A DAY APART

How Jews, Christians, and Muslims Find Faith, Freedom, and Joy on the Sabbath

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inhales deeply. Many believe the spices revive one’s soul as the Sabbath angel departs. In ancient times, Erwin R. Goodenough writes, incense was burned to chase away demons. Jews continued the practice until the Greco-Roman period, and then relinquished it as too pagan or Christian.

The Jews of Temple Israel recite a final prayer that thanks God for separating sacred from profane, light from darkness, Israel from others, and Shabbat from the other days. Technically, Sabbath ends once three stars have appeared in the night sky. Though the Minnah began before sunset, the meal afterwards puts us safely into the evening.

At the end, everyone wishes each other a good week. Les does so with me, then his face lights up as he remembers that as his holy day ends, mine begins. He leans in with a smile, “And you have a good Sabbath.”

How Does the Sabbath Survive in the World?

As one looks across the earth, the universal phenomenon of a regular or recurring day for rest is striking. Many primitive societies have or had rest days, not necessarily periodic or religious but involving superstition and taboos on light, noise, food, or sex. These days of solemn inactivity and abstinence were held after deaths or disasters, at changes of the moon, or at times of war, harvest, or planting. Irregular taboo or rest days usually became regular as priests sought to routinize religious calendars and, often, extend their control. The Hawaiian religion had four regular taboo periods every lunar month in honor of their four great gods. The Bontoc Igorot people of Luzon developed a Sabbath that happened, on average, every ten days.

In many of these societies, the notion of taboo or forbidden activity, over time, yielded the familiar concepts of sacred and profane. The holy day could make observers holy, just as the impure could stain or doom them. Some early societies showed respect for the divine by enforced idleness, just as children are dressed up for a visit to a grandparent, then ushered in and told to remain silent and still. The urge to make burdensome rules, apparently, is as common as the instinct to stop working.

The Sabbath rest has been pushed underwater in Western lands only to bob back up repeatedly, often in secular garb. After nearly being crushed by commerce and industry during the final decades of the nineteenth century, in a remarkably short period, from 1890 to 1915, virtually every country passed laws to require a weekly day of rest.

This ancient humanitarian impulse rescued Christianity from its tendency to spiritualize the Sabbath, which devalued rest and removed a protection for vulnerable people—servants, slaves, workers—the very people singled out in the original commandment. We humans need a real break from work, not a conceptual one.

In our age, the weekly rest day still thrusts a rhythm upon time such that all moments are not equal despite the modern economy’s promise of constant choice and availability. The Internet may be open constantly for business or transactions; we are not so able. By invoking our origin and destiny, the Sabbath checks the pride or greed that often drives excessive work. At Creation, we were given time and the means to mark its passing, the seasons and days and years (Gen. 1:14). In each religion, believers give their time to God, whose it was all along. This obliges us to use our hours carefully. We always know when we are wasting time. Wrote William Penn, the Quaker leader, “Time is what we want most, but what, alas! we use worst... and for which God will certainly most strictly reckon with us, when Time shall be no more.” Yet we are hemmed in by society, which organizes and uses time in ways that often contradict personal conscience and divine dictates.

The Sabbath survives thanks to its fruits, which sustain it from generation to generation. It sanctifies rest so that we indeed rest and become new people in God. The rabbis taught that the Sabbath delivers four blessings: equality in a special day free from the profane or mundane; freedom for all from giving or taking orders; a taste of heaven that renews and inspires; and the chance to end our work and call it “good,” or not. This new perspective, given weekly, elevates us in a priceless manner. “If a seventh of every life is devoted to rest, then we have been given 52 days a year, or approximately 10 years of sabbath or rest or reflection in a lifetime,” writes Joan Chittister, “to determine the meaning and substance, the purpose and direction of our lives.”

I Rest is —oo, What is Work?

The commandment is clear: don’t work on the Sabbath. God created for six days, and then stopped on the seventh. So work and rest are inextricably bound together. One defines the other beyond merely being opposites. However, if rest is holy, does that make work profane? No. As we read in Genesis, it is by stopping that God completes His work. “On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the
work that He had done” (1:2). Work has no meaning without an end; it is only done when we cease. And though it seems obvious that we would simply stop when we are finished, this mindset actually prescribes an eternal jog on the treadmill. As God shows us, we stop and then the work is done, at least until next week. It’s a mystery, but no less true for being so.

The reason for rest may differ between the monotheisms. Jews observe the Sabbath by resting or ceasing. Christians rest primarily to attend church but also to be renewed in Christ. Regardless, who has not felt the relief of having to stop work?

Years ago on my first day as a carpenter on a construction site, I was burning through the afternoon, eager to prove myself by finishing a complex doorway. I worked past several stages when I could have stopped. Then I picked up my circular saw for one more cut. The power was off. I stepped outside to see Glen, the foreman, winding up my electrical cord. “It’s quitting time, let’s go,” he said. “We’re done for the day.” I still feel the relief of that moment. It comes every Saturday evening. (Yes, there should be a country-western song, “God is My Foreman.”)

The entwined nature of work and rest emerged as thinkers contemplated the question of whether God truly ceased on the seventh day. The rest of God is not mere inactivity, according to Philo, the Greek Jewish philosopher of the first century. God’s goodness is changeless and constant. Even when ceasing from Creation, God maintains the world. Muslims, of course, went further and rejected the idea that God would ever rest or need to. God’s work and rest, however, are both of a higher nature than ours. Some of the rabbis who compiled the Talmud said that on the Sabbath, God continues to sustain and judge the world.

The Gospel of John supports this interpretation with a verse that has often confounded Christians. In 5:17 Jesus tells the disciples, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For our purposes, God can continue holding up the universe on the Sabbath, but we mere humans need to withdraw from earthly business if we are to enjoy a day of rest and worship.

Now back to Creation for a moment. Once God’s work is complete and He declares it good and rests, the world is ready for human activity. And as the fourth commandment makes clear, we are to work the other six days. The sages who compiled the Talmud made this point repeatedly. And a person who does not work will not have food ready for a proper Sabbath. Even Torah study alone, unless combined with real work, will profane God and lead to sin.

Work as Creation or as Servile Labor

So what is work? Jews took the story of Creation as their exemplar and defined work as creative activity, anything that changes the natural world. On this foundation, the rabbis elaborated the endless set of rules and guidelines for Sabbath rest. Work was not mere effort. For an act to be prohibited, the person involved had to intend the specific result and the result had to be personally advantageous. Thus if one went to gather grapes and collected dates instead, the act was not punishable. Similarly, if one destroyed his house there was no punishment unless the person did so in order to build a new one. Even early thinkers came close to violating the nature of the Sabbath in their interpretations. The Torah and Talmud relentlessly emphasize the divine nature of Sabbath. Jews are to keep it as a commandment, not because it serves their earthly purpose. But Aristobulus, an Egyptian Jew of the second century BCE, and later Philo demonstrated that Sabbath keeping made sense and paid off, so to speak. We still hear that a good Sabbath makes us better people and more productive workers. That sentiment strays into utilitarianism and away from the commandment’s original spirit.

Early Christians, and in later years Catholics and some Protestants, defined the work that is banned on Sunday as “servile labor,” a very different notion from the Jewish emphasis on creative work. Thus, for centuries physical labor was banned in Christendom while intellectual labor—reading, writing, and studying—was not. Dictated by the elites, the distinction discriminated. The work of slaves, servants, and the poor is so conveniently public and visible while that of the clerics, nobles, and officials is usually private and internal. Rest from servile labor signified not only the holy day but also which holy day. The Council of Laodicea in 364 declared that, “Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday, the Sabbath, but shall work on that day; but the Lord’s day [Sunday] they shall honor, and as being Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day.”

Work as

We find in Genesis a definition of work richer and deeper than mere effort. The world delights us, but it calls forth our talents for guarding, nurturing, growing, building, and making. God makes humans co-creators, stewards of Creation with dominion over the earth and its lesser creatures. We are told to
be fruitful and multiply. These thoughts were picked up by Reformers and, more recently, by Christians who advocate meaningful work.

By the Middle Ages, a vocation was the work fulfilled by monks, priests, and nuns. The rest of us wasted our days in servile labor. Some of this originated in the example of the disciples who abandoned their fishing nets and followed the Savior. Jesus himself tells us to imitate, by our trust in God, the birds “who neither sow nor reap” or the lilies “who neither toil nor spin,” yet thrive and grow nonetheless (Matt. 6:23–33). In the 1500s, Martin Luther rescued the concept of work, and said our vocation was to be found in all we do in our jobs, families, and leisure. By these means are we to glorify God. Not everyone needs to burn incense and chant in cathedrals and monasteries.  

In 1633 the poet George Herbert asked,

Teach me, my God and King
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in any thing
To do it as for Thee.  

A century later, Jonathan Edwards, the great New England preacher, turned this sentiment sternly, “Time is a talent given us by God; he hath set us our day; and it is not for nothing.” Rest on Sunday, but be busy with God’s work the other days. Sadly, Edwards reinforces the older Catholic prejudice against manual labor. “When we are most free from cares for the body, and business of an outward nature, a happy opportunity for the soul is afforded.” By this perspective, contemplating the divine is holy, growing food is not.

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII declared the church’s concern for work and workers. The nature of work was further studied and developed. Since the 1960s, church statements have emphasized labor as the highest element in economic life since it comes from the person who endows it with his or her dignity and unique character. As such, the industrial sin was to fit people into factories and other schemes of production. Instead, work must fit the person. We should become neither slaves to the work nor to the products of our work—a growing danger in our technical, bureaucratic, and materialistic world. Indeed, many of us have been forced to adjust our work habits to a software program or corporate system requirement. More recently, John Paul II praised work as good for the individual because it is useful and enjoyable. More importantly, he wrote in his letter *Laborem Exercens*, work is “something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it.”

Today, a growing chorus of Christians sings the glory of work. Proponents of a “spirituality of work” say we should act out our faith on more than just Sunday. (The movement, of course, has members in other religions.) I’d say a Sunday, or Sabbath, well kept will help us follow God the other days. So much of what we do to earn our way can dehumanize and degrade us. Despite high earnings, numerous workers are unhappy; despite too much work and long hours for some, many others are unemployed. By drawing on the Genesis conception of work and rest entwined, the “spirituality of work” movement can revive the dignity of labor without romanticizing work or ignoring those who are without jobs.

The Sabbath spirit can inform and elevate the work we do the other days despite the danger of utilitarianism. “Have a good week,” is the farewell issued by Jews and Christians alike after their weekly services. On the holy day, we remember the higher purpose of our labors. And until we rest in God, at least have a weekly rest. But if our hard work requires rest, does that rest require work?

We often forget that while the fourth commandment stipulates one day of rest, it directs us to work the rest of the week. Similarly, Saint Paul encourages Christians to “redeem the time” (Eph. 5:16). The Puritan Sabbath emerged during the early industrialization of English cities and villages when work was changing quickly. Luther had, already, developed a theology of daily work as a vocation by which the average believer served God on all days. Catholics still were divided, exalting the life of prayer and denigrating servile labor. But when Protestants joined these impulses, they also spiritualized economic processes. As they reduced the feast days that clotted the Catholic calendar, it became the norm that “Six days shalt thou labor, and do all your work.” Authorities were quick to cite this fourth commandment phrase to justify long hours for the common people.

Further, Sabbatarianism discouraged hindrances to worship, such as sports, gambling, and hunting, which were also distractions from work. And so the gospel of work emerged from Sabbatarianism and remained bound to it ever since. “Work hard, play hard” is still a popular notion, one that chains the two realms together.

Today, however, for many people it’s only “work hard.” For the world’s poor, at least those with jobs, such is life and has long been so. Overwork, or at least
relieved from the burden of being beasts of burden or minigods of work. But often we stand in our own way.

“Modern non-religious man,” Mircea Eliade observed, “regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. . . . Man makes himself,” but only to the degree that he “desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demystified. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.”

Nevertheless, we rarely toss off religion completely. We embrace new gods and new rituals as soon as we expend the old ones. New Year parties or house-warmings, for instance, resemble ancient rites of renewal. Those who care to look will see religious structure to certain political ideologies. Personal lifestyles from “simple living” to excessive wealth often amount to faith-based creeds. Many people make a religion of parenting complete with gurus, fads, orthodoxy, and rebellions. During the 1980s, the insistence that bouts of “quality time” with children would make up for long hours at the office manifested the religious habit of using sacred time to ameliorate the harms of profane time.

Some of these counterfeit religions bear good results. Fundamentally, all of them reveal our yearning for Eden, for a time and place beyond this time and place, a time and place that is pure, eternal, and sacred, a time and place where we will be at peace and one with God. Just like the Sabbath.

Equality: The Poor Most of All

The fourth commandment was revolutionary on two counts. It set aside one-seventh of time for rest and worship, and, by extending this to slaves, it demanded equal treatment for society’s disadvantaged members. In Exodus and Deuteronomy, then, we have “the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their master.” Stimulated by this command, Hebrew law further limited an owner’s power over slaves. Slaves usually can’t decide when to rest, but the Sabbath restored this minimal dignity while reminding the Israelites that they were once in bondage and are now free.

Through the centuries Shabbat relieved even poor and oppressed Jews for a day from their burdens and offered them earthly delight and divine refreshment. The day, ideally, should do the same in Christianity and Islam. Little enforcement should be required beyond ensuring that rich and poor are treated