extends beyond ecclesiastical activities into the workplace, business organizations, and economic institutions. Work, therefore, becomes a sphere of Christian witness where faith is embodied through responsibility, creativity, service, and justice.<sup>11</sup>

This theological perspective provides an important corrective to contemporary globalization. Modern economic systems frequently evaluate labor primarily in terms of efficiency and profitability. Such an approach tends to commodify workers and marginalize ethical considerations. Volf's theology rejects this reductionism by insisting that economic activity must be evaluated according to its contribution to human flourishing, communal well-being, and participation in God's purposes for creation.

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<sup>9</sup> Volf, pp. 78-79.

<sup>10</sup> Volf, pp. 118-21.

<sup>11</sup> Donald W. Griesinger, "The Theology of Work and the Work of Christian Scholars," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 2010.

The significance of Volf's contribution lies in his ability to connect theological anthropology, economic participation, and social responsibility within a coherent framework. Rather than reducing work to an Spirit-empowered social practice grounded in charisms, Volf understands work as a Spirit-empowered social practice grounded in charisms and oriented toward participation in God's new creation. This perspective establishes the theological foundation for examining labor, capital, and production in the context of globalization.

### **Labor as Participation in God's Creative and Redemptive Work**

A central contribution of Volf's theology is his understanding of labor as participation in God's creative and redemptive activity. This understanding is rooted in the doctrine of *imago Dei*. Human beings are created not only to exist but also to participate actively in shaping and cultivating creation. Consequently, work is not a consequence of the Fall but an essential dimension of humanity's participation in God's creative activity.<sup>12</sup>

The Genesis creation narrative portrays humanity as entrusted with stewardship over creation. For Volf, this mandate establishes the theological basis for productive labor. Human work reflects God's creativity whenever it contributes to order, development, service, and the flourishing of creation. Economic activity therefore possesses spiritual significance because it participates in God's ongoing care for the world.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Volf recognizes that labor exists within a fallen world. Globalization has intensified forms of labor precarity, exploitation, and inequality. Workers often experience alienation from the products of their labor, from their communities, and from the broader meaning of their work. Such conditions contradict the theological purpose of labor because they undermine human dignity and distort the worker's participation in God's creative activity.

From this perspective, labor justice becomes a theological imperative rather than merely a political or economic concern. Fair wages, safe working conditions, meaningful participation, and respect for workers' dignity are not optional ethical ideals. They are necessary conditions for enabling labor to fulfill its God-given purpose. Economic systems should therefore be evaluated according to how effectively they support the flourishing of workers as persons created in the image of God.

### **Capital, Production, and the Critique of Economic Instrumentalism**

While Volf affirms the legitimacy of economic activity, he rejects economic systems that reduce human beings to instruments of production. In many contemporary global markets, capital functions as the dominant organizing principle of economic life. Decisions concerning labor, production, and resource allocation are frequently evaluated primarily according to profitability and efficiency. As a result, workers may be treated as expendable resources rather than as persons possessing inherent dignity.<sup>14</sup>

Volf's theology challenges this instrumental understanding of economic life. Because human beings are created in the image of God, they possess value that transcends economic productivity. Capital, therefore, cannot be regarded as an end in itself. Instead, it should function as a means for supporting human flourishing, social well-being, and responsible

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Finn, "Human Work in Catholic Social Thought," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Wipf and Stock, 2001); Nicola Phillips, "Labour in Global Production: Reflections on Coxian Insights in a World of Global Value Chains," *Globalizations* 13, no. 5 (2016): 594 – 607.

stewardship of creation.<sup>15</sup> This perspective resonates with contemporary discussions on stakeholder-oriented capitalism, which argue that organizations should create value not only for investors but also for employees, communities, and society at large.<sup>16</sup>

This perspective also transforms the understanding of production. Production is not merely a technical process designed to maximize output. Rather, it is a moral practice that shapes relationships among workers, employers, consumers, and communities. Every production system embodies particular values and assumptions regarding human dignity, justice, and responsibility. Consequently, theological evaluation must examine not only economic outcomes but also the ethical character of production processes.<sup>17</sup> Recent scholarship on meaningful work similarly suggests that organizational practices influence workers' sense of purpose, dignity, and contribution to society.<sup>18</sup>

Volf further argues that economic institutions should create conditions that encourage participation, creativity, and cooperation. Work environments that foster human development reflect God's intention for labor more faithfully than systems driven solely by competition and accumulation.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, production becomes an arena in which economic activity contributes to both material prosperity and social transformation. Such an understanding aligns with contemporary research demonstrating that participatory and human-centered organizations generate higher levels of innovation, employee engagement, and long-term sustainability.<sup>20</sup>

From this theological standpoint, the ethical challenge of globalization is not the existence of markets themselves but the tendency to detach economic activity from moral responsibility. A theologically informed understanding of capital and production, therefore, calls for greater accountability, equitable distribution of opportunities, and institutional commitments to human dignity. This conclusion echoes recent critiques of global capitalism that emphasize the need to reconnect economic performance with social justice, ecological stewardship, and human flourishing.<sup>21</sup>

### Reintegrating Faith and Economic Life in a Globalized Economy

One of Volf's most significant contributions is his critique of the separation between faith and ordinary economic life. Modern societies often treat religion as a private matter while economic institutions operate according to supposedly neutral market principles. This division creates a fragmented understanding of human existence in which spiritual commitments remain disconnected from workplace practices and economic decision-making.

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<sup>15</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Wipf and Stock, 2001); Daniel Finn, "Human Work in Catholic Social Thought," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 4 (2012): 874–885.

<sup>16</sup> R Edward Freeman and Robert A Phillips, "Stakeholder Theory and the Resource-Based View of the Firm," *Journal of Management* 47, no. 7 (2021): 1757–70.

<sup>17</sup> Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, pp. 118–121.

<sup>18</sup> Brent D Rosso, Kathryn H Dekas, and Amy Wrzesniewski, "On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 30 (2010): 91–127; Catherine Bailey et al., "The Meaning, Antecedents and Outcomes of Employee Engagement: A Narrative Synthesis," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 19, no. 1 (2017): 31–53.

<sup>19</sup> Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, pp. 126–132.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Pirson, "A Humanistic Perspective for Management Research: Protecting Dignity and Promoting Well-Being BT - The Palgrave Handbook of Workplace Well-Being," ed. Satinder K Dhiman (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 1187–1208; Catherine Bailey et al., "The Meaning, Antecedents and Outcomes of Employee Engagement: A Narrative Synthesis," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 19, no. 1 (2017): 31–53.

<sup>21</sup> J. Stiglitz, J. Fitoussi, and M. Durand, *Beyond GDP: Measuring What Counts for Economic and Social Performance* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018); R Edward Freeman and Robert A Phillips, "Stakeholder Theory and the Resource-Based View of the Firm," *Journal of Management* 47, no. 7 (2021): 1757–70.

Volf argues that Christian faith necessarily extends into the sphere of work. Economic activity is not morally neutral because it involves relationships, responsibilities, and decisions that affect individuals and communities. Consequently, questions concerning wages, labor conditions, environmental sustainability, and corporate governance are not merely technical matters but also theological concerns.

Globalization intensifies the importance of this insight. The increasing mobility of capital, the expansion of global supply chains, and the growing complexity of production networks often obscure moral responsibility. Economic actors may benefit from systems whose social and environmental costs are borne by distant communities. Such conditions make it easier to ignore ethical obligations and more difficult to identify accountability. Volf's theology provides an alternative vision by emphasizing that economic participation should be guided by virtues such as justice, stewardship, solidarity, and responsibility. Christian engagement in economic life, therefore, involves more than personal honesty or workplace morality. It requires active participation in shaping economic institutions that promote human flourishing and protect vulnerable populations.

This perspective also broadens the mission of the Church. Rather than limiting ministry to ecclesiastical activities, Volf encourages Christian communities to engage the marketplace as a sphere of discipleship and public witness. Economic life becomes a context in which faith is expressed through ethical practices, social responsibility, and commitment to the common good. Through such engagement, Christians contribute to the transformation of economic structures while bearing witness to God's redemptive purposes in the world.

### **Practical Implications for Economic Justice and Marketplace Ministry**

The preceding discussion demonstrates that Volf's theology of work offers a coherent framework for addressing the ethical challenges of globalization. By integrating the doctrines of creation, human dignity, charisms, and participation in God's mission through the Holy Spirit, Volf provides a theological vision that reconnects economic life with moral responsibility.

*The first* implication concerns labor justice. Because work is participation in God's creative and redemptive activity, economic institutions have a responsibility to ensure fair compensation, safe working conditions, and meaningful opportunities for human development. Labor policies should therefore be evaluated according to their contribution to human flourishing rather than solely their economic efficiency. *The second* implication concerns the ethical use of capital. Capital is a necessary component of economic activity, yet it must remain subordinate to the well-being of persons and communities. Investment, production, and corporate governance should be directed toward long-term social value rather than short-term profit maximization alone. *The third* implication concerns the role of churches and Christian organizations. Volf's theology encourages faith communities to move beyond a narrow focus on personal spirituality and engage actively with economic realities. Churches can promote Spirit-empowered workplace discipleship, support ethical entrepreneurship, advocate for labor justice, and cultivate economic practices that embody solidarity and stewardship.

Finally, Volf's framework highlights the importance of marketplace ministry. Christian professionals, entrepreneurs, managers, and workers participate in God's mission not only through charitable activities but also through the ordinary practices of their work. Economic life, therefore, becomes a sphere of witness where faith, justice, and social responsibility are integrated. Such a vision offers a constructive theological response to the ethical challenges

generated by globalization and provides practical guidance for pursuing economic justice in contemporary society.

## CONCLUSION

This study has reappraised labor, capital, and production in the context of globalization through Miroslav Volf's theology of work. The analysis demonstrates that Volf provides a coherent theological framework for understanding work as participation in God's creative and redemptive activity rather than merely an economic necessity. Within this framework, labor is affirmed as the expression of Spirit-given charisms through which human beings participate in God's creative and redemptive activity. Capital is understood as a means that enables the exercise of Spirit-given charisms in service to human flourishing and the coming new creation. The study further shows that many of the ethical challenges associated with globalization, including labor precarity, the instrumentalization of workers, excessive profit orientation, and the separation of faith from economic life, can be critically evaluated through Volf's theological perspective. His emphasis on **charisms**, participation in God's new creation, and social responsibility offers important resources for reconnecting economic activity with moral accountability and the common good.

The implications of this research extend to churches, Christian organizations, business leaders, and individual professionals. Churches are encouraged to cultivate Spirit-empowered discipleship in the marketplace, while economic institutions are challenged to promote labor justice, responsible stewardship, and human-centered forms of production. By integrating faith and economic life, Volf's theology provides a constructive vision for pursuing economic justice and human flourishing within an increasingly globalized world. Future research may further explore the application of Volf's theology to specific economic contexts, such as global supply chains, digital labor platforms, environmental sustainability, and emerging forms of work in the contemporary economy.

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