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A VOCATION AS POLITICS:  
WORK AND POPULAR THEOLOGY IN A CONSUMER CULTURE

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Jeffrey E. Scholes

June 2009

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Title: A VOCATION AS POLITICS: WORK AND POPULAR THEOLOGY IN A  
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## ABSTRACT

The idea of vocation or a calling is particularly salient in much business motivational literature and popular Christian self-help books alike. Promoted is the idea of vocation that glosses over issues stemming from political power in the corporate workplace in order to give meaning to workers in spite of working conditions. In this form, vocations are unable to engage one's working life in ways that they can and should. I argue that recent trends in academic theologies of vocation as well as the role of consumer culture combine to allow the ascendancy of this form of the idea. I support this claim with an analysis of the relationship between consumer culture and business. I locate Rick Warren's concept of "purpose" contained in *The Purpose-Driven Life* as the functional equivalent of the idea of vocation that serves to distance the idea from the material workplace through its interplay with the mechanics of consumer culture. Utilizing selective theological sources and José Casanova's work concerning public religions, I finally contend that the idea of vocation that resists wholesale commodification can express a latent political quality to combat particular unjust social norms that regulate the corporate work world.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With my dissertation proposal on baseball and religion ready to go in the fall of 2004, the presidential election in November derailed my plan. The common belief that religion played a significant role in the reelection of President Bush forced a shift from sports to politics. My committee members, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Ted Vial, and Robert Urquhart, were not only instrumental in encouraging the move in this direction, but they also have been incredibly supportive throughout the writing process.

Robert's insights on consumer culture were necessary given my relative lack of expertise on economic matters. Sheila's broad grasp of the current field of religious studies and theology gave me confidence to proceed methodologically. And Ted's overall understanding of my project (as well as his pointed criticism at times) helped instill a seriousness towards the concepts presented. Ted's *de facto* status as my first reader was a turn of events that proved indispensable to the writing process.

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## INTRODUCTION

The question, therefore, is not whether it is permissible to formulate social doctrines from the standpoint of the churches and of religions in general; all we have to do is to ask whether these attempts have achieved something useful and valuable for the modern situation.

Ernst Troeltsch

Studs Terkel's popular 1972 book, *Working*, recounts the testimony that Nora Watson gives about the meaning of her job, a staff writer for an institution that publishes health care literature. She laments, "A job like mine, if you really put your spirit into it, you would sabotage immediately. You don't dare. So you absent your spirit from it. My mind has been so divorced from my job, except as a source of income, it's really absurd."<sup>1</sup> Later, Nora adds, "I'm coming to a less moralistic attitude towards work . . . I don't think I have a calling—at this moment—except to be me. But nobody pays you for being you, so I'm at the Institution—for the moment. . ."<sup>2</sup>

Nora's sentiment divulges a still-held orientation towards work: that a job and a calling may have nothing to do with each other. A calling or vocation<sup>3</sup> connotes that which taps a deep, even religious place in the individual that ideally guides, amongst other activities, one's daily work. Today's callings do not have to stem from a divine source. Yet, as Nora reveals, something besides money or the bare bones tasks of the job

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<sup>1</sup> Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 675.

<sup>2</sup> Terkel, 679.

<sup>3</sup> "Vocation" and "calling" are typically synonyms in common usage. The difference between the two that Schuurman makes use of is largely one of his own making for the sake of his argument. For the purposes of simplicity, I use the terms interchangeably throughout my argument unless otherwise noted.

itself must animate a job if it is to be calling-worthy. When used in this way, a calling can range in meaning from the secular (it helps put a job or role above pure self-interest) to the sacred (it is an expression of divine will in the world). In either sense, a vocation enables an individual to transcend his or her daily tasks by locating them in a framework that is larger than him or herself. Yet jobs or careers often do not intrinsically carry this kind of freight.

Dissonance between the meaning of a job and that of a calling experienced by many like Nora invites several general responses. Work, as expressed in the quality of a job, must provide a certain kind of satisfaction if it is to elevate to the level of a calling. Or if the idea of a calling has been overextended to include work, expectations that a job should be able to deliver on a kind of spiritual fulfillment need to be lowered. Or finally, if paid work and the activities that would befit a calling are mutually exclusive in reality, the project to integrate the two should be abandoned.

Because most of us spend one-third of waking life at a job, the last option is not a particularly desired one. Douglas J. Schuurman agrees, yet takes a different tack than the ones just enumerated. He begins his inquiry of the current meaning of vocations by parsing current uses of some important terms. Vocation, he states, has come to be synonymous with paid work, whereas a calling conversely implies what one is passionate about doing, as articulated in popular parlance.<sup>4</sup> “I work in banking, but my passion is rock climbing,” conveys Schuurman’s idea. Depending on the job and the person, justifications for a vocation, in this sense, can be purely secular and pragmatic: for the paycheck, for the experience, for the résumé, etc. Designations such as “vocational

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 1-3.



schools” or “vocational counseling” (both designed to connect people to jobs based on skills and/or availability, not necessarily passions) disclose the difference between vocation and calling for Schuurman. He seeks to unify these terms, as had been the case in early Protestant usages, by returning to the expansive and all-pervasive function of vocation at the time of the Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Harkening back to the Reformed notion of vocation, Schuurman claims that there should be no difference between a vocation and a calling as he describes them. The two should be reunited because both work and passion are parts of a vocation according to God’s will; vocation originates from God in the form of a call and should rightly be returned to God.

Schuurman’s concerns about the status of vocations have merit. However, projects like his that attempt to resuscitate the religious component of a vocation for the purpose of injecting passion into a job are incomplete. I contend in this dissertation that neither one’s experience of a job nor the absolute authority of God but the *material conditions of work*, should play the primary role in the meaning-making of a vocation. And because those conditions are mediated by cultural forms, the effort to revive the idea of vocation must proceed horizontally *through* culture instead of vertically, thus *bypassing* culture, if it is to be successful. I demonstrate that recent theological treatments of vocation, both academic and popular, unwittingly collude with consumer culture to produce and perpetuate a concept of vocation that is detached from the material conditions of work. A vocation’s ability to gain traction in the workplace is stymied when it is in a commodified form, as expressed in much popular literature and permitted by recent theologians. I argue that resisting commodification is a possibility *and a*

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<sup>5</sup> Schuurman, 4.

prerequisite for a concept of vocation, if it is at all able to inform the political discourse that regulates many modern workplaces. To accomplish this task, a vocation must neither lean too heavily on its religious sources nor become a handmaiden to the norms of the corporate business culture in America. Finally, I offer a concept of vocation that admits of its embeddedness in culture, yet is able to enlist certain components of its theological history in order to engage the culture of the workplace effectively. This more useful idea of vocation makes work more meaningful from the ground up, though still honors its theological history by selectively utilizing qualities ascribed to it from the top down.<sup>6</sup>

I support this thesis first by exploring the Protestant idea of vocation, past and present, in order to address the deficiencies of a de-contextualized, de-materialized and de-politicized vocation. More recent theologies of vocation help establish the conditions for this hollowed-out concept of vocation to thrive by gradually devaluing the role of work in the concept itself. I show that this theological emphasis occurs at the cost of underestimating the role of culture to shape discourse involving vocation.

I attend to the role that consumer culture plays in the individual incorporation of a vocation specifically as it is exercised in Rick Warren's best-selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. I contend that the idea of "purpose" here is the functional equivalent of the idea of vocation, yet Warren's purpose can be engaged and realized without reference to one's material or social life; it is merely "consumed" as an idea. Applying the arguments of Vincent Miller, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, I assert that not only can such a

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<sup>6</sup> The political quality of the concept of vocation does not exhaust its meaning—the religious quality of the concept has been and will still be operative in the appropriation of the idea of a calling for most. In chapter 4, I offer a way for the strictly religious component of vocation to merge with the political component in order to accomplish specific goals.

domesticated version of a calling render inequitable work conditions bearable, but it can also sell out the capacity for a vocation to make working conditions more just. To the point, I argue that, despite its popular usage, the theological concept of a vocation contains within it the ability to bring humanizing norms to bear on the general labor culture in corporate America. Specifically, corporate power dynamics that work to diminish the social capital of employees, thus widening the power differential between employers and employees, will be seen to conflict with a certain moral quality of a vocation. A fresh conception of vocation must serve as a corrective to Warren's theological take that enables the commodified idea of vocation to hold cultural sway.

The potential for the idea of vocation to enter the political space of the workplace rests in the fact that a religious vocation necessarily traffics in both the transcendent and immanent realms: a call from God travels the distance between the two realms. And once heard and lived out, a calling can reveal much about that which calls *and* the world in which a calling must manifest. However, Schuurman's work joins the vast majority of writings on vocation since Luther that downplay the role of the immanent realm within the concept of vocation.

The popular use of "calling language" that Schuurman laments actually proves instructive on the means to arrive at a better version of vocation. Popular usage cannot be shrugged off so easily, though when culture is deemed the enemy of religion as opposed to its home, culture can be summarily dismissed. Two primary consequences of this oversight emerge. One, when popular uses of calling language, such as those illuminated by Schuurman, are either ignored or not afforded sound explanations, an opportunity is missed to let powerful expressions of a calling inform us of the wider

culture. How did it come to be that a calling became equated with a passion or a purpose as Schuurman correctly points out? Does this usage tell us as much about the current condition of work rather than it does about some kind of corruption of the idea of vocation? Why does this kind of calling language issue a summons to a vocation to locate itself solely within God's plan instead of within a more satisfying work atmosphere as well? Calling-*qua*-passion-or-purpose discloses a cultural trajectory that can inform the state of work by way of contrast. The need to look outside of work itself and turn to culturally resonant self-help books to find the meaning of work signals an often less than satisfying work environment at the least. In addition, popular use of calling language indicates, in part, the kind of culture that gives this use of vocation purchase, hence an examination of its function is warranted.

Two, reluctance to address the implications that follow from the now-observed relationship between vocation and the concrete aspects of the work world strip the meaning of a vocation of its power to challenge or affirm that world. If, like Schuurman, effort is taken to ensure that vocation is aligned with God's will alone, the possibility that vocation could be concomitantly embedded in the nature and culture of work itself is never explored. Or, that vocation as a concept owes as much of its conceptual power to God as it does to the world in which a calling must be lived is equally neglected. Vocation, because of its function as an intermediary between the divine and human realms, necessarily gathers its meaning from both. When both of these components of a vocation are not reasonably dealt with, the concept typically takes on an a-historical character in the sense that God redeems *all* work through *all* cultural and historical permutations. Consequently, a concept of vocation that is reduced to acting as the

servant of divine will alone does not have to be responsive to the material context of work—what one does on a job, what power dynamics are at play through social relations.<sup>7</sup>

This introductory chapter clears the ground for the argument to follow by first, clarifying important terms and second, stating the methodology that is utilized. The method employed is not so much an established, programmatic framework as it is a set of assumptions about theological products. The idea that theologies are culturally embedded and hence cannot be distilled out from culture, as is still a common conviction, is acknowledged and applied throughout this argument. I show that the admission that theological products are culturally embedded is a more honest as well as effective means to approaching the Christian self-help literature in which the concept of vocation largely resides today.

A selective theological history of the Protestant calling, as laid out in chapter 1, betrays the profound cultural impact on the meaning of the term while revealing a trend. The history discloses a gradual emphasizing of the continual need for vocation to ally itself with God's will, either despite the changing conditions of work or because of them. Consequently, the relationship between a vocation and the material conditions of a job has been neglected in favor of attending to the proper relationship between a vocation and God. This historical survey supplies us with one of the reasons for the type of concepts of vocation that are now popularized—ones where the nature of work recedes into the background.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 15-6.

Operating outside of most theologies of vocation is consumer culture. It has been widely acknowledged as the primary cultural discourse that nourishes the social environment of modern capitalistic societies.<sup>8</sup> Functionally, consumer culture establishes a cultural hegemony by seeping into all possible social space and commodifying aspects of life within it. Jean Baudrillard states,

We have reached the point where “consumption” has grasped the whole of life; where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode; where the schedule of gratification is outlined in advance, one hour at a time; and where the “environment” is complete, completely climatized, furnished, and culturalized.<sup>9</sup>

Ours is a society that is organized around consumption that is preceded by a society organized around production. Chapter 2 examines the social implications of this shift, the impact of consumer culture on society and finally the bearing of consumer culture on work today in the West. The writings of sociologists Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett couch the shift from production to consumption in terms of the resilience or lack thereof of social bonds. Their respective designations, “liquid modernity” and “flexible capitalism,” provide useful frameworks with which to view the social conditions that structure the work world in a consumer culture. Bauman classifies the shift in more totalizing fashion than Sennett; consumer culture has eclipsed *all* aspects of producer culture leaving work at the mercy of the dictates of consumer culture. Sennett

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<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism and Veblen’s classic on conspicuous consumption, a truncated list of authors on the culture of capitalism such as David Riesman, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, to a lesser degree John Kenneth Galbraith, Daniel Bell and Christopher Lasch offer varied takes on the deleterious effects of consumer culture. See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 116-9; John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 52-60; Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 8-12; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 55, 63-5; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), 71-4.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 33.

acknowledges the ascendancy of consumer culture, but he cannot concede that the power dynamics of productive relations in the workplace have become consumptive relations in the business world. Hence, Sennett speaks forcefully of the influence of consumer culture on flexible capitalism (and vice-versa), yet also leaves room to address the power differential between employees and employers—a long-standing situation that has not been completely infected by consumer culture. Sennett’s use of consumer culture to explain several facets of flexible capitalism will be revisited in chapter 4.

In order to gain a better understanding of the *use* of consumer culture by corporate brass to maintain this power differential, it is crucial to appreciate the means by which relevant concepts, such as vocation, interact with consumer culture so that they can then be deployed. Beyond establishing the rules of the game played in our social environment, consumer culture facilitates the commodification of the very idea of vocation. Chapter 3 turns to the mechanics of such a commodification process as expressed primarily in *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Here, I argue that Warren’s expression of the idea of purpose, when used instrumentally to offer a higher meaning or therapeutic solace in life, has been disciplined for the market through the process of the “packaging” and “selling” of the idea to consumers. I examine the connection between *The Purpose-Driven Life* and consumer culture through its questionable status as a self-help book and as a text that uses seeker-sensitive methods to woo religious consumers. The shortcomings of these two ways to position *The Purpose-Driven Life* as a product of consumer culture are made evident when contrasted with Vincent Miller’s assessment of the relationship between religion and consumer culture.

Using Miller’s thesis that the meaning of consumer-friendly religion must be detached from the material and political context from which religious traditions arise and function, I identify purpose as possessing consumer-friendly properties. After establishing that purpose is a functional equivalent of vocation, I demonstrate that Warren’s concept is shorn of any reference to a material world in which a purpose should be able to engage—if in fact purpose is universal in scope and power as Warren attests. In this way, Warren’s version of vocation solicits readers to maintain a “shallow engagement” with the concept that establishes the conditions for Warren to use seeker-sensitive methods to package a book with self-help qualities.<sup>10</sup> Hence it will be shown that the classification of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and books like it as products of consumer culture based on their seeker-sensitive qualities overlooks the mechanics at work that precede the expression of these qualities.

More insidiously, companies are increasingly encouraging employees to think of their approach to work in terms of consumer-friendly concepts like “purpose” or “mission” to foster efficiency and productivity on the job.<sup>11</sup> Again, consumer culture tailors the idea of a calling not only to act as a palliative for the employee soul, but also for unobstructed deployment by an employer. When deployed as such, a calling not only serves the interests of the employer, but also loses the capacity to frame and then expose the ideology backing such interests. Likewise, the effects of this parasitic usage have a “dematerializing” effect on vocation, albeit for non-theological reasons.

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<sup>10</sup> Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 106.

<sup>11</sup> Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63; Jesper Kunde and B.J. Cunningham, *Corporate Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 8, 64; Carrette and King, 132-7.



Chapter 4 explores the power dynamic in the contemporary corporate work world that fuels such usage in order to disabuse those of the belief that consumer culture *always* empowers consumers. Miller, while insightfully describing the dematerialization of religion in a consumer culture, fails to treat the etiology with similar scrutiny. His emphasis on “habits and dispositions” that are instilled by consumer culture serves to de-emphasize the role that human and corporate agents play in the production and sustenance of consumer religion. Lacking a detailed discussion of the real beneficiaries of the commodification of religious products, Miller is resigned to leaving consumers with *tactics* of resistance when a *strategy* is called for. I pit Miller’s leanings towards a “democracy of consumers” against the more critical stance of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King. The latter argue that the consumer orientation towards religious concepts and practices is far from innocent; the commodification of spirituality is “corporate-led” and “corporation-served.”<sup>12</sup> Their argument simultaneously reveals the distance between commodified religious concepts and actual work conditions as well as exposes the means by which employers benefit by the distance. Here, the “consumer-friendly calling” meets the work world to reveal the limits of such an appropriation of vocation.

Later in the chapter, I explore ways in which a vocation can act to redress such uneven power dynamics at work. Richard Roberts, at the end of his book *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*, advances the idea of “identity as vocation.”<sup>13</sup> I consider his idea as a means to counter the fragmenting of self-identity under the dictates of consumer culture. Roberts’s idea, amongst his other concerns, is based on his

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<sup>12</sup> Carrette and King, 127-32.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, 295-305.

assessment that modern Western religion has fallen under the spell of consumer culture and is subject to an over-managerialized society.

In order to reverse this spell, a vocation must be able to deploy itself as a political weapon that can counter the institutions that maintain the status quo through their use of consumer culture strategies.<sup>14</sup> Returning to the theological articulations of vocation of John Calvin and Walter Rauschenbusch, I seek to use the means by which they expand the concept of vocation into political arenas to address Roberts's concerns. While Calvin and Rauschenbusch employ traditional theological methods to guide their respective notions of vocation, the way that their ideas engage the world enables their notions to have political cache. I apply the elements of their respective theologies of vocation that intersect with the political world to the current work environment, but with qualifications. A vocation must be able to respond to twenty-first century work environments which limits a direct application of the ideas of Calvin or Rauschenbusch. I draw on Jose Casanova's argument about public religions to help with the translation of traditional religious ideas into modern secular contexts. Casanova provides a theoretical basis for the entrance of religious norms into the public square that is predicated on the modernization of the religious ideas that provide the normative framework.

In my case, a vocation can carry aspects of Calvin's and Rauschenbusch's versions of the concept into the workplace, but its efficacy is dependant on its ability to challenge *current* workplace norms that deserve to be challenged. Casanova offers a

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Novak's unique melding of vocation and business in a capitalistic economy uncovers some novel facets of a calling (and the heart of the business world) as it is appropriated today. Yet his concept of vocation is placed too quickly in the service of a free market ideology, and hence loses some credibility. And understandably, Novak's idea of business as calling would be unable to stand outside of the business community if needed. See Michael Novak, *Business as Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

valuable means of endowing a vocation with the capacity to demand fairness in the modern workplace while retaining much of a vocation's religious import. I contend that the concept of vocation must break free from the grip of consumer culture first in order to reengage one's work with the kind of political energy needed to endow a job with meaning from the ground up. Yet from Carrette and King, the process of "de-commodifying" religious products has a religious impulse itself. With their insights, Calvin's and Rauschenbusch's "political theology of vocation," and Casanova's provision for religion's access into the public square, conditions are in place for a "political vocation." My move towards such a concept, then, is one that seeks to ground a vocation over and against abstract manifestations found in popular literature while remaining faithful to appropriate elements of the original Protestant concept.

The political content of the concept by no means exhausts the entire idea of vocation. It merely represents a latent element of the idea whose expression is sorely needed. And when so expressed, vocations can ideally possess the power to challenge a well-heeled business culture when and if confrontation is demanded. Resultant is a concept of vocation that, through an exertion of its political muscle, can promote obedience to God's will as much as disobedience towards an unjust or merely unsatisfying working life.

### **American Work in the Twenty-First Century**

Some preliminary ground clearing is necessary before proceeding. First, what I mean by "work" as it relates to vocation needs clarification. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah et al. provide a useful "glossary" to parse terms associated with work. In a chapter intended to locate work within the changing religious landscape, Bellah

distinguishes a job from a career and from a calling. A *job* is not typically interpreted as an end in itself but is performed for material benefits alone and as such does not provide the means to express the jobholder's deeper interests. A *career* offers the means to transcend mere material benefits of work through advancement within an occupational structure, though salary may be the indicator of advancement. Bellah states that higher social standing and perhaps increased self-esteem can accompany career success, but work is still not an end in itself in a career. A *calling*, on the other hand, forges the relationship between one's life and work that renders them inseparable. Work is an end in itself in a calling; monetary gain and social standing gained through work are secondary. Whether religious in nature or not, a calling, for Bellah, expresses the relationship between life and work in which one's highest life purposes are made manifest through work.<sup>15</sup>

Bellah's "job-career-calling" schema helps move us towards a working definition of the term, "work." The relationship between work and life that Bellah maps is based on interpretations of working experiences gathered from workers.<sup>16</sup> Meaning through work has less and less to do with what one actually does on the job, thus the attempt to understand the meaning of the idea of vocation through a job/career schema is becoming more difficult. Something besides longevity at a job or lack of it animates a calling. Given this situation, peoples' interpretations of the meaning culled from work say little

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>16</sup> It is beyond the scope of my project to distinguish between the kinds of jobs that Americans have and then determine which jobs are "calling worthy" before advancing an argument. Even when this line of inquiry has been followed, findings reveal that the *kind* of job is not a determining factor in whether a job was considered merely a job, a career or a calling. Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, and Paul Rozin, "Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People's Relations to their Work," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31 (1997): 21-33.

definitively about the relationship between actual work and a vocation that informs that work. Again, many people consider their calling to transcend their job. Hence a vocation is not necessarily tied to work as given by a worker's expression of this relationship. My concern is not the more subjective registering of meaning on the job that Bellah uses but the more objective work conditions that help generate these expressions. Worker satisfaction is an important piece of the puzzle regarding the relationship between vocation and work. Yet a reliance on these alone ignores the conditions that make work meaningful that also contribute to the interpretation used by Bellah.

Raymond Williams's set of definitions for "job" and "career" largely mirror Bellah's, though he contends that "work" can stand in semantically for both terms.<sup>17</sup> Hence "work" which includes both a job and a career, as Williams defines it, is, "the piece of work, the activity you get paid for, the thing you have to catch or to shift or to do, the ordinary working experience."<sup>18</sup> Here, work is a more inclusive term that contains worker experience and the "thing" that one does without getting caught up in whether it is a part of a job or career. Work is simply work thus simplifying the relationship between a vocation and work.<sup>19</sup>

The fulcrum about which the meaning of the Protestant calling pivots is the role of work operating within the calling. Williams also remarks that the word "work" has

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<sup>17</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 335-7. It should also be noted that "work" as a verb can include non-paid activity as it is used with expressions such as, "work around the house" or "work on my jump shot." And while these activities can be construed as vocational, given Luther's expansive definition, they leave open the possibility that *any* activity can potentially be a part of a vocation—a possibility that this project has not the ability to address fully.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, 337.

<sup>19</sup> Williams's generalization of work succeeds instrumentally at the expense of an accounting for the vastly different meanings that work carries. I willingly incur this expense for the sake of making my project feasible yet still substantial. No matter how high the amount of meaning or purpose is being extracted from one's work, the concept of vocation can do more heavy-lifting.

undergone changes; the most profound being the change wrought by capitalism. From the Reformation until early capitalism, work carried more of a medieval character of *toil*.<sup>20</sup> Since the onset of capitalism, the meaning of the word has been specified from its very general form, “to indicate activity and effort through achievement” to be defined by relation to, “its imposed conditions, such as ‘steady’ or timed work, or working for a wage or salary: being hired.”<sup>21</sup>

For the purposes of understanding what a calling has meant and how it has functioned in the Protestant notion of calling, “work” is defined here in these two very general senses—before and after capitalism. Williams also notes that the meaning of work under capitalistic conditions has been circumscribed not only by paid employment, but by the set of social relations that surround one’s work and legitimize it as work, *per se*.<sup>22</sup> Thus defined, work describes not just the time spent “on the job,” but also that which has the capacity to act as a lightning rod for the forces that fashion one’s social identity. When considered in the context of identity formation, this latter quality of work significantly broadens the definition of work to include also the effects of one’s job/career, as it is defined by social relations, on the sense of who one is. If work is reduced simply to the activities that one performs on the job in exchange for a paycheck, then it would lack the power to assert itself as a fundamental component of a calling.

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, 335. The difference between Reformation “work” and today’s version is important to note when attempting to understand the Reformation treatment of calling later on in this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, 335.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, 335.

This is so because when the word “calling” has been attached to work, work is given added significance; a purpose that transcends the actual day-to-day duties of a job.<sup>23</sup>

There are myriad interpretative stances with which to view the working conditions and experiences of the modern American worker. Sennett’s emphasis on the impact of *social relations* on the modern workplace rather than the economic or psychological forces is particularly helpful. Sennett conceptualizes the work world as a network of social relations that determine the environment in which identities on the job are forged.<sup>24</sup> Sennett describes social capital as an expression of individual and/or corporate power saved up and/or exerted at work that defines the social relations. Levels of social capital act as a barometer measuring the overall health of the work world and as such, appropriately indicate the level of receptivity that a concept of vocation can manage.<sup>25</sup> As noted earlier, I seek to extend the concept of vocation into the political arena of the work world. Lacking a baseline description of the way in which social groups interact in the workplace, a vocation remains individualized, private and unable to alter social structure.

Sennett pares down his task further by focusing primarily on business institutions on the, “cutting edge of the economy: high technology, global finance, and new service

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<sup>23</sup> It must be noted that at any given time, certain jobs or careers have provided more satisfaction and hence have been more able to plausibly be considered part of a calling than others. This is of course true today. That said, theologians have typically ignored the differences in the meaning of work for the worker when analyzing the role of work in a calling. Instead of delineating which kinds of work are more “calling-worthy,” which, practically speaking, would be a painstaking task, most theologians dealing with vocation simply refer to “work” in the most general sense.

<sup>24</sup> Specifically, Sennett argues that descriptive terms like “liquid” or “flexible” define modern capitalistic society. Contrasting today’s business world with Weber’s “iron cage,” Sennett places company demands for worker flexibility and complacency with job volatility under the umbrella of a pervasive consumer culture—an association that I explore in chapter 2. By connecting volatility that accompanies flexible capitalism to the mindset of the modern consumer, Sennett situates work in the larger cultural setting. As noted earlier, the meaning of vocation is caught up in this setting as well and hence Sennett’s investigation proves doubly fruitful.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 63-6.

firms with more than three thousand employees.” He is quick to remark that most Americans do not work for such firms, “[r]ather, they represent a leading edge of change, an aspiration of what businesses ought to become: no one is going to start a new organization based on the principle of permanent jobs.”<sup>26</sup> As a vanguard that may be in a nascent stage, but is *the* model for any business desiring to be successful, Sennett contends that, “this small glue of the economy has a culture influence far beyond its numbers.”<sup>27</sup> As I rely on Sennett’s use of social capital to elucidate the relationship between work and vocation, his focus on *this* sector of the business world will be where my focus lies as well in chapter 2.

Admittedly, circumscribing my study in this way risks passing over workers, specifically manual laborers, who do not work in these fields. Luther is explicit in his inclusion of *all* jobs, including those that stem from social roles, to be “calling-worthy,” and Rick Warren is similarly non-elitist or non-selective in his determination of who can live a “purpose-driven life.” I choose to apply vocation to the kind of work on which Sennett focuses primarily for the purposes of simplicity. Work environments vary wildly from those of the forest ranger to the mid-level bureaucrat to the self-employed who work out of the house. While aspects of a political vocation can engage all work, I focus on a specific type of work environment so that my concept retains specificity too. To account for all types of work, as Luther attempts to do, would be a difficult task given the vast difference between say, manual labor and service industry jobs in late capitalism. In addition, as we will see in chapter 2, there are particular qualities of the flexible

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<sup>26</sup> Sennett, “Capitalism and the City,” in *Future City*, eds. Stephen Reed, Jürgen Rosenmann and Job van Eldijk (New York: Spon Press, 2005), 119.

<sup>27</sup> Sennett, 12.



corporation that differentiate its workers from manual laborers. As will be explored later, “team-based,” intra-business competition and the use of consulting firms in corporations lend themselves to some of the mechanics of consumer culture. Manual, wage labor typically does not participate in such business strategies. Finally, Sennett takes pains to argue that because fewer and fewer corporations are controlling the economy, hence a lion’s share of employees, the actions of corporations on “the cutting edge of the economy” are felt in some way by all Americans. Therefore, if a concept of vocation can engage *this* working environment, its implications can be far-reaching as well.

My use of consumer culture requires brief qualification as well. Throughout my argument, I do not assume that consumer culture is the *only* determinant of the meaning of vocation today for the simple reason that consumer culture itself is not determinative of the cultural landscape including the meaning of work.<sup>28</sup> Political and economic forces have heavily contributed to the shaping of the form of work (and hence vocation) that can explain the current status of work without recourse to consumer mindsets and behaviors. I choose to examine the impact of consumer culture on work and the idea of vocation in part, because of the immense impact that consumer culture exerts on popular renderings of vocation and hence their interpretations.

Finally, my employment of the term “political” entails some clarification. I use the term in a *general* sense to describe the now dormant ability of the idea of vocation to

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<sup>28</sup> Most literature on consumer culture admits of its inescapability though not of its omnipotence. Wendell Berry suggests lifestyle choices that avoid the pitfalls of consumer culture through non-participatory stances towards the market. See Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 40. Robert Reich argues for a separation between politics and the market that will reenergize a citizenry that, in his view, can stave off the commodification of public space. See Robert B. Reich, *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 209-25. Vincent Miller, in his efforts to curb the encroaching commodification of religion, calls for a return to a “sacramentality” within the Catholic Church where sacramental thinking and action can counter consumer thinking and action. See Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 188-92.

engage the politics of the corporate workplace. “Political” also modifies the general nature of social relations between the players in corporate America, broadly speaking, so that the political component of a vocation can engage its target accurately. The term localizes a certain kind of social relationship that gains its currency from uneven power distributions between certain parties that are generated by productive relations. The productive relations are primarily economic but quickly translate into a more generalized power differential at work. “Political” is thus set apart from other ways to view social relationships such as strictly economic, psychological, racial, ethnic or gender-based or even religious. This, in turn, helps isolate the political in the idea of vocation.

“Workplace politics” is a common expression typically used in a pejorative fashion to describe uncomfortable or unproductive working environments in which social relationships act as obstacles to production or promotion. The specific environment of the corporate workplace that I attend to is one of power disparities which render social relationships political; not just economic nor merely social. And because my primary concern is to “awaken” the political component within a religious concept, not necessarily to launch a political program or to involve vocation with state politics, my use of the term “political” is primarily heuristic. The problems that I address with a political vocation are not that of state politics, but deal with the ways a vocation can inform and challenge certain aspects of workplace politics. I merely illuminate some of the political qualities of vocation and then ascertain the conditions needed for a possible entrance of the idea of vocation into the power game occurring in corporate America.

In this way, the application of a “political vocation” has family resemblances to, yet also has more measured goals than, the concepts employed by liberation theologians.

For many who consider themselves to be doing liberation theology, theological concepts must fit into a conceptual whole under the burden of liberating all constraints on the human condition.<sup>29</sup> Or the political and economic liberation of the poor is underwritten by a comprehensive set of theological convictions. The *political* is the *theological* and vice-versa. The idea of a political vocation suggested in my project is an offering in the spirit of liberation theology (vocation as a means to empower all workers), but it claims no totalizing ability nor does it allege membership in a pre-existent theological system. Moreover, I admit of no equation between the theological and the political, as if one serves the other or as if both have a common goal. Instead, I largely bracket off the question of whether a vocation actually gains its strength from divine sources (while attending to the role that theology plays in the social standing of a vocation) in order to locate its political potential to affect the secular realm. The following section on the methodology explicates this move more fully.

### **Some Notes on Methodology**

Work is by no means fully determinative of the meaning of a calling, both past and present. Rather the religio-cultural environment in which work occurs figures prominently in the power and interpretation of one's vocation, as Max Weber was well attuned. For Weber, as opposed to Karl Marx, certain theological commitments are causal factors in socioeconomic effects.<sup>30</sup> However recent developments in the scholarly

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<sup>29</sup> The father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, writes: "From the outset, liberation was seen as something comprehensive, an integral reality from which nothing is excluded, because only such an idea of it explains the work of him in whom all the promises are fulfilled." Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxviii.

<sup>30</sup> See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's 1958).

approach to theology and its relationship to culture have altered the methods with which the scholar can analyze the relationship between religion and society since Weber's day.

Weber's assumptions bolstered his overall approach in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that theological concepts such as Calvin's notion of predestination could be understood through a causal relationship that inhered between religion and society. Those assumptions and his findings led him to conclude that theology would give way to secular, modern normative frameworks, if in fact that had not already occurred.<sup>31</sup> A causal relationship between theological beliefs and secular society presupposes an ontological separation between the two, despite Weber's bold claim of integration in *The Protestant Ethic*.

My own argument is not theological in the traditional sense but constructed more with a Weberian spirit in play. In the final analysis, I do not offer a concept of vocation that accords with a certain interpretation of the biblical God. Nor will it fit nicely into a theological metanarrative or correspond to a particular religious tradition's system, at least intentionally. In both of these cases, projects typically aim to clarify a theological concept by mining original sources and accepted interpretations in order to recover orthodox principles against the threat of cultural contamination of such principles.<sup>32</sup> Instead, I use theology *instrumentally* rather than substantively to further my argument. The concept of vocation that I finally offer is not a part of a confessional theology. Or more explicitly, my concept does not assert anything about the actual relationship

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<sup>31</sup> Weber, 155-83.

<sup>32</sup> In order to claim that contamination has occurred, one must contend that an uncontaminated essence of a concept exists. I do not claim this about vocation or any other theological concept. Hence the idea of vocation that I proffer is a tentative one and is amenable to change. For an example of this kind of treatment of the subject of labor, see David H. Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

between God and humanity. This relationship is bracketed off, not undermined, for the purposes of understanding the function of the idea of vocation in culture and arriving at a concept that can do this work most suitably.

This kind of method is becoming progressively more legitimized through the work of scholars for whom theological formulations are culturally embedded and hence brook no recourse to orthodoxy. Sheila Greeve Davaney writes: “For many scholars, texts and beliefs no longer float free, to be interpreted only in relation to other texts and ideas, but are understandable only within the concrete particularities of historical existence.” And for theology, she remarks that, “there has been a move away from the study of ideas abstracted from their concrete histories and contexts and a turn to the thick histories and realities of religious communities and individuals.”<sup>33</sup> No longer can theological concepts that emerge either from the academy or from individual religious beliefs proceed from a culturally insulated position. In turn, when theological concepts are seen to be inextricably bound up in a historical and cultural matrix, the *authority* of cultural discourse is permitted to inform the analyses of religious expressions, beliefs and practices.

The “turn to culture” by theological thinkers admits two primary claims about theology. One, the assertion that all theological concepts and religious belief statements are embedded in culture is a response to the inability of theologians to broker in non-contextual, universal or *sui generis* concepts when faced with multi-cultural, postmodern epistemologies. Two, despite implications of the first claim, theological concepts, even

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<sup>33</sup> Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.

when their cultural sources are acknowledged, still have a *normative* function and hence can uniquely inform and at times pass judgment, albeit chastened, on that culture.

First, theology has had to contend with shifting ground underneath its feet.<sup>34</sup> Philosophical, historical and anthropological findings alike reveal that, despite the protestations of theology in general, theological ideas are and have always been bound up in their surrounding cultural context.<sup>35</sup> Delwin Brown, after citing the “loss of objectivity” in theology arrived at with a historicist rendering of changing interpretations of God, delivers the hard truth. He remarks that, “...there are no self-evident generalities from which to begin these scholarly inquiries and hence from which equally sure conclusions might be deduced...They [objects of religion] have lost their essences. This is especially evident when we speak of religion and religious traditions.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore any current usage, e.g. the term “evil,” when no account is taken of the cultural conditioning of the concept, is no longer a viable theological option. It has been a particularly difficult pill for theology to swallow because of its traditional insistence that it trade in universal concepts and systems of concepts.

The crisis resulting from this table-turning has spawned everything from reclamation projects devised to recapture original theological meanings,<sup>37</sup> to creative

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<sup>34</sup> This development is now well known, but was articulated definitively by Van Harvey in a well known article. Van Harvey, “On the Intellectual Marginality of American Theology,” in *Religion and Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1997), 25-37.

<sup>36</sup> Delwin Brown, “Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy, and the New Ethnography,” in *Converging on Culture*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41-2.

<sup>37</sup> For examples see David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-20.

reworkings of traditional theological ideas,<sup>38</sup> to the abandonment of any theological methods,<sup>39</sup> to an unqualified acceptance of historicism and cultural relativism with a willingness to view theological concepts in light of these developments. The fourth option, which I opt for in this study, raises a thorny question, however. When *all* is conditioned by shifting cultural contexts, how are culturally conditioned theological concepts even able to retain their normative capacity to confront and even critique cultural institutions when warranted?

The acknowledgment that all theological statements are culturally embedded relegates religious discourse to merely one amongst all other discourses. Hence, the democratization of discourses that attends the cultural turn in theology signals the potential loss of vocal distinctiveness. Under the secularization of society, the increased ability of secular institutions to provide their own societal norms further threatens the authority of religious norms to contribute to the conversation.

Yet Casanova argues that the perception of the public impotence of religion operates off of a set of assumptions stemming from secularization theory that need to be questioned. When the content, scope and reliability of secularization theory is scrutinized, the power of religion and its normative capacities still retain the ability to participate in the public realm, Casanova contends. He persuasively argues that when subsets of the theory are separated out and analyzed separately, the overall theory loses its ability to categorize religion and predict its fate.<sup>40</sup> One subset, the differentiation and

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<sup>38</sup> For an example see David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> For an example see Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 211-217.

emancipation of secular spheres, and another, the privatization of religion, have operated separately in the past and continue to do so. The upshot is that the release of institutions from religious control says little prescriptively about the social location and function of religion, even in the midst of secularization.

In several case studies, Casanova demonstrates that despite the general flow of the secularization of the West, religions have been able to enter the public realm and offer a contesting normative discourse in contraposition to the dominant “secular” discourse. This was and is only possible if the boundaries of the public/private and sacred/secular split that were largely defined by secularization theorists are questioned. Further, Casanova’s findings reveal that parts of secularization theory work only if a rigid separation of sacred/secular, private/public is discarded. Once the “differentiation” part of the theory is disentangled from the “privatization” part, the dividing line between public and private becomes permeable.<sup>41</sup> Flow is then permitted in both directions—if religion opts for such movement.<sup>42</sup>

In order to enter the public realm and negotiate with “secular” institutional norms, newly “deprivatized” religion, “is conditioned by the very success of the move.”<sup>43</sup> Modernity “trains” religion to communicate its specific normative concerns in terms of modern values such as freedom and natural rights. In turn, deprivatized religions, with their traditional principles in tow yet blocked from recourse to private language, can

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<sup>41</sup> Casanova, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Casanova notes that the loosening of the grip that modern public/private schemas have had on the proper place of religion has not dictated where religion will now stand. Instead whether a religion stays private or enters the public square is a “historical option.” While most Western religions still prefer privatization, the option is now there. Casanova, 39, 223.

<sup>43</sup> Casanova, 222.



confront the normative frameworks of secular institutions.<sup>44</sup> Hence the entrance of deprivatized religions into the public sphere cannot assume either an antimodern religious stance, a transcendent point of contact or even a “return of the sacred.”

They represent, rather, new types of immanent normative critiques of specific forms of institutionalization of modernity which presuppose precisely the acceptance of the validity of the fundamental values and principles of modernity, that is, individual freedoms and differentiated structures. In other words, they are immanent critiques of particular forms of modernity from a modern religious point of view.<sup>45</sup>

Conceding the accommodation to modern principles that deprivatized religion must undergo, Casanova admits of the embeddedness of religion in modern culture. Instead of religion receding into background of sociopolitical discourse, ironically it is the turn to the culture that enables the public entrance and resonance of religion.

However, as Casanova points out in the above quote, certain forms of institutionalization of modern principles demand critique. Specifically, when modern principles are used to underwrite institutional action that may militate against the manifestation of these same principles, criticism is in order. According to Casanova, deprivatized religion, while modernized, still retains the ability to offer “immanent normative critiques” of applications of modern principles that conflict with the principles of that religion. These, of course, vary widely but Casanova focuses on the need for religion to remind secular institutions of the principles that uphold the “common good” over and against their tendency to push for individual gain. Deprivatized religions are still able to deploy normative critiques because these norms, such as ethical treatment of

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<sup>44</sup> For example Casanova cites the recent emergence of the theme of “humanization” from American Catholic bishops as evidence for his theory. The entreating of secular institutions to bend their policies towards the end of “the dignity of all human beings” constitutes a means by which Catholic tenets are “modernized” yet still bring a religious normative framework. Such a stance can work in the public arena of the market because it has been cut loose from the imperatives of natural law and even the Church hierarchy. Casanova, 191-193, 206-207.

<sup>45</sup> Casanova, 221-222.

others, have always been a part of most religions *and* these norms have been prepared by modernity. The need for religion to deploy such norms at times speaks to the invaluable role that religion plays in social discourse. Modern institutions allowed to self-regulate alone can wind up harming the very human interests that they explicitly set out to further.<sup>46</sup> Religion can and should contest the normative framework that justifies such an environment.

Casanova's analysis provides the theoretical conditions for religious concepts to contest "secular" discourses with religious normative counter proposals. But he is vague on exactly what is salvaged of religious *concepts* when they are made functional through deprivatization. If the unmediated path to a concept's divine source is blocked, what is left of the concept and how can it be used exactly? Kathryn Tanner's use of the concept of grace serves as a good example. She argues that the material exchange of money, and all of the cultural signifiers that go along with it, stands as the interpretive grid within which "grace" becomes intelligible in the contemporary world.

[g]race has everything to do with money. Here divisions in the distribution of grace—religious differences most generally, differences in religious commitment, differences in religious affiliation—are taken to be signs of economic differences, for example, differences in class or status grouping...money and class are what should not be discussed in polite society or in the supposedly classless society of the United States, what, indeed, the veil of religion keeps from being mentioned as such. Grace is substituted for money, as money's representation, its representable stand-in or sign.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Tanner deciphers the concept of grace using *functional* terminology so that the concept operates as a signifier that mitigates the harsher reality that money acts as the real determiner of social differences and status. For this to happen, grace, as a theological concept, must not only participate in the cultural game that designates

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<sup>46</sup> I apply Casanova's theory more directly in chapter 4 with a discussion of the role of an idea of vocation that carries certain norms into the public space of the contemporary work world.

<sup>47</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 7.

winner and loser in a capitalistic society, but it must also take its cues from and be deployed by the cultural dictates that execute the rules of the game. In other words, grace, as Tanner sees it, is fully embedded in culture.

Further, Tanner uses the similarities between grace and money to pit an alternative set of economic exchanges over against the kinds commonly practiced in a capitalistic economy. Her “economy of grace” is based on noncompetitive economic exchanges on the global level that will result in a mutual benefit for all parties to the exchange. Tanner bases her proposal on the meaning of grace as it was appropriated by early Christian communities in both economic and non-economic exchanges.<sup>48</sup> Her overall argument is that a notion of grace can act as a normative concept that criticizes the non-zero sum game played by powerful multinational corporations and developing countries. Here, grace is immersed in the world yet still carries with it the import that can imaginatively restructure economic relations in ways that economic solutions cannot. It is in this same vein that I apply the concept of vocation to the wider culture for the purposes of exposing features of the work world and move towards a notion of vocation that can contribute to a more just work world.

### **Christian Self-Help Literature and the Turn to Culture**

My project departs from Tanner’s in that I explore usages of the idea of vocation as it is found in a popular example of Christian self-help literature to help clarify the current use of the term. Because self-help books are not common objects of scholarly interest, some addressing of how the turn to culture in theology helps in dealing with this literature is warranted.

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<sup>48</sup> Tanner, 2, 26-7.

Fortunately, the connection between theology and culture within this genre is ready-made for the analyst. Self-help books are often written in response to a perceived gap between the way that individuals are living their lives and the way they should. And while this “is/ought” problem is a common stimulus for academic theological inquiry, Christian self-help literature typically resolves it by accommodating to culture in its effort to appeal to a mass audience. For instance, God’s omniscience may be invoked by self-help literature not necessarily to make a theological point but to address troubling issues such as depression, addiction, loss of a loved one, etc.<sup>49</sup> Because Christian self-help authors tend to begin with more immediately felt human issues and end with corresponding solutions, their theological concepts *must* be easily translatable into the wider culture.

Instead of investigating this use of theological concepts for the purposes of understanding the tight relationship between the concepts and culture, critics of Christian self-help literature typically condemn it for its close tie to culture. A brief examination of this line of criticism is needed in order to draw attention to the more fruitful approach of the method that I use.

Conservative Christian commentary on the nature and effects of Christian self-help literature tends to apply its own version of theological concepts in order to frame what is being communicated in this literature. For example, an orthodox interpretation of a concept such as sin can be pitted against an allegedly shallow or New Age articulation

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<sup>49</sup> See Joyce Meyer, *Battlefield of Your Mind: Winning the Battle in Your Mind* (New York: Warner Books, 1995); Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe: And the Truth That Sets Them Free* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001); M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: Spiritual Growth in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989).

of the concept found in self-help literature.<sup>50</sup> Analyses such as these simply stack the claims of certain self-help books up against a purportedly more biblical account of God and humanity. Then after framing the argument thusly, the former position is rejected on the basis of its errant interpretation.

For example, John Eldredge in his self-help book, *Wild at Heart*, calls for men to recapture their “masculinity” by returning to a kind of primal “wildness.” Wildness emerges from a reservoir of latent energy in all men that, when tapped, connects them with their true identity. Eldredge relies on examples of men from the Bible (Adam, Abraham, Samson, Job, David and Jesus) to support his claim. These figures show that the proper relationship with a loving God uncovers the “masculine heart” in all men which generates excitement not boredom, courage not fear, wildness not docility. *Wild at Heart* enters self-help territory in several ways. For instance, on the topic of sin Eldredge talks of the common practice of men carrying a particularly burdensome version of original sin which limits their relationship with God. Yet instead of casting original sin in metaphysical terms, the sinful weight is made up of “old psychological and emotional wounds” that hinder the soul’s expression of wildness.<sup>51</sup>

Daniel Gillespie, a nondenominational pastor, criticizes Eldredge’s treatment of sin:

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<sup>50</sup> See John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001); Nathan Busenitz, "A Sense of Purpose: Evaluating the Claims of The Purpose-Driven Life," In *Fool's Gold*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004); Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books: 1993). For a more nuanced stance towards Christian self-help literature, see Joanna and Alister McGrath, *Self-Esteem: The Cross and Christian Confidence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). Even though the McGraths take a more conciliatory stance on the self-help movement (they cite some therapeutic benefits of it), they conclude their book with the judgment that problems with self-esteem can only be solved with faith in the work of Christ, as detailed scripturally.

<sup>51</sup> John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 127.

Man's personal responsibility for sin is overlooked. Instead of establishing individual responsibility for sin, the author encourages men to shift the blame—seeing sin more as a sickness than a moral choice . . . By convincing his readers to blame their behavior on these hidden wounds, Eldredge replaces the guilt of a sinner with the self-righteous pity of a victim. That falls far short of the biblical picture of man's responsibility.<sup>52</sup>

Here and in many other commentaries on Christian self-help literature we find a criticism of a theological concept is legitimated solely on the basis of an “authentic” biblical rendering of the concept. Hidden in Gillespie's comment is a reliance on a Calvinistic interpretation of the depravity of humanity in the face of God. We do not rise up out of our depravity by attending to contingent psychological scars—such a suggestion smacks of Pelagianism. For Gillespie, it is either God who dictates the terms of sin or fallen creatures who mistakenly attempt to define sin for themselves. And it is *culture* that is designated as the primary culprit for tempting Eldredge into modifying and diluting the theological concept of sin. After citing Eldredge's use of masculine movie icons, in addition to biblical figures, for more examples of expressions of wildness, Gillespie remarks,

Quotes from secular song writers, poets, and philosophers also line the pages of *Wild at Heart*. From the Dixie Chicks to the Eagles to Bruce Springsteen, Eldredge seems enamored by the thoughts of worldly men . . . Is Hollywood where Christians should go to find out what God expects for men? Should movies form the foundation, or furnish the role models, for true masculinity? Since when does the church develop its spiritual ideals from the on-screen imaginations of unsaved directors?<sup>53</sup>

Gillespie answers these questions with a predictable, “never.” The worldly culture that produces worldly men can never serve as the template for the church's ideals for its male congregants. The Bible and a certain interpretation of it stand above culture from where it alone can provide the true foundation for men's lives.

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel Gillespie, “Roaming Wild: Investigating the Message in *Wild at Heart*,” in *Fool's Gold*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 93.

<sup>53</sup> Gillespie, 82.

Authors like Gillespie who employ this kind of strategy so clearly stray from the method of investigation employed by those who view theological concepts as culturally embedded that it is difficult to engage them as serious interlocutors. Culture and the things of God stand at a Kierkegaardian “infinite qualitative” distance from each other.

In contrast, more complex analyses of Christian self-help literature that operate with a historical seriousness when addressing theological concepts in culture are more useful. One such scholar, David F. Wells, has embarked on such an investigation of the historical and cultural forces that help account for the corrosion of evangelical theology in America. Wells’s approach differs from Gillespie’s because he does not separate culture from theology absolutely. Rather he admits of the power of culture to transform the relationship that humans have with the objects of theology. By identifying Christian self-help literature as a product of American culture, Wells brings secular culture and the theological ideas contained in self-help literature closer together, though the closeness is bothersome. A brief examination of Wells’s argument, which extends over a three book series, will reveal some merits of the claims he makes about Christian self-help literature, while at the same time also exposing some of the shortcomings of his interpretive framework. Attention to these shortcomings will serve to bolster the claim that the cultural influence on theological concepts is *material* as well as ideational.

Wells’s three books, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, and *Above All Earthly Powers* attempt to explain the failure of the evangelical church to hold true to its principles. Throughout his self-proclaimed trilogy, Wells focuses attention on the secularizing forces of the Enlightenment as signaling the beginning of a

radical change in the tasks and goals of theology in general. He writes, “The Enlightenment worked its dark magic by seizing such Christian motifs as salvation, providence, and eschatology and rewriting them in humanistic terms, offering their substance in this-worldly ways.”<sup>54</sup> For Wells, secular humanism that emerged from Enlightenment “dark magic” failed in its attempt to replace pre-Enlightenment values and virtues. And now postmodernism helps knock down the house of cards that was built on humanistic principles but without building anything substantial in its place. In other words, postmodernity helpfully reveals the vacuousness of secular humanism. Yet Wells does not believe that postmodernism is sufficient to the task of reconstructing a coherent cosmos. He explains,

It is thus that modernity has brought forth its own intellectual conquerors in the post-moderns. They are eviscerating its hopes while having to leave its structures—urbanization, capitalism, technology, telecommunications—in place. In effect, they are producing a version of modernity bereft of its beliefs, stuck in despair. On the one hand, post-modern authors have made the Christian critique of modernity easier, but on the other hand their virulent attack not merely on Enlightenment meaning but on *all* meaning has made Christian faith less plausible in the modern world.<sup>55</sup>

This comprehensive damage to all grounded meaning permits the rise of false prophets of all kinds to capture our attention, direct our activities, and most importantly for Wells, alter the task of evangelical theology.

According to Wells, the principles of correct evangelical theology are threefold. Any theological project must include, “confessional elements, reflection on this confession, and the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two

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<sup>54</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 47.

<sup>55</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 47.



elements.”<sup>56</sup> It is “confession,” as not only a fundamental component of Wells’s definition but also as a theological concept, on which I wish to focus.

In its most traditional form, confession is substantive and consists in what the church believes. Yet for Wells, confession has a specific trajectory with regards to what the church is to confess and what guides confession itself. “Churches with roots in the Protestant Reformation confess the truth that God has given to the Church through the inspired Word of God.”<sup>57</sup> The Word of God is thus understood to guide the church’s confession and consequently, confession is always geared towards the truth. These confessions can be negotiated and argued for and this negotiation and argumentation form the primary task of theology. Nonetheless Wells maintains that there can be *no* disagreement that statements of a proper confessional nature are attempts to get at objective truth about God. Therefore, confession is a means to coalesce biblical interpretations that both maintain continuity of proper belief across time, and orient communities of faith to the truth about God.

Wells blames the gradual loss of the evangelical church’s maintenance of such a conceptual trajectory on a fracturing of authority wrought by modernism and the subsequent destruction of meaning effected by postmodernism. With the rise of multiple sources of authority after the Enlightenment, not only has the Bible been forced to compete with non-biblical sources of authority, but the actual capacity of confession to connect the church to the truth about God has been severely compromised as well. Then the destruction of biblical foundations created a vacuum that other cultural authorities stepped in to replace.

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<sup>56</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 98.

<sup>57</sup> Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 99.

It is here that Wells points to commercialization and consumerism as being the primary movements that dictate what is meaningful or not. He identifies consumer culture as the new dominant cultural paradigm within which the church now operates. As opposed to a secular culture that the church could absorb while still preserving the essential integrity of its confession, consumer culture has altered confession itself. He emphasizes this new power of culture by contrasting H. R. Niebuhr's simplistic interpretation of culture with that of today: "Culture, he [Niebuhr] argued, is what human beings made of nature; it is what we impose upon nature by way of cities and transportation systems, or what we make of it by way of artistic artifacts . . . What Niebuhr did not ponder is the stunning commercial success that industrialization has brought, and this is what has begun to change the meaning of culture."<sup>58</sup>

The primary effect of this cultural change beginning with the Enlightenment and carrying us to consumer culture is the new direction of the church's confession for Wells. No longer is confession directed externally towards objective truth about God, but rather towards the church's own inner theater and to the inner theaters of individual members. Wells elaborates, "as the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized. At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one's self."<sup>59</sup> When the self is the focus, God's commands, moral direction and proper action are first and foremost subject to human desire, feeling and intuition. Not only has the need for external direction and truth that confession used to supply dwindled, an

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<sup>58</sup> Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 18.

<sup>59</sup> Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 101.

ersatz authority has stepped in to satisfy needs that are primarily internal and psychological in nature.

Wells has much more to say about the allegedly shameful state of the evangelical church, but for my purposes, his method used to analyze the relationship between religion and culture is particularly instructive. Admittedly, there is much to be commended in Wells's project. His claims about the "rise of the therapeutic" in American culture are well documented,<sup>60</sup> and his association of the therapeutic model with the diminishment of the power of a traditional confession in the church is very plausible. In addition, Wells, unlike Gillespie, establishes his case on an interpretation of American cultural history instead of *strictly* relying on biblical orthodoxy to make his case. Instead of dismissing secular culture as too utterly tainted by sin to have any real authority, Wells grants that culture can substantively alter the meaning of theological concepts, albeit lamentably so.

His argument's merits notwithstanding, the question remains, "how does culture function in Wells's analysis and does it further the understanding of a theological concept such as 'confession' as it is appropriated today?" While Wells admits of the power of culture, he clearly rejects that confession is *essentially* formed and modified by culture. His claim, rather, is that the meaning and function of confession have been corrupted by culture. The evidence for corruption is the substitution of psychological contentment for the truth about God—the objective of confessional activities.

In order to support this claim, Wells reduces the culture that is to blame for the failure of the evangelical church strictly to its *meaning*—primarily that the rise of the

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<sup>60</sup> See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in and Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

authoritative self *means* that confession in the church is shorn of its ability to connect believers to God's truth. Wells's focus on the meaning of modern confession alone minimizes the changes in some of the ways that evangelicals (and others) have been interacting socially and materially that have generated meaning.<sup>61</sup> Wells gives short shrift to material causes of the failure by collapsing culture (which must include the social relations that communicate culture) and the meaning of that culture into each other. Thus collapsed, cultural meanings can be more easily manipulated for Wells's purposes without the messiness of social reality getting in the way. Hence Wells is able to integrate the meaning of the rise of the therapeutic self into bounded cultural whole. The therapeutic self then easily serves as an affront to Wells's biblical view of humanity.

Such an unchanging stance on biblical truths entrenches his position that culture *only* corrupts and prevents him from more thoroughly investigating the possibility that the meaning of confession has always been subject to cultural negotiation. In fact, Wells is unwittingly a part of this negotiation. For his reclamation of the "true" meaning of

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<sup>61</sup> An example of such an investigation is ironically where Wells get the title for one his books, *No Place for Grace* by T. J. Jackson Lears. Lears, like Wells, locates some of the sources of the self emergent in the early twentieth century that begins to rely more heavily on self-actualization as the means to "salvation." In contrast to Wells, however, Lears does not conflate the meaning of such a development, such as judging that advertising is inherently manipulative of such selves, with all of the factors that contribute to the development. Hence he refuses to deduce from an emerging therapeutic ethos the whole of the social context that produced it. Lears writes, "Advertising cannot be considered in isolation. Its role in promoting a consumer culture can only be understood within a network of institutional, religious, and psychological changes. . . The coming of the therapeutic ethos was a modern historical development, shaped by the turmoil of the turn of the century." T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 3-4. The turmoil that Lears refers to is largely the result of grand alterations in both social relations and religious worldviews. "Feelings of unreality stemmed from urbanization and technological development; from the rise of an increasingly interdependent market economy; and from the secularization of liberal Protestantism among its educated and affluent devotees." Lears, 6. All were factors in the formation of the therapeutic ethos around this time in American history and for this reason, cannot be separated from any interpretation of the self, either then or now. See also Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 5-6, 32-33.

confession is informed so heavily by the cultural forces that he perceives to be undermining confession that culture is involved in his own project.

Additionally, one can rightfully ask of Wells, “when does the impact of culture on the nature of the confession itself end and object of confession, God’s objective truth, begin?” To concede so much to culture in the construction of the therapeutic self and its confession, but then to pull back and restrict cultural scope when it comes to the object of confession, is a more difficult task than Wells concedes. It is easier and more honest to acknowledge that both the confession and the object to which the confession is directed are subject to cultural modification to some degree. Wells may be correct in the end — that God *is* insulated from culture. Yet his argument, while forfeiting more to culture than Gillespie as it interacts with theological concepts, provides little evidence to suggest that the objects of theology are not exposed to the same cultural dynamics. So while Wells is willing to take the cultural impact on theology earnestly, his argument merely detours around the possibility of a culturally embedded theology on his way to a place that more closely resembles Gillespie’s standpoint.

To say that a theological concept is culturally embedded means that both the meaning of the concept *and* the dynamics of power that undergird meaning are taken into account.<sup>62</sup> Then, the possibility that objects of theology are protected from cultural

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<sup>62</sup> By power dynamics, in a Foucauldian sense, I mean the forces that are generated in lived social relations and distributed through institutions and material practices that can give rise to meanings that at times differ radically from the intentions of the society that makes them. This is, of course, one of Foucault’s main insights into the disconnect between lived “reality” or material discourse and the knowledge/meaning that emanates from it. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979) and *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1980). Actually presaging Foucault’s relationship between concepts and their social impact is Ernst Troeltsch. His delineates more of a straight line between theological concepts and society than Foucault, but the work that Troeltsch does on the history of Christian thought is performed in the same spirit. I utilize Troeltsch’s insights in chapter 4 through his

contamination *can* be held out, however this possibility cannot be an operating assumption for the theologian. Assumed is that the objects of theology and the concepts that contain them become meaningful only through a cultural filter. It is by attending to the relationship between the meaning of a theological cultural product and the social agents that produced it that elicits better indicators of the function of such products.

### **Christian Self-Help Literature, Contextually Speaking**

Micki McGee, in her study of the cultural dimensions of the self-help phenomenon in America offers up a “belabored self,” in contradistinction to Wells’s therapeutic self. The belabored self, like the therapeutic self, is at once the subject of self-help books and their target audience member. Though unlike Wells, McGee does not strictly classify the cultural developments that produce selves as a mistake. Instead, the belabored self, as the product of and a contributor to social structure, *is* the self of self-help literature. In addition, McGee would quibble with Wells’s idea of the therapeutic self in that he reduces self-identity down to psychological health. This move tends to emphasize the inner struggle and its resolution over the social factors that contribute to such struggles. Specifically, the belabored self’s impulse to “work on oneself” is the result of working conditions on the job, not simply the result of a “secular” cultural ascendancy over an essentially “unbelabored” self. She writes:

The concept of the belabored self operates on two levels. First, the belabored self describes an actually occurring phenomenon: workers are asked to continually work on themselves in efforts to remain employable and reemployable, and as a means of reconciling themselves to declining employment prospects. Second, the concept of the belabored self offers a new way of framing what the historian and social critic Christopher Lasch misunderstood as the “narcissism” of late-twentieth-century American culture. Rather than understanding the individual’s preoccupation with the self in psychological terms—a move that created an analytical cul-de-sac for Lasch—the idea of

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treatment of Calvin. See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

the belabored self asks us to reconsider the cultural preoccupation with the self in terms of labor.<sup>63</sup>

The idea of the belabored self connects the psychological anxiety that superficially explains the need for self-help books to material work conditions. It is not that work conditions are completely determinative in the formation of the belabored self—this self can manipulate its surroundings. McGee emphasizes that, “[S]ocial structures and individual identities are mutually constitutive: interconnected to such an extent that changes in the former necessarily produce changes in the latter, and, some would argue, vice versa.”<sup>64</sup> This recognition of the belabored self’s agency keeps her analysis of self-help literature tethered to the social conditions that forge the selves feeding the self-help industry.

The idea of the belabored self as a means to understand the content and function of self-help literature is more consonant with the cultural turn in theology than Wells’s notion of the therapeutic self. The self-help themes that McGee addresses are analyzed in light of their social context, particular that of gender relations.<sup>65</sup> And while the role that individual theologies play in the kind of reception that Christian self-help literature garners is not discussed in detail, interestingly McGee turns to the Protestant calling for insights into the work/identity relationship within the belabored self.<sup>66</sup> She begins by opposing Weber’s claim that the Protestant calling took on a purely secular form claiming that with the Protestant calling,

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<sup>63</sup> Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>64</sup> McGee, 15.

<sup>65</sup> McGee, 25-48, 79-110.

<sup>66</sup> I return to the content of McGee’s treatment of vocation in chapter 2. I introduce this part of her book now to show how the method I use for analyzing vocation differs from hers.

Weber neglects the profoundly expressive, emotional and charismatic dimensions that are central features of the evangelical Protestant tradition . . . [T]o ignore the expressive and spiritual dimensions of daily life would be to reproduce Weber's bias toward the productive commercial sphere and its rational imperatives.<sup>67</sup>

McGee alleges that Weber's tendency to favor rationalization as the dominant socializing force discourages him from entertaining any alternatives. Most blatant for McGee is Weber's neglect of the popular use of Emersonian transcendentalism that occurred alongside the use of Benjamin Franklin's common sense writings. Weber homes in on the latter exclusively.

Methodologically speaking, McGee's treatment of Weber serves to highlight a blind spot in her own analysis. While McGee redresses the one-sidedness of Weber's argument, she narrowly condenses the spirit of the Protestant calling down to the force behind the myth of "the self-made man" that became prominent in the early part of the twentieth century. She argues that this reduction led to an emphasis on "self-actualization" with self-help literature greasing the wheels, later on.

While the American mythology of the self-made man pursuing his calling has long served to buoy the hopes of working-class men with visions of entrepreneurial wealth and bootstrapping achievement. . . the tension between the near impossibility of working in a particular calling or vocation across the course of a lifetime and the ideology that finding one's particular calling is central to achieving salvation is mitigated in two ways: first, an increased emphasis on working on the self, and second, the ideal that one ought to pursue work one loves irrespective of compensation.<sup>68</sup>

There is certainly legitimacy to McGee's claim made here. However, just as Weber places the calling in the service of increased rationalization on the job, McGee reduces contemporary vocation to the pursuit of self-actualization through work. While she provides an important corrective to Weber, she nonetheless leaves unexplored the changing *theological* dimension of the calling. Such a move would have honored the

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<sup>67</sup> McGee, 28.

<sup>68</sup> McGee, 41.



theological component that, at the very least, factored into the means by which self-actualization was attained through a calling for the self-made man.

She sets her sights on the self-help genre generally; not just on the religious variety. When McGee does discuss quasi-religious examples such as Richard Nelson Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, she concentrates on secular impulse of the book.<sup>69</sup> Bolles's protean annual editions of his book (the role of God in a vocation seems to rise and fall with popular culture) are viewed by McGee with justified suspicion as to Bolles's sincerity. But because McGee is *only* looking for the impact of changes in the job market that mirror Bolles's emphases, she glosses over the religious function that Bolles may intend and that his readers probably take from his book. McGee's approach to the contribution of religion to the vocation of the self-made man is understandable given her goals.<sup>70</sup>

Yet to ignore the function of theology, albeit culturally embedded, in a concept such as purpose in *The Purpose-Driven Life* is to devalue the role that God plays in the animation of a calling long found in self-help literature. True, McGee calls attention to an important facet of vocation as it is presented in self-help literature—that of its responsiveness to cultural changes in the workplace. Yet she overlooks the fact that the theological connotation of vocation language in self-help literature plays an indispensable role in the common understanding of an individual's vocation. As Weber knew, any talk of the Protestant calling, both in Reformation times and at the time of his writing, was

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<sup>69</sup> McGee, 116-122.

<sup>70</sup> She argues that the pressures to invent the self as given in self-help literature, "represent a unique opportunity to revisit our concept of the self and its making, not in psychological terms but as features of political and economic forces." Or if the forces pushing for self-invention can be redirected towards political and economic goals that move us out of solipsism, then an analysis of self-help literature is justified. McGee, 16.

incomplete without an explanation of the role of God, albeit a changing one, providing the vigor and staying power of a calling.<sup>71</sup>

The approach to self-help literature that works off of the assumption that theological concepts are thoroughly embedded in culture is better equipped to respond to a concept like vocation as presented in such literature than either that of Wells or McGee. My method strikes out a path that falls in between the steps taken to arrive at the “therapeutic self” of Wells and the “belabored self” of McGee (though admittedly it will veer farther away from Wells than McGee).<sup>72</sup> It takes the theological seriousness with which Wells laments the hijacking of Evangelical theology but leaves behind his reluctance to detach certain theological concepts from an immutable divine foundation. The idea of God as it impinges on the meaning and function of calling language in certain Christian self-help books cannot be overlooked in any study of such books. In other words, the content of Christian self-help literature cannot be *entirely* reduced to culture, as McGee is wont to do.

In this introductory chapter, I sought to clarify my usage of relevant terms and then show how the turn to culture in theology opens up new methods with which to grasp the function of theological concepts within the wider culture. Far from being subject to a cultural hegemony that asserts a shrinking role for religion and theology, culturally embedded theological concepts are able to stay culturally relevant *because* they are

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<sup>71</sup> Weber, 79-154.

<sup>72</sup> I take the demand to cast the self that is now receptive to self-help literature in terms of its deep, inextricable association with material social relations with equal, if not more, seriousness. The tracking of material cultural changes, such as the reorganization of gender roles around alterations in the workplace that McGee emphasizes, is the way to scratch below the slick, mawkish and overly-optimistic language found in many self-help books. Yet with *Christian* self-help books, the belabored self that McGee introduces is also integrating the felt needs addressed by the books into religious worldviews.

inseparable from culture, not in spite of it. And while it is impossible for a theological concept to claim *complete* freedom from culture, Casanova and Tanner demonstrate that the normative dimension of culturally embedded, deprivatized religious concepts is not relinquished because of their unique religious qualities.

Additionally, through an examination of alternative ways to judge the relationship between theology and culture, I make the case that analytical methods that assume culturally embedded theological concepts allow for more fruitful results. Specifically, the turn to culture in theology enables an engagement between theological concepts found in Christian self-help literature and the cultural forces that generate the efficacy of the literature. This engagement acknowledges that historical and cultural influences on theology cannot be ignored or dismissed when analyzing the meaning of certain theological concepts. Yet a similar dismissal of the undeniable role that one's religious beliefs play in the function of a theological concept, even when filtered through a self-help book, is equally problematic.

In the case of a contemporary analysis of the concept of vocation, recognizing that it is and has always been caught up in culture opens several avenues for analysis and understanding. First, the historical character of vocation is treated *as* vocation itself. The theological history of the Protestant calling can then reveal that there is no static concept of vocation that floats above the historical flux. Second, the theological significance of vocation, both past and present, is informed by relevant cultural movements and hence, has to be taken into account. Therefore, the cultural turn in theology allows for the possibility that consumer culture is instrumental in the semantics of the idea of vocation today, yet not wholly determinative. Third, these two consequences permit not only the

possibility that Rick Warren's purpose is a later manifestation of vocation but also that cultural directives that surround Christian self-help literature are pertinent as well. And finally, vocation, as a deprivatized theological concept, is able to carry a modernized set of norms into the public arena in order to contest other relevant normative frameworks.

The fact that theological concepts are inextricably caught up in culture does not mean that concepts can be wholly reduced to a certain domain or historical epoch of culture. Therefore while consumer culture has proved extremely powerful in its shaping of the meaning of vocation, its scope and power is not exhaustive. As I discuss in a later chapter, a vocation that is packaged for consumer use is currently a prominent way of orienting towards a vocation. But it is nonetheless a contingent version of a vocation which is open to new trajectories. My project is an attempt at establishing a new trajectory for the idea of vocation that is culturally embedded, yet carries with it a set of norms that enter the political arena of the contemporary workplace by contesting commodified versions of vocation.

## CHAPTER 1—THEOLOGY OF VOCATION AND THE ROLE OF WORK

My entire complete vocation I cannot comprehend; what I shall be hereafter transcends all my thoughts. A part of that vocation is concealed from me; it is visible only to One, to the Father of Spirits, to whose care it is committed.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*

Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him. He is like a ship in a river; he runs against obstructions on every side but one, on that side all obstruction is taken away and he sweeps serenely over a deepening channel into an infinite sea.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Spiritual Laws*

In this chapter, I track the shifts in theological language of the Protestant calling with careful attention paid to the corresponding ways in which one's daily job is portrayed in these theological articulations. Emergent from this historical survey is the gradual diminishment of the details of daily work from the meaning of vocation. Much of this trend can be attributed to a reflex in theology in response to a seismic shift in Western society in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Ushered in by an expanding market followed by industrialization, the nature and meaning of work underwent parallel alterations to the changes brought on by the new economy. The predominant theological response to the shift throughout the twentieth century is marked by an increased emphasis on the power and immutability of God who issues a consistent call over and against the dictates of a protean, and often cruel culture.<sup>73</sup> The idea of vocation, thusly construed, is

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<sup>73</sup> The narrative does not follow this script at all times, however. The treatment of vocation by certain theologians of the Social Gospel movement provides a counter-narrative where the quality of work is the standard by which a vocation is judged. Their ideas are included in this history and the implications of the thought of Walter Rauschenbusch on a political vocation are examined in chapter 4.

one that may uphold a certain theological conviction, but it lacks the ability to inform actual work practices. And when work is not a primary means of realizing one's vocation, the idea of vocation is ironically more susceptible to cultural manipulation, as we will see in the last installment of the theological history.

From Martin Luther's time up until industrialization, the idea of calling manifests itself as both a *general* calling and a *special* calling.<sup>74</sup> The general calling refers to the broad-based, open invitation to a relationship with God that is universally issued to all. A special calling, in contrast, is delivered to the *individual* and hence is more closely tailored to the capacity of an individual to perform certain tasks needed to answer the call. Consequently, the special call has provided more of an opportunity for negotiation between God's will and one's own talents. This negotiation necessarily takes into account the degree to which the world or social situation accommodates to the successful execution of such tasks. Because the special calling is more closely tied to the way talents correspond to a job, its changes over time speak more directly to the changing relationship between work and vocation.

In post-industrialization theological treatments of vocation, the distinction between a general and special calling is not relied upon. Instead, a unified idea of vocation is largely considered under assault by the surrounding society, and hence the idea is forged, in part, over and against the "world." If work itself is holy, then it can live up to the standards set by a vocation without consideration for the economic health of the

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<sup>74</sup> I refer here to the general and special calling in reference to the idea of the calling after the Reformation despite the fact that the idea of a calling existed before the Reformation. I address pre-Reformation notions of a calling in this chapter, but because the distinction between general and special calling was not an explicit means of formulating these early notions, I will not use these terms (general and special) until discussing post-Reformation theology.

society or the particulars of a job. A more tempered notion of work is also employed as an essential activity for the sustenance of a Godly society. Both kinds of theological appropriations of work not only point to the importance (or lack thereof) of work in a calling as it relates to the functioning of society, but they also betray the ways that societal norms often function as the starting point through which proper activity in a calling is understood.

Entering a theological history of the Protestant vocation under the assumption that all theology is culturally embedded accomplishes two primary tasks in this chapter. First, in one direction, the alterations that the idea of a calling has undergone over time self-evidently demonstrate the impact of culture on the idea. Not only are the cultural ties of the idea of vocation revealed through this continual reflection on the changes in the meaning of work, but also reflected is the changing role of God in the calling. Both facets present little metaphysical problem if theological concepts are always conditioned by culture. Second, the application of the cultural turn in theological studies forces our attention onto the actual cultural forces that influence the meaning of vocation—not just the epiphenomenal changes in theological language. Such an application encourages a closer inspection into possible cultural frameworks that help explain differing manifestations of vocation.

It is important to add that a theological history of the Protestant calling has rarely, if ever, been undertaken, as Paul Marshall notes.<sup>75</sup> As such, not only will the history that I offer in this chapter be somewhat of a pioneer effort, but given the freedom granted by the dearth of preceding authoritative trajectories on the topic, it will also be a selective

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Marshall, *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 9.

one. While I will present this historical sketch chronologically, my analysis predictably lights on those who have either explicitly discussed the meaning of the Protestant calling or the relationship between God and labor.

On a final note, the trend in theology towards the de-emphasis of work within a calling means that a calling is left with less of a material context on which to rely for its meaning. Lacking an entrenched association with actual work, a superficial, almost ethereal relationship between a calling and work is permitted. The last example given in this theological history is one from a self-help book that stands as evidence of this claim. Here, the idea of vocation presented is one that is employed for the task of furnishing meaning in the face of a cold business world. Yet because the kind of business or the nature of the work involved does not substantially inform the idea of vocation proffered, the idea is allowed to justify success in the business world. And though this kind of appropriation of the idea of vocation cannot be considered the *inevitable* upshot of the detachment of work from a vocation, it represents the predominant usage in Western culture today.

## **The Reformation**

### **Martin Luther**

Reformation theological discourse marks a momentous departure in the meaning and social effects of the idea of vocation. Part of the departure can be attributed to inventive translations of the term into the German language along with their readability for common folk. One way that Martin Luther achieves such a task is through the expansion of the meaning and scope of the German word *Beruf*, which is legitimized



through his interpretation of St. Paul's Greek term, *klesis* (calling).<sup>76</sup> *Beruf* had previously referred only to the priestly vocation or jobs directly related to the Church. Luther's interpretation boldly includes occupations outside the Church. Expressed in *Beruf*, then, is a loss of the special status of the priestly vocation through the elevation of non-priestly work—all jobs can be vocational.

*Beruf* reflects and incorporates Luther's overall theological leanings. He maintains St. Paul's emphasis that the call from God commands obedience to a Godly life, but then Luther extends the means by which one can obey God's call through mundane activities including work. Consequently the Lutheran refrain of "The Priesthood of All Believers" signifies more than the lifting of the status of all believers into that of clergy; his innovative notion also sacralizes the activities of all believers. The pulling of the priest off of his perch not only brings the privileged status of vocation down to the ground, but it also boosts non-priestly vocations to previously unknown heights. Or as Marx put it, "[h]e turned priests into laymen because he turned laymen into priests."<sup>77</sup>

A vocation is available to all in Luther's mind as long as it is lived out within the confines of the biblical mandate to express *brotherly love* in all activity. This means, among other things, that any activity (including that inhering in social roles such as fatherhood or friendship) motivated by care for others is a part of a calling. The requirement that brotherly love serve as the *sole* end to any activity that can be considered vocational forces the idea of vocation to engage the world. Luther's demand,

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<sup>76</sup> See Romans 11:29, Ephesians 4:1.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 60.

in addition to democratizing participation in God's call, acts as a critique of the old notion of vocation. States Weber,

The monastic life is not only quite devoid of value as a means of justification before God, but he [Luther] also looks upon its renunciation of the duties of this world as the product of selfishness, withdrawing from temporal obligations. In contrast, labour in a calling appears to him as the outward expression of brotherly love.<sup>78</sup>

Labor is the vehicle that carries God's will into the world. The way one conducts one's business, not only through the diligence to perform all tasks in a given job but also through financial exchanges, must be motivated by love for the neighbor. Or the temptation to work for self-gain should always be resisted. Giving in to this temptation bars a vocation from fulfilling its duty to engage the world through care of the neighbor.

Luther speaks to the merchant:

The rule ought to be, not, "I may sell my wares as dear I can or will," but, "I may sell my wares as dear as I ought, or as is right and fair." For your selling ought not to be an act that is entirely within your own power and discretion, without law or limit, as though you were a god and beholden to no one. Because your selling is an act performed toward your neighbor, it should rather be so governed by law and conscience that you do it without harm and injury to him, your concern being directed more toward doing him no injury than toward gaining profit for yourself.<sup>79</sup>

"Law" is, of course, God's law mediated through the Bible and "conscience" is what carries biblical law into action on a daily basis. The Bible, however, is not restricted to the book itself. The instruments of work act as a biblical text as well. Luther writes,

To use a rough example: if you are a craftsman, you will find the Bible placed in your workshop, in your hands, in your heart... Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel . . . and you will find this saying [the Bible] written on them... you have as many preachers as there are transactions, commodities, tools and other implements in your house and estate; and they shout this to your face, 'My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his.'<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 81.

<sup>79</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 248.

<sup>80</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 32, 496.

The Bible is used to convey the seriousness of work—instruments of work reveal biblical injunctions. In addition, the transmission of God’s Word is not confined to church or even to a private time in the Word. God’s Word follows the worker and appears whenever the opportunity is present for brotherly love to be expressed. Just as the actions of the Good Samaritan were holy, so are the activities of ordinary work which carry moral weight. So long as work is directed towards the care of neighbors, God’s word is being followed through work. All work for Luther can become a means to fulfill the demands of God’s call in the earthly kingdom.

The lift on certain theological restrictions of Luther’s vocation is offset to a degree by societal restrictions that he places on the range of motion of work within a calling. These two countervailing trajectories move hand-in-hand as both constitute respective responses of Luther to certain predominant ideologies of his day. If the freeing of labor from jurisdiction of the ideology of the Church elevates the status of work in God’s eyes, Luther’s rejoinder to the ideology of humanism explains the concomitant societal restrictions placed on work. Richard M. Douglas points out that for Luther, in contrast to the kind of vocation that humanism would advocate, choice and human volition play *no* role in the determination of a calling:

The humanists implicitly defended a principle of utility resting upon the belief that the welfare of the commonweal depends upon the existence of self-determined members, each of whom he has chosen the course of life which best suits him or which he most enjoys pursuing. The sixteenth-century reformers, on the other hand, explained vocation as the office or station in which God has placed us in the orders of creation or that which God has assigned us for the service of others through love.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Richard M. Douglas, “Talent and Vocation in Humanist and Protestant Thought,” in *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of E. H. Harbison*, ed. Theodore K. Rabb and Jerrold Siegel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 261-2.

While Luther gives non-church occupations divine import in the heavenly kingdom sense, the sky is not the limit in the earthly kingdom. God's stratified order for creation dictates that a vocation always connotes a "station in life" that is not to be vacated.

The priestly estate was considered by the Church to be divinely appointed and hence carried with it certain duties required of the office of its estate. Luther simply expands the number of divinely appointed estates, while maintaining the integrity of their boundaries, to cover all social situations in which believers find themselves. Yet instead of implying that a vocation is damaged by the circumscription, because one's estate is divinely assigned, one's calling can operate *only* with such limitations. Marshall asserts, "If some objected that they had no calling, Luther replied, 'how is it possible that you should not be called. You will also be in some estate, you will be a husband, or wife, or child, or daughter, or maid.'" Marshall continues,

All work in the world, not just some particular offices, was understood as immediately divinely appointed; one was called to it. The type of work varied according to one's office; one's office was determined by one's estate; one's estate was given by God, and it was one's existing social situation. The calling was hence a definite divine commandment to work diligently according to one's given social position.<sup>82</sup>

The parameters of one's estate execute God's will by governing selfish motives to transcend one's social location. If newly found pride in one's work and talents incites a move (or even the desire to move) beyond these parameters, divinely ordained offices are breached. That brotherly love can only be made manifest when work is contained within the social boundaries of one's estate conveys an implicit conservatism in Luther's formulation of vocation. Yet Luther's social conservatism towards the scope of a vocation is held in tension by a theological liberalism that upholds the democratizing of vocation—both stances are legitimated by Luther's God.

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<sup>82</sup> Marshall, 23.

Because work for Luther serves as a means to the end of serving others, he does not take pains to delineate either the substantial differences between jobs or how special, individualized callings are heard and deciphered. Luther's writing on vocation nevertheless prefigures more contemporary forms of the distinction between a general call and a special one. Jobs can provide the environment in which particular skills/abilities/talents should be employed to help out a neighbor. Yet because all work is enlisted by God to adapt to the *earthly* kingdom, any activity performed on the job is limited in its ability to bring righteousness before God. This is a point that Luther was wont to make over and against those who, in his view, claimed salvation on the basis of works rather than on faith. Gustav Wingren interprets Luther on this point:

Conscience does not find peace through any work. Here, it is only the gospel which is fully effective . . . Vocation gives steadiness and strength before men, because righteousness in vocation, according to earthly rules, is real righteousness, which before men we are not able to despise or label as sin. But before God, on the other hand, even the most righteous work is a serious sin, which stands in need of forgiveness, since it proceeds from an evil heart . . . Only the gospel, not one's vocation, can remove that judgment against the sinful heart and gives peace to the conscience.<sup>83</sup>

So while one's work, however ordinary, is honored by Luther, the superiority of the heavenly kingdom over the earthly one has the effect of subsuming all work under the general call to have faith in the God who alone can ultimately redeem all human activity.

Luther's thought marks a watershed in the meaning of a calling. His idea of vocation expectedly bears on the meaning of work as well. Several observations follow. One, because one's job is understood by Luther to be part of a preordained and fixed "office," switching jobs based on individual desire was out of the question. The office in which each person occupied was one that during the early-sixteenth century was ordained by God and affirmed by a late-feudal society that functioned on established class

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<sup>83</sup> Wingren, 76.

distinctions. Therefore, the work that one performs within its confines does not provide an opportunity for social mobility or change.

Two, since work, as part of vocation, is only a vehicle used for the expression of brotherly love, the *specific way* in which one brings this goal about is relatively unimportant. Marshall explains, “What he [Luther] usually had in mind when he spoke of calling was a call to service that came to a Christian *within* the midst of his or her sphere of work. Vocation was hence seen primarily as a summons to work for a neighbor’s sake. . . In this sense, a vocation could be distinguished from one’s immediate work.”<sup>84</sup> This distance between “immediate work” and vocation permits Luther to write in vaunted tones about vocation at the expense of glossing over actual work activity and the conditions that modify it. To the extent that Luther’s writings value jobs, good or bad, the special calling is more of an *extension* of God’s general call. Little account is taken of the difference between a magistrate, a merchant and a lowly seamstress. Consequently, little attention is paid to whether society unfairly fixes these stations in life. As long as all jobs provide the opportunity for neighborly love, all jobs and their working conditions should not be challenged. Weber similarly finds a lack of a “relation between practical life and a religious motivation in Lutheranism.”<sup>85</sup> And it is God’s general call to love one’s neighbor that authorizes such a lack of relation.

Three, Luther’s subordination of individual motivations into a general calling leaves little room for individual questioning, reflection or analysis of a special calling. Douglas asserts,

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<sup>84</sup> Marshall, 24.

<sup>85</sup> Weber, 87.

Vocation does not proceed in some vague way from the self, from a *vocatio interna* by which one responds to a voice of one's own. For the Christian to be certain of his vocation, he must be called to it through the independent, external fact of a calling from God, mediated to him through other men.<sup>86</sup>

For Luther, one performs daily activities for the benefits of others only because God has dictated thusly. A reluctance to upset social hierarchy is supported by Luther's theology that places God's law over the self-determining individual.

Be that as it may, by merely labeling the job of a seamstress as a role that is just as much a vocation as the job of a priest, Luther sets into motion a transformation in what it means for newly-minted Protestant Christians to be called by God. Despite the social limits that Luther confines vocations to, daily work for all acquires a backbone under Luther that now holds the *potential* to exert an influence on all aspects of society. From this point on, Protestant theologians and pastors have struggled to maintain Luther's emphasis on God's general call and his democratizing spirit while negotiating with the shifting meaning of work. John Calvin is no exception to this trend, and it is to his theological innovations that we now turn.

### **John Calvin**

Calvin on vocation, as on many other topics, follows a general Lutheran trajectory. Not unlike Lutheran thought, Calvin's theology displays a conservatism related to the necessary resignation that individuals must adopt towards their life's station. Calvin explains in *The Institutes*:

And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he [God] has named these various kinds of living "callings." Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Douglas, 291.

<sup>87</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 1: 724.

For Calvin and Luther alike, all work is potentially calling-worthy, yet this does not mean that one can escape the duties that attend to divinely assigned work. Calvin, though, asserts more emphatically than Luther that it is *God alone* who assigns believers to their “sentry post.” Along the lines of Weber’s argument, when God is the sole legislator and executor of all human life, a God/human distance materializes which ironically allows a surprising freedom of movement in the earthly kingdom. Marshall summarizes the difference, “Calvin’s view was not as static as Luther’s. One’s given social position was not quite so normative, limiting, or all-encompassing. Although he still emphasized that one should stay in a calling, Calvin did not regard this as an iron rule but only as a caution to prevent undue ‘restlessness.’”<sup>88</sup> As compared to the Lutheran accent on the “external” office or estate that effectively rationalizes immobility, Calvin’s reasons for remaining in a station find a more “internal” justification. If stepping out of the line that a vocation-*cum*-God has drawn means a dangerous flirting with a move up the social ladder for Luther, Calvin ascribes any transgression to our own weak mind.

The Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling. For he knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once.<sup>89</sup>

In contrast to Luther’s arguments about the role of vocation in preserving the integrity of the social order, Calvin here argues that the God-given purpose of a vocation is to keep in check the natural, yet sinful, inclinations of individuals to chase aimless pursuits. The problem is not necessarily the political unrest that can result from transgressing that which God establishes in a vocation but the human mind run amok. Instead, we must use

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<sup>88</sup> Marshall, 25.

<sup>89</sup> Calvin, 1: 724.



a calling to keep in check our own restlessness—allowing our desire to direct a calling is tantamount to disobedience.

No one, impelled by his own rashness, will attempt more than his calling will permit, because he will know that is not lawful to exceed its bounds. A man of obscure station will lead a private life ungrudgingly so as not to leave the rank in which he has been placed by God . . . [e]ach man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.<sup>90</sup>

So the law that bars movement out of an unpleasant job is one predicated not as much on societal norms but on the need to settle a restless and impulsive human nature. It is the duty of self-protection, not societal-protection, with which Calvin endows a vocation.

Another way to see this subtle extension of the social boundaries that contain work within a calling is through Calvin's account of the special calling. Again in Calvin as in Luther, the command of God remains paramount as *the* means for understanding the execution of a special calling. However, where the duty to fulfill this calling acts more as a *burden* in Luther's rendering, Calvin sees vocation more as that which is entrusted with the proper use of a *gift* from God.<sup>91</sup> This difference is predicated on Calvin's interpretation of work after the Fall. Work was given to Adam as a punishment for the first sin, yet work cannot be reduced wholly to a curse for Calvin. According to Andre Biéler,

Calvin points out that the curse does not wholly do away with the blessing that was attached to work in the beginning. "Signs" remain that give man the taste for work . . . The curse that lies heavily on work is of educational value. It is intended to open man's eyes to his real condition and lead him to repentance. So this curse is constantly lightened by God's grace . . . That was already to be seen when Adam, instead of succumbing to the consequences of his error and being crushed under the weight of

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<sup>90</sup> Calvin, 1: 725.

<sup>91</sup> Calvin, 1: 719-25, André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, trans. James Greig (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1961), 352, 53.

God's curse, received the power to till the ground and live from his work as a new grace.<sup>92</sup>

If work is an educational reminder of God's mercy instead of judgment, a calling is that which governs this gift from God. A calling, then, becomes a kind of "meta-gift"—an offering out of God's grace whose purpose is to ensure that the original gift of work is managed properly. Absent the direction that a vocation provides as a result of the refusal of this gift, we burden ourselves. Douglas explains that,

[w]hat Adam once enjoyed as wholly his own came through sin to be redistributed in infinite variety through grace to his progeny. Those who refuse their vocations are condemned to unpurposed confusion, whereas those who accept them confirm their callings by the holiness of the lives they lead.<sup>93</sup>

By interpreting work as a gift instead of a burden, Calvin permits himself to speak of work as something to be enjoyed as opposed to that which must merely be endured. Appropriated as such, Calvin lessens the instrumental role that work plays in Luther's formulation of vocation. Of course, that work involves care for the neighbor is the defining sign that one's work is vocational for Calvin. However, because the enjoyment of work is an additional sign, work is more self-referential in Calvin than in Luther, though self-referentiality cannot translate into self-pride.

Further, Calvin incorporates a fuller account of human agency in his theology of calling by stressing the *utility* of work. Where Luther passes over the utility of actual work in favor of the caring for one's neighbor (a principle that is closely tied to the moral realm of the heavenly kingdom), Calvin focuses more on the relationship between the utility of one's actual work and the task of perfecting the earthly kingdom. Weber writes, "In Luther we found specialized labor in callings justified in terms of brotherly love. But

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<sup>92</sup> Biéler, 354.

<sup>93</sup> Douglas, 295.

what for him remained an uncertain, purely intellectual suggestion became for the Calvinists a characteristic element in the ethical system.” He continues:

Brotherly love, since it may only be practiced for the glory of God and not in the service of the flesh, is expressed in the first place in the fulfillment of the daily tasks given by the *lex naturae*. . . This makes labour in the service of impersonal social usefulness appear to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him . . . [hence] the social activity of the Christian in the world is solely activity *in majorem gloriam Dei*. This character is hence shared by labour in a calling which serves the mundane life of the community.<sup>94</sup>

Weber’s argument, that of causally connecting the Calvinistic work ethic to modern capitalism, needs this crucial separation of the work world from *immediate* moral importance in order to succeed. Weber highlights Calvin’s emphasis on the *social usefulness* of work that enables an eventual, and no doubt unintended, disengagement of work from a religious calling.

As Ernst Troeltsch puts it, Calvin’s appropriation of the calling,

raised the ordinary work of one’s profession (within one’s vocation) . . . from a mere method of providing for material needs it became an end in itself, providing scope for the exercise of faith within the labour of the “calling.” That gave rise to that ideal of work for work’s sake which forms the intellectual and moral assumption which lies behind the modern bourgeois way of life.<sup>95</sup>

As pointed out by Weber and Troeltsch, the social importance of Calvin’s emphasis on the utility of work is twofold. One, utility further integrates one’s work into the social machinery. When one is concerned with the usefulness of work, one must then ask, “useful for what?” Calvin’s answer to this question is innovative: work is only useful for the purpose of enabling society to function in a way that reflects God’s will, however imperfectly. Calvin thus departs from Luther again on the nature of the relationship between one’s work and the external environment. For Luther, the estate is confined to the sociopolitical parameters that define proper work, which obviates the utility of work

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<sup>94</sup> Weber, 108-9.

<sup>95</sup> Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 609-10.

in the wider society. Alternatively, the estate occupies a place in Calvin's thought on a calling, yet its power to chain one to a certain social stratum is significantly diminished.

Calvin's attention to the utility of work begins to add substance to the complementary notion of a special calling. His new take on the special calling is that an individual can not only *hear* it but also *act on* it in his or her own way—as long as God's will is followed. The special calling, in other words, is not only something that is issued by God, but for Calvin is also something that is taken up by the individual to whom it is addressed. In sixteenth-century Geneva, work and the way in which laborers interacted with each other via material exchanges became a crucial piece of a functioning society. Calvin and his followers believed that a smooth-running society functioned as a primary sign of a people who are operating according to God's will. In order for the societal machine to run properly, Calvin envisions a kind of division of labor in a community where all individual labor plays an indispensable role in the social health of the community.<sup>96</sup> A healthy community, or "Holy Community" as he calls it, stands as the outward proof of a people following God's plan for creation and of God's blessing on such a community both financially and spiritually. Only work that is *useful* in the service of this latter goal is worthy of integrating into one's calling.

It is important to note that despite the fact that Calvin's treatment of the calling elevates the importance of individual work, he always answers the question, "useful for what?" with, "serving God." While his stress on the utility of work can allow space for individuals to reflect more on the nature and purpose of their own work, Calvin nevertheless grants *no* place whatsoever for the authority of the self in the analysis of

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<sup>96</sup> Biéler, 141-45.

one's calling. Douglas notes, "Self-knowledge and vocation are inseparably bound to the knowledge of God and of God's intention; the whole meaning of vocation is to be found in abnegation of the self."<sup>97</sup> So while one's work enacted under a special calling is given more prominence in Calvin's thought, the general call to obey God's commands above all else holds sway. However, some ground had been laid by Calvin that, under the right social, economic and political situations, permits the individual's desire and talents to assert themselves more forcefully within the meaning of a calling.

### **Vocation in Puritan Thought**

For a century after Calvin, early Puritan ministers and theologians continued to address the theological meaning of vocation by adding distinctions to the dual components of general and special calling. As with Calvin, the general call from God always took precedence over the particular ways of heeding a special call. However, in much Puritan writings on the subject, the role of one's special calling, and hence one's individual talents, begins to assert itself more forcefully. In short, reflection on individual talent and one's own human agency as the means to realize talent in the world become a source for defining what is and is not proper action within a calling. "Before Protestantism had entered its second century," Douglas claims of the Puritan era, "a more secular idiom of self-knowledge and vocation began to penetrate the early orthodoxy of Luther and Calvin and to complicate its original clarity."<sup>98</sup> This original clarity was safeguarded by the belief that one's calling is utterly prescribed and authorized by God alone. Hence, the increased role of human participation in the construction of the meaning of one's own vocation starts the process of short-circuiting the previously

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<sup>97</sup> Douglas, 295.

<sup>98</sup> Douglas, 295.

uncomplicated connection between God and a calling. The allowance of more room for human choice in matters of finding the right job becomes a part of the pursuit of appropriate vocations. This in turn forces the settling on a vocation to involve what society gives it as a set of opportunities to permit a choice to end in satisfaction. In early Puritan writings, the subtle ceding of some control over the shaping of a vocation to society and by extension, from God, though, is unintentional.

Nascent instantiations of a Puritan idea of vocation hold firm God's sovereignty over an individual's calling; the vocation in which one ends up *is* the one pre-ordained by God. But interestingly, the merits of one's own talents deployed in an inviting new economic world began to be used as leverage in a negotiation with a more rigid Calvinistic theology of vocation. The tension between divine and human forces to secure a fitting vocation is evident in the writings of sixteenth-century British theologian, William Perkins (1558–1602). He acknowledges substantial differences between individuals, yet these differences are ordained by God:

By reason of this distinction of men, partly in respect of gifts, partly in respect of order, come personal callings. For if all men had the same gifts, and all were in the same degree and order, then should all have one and the same calling; but in as much as God gives diversity of gifts inwardly, and distinction of order outwardly, hence produced diversity of personal callings, and therefore I added, that personal calling arise from that distinction which God makes between man and man in every society.<sup>99</sup>

Guarded by social "order," the divinely established distinctions between individuals moves Perkins to concede the role of individual discernment in the process of landing in the appropriate vocation. He writes, "Every man must choose a fit calling to walk in; that is, every calling must be fitted to the man, and every man be fitted to his calling."<sup>100</sup>

Here, we find the meeting of divine and human agency in Perkins's theology: we can

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<sup>99</sup> William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations* (London: John Haviland, 1631), 755.

<sup>100</sup> Perkins., 775.

choose the fitting calling *and* that fitted calling is ordained by God. Douglas writes, “Perkins said that we must be permitted to choose what we are born—and what God has called us—to do. Vocation is in one sense imposed, but in another, it is chosen according to one’s gifts.”<sup>101</sup> Yet despite a constant return to God’s full dominion over callings, as Calvin posited, Marshall notes that Perkins, “introduced the voluntarism with respect to callings that had been hinted at by Calvin.”<sup>102</sup>

This voluntaristic trend was continued by one of Weber’s primary sources, Richard Baxter (1615-1691). A Presbyterian pastor and civil leader in England, Baxter reiterates the role of choice in a calling yet more tightly connects this choice to action expressed through labor. Baxter entertains some of the more comprehensive questions that may face individuals attempting to discern a calling; for example, “Are all callings created equal?” or “Even though one’s work is legal, is it a calling?” In taking up these questions, Baxter couples individual choice with work itself. For instance, he asserts, “Some callings are employed about matters of so little use (as tobacco and lace sellers, feather makers, periwigmakers, and many more such) that he that may choose better should be loath to take up with one [of] these, though possibly in itself it may be lawful.”<sup>103</sup> Even though certain professions are lawful, this does not mean that they are useful. Mere legality cannot authorize the work befitting of a calling, and faced with whether a legal job is actually useful or not, a choice must be made.

In addition to the law acting as only a minimal source of direction, Baxter states that a vocation cannot be reduced to professions that are legal. “It is not enough that the

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<sup>101</sup> Douglas, 296.

<sup>102</sup> Marshall, 42.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Baxter, “Directions about Our Labor and Callings,” in *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, (London: James Duncan, 1830), 584.

work of your calling be lawful, nor that it be necessary, but you must take special care also that it be safe, and not very dangerous to your souls.”<sup>104</sup> Here, Baxter equates jobs taken simply because they are lawful with a kind of compulsion to work a certain job. Human volition that is allowed to inform the choosing of a proper calling militates against this kind of coercion. Hence responsibility lies with the Christian for a correct ruling, not with an external and potentially non-Christian society bound only by minimum legal standards.

The choice of the kind of work that befits a calling is, of course, the domain of the special calling. There are some important mutations that the language of the general calling undergoes in Puritan theology that impinge on the interpretation of the special calling. Baxter, along with Perkins, vigorously insists that any internal debate on the proper manifestation of a special calling must be resolved by turning to the dictates of the general calling. For instance if one’s talents lend themselves to business, yet daily work occupies the mind to the point of distraction from the things of God, another calling must be sought.<sup>105</sup> Baxter’s reason for addressing the ability of a vocation to pacify the restless mind, though, differs from Calvin’s concerning the mechanism by which the will of God is ascertained. Instead of God’s will being largely unknown with a mistrust of one’s own desires attending, the evidence for Baxter’s litmus test is found in society. Baxter continually emphasizes that if a vocation runs counter to the advancement of the public good, this is a sure sign that it also runs counter to God’s will. And when the public good, however that is defined, serves as the primary manifestation of God’s will being

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<sup>104</sup> Baxter, 584.

<sup>105</sup> Baxter, 585.



executed on earth, a closer association between the contents of the general and special calling obtains.<sup>106</sup>

Both dimensions of calling are understood in the Puritan era more by judging the success of human action in society than by stacking them up against biblical injunctions.

Marshall remarks,

The views of Luther and Calvin, which had previously been understood in England in terms of abiding and being dutiful in one's estate, were being combined with an openness towards new developments in the social structure. This latter attitude manifested itself in an individualism which sat uneasily with traditional views. The resulting doctrine was one which stressed individual responsibility in economic affairs but limited itself to recommending quiet labour in one's estate with a strong emphasis on being able to *preserve* that estate. Over time, however, the content of particular callings came less from God's word which challenged social patterns and more from social patterns which themselves reveals God's will.<sup>107</sup>

A reversal of this kind signals a new trajectory for theological understandings of a calling specifically where Puritan writings gained purchase. The inclusion of societal indicators into the "vocation calculus" opens the door for cultural authorities, such as the market, to advance further into terrain once occupied by God alone. And as society is increasingly arranged by larger and larger markets in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century West, the relationship of one's work to a calling is beholden more and more to secular directives and less by divine command.

## **Work and Calling in the Twentieth Century**

### **The Self-Made Man**

In the time that passes between the height of Puritanism in America with Jonathan Edwards in the mid-eighteenth century and the height of industrialism, the role of human

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<sup>106</sup> Actually Calvin's idea of the "Holy Community" as a reflection of God's will is similar. I use his idea in chapter 4 as a means to politicize vocation. But here and in the context of my earlier discussion on Calvin, Baxter mixes signs given by society and those directly from God so clearly that his thought still suggests a more explicit departure.

<sup>107</sup> Marshall, 53.

agency in the meaning of a calling, as manifested in human choice, desire and reflection upon one's talents, expands. A difference between the two American Great Awakenings illustrates part of the reason why. During the first awakening in the early decades of the eighteenth century, America was still beholden to the twin Calvinistic principles of the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. A different emphasis emerged in the second awakening one hundred years later. Arminian theology that rejected Calvin's rigid notion of predestination in favor of free human will participating in God's plan was the cornerstone of the Second Great Awakening.<sup>108</sup> The increased human role in the manifestation of God's plan along with the beginnings of the expansion of capital and attendant opportunities combined to alter the meaning of vocation yet again. While a calling was still considered to be under the auspices of God's care leading up to the twentieth century, the radical change in the nature of jobs wrought by urbanization, the elevation of the importance of the kind of work one does (thanks to Marx) and the newer, more amenable circulating theologies all conspired to alter God's role in a vocation as well.<sup>109</sup>

Cultural historian Judith Hilkey finds that during the American Gilded Age, roughly 1870-1900, calling language was used by "success writers" (motivational writers who played on the ideology of the "self-made man") in order to maintain a balance

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<sup>108</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 74, 99; Julius H. Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 170; Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, *Protestantism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 58; Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 113-14.

<sup>109</sup> Jacques Ellul writes that, "This prodigious, high value of work, argued by Marx, which before him, had never known such exaltations, is the result, on the one hand, of the growth of work in the Western world during the nineteenth century, and, on the other, the secularization of the idea of man's divine vocation in work." Jacques Ellul, "Work and Calling" in *Callings!*, ed. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 26-27.

between the lingering Puritan idea of a stable vocation and the fact that laborers had career choices like no time before.

Insofar as the Puritan notion of a calling evoked a presumably stable and pious albeit idealized past, it suggested that which was comfortably familiar and accepted in rural small-town America: a view of work characterized by long-standing patterns of father-to-son occupational continuity . . . On the other hand, the modern concept of choosing rather than inheriting one's life work opened the doors to new possibilities. With the proliferation of new kinds of work . . . more and more young men of the late nineteenth century left home in search of work with which they and their fathers had no experience and very little familiarity.<sup>110</sup>

With a variety of job options presumably opened to a willing work force, Hilkey notes that these writers increasingly encourage reliance on one's own character for the purpose of landing the right vocation. Simultaneously maintained is that a calling is something stable. Though instead of a rigid divine plan explicitly guiding searchers to a pre-established, singular vocation, once the proper job was chosen, it then *became* a vocation *post facto*. The power to choose a calling (not abiding by an envisioned pre-arranged plan) and character on the job (not necessarily physical talent) are qualities, according to these writers, needed to ensure the suitable vocation. God's name is invoked in many of these success manuals but expectedly, the ability of human agents to find and stay in a calling increasingly wedges out the God of Luther who unequivocally dictates the terms of a vocation thus forcing human desires serve the larger divine plan.

When an individual's ingenuity and personal repertoire of talents were considered integral to that person's work, work could be included within a calling with only a minor theological adjustment. Even though self-reflection and choice played a large role in the negotiation of one's calling for success writers of the Gilded Age, God's omnipotence (as expressed in a general call) was smoothly squared with individual human agency (as was

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<sup>110</sup> Judith Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 101.

needed to answer the special call). Yet industrial capitalism forced a situation that challenged the aspirations of the self-made man. For this reason, if one were to undertake the difficult task of retaining a theology of vocation during the Industrial Age, an accounting of the discrepancy between factory work and a “true” calling was critical.

### **Social Gospel and Vocation in the Industrial Age**

The nature of factory jobs that proliferated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the West thwarted individual expression as well as the ability to choose the kind of job to have. When the ability to choose a vocation *cooperates* with God’s will, as we see in the success writers of the Gilded Age, the curtailment of choice wrought by industrialization affects God’s role in a vocation accordingly. Though by the time of Weber’s writing of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1905, he could plausibly claim that a calling was only nominally connected to God. He persuasively argues that the spiritual energy an individual gains from the *belief* that a calling is divinely inspired fueled a work ethic able to withstand the grind of factory work. But for Weber, the reality of work within a calling belies the belief that allegedly sustains it. He famously paints the scene in stark terms,

The idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all.<sup>111</sup>

For Weber, the Lutheran force behind a calling that used to animate working lives was no longer culturally, religiously, or even economically viable. Thus he predicts its impending obsolescence.

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<sup>111</sup> Weber, 182.

While his prediction of a comprehensive abandonment of the justification of work that a “God-authorized-calling” can provide may help Weber make his case, theologians promoting the Social Gospel resist omitting the role of God from a vocation. Their task of animating factory work with God through a vocation is challenging indeed. A reconciliation of work and vocation in the Industrial Age requires either a *de-emphasis* of the role of actual work or a *re-conception* of work via a kind of societal transformation. The former typifies the twentieth-century trend. Yet Social Gospellers opt for the latter by claiming that work, through a novel conception of God’s interaction with creation, can once again achieve the status that befits a vocation. Thus the rescuing of the concept of vocation from a Weberian fate illustrates the extent to which Social Gospel theology relies on a reversal of the roles played out in the relationship between a vocation and work. The quality of work, because it serves as a sign that God’s will is being done, is a substantial and necessary component of God’s earthly kingdom. Hence what one does at a job must rise to a divine standard instead of being merely a mundane activity that only tangentially informs a vocation.

### **Rauschenbusch and Sayers**

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) approaches the work/calling discrepancy bequeathed to him by industrial society in a radically different way than his Christian predecessors. His call for the divine redemption of the earthly kingdom as articulated in his book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, marries the two kingdoms of Reformed thought. Provoked by deplorable and inhumane working conditions in the American city, Rauschenbusch recasts classic theological terms that broker with the transcendent into immanent, societal ones. God is present in his Social Gospel, though it is not to the

heavens but to the earth that we look for divine presence. He understands factory work in terms of its distance from the kind of work to be rightly performed in a divine calling.

About the current work situation he laments,

One of the gravest accusations against our industrial system is that it does not produce in the common man the pride and joy of good work. In many cases the surroundings are ugly, depressing, and coarsening. Much of the stuff manufactured is dishonest in quality, made to sell and not to serve, and the making of such cotton or wooden lies must react on the morals of every man that handles them. There is little opportunity for a man to put his personal stamp on his work . . . The modern factory hand is not likely to develop artistic gifts as he tends his machine.<sup>112</sup>

Channeling a Marxian spirit, Rauschenbusch contrasts alienated work with the kind of work that bears a “personal stamp.” As opposed to Marx, though, Rauschenbusch asserts that the only way to “un-alienate” work is through religion. Meaningful, hence Godly, work is that which not only produces that which can be called one’s own, but also that which “contributes to the welfare of mankind.” Because most factory work neither personalizes production nor furthers the common good, it cannot be the kind of work that God would deem worthy of a calling.

In this way, Rauschenbusch reverses the Reformed approach to the idea of vocation. Instead of beginning with God’s will as that which work must align as Luther and Calvin do, Rauschenbusch looks first to the state of work itself. Granted, Rauschenbusch has a strong notion of God’s will; namely, it is God’s will to effect an equitable social order. But instead of that will subordinating the desire to make work correspond with our wants, God’s will is made manifest through the alteration of work. In other words, the nature of work in early twentieth-century America *is* the locus of a

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<sup>112</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Classic That Woke Up the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 234.

calling for Rauschenbusch and through a modification or even removal of the structures that keep it in its current state, a calling can be returned to the average worker. He writes,

If a man's calling consisted in manufacturing or selling useless or harmful stuff, he would find himself unable to connect it with his religion. In so far as the energy of business life is expended in crowding out competitors, it would also be outside the sanction of religion, and religious men would be compelled to consider how industry and commerce could be reorganized so that there would be a maximum of service to humanity and a minimum of antagonism between those who desire to serve it.<sup>113</sup>

Religion *is* morality here. "Irreligious" work that falls outside of a vocation either harms another or oneself. Hence a vocation acts as a kind of moral barometer, judge and guarantor. Its criteria are gathered from perceived societal ills; its authority is underwritten by God through biblical moral precepts.<sup>114</sup>

This formulation bears on the relationship between God and society as Rauschenbusch sees it. God's will for creation is found in a society whose work is not alienated and for the common good, as opposed to God's will manifesting itself in the believer who endures meaningless work for eternal benefits. It is the special calling that has been corrupted as evinced by Rauschenbusch's singling out certain business sectors and jobs instead of all work. And it is up to Christian soldiers to recognize this moral discrepancy and reestablish the balance between a general calling to be a Christian and a special calling to have one's individual work accord with God's will. Here, the salvaging of a meaningful vocation must take its cues from a dehumanizing work world in order to overcome it.

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<sup>113</sup> Rauschenbusch, 356.

<sup>114</sup> Rauschenbusch's formulation resembles Luther's association between a calling and brotherly love. Though because Luther is attempting to define a new term, brotherly love ends up filling out what a vocation is. Rauschenbusch is dealing with an inherited definition. Hence he is able to take aspects of the definition of vocation and apply them to instances where brotherly love is absent.

Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957), writing thirty years later and in Britain, writes in a Social Gospel vein though with some branching. She similarly laments the inability of jobs to rise up to the standards of a vocation in a capitalist system. The problem for Sayers, however, is not that the kind of work generates inequality between the rich and the poor, but the simple impossibility of *any* job that is performed strictly for money to become a vocation.

I think we can measure the distance we have fallen from the idea that work is a vocation to which we are called, by the extent to which we have come to substitute the word “employment” for “work.” We say we must solve the “problem of unemployment”—we reckon up how many “hands” are “employed”; our social statistics are seldom based upon the work itself—whether the right people are doing it, or whether the work is worth doing.<sup>115</sup>

Work’s meaning has been reduced to fact of mere employment and the wages earned with the work itself figuring in little to any meaning that work may furnish. Sayers suggests that work will regain its proper place in a vocation when work is performed for itself—not strictly for unrelated ends, namely money.

Important for my argument regarding vocation and the Social Gospellers is that for them, work is not taken as a given to which a calling must adjust. Nor is mere success the sign that a calling is being lived out. To the contrary, society and culture disclose moral, irreligious work practices. Only by overhauling the ideologies that prop up such practices can a calling have any real meaning. And it is in the power of human agents operating with a biblical moral conscience alone that can recalibrate the relationship between work and a calling.

The Social Gospel’s turn to society for evidence of moral violations, as well as for the remedy, constitutes an instructive stage in our theological history of vocation. The

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<sup>115</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, “Vocation in Work,” in *A Christian Basis for the Post-War World*, ed. A. E. Baker (New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1942), 104.



elevation of the status of work as one starting point for theological reflection impinges on the role that a vocation could possibly serve in an earthly kingdom. Attention to the meaningfulness of actual work necessarily brings the social relations, class structure, and secular ideologies that reify problematic business practices into the equation.<sup>116</sup>

The question of the *kind* of work that is calling-worthy lingers to this day, yielding varied answers. However the overall Social Gospel program famously came under assault in the wake of the first World War. Neo-orthodox thinkers and later, Christian realists charged that a world capable of atrocities is no place for God's kingdom. Consequently the meaning of vocation and its relationship to "worldly" work underwent drastic changes.

### **Barth and Brunner**

Troubled by the reliance on the ability of human agents to bring about God's kingdom on earth in the wake of a destructive World War I, Karl Barth (1886-1968) broke with liberal colleagues. Barth's "crisis theology" is predicated on an infinite distance between creation and the wholly other Creator. Efforts to bridge this impossible gap, such as altering society to align with God's will, are always futile given the distance they must really travel. Barth's idea of vocation reflects this theology.

In opposition to advocates of the Social Gospel, he asserts that God's call to humans to act in a calling has been confused with human aspirations within a given economic system. When a calling is animated by the desire to improve the quality of

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<sup>116</sup> I revisit the political implications for Rauschenbusch's insights in chapter 4 as I do with Calvin. Similarly here in this present chapter, I highlight only Rauschenbusch's treatment of vocation that are consequential to a theological history.

work, whether on an individual or societal level, a calling is overshadowed by the nature of work and, Barth argues, it loses all of its intended meaning.

It is a piece with the rather feverish modern over-estimation of work and of the process of production that particularly at the climax of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and even more so in our own, it should be thought essential to man, or more precisely to the true nature of man, to have a vocation in this sense.<sup>117</sup>

Barth is responding to a general orientation to work gone awry. He differentiates “vocation” from “calling” in order to elucidate his point. Barth’s “vocation” is that which has been corrupted by its reduction to work. Barth’s “calling” is direct revelation from God and hence is dictated by the terms of the “infinite qualitative distance” between God and humanity. He arrives at a proper notion of a calling by first describing its relationship to a vocation. A *calling* is overtaken by a *vocation* when work becomes the primary, or in extreme cases, the only substance of a calling. With the God of a calling in one ear and the society of a vocation in the other, a dilemma arises as one cannot listen to and follow two imperatives moving in different directions.

[T]he attempt to listen to a Word of God on the right hand and another word on the left, has always had the unfortunate result, as in Protestantism, that vocation has begun to take and has actually taken precedence over calling, so that the Word of God on the right hand has increasingly and finally to yield before that on the left.<sup>118</sup>

Work, for Barth, is always an endeavor that must be placed in the service of God and hence should never act as the exclusive activity within a calling. God’s call cannot constitute a mere summons to search for and acquire satisfactory work. Such is another temptation to substitute a human activity and the ideologies that animate it for the things of God. “That a man’s vocation is exhausted in his profession is no more true than that God’s calling which comes to him is simply an impulsion to work.”<sup>119</sup> Barth is not

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<sup>117</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III:4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 599.

<sup>118</sup> Barth, 645.

<sup>119</sup> Barth, 599.

arguing for the elimination of work, of course. However, he is claiming that one must not forget that a calling is from a wholly other God. Whether a calling elevates work or compels it, either way work is overstepping the bounds established by God's call. Hence when work begins to gain a life of its own, create its own dictates, and then gains its legitimacy by attaching the word "vocation" to it, it offers false security and is completely out of sync with God's objectives.

Emil Brunner (1889-1966) shares Barth's sentiments.

Thus it is quite obvious that this idea of vocation ("the Calling") has no more than the name in common with that which is called so to-day. The idea of the Calling has been degraded, so disgracefully, into something quite trivial, it has been denuded of its daring and liberating religious meaning to such an extent, and has been made so ordinary and commonplace that we might even ask whether it would not be better to renounce it altogether.<sup>120</sup>

Brunner similarly predicates his assertion on the ultimate power of God's general call to dictate the terms and activities permitted under a special calling. If understood and applied faithfully, the proper execution of a calling can never take its direction from society—only from God. Brunner describes the "secularization of the Calling" as the process by which the calling has been slowly wrenched from its eschatological significance to be captured solely by secular forces.<sup>121</sup> He, however, does not want to "renounce" the idea of a calling, for he still affirms that it has a divine source. His reclamation of the idea of a vocation involves the dethroning of work by way of a

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<sup>120</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, 1936), 205.

<sup>121</sup> Brunner claims that Luther never meant to equate vocation with work. Instead, Luther, according to Brunner, altered the meaning of vocation in order to establish a "good conscience in one's Calling" which can more easily submit to God's dictates, rather than certain activities. God then can enact the fulfillment of God's kingdom via the calling by calling the individual to correct belief, then calling him or her out of the world at the eschaton. Brunner writes, "God takes over all responsibility for our action in the world which in itself is sinful, if we, on our part, will only do here and now that which the present situation demands from one who loves God and his neighbour." Brunner, 206.

reiteration of the fact that God calls believers to do God's service alone.<sup>122</sup> When one ceases searching for secular affirmation for work and looks to God's will for the proper goal of all work, then a calling can be restored.

In line with neo-orthodox skepticism towards liberal theology, Barth and Brunner do not argue for the restoration of work so that it can somehow align itself with God's own version. Instead both criticize the unjustified rise of the place that work occupies. They oppose the "ungodly" endowment of work with import from the secular world when work already possesses divine import in a calling. Consequently, both are ready to abandon the role of work altogether in a calling if the trend that they see continues. The trend has less to do with the quality of work and more to do with the general power that the meaning of work can hold in the lives of Christians. Hence, changes in the overall quality of work that may occur in the future have little bearing on the accurate idea of vocation. Second, in spite of their dire judgments, both theologians compensate for skepticism toward the ways in which an ideology of work can corrupt a relationship with God by shifting their entire attention to the revealed Word of God. It is by the situating of one's activities completely within the flow of an unknown yet sovereign divine purpose that a vocation maintains its integrity.

Important for my argument is the witness that Barth and Brunner bear in the unimportance of work in a vocation. Their conclusions establish a general framework of the idea of vocation out of which subsequent theologians operate. The role of work in a vocation is wrestled with continually hereafter. However the tendency to look first and

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<sup>122</sup> Brunner goes directly back to Luther for this interpretation of a calling.

foremost to God for direction on what a vocation should be occurs at the expense of turning away from an idea of vocation that has a footing in the work world.

### **Recent Theological Assessments**

There is a dearth of theological treatments of vocation after the mid-part of the century. For evidence, William Placher's recent anthology of theologies of vocation ends with Barth. The reasons for this are not fully self-evident, but there are two possible explanations for this trend. One, the lack of recent productions of systematic theologies could translate into a leaving aside the consideration of vocation, whereas theologians of the past felt the need to include it in a system. And two, the increased "internalization" of religion coupled with the more slippery meaning of work in a post-industrial society, which will be discussed in the next chapter, make more difficult the task of assessing the theological significance of vocation.<sup>123</sup> Gone are the days where a critical mass of Western society can plausibly square a coherent notion of work with the burden of the kind of calling that Luther envisions, much less the Puritan idea. However, as stated before, despite the relative theological silence, calling language persists in American vernacular. What is the connection between modern work and a theology of vocation, if there is any? I first turn to two more recent theological treatments of vocation and then to a popular rendition with the intent of answering this question.

#### **Jacques Ellul and Miroslav Volf**

Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) stands at the juncture between industrial and post-industrial society. He echoes much of Barth's and Brunner's refrain that God's call should never bend to culture. Yet like Rauschenbusch, it is the nature of work that serves

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<sup>123</sup> See *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah, et al. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

as Ellul's evidence that a vocation and the current nature of work have little to do with each other. Ellul alternatively shares Barth's concern that cultural ideologies have exaggerated the status of work, but because modern work is now self-regulating and may not even need an ideology, his suggestion strays from Barth's. Ellul, as displayed in his classic, *The Technological Society*, takes pains to point out that "technique" is the dominant quality of work that reduces all work to the application of method alone.<sup>124</sup> One only has to learn and employ certain techniques in order to succeed at a job. For Ellul, technique has little to do with the kind of work worthy of a calling because it detaches all work from any higher purpose, whether it be obeying God's will or serving one's neighbor.

Instead of suggesting the means of reversing this development, Ellul contrasts the current meaning of vocation with its "real" meaning as gleaned from biblical writings that present a calling that adheres to a totalizing divine plan. Technique separates work from any ordered whole by atomizing tasks, placing them under the direction of a *seeming* technological whole, and finally demanding only a sanguine attitude towards work. To the last point Ellul writes, "Thus to become a lawyer by "calling" represents the expression of good sentiments, a generous will, an idealism, but it means in reality to be the victim of an illusion and to live in ignorance of what is real in our society."<sup>125</sup> Work as technique is thus barred from engaging in the *real* whole as given by a *real* calling. And for Ellul, work has become a primary way to sin against the God that demands that a calling be in complete service to a transcendent God.

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<sup>124</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 1964), 13-18.

<sup>125</sup> Ellul, "Work and Calling," 34.

The predicament that modern work presents is not one that can or should be averted by way of either reconfiguring work (Rauschenbusch) or by deploying God's power to undermine the problematic orientation to work so that it can fit into a calling once again (Barth). Ellul is more pessimistic than Barth and Brunner as to the chances that not only work, but also any meaningful notion of a calling can be restored. Work as technique cannot function along side a calling, and so work, along with its ideology, must be permanently removed from any true conception of vocation. He writes,

We must accept the fact that work is condemned in our society; that there is a segment of our life that is 'cursed.' Hence, we can abandon ourselves to trade our profession which is without any value, without any significance, without any interest, which functions solely to supply us with enough money to survive, and we shall find the main interest for our lives elsewhere.<sup>126</sup>

The place to look elsewhere is the general call that God makes to all Christians. The special call that enlists individual talents now can only place them into service of technique. If this can happen, why was the idea of vocation ever held at the mercy of such a susceptible entity such as work? Work should never have been given such power, but now that it does grip our collective consciousness, it can be used to point beyond itself. "In reality," Ellul charges, "we must assume, accept positively, and take upon ourselves, this sign of our rupture with God—to live fully this order of necessity, *in order that* the freedom which is at times granted by God, the calling which we are able to assume, represents *its* true value."<sup>127</sup> The meaning of work, here, is instrumental. Work is to be used as a sign of its (and our) limits—a reminder to Christians to listen for the real call from God, which will not be heard in the workplace.

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<sup>126</sup> Ellul, 34-35.

<sup>127</sup> Ellul, 42.

Like Ellul, Miroslav Volf (1956- ) upholds the view that there exists the difficulty of maintaining a functional use of vocation given the way work is experienced. Yet instead of conceiving the issue with modern work as an ideological problem, Volf calls it a crisis. In his 1991 book, *Work in the Spirit*, he writes, “Today we can observe a general crisis of work. It frequently surfaces in the negative attitude of workers toward their work. Many people are deeply dissatisfied with the kind of work they are doing.”<sup>128</sup> Volf seeks to overcome this crisis not by retreating into supra-mundane orientations to a calling, but by retrieving an exhaustive theology of the Holy Spirit that can infuse all activities, including work, with divine significance.

Volf criticizes the Lutheran conception of vocation as conservative; it aligns a calling too much with the duties required of a certain social position with little room for the questioning of those duties. The Lutheran calling is beholden to the given-ness of the duties of one’s special calling which is mitigated by the security manifest in the general call that soothes discomforts experienced at work. This poses a problem for Volf. Because Volf identifies the primary features of work in the late twentieth century as transient and fluid, it is no longer possible to stay in one job for long or even hold down only one job at a time. Hence the ability of work to convey the kind of stability that provides givens is gone. The very efficacy of Luther’s special calling is suspect under modern working conditions.

In addition, Luther and others’ reliance on the general call that presumably provides solace in God’s grace in the midst of work is not fully integrative of the whole of human life for Volf. In contradistinction to Ellul, Volf holds that the Garden of Eden

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<sup>128</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 35.



story establishes that work is an essential human activity. It should be performed in “cooperation with God” as opposed to being endured in spite of the consolation received by God’s grace alone.<sup>129</sup> By conceiving of a vocation as moving in one direction from God to us in the form of a command, human cooperation with God in the living out of a vocation is largely foreclosed. Volf argues that the inclusion of the Holy Spirit as the broker of such a cooperation is needed. He offers an interpretation of the efficacy of the Holy Spirit that relates work to God’s will via the animation and sustenance provided by the spirit.

Elevating work to cooperation with God in the pneumatological understanding of work implies an obligation to overcome alienation because the individual gifts of the person need to be taken seriously. The point is not simply to interpret work religiously as cooperation with God and thereby glorify it ideologically, but to transform work into a charismatic cooperation with God on the ‘project’ of the new creation.<sup>130</sup>

The spirit can reattach work to a calling by at once lifting out and legitimizing one’s true talents as well as furnishing the worker with the judgment to find work that finally cooperates with God’s creative work in the world. Work that is infused with the Holy Spirit can not only accommodate a fluid labor market in an information/service economy (thereby avoiding Ellul’s resignation), but it can also overcome alienation on the job by lining up the “right” job with one’s God-given talents (thus circumventing Lutheran conservatism).

Both Ellul and Volf show an unwillingness to drag the concept of vocation down into the morass of the contemporary work world. Whether it be an embellished ideology of work or a crisis in the work world that forces each of their hands, it is a deep respect for the idea of a calling that motivates their respective responses. The upshot in both

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<sup>129</sup> Volf, 114, 126.

<sup>130</sup> Volf, 116.

analyses (though in a lesser extent in Volf) for my purposes is a further aggrandizement of God's power over a calling, as exerted through the general calling, in a rejoinder to the problem of integrating contemporary work into a genuine calling. This problem is acknowledged by both with some lamentation and consequently, their efforts to salvage vocation with the help of a divine life preserver stands as a further statement of not only the persistence of the idea of a calling (that it deserves to be salvaged) as well as increasing lack of the ability of work to satisfy their demands of the idea.

Prompted by a work world that reveals itself to be unresponsive to real human needs, Ellul and Volf both turn to a member of the Godhead for help. The turn from work itself for a clue about what a vocation should be is facilitated in part by the assumption that a gap exists between activity at work and a true Godly vocation. When less than meaningful work along with its artificially elevated status as a "meaning-giver" is considered ungodly or sinful, the move to God is understandable. Yet when work is separated from vocation on these grounds, the cultural environment that molds actual work and its experience is similarly devalued and often neglected in the final verdict on vocation.

The reluctance to engage vocation with work leaves the idea of vocation vulnerable to unintended appropriations that likewise have negligible contact with the concrete work world. Liability for popular uses of the idea of vocation that has little to do with work today does not solely lie at the feet of theologians who have gradually prevented work and its cultural adjusters from informing the idea of vocation. Culture itself is a major culprit as well. I examine a prime example of what happens when culture and vocation mix in *The Purpose-Driven Life* in chapter 3. But as the final instance in

this theological history, it is helpful to observe how a theology of vocation is articulated in another popular offering.

### **Keeping the Faith When Losing at Work**

It is difficult to tell whether Ana Mollinedo Mims's book, *Keeping the Faith*, should be in the business motivation or spirituality section of the book store. As evidenced by the ideas she pushes throughout, the "spirit-led career," Mims intends to merge the business world with her own hard-won spiritual insights in order to help readers on their own journey. This is a self-help book designed to offer guidance to lost business souls. Personal cautionary tales and success stories come with tips for avoiding the former and replicating the latter. She uses the idea of vocation as a reliable concept running through her working career. No matter what happens on the job or how she is treated, it is the fact that she remains in a calling throughout her travails that gives her hope. And while her book is not a theological treatise, a theology of vocation is present and operative for Mims. Her theological articulation stands as an example of the upshot of twentieth-century theologies of vocation. When work is removed from consideration in the functioning of a vocation, the idea of vocation is susceptible to cultural appropriation of which Mims's book serves as a particularly clear example.

She enumerates several distressing trends of the modern business world: constant threats of job loss through downsizing, lack of long-term employment, continuing disloyalty felt by employers to employees and vice versa. For Mims, it is a vocation that acts as a shock absorber. Her (and our) engagement with a stable God accompanies a stable and discernable purpose that God has already laid out. She writes,

Each of us has a calling, a purpose in life. I have discovered that when you reach out to a God who is there, listen to His call, and embark on a journey with Him, then a career path—the one you're meant to be on—opens before you.<sup>131</sup>

The plan is never explicitly laid out for us nor can God's call be heard in a clear voice most of the time, according to Mims. Yet a faithful mindset and corresponding action act in concert with God's plan as doors are opened along the path that is meant to be on. The meaning of a vocation for Mims is that despite trying working conditions, a trust is placed in the One who has a plan. When one cultivates this trusting relationship through prayer, moral commitment and a faith that the right result will surface, actual success will follow. Trying to outpace God's plan with one's own plan is not the way to find a calling. But when a vocation is found the right way, it guarantees success.

I learned that God's timing is not always our timing . . . I learned that when you follow a calling, you won't fail even when you fail. All things will work for your good and growth ultimately.<sup>132</sup>

Mims does not claim that a calling does all of the work, though, as if one can simply sit back and enjoy the spoils. Talent in conjunction with hard work is necessary for the fulfillment of God's plan. Indeed, the coincidence of the right job and the appropriate talents constitute an *anointing* in Mims's words.

When you are anointed to be in a particular job, a line of work, you will be ready for it . . . When you're anointed, you bring with you not just intelligence or technical expertise or X years of experience. You also bring a set of qualities, a unique combination of the practical and the spiritual that didn't exist in that role before you came along. It's a special alignment of all that's needed to accomplish a task or a goal, and it's one that may not occur again. And it comes from being in the center of God's will for your life.<sup>133</sup>

Anointment, here, means that special privilege is given to the anointed to perform a job uniquely—one's talents perfectly fit the duties of a job. Or a calling provides the

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<sup>131</sup> Ana Mollinedo Mims, *Keeping the Faith: How Applying Spiritual Purpose to Your Work Can Lead to Extraordinary Success* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), xiii.

<sup>132</sup> Mims, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Mims, 45.

conditions, if recognized and engaged faithfully, for one's God-given talents to generate real success in the business world through a career that is tailor-made.

On the age-old theological negotiation between human and divine ability, Mims reflects on her own success. "Was it because I brought to the role more innovation of thought or expertise or because I prayed more through situations? It was probably a combination of the two."<sup>134</sup> She is content to mix her own talent with God's ability to bring success without resolving the tension fully, but it is clear that success is the surest sign that one is anointed to accomplish certain job tasks and more importantly, that a vocation is being lived out.

Mims recounts a personal story that attests to her conclusions. Working at a large organization, she discovered that she was in the middle of a power struggle. For a year superiors used passive aggression and unnerving silence to deliver the message that Mims and her talents were not wanted. Reasons that she gives herself for the situation are believable enough:

Maybe what you were hired to do is no longer a company priority. Maybe a new management team wants to bring in its own people. From the standpoint of the organization, it's easier and, of course cheaper if the out-of-favor employee just leaves quietly. Maybe you are not out of favor but perhaps someone wants to put another person in your role and management is not a part of the whole thing.<sup>135</sup>

What is the relationship between corporate decisions and one's own talent? How is this discrepancy rationalized?

Regardless, in environments like any of these, tolerating the injustice of it all and the scheming that goes on is exhausting. You have done nothing wrong. Negative forces are at play that have no connection to your skills and talents or the efficiency with which you're doing your job.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Mims, 46.

<sup>135</sup> Mims, 142.

<sup>136</sup> Mims, 142.

Instead of fighting the injustice head on at work or even questioning whether her gender had anything to do with the treatment, Mims visualized the real battle taking place in her mind. Contempt for the cowardly behavior of her superiors along with the desire to up and quit clashed with her stubborn idea of vocation.

Why didn't I just quit? I thought about that many times over those months. But when I first accepted the job, it was clear to me that this was the door God had opened. Whatever was going to happen, He would allow—not necessarily cause, but allow, and there was a purpose to that somehow. When God places you in a position, when He opens the door and says, *This is it—walk through*, only He can tell you it's time to walk out again. Certainly I could have left at any point during that miserable year. As much as I wanted to, something inside was stopping me. God hadn't yet told me it was time to go. I can't walk out of a door that he's opened until He says, *Now we're moving*.<sup>137</sup>

What finally closed the door was a combination of her internal voice and external circumstance:

Finally, He closed that door. The pieces came together. I saw in my mind's eye, more and more clearly, that I was coming to the end of what I needed to accomplish in that place. The company itself was changing. And I ended up resigning. It was a total miracle from where I stood. I actually felt like I had been promoted.<sup>138</sup>

Through her reflection on this experience, Mims's notion of a calling becomes clearer. God alone opens doors thus *allowing* one to flourish in the calling given. But once in the door, the role of external circumstances mysteriously works in conjunction with God's plan and both are adjudicated in the mind's eye. Mims can rest assured that she never closed doors herself, she never acted immorally when she was being a good soldier and through this, she received confirmation that a miracle, her own sanity and success could be achieved in one fell swoop. Her vocation bundles these beliefs together.

Several things can be inferred from Mims's book. First, though she pays homage to a God who is in control of her life, Mims uses this God instrumentally. Her success is attributed to a seamless intertwining of her own talent and God's power. Consequently, it

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<sup>137</sup> Mims, 143-44.

<sup>138</sup> Mims, 144.

is difficult to determine where her own skills end and God's plan begins. For the most part, this theological predicament is resolved by primarily crediting her own talent for her success and then *post facto* bringing God in to legitimate her accomplishments.

This kind of relationship between God and her success cuts both ways: if she is having success, God did it; if not, it is not her talents or personality that are obstacles, but God has not opened a door yet. God is brought in *post facto*, but more correctly Mims commits the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy here. After moments of career success, God is the cause; after moments of struggle, God is again the cause. In addition, because Mims's comfort in a vocation seems largely driven by her *need* for success in the business world—God is smuggled in to legitimize this need. Why did she refuse to confront directly her superiors if an “injustice” was occurring? If God communicates details of an exhaustive life plan to Mims, God must have also informed her of the injustice at work. One conclusion to be drawn is that the fear of possible damage to her career for speaking out against work place injustice drowned out God's voice here. Yet when her situation was resolved through corporate restructuring, it was explained as a miracle.

The confusion arising from the relationship between God's plan and her own initiative can be cleared up somewhat when we locate Mims's idea in our theological history. With an easy fusion of God's fixed plan and her own talents, Mims can more clearly separate the general call from the special. With God mostly operating behind the scenes but at times performing miracles that merge with Mims's own desires and expectations, she is free to define aspects of her special call in ways that suit her. Because success in the corporate world can lead to pride, Mims turns inward (and

upward) for confirmation that she is doing it the right way. Her refusal to challenge an unfair status quo necessarily prevents her from turning to the workplace for resolution. Her special calling, that which authorizes her belief that her own God-given talents will overcome unpleasant working environments, becomes a kind of therapeutic device; a coping mechanism of sorts. She can endure intra-office pettiness that foretells of her own job insecurity because comfort is given in the general call that everything that happens is in accordance with God's will. The interpretation of the details of her special calling communicate that her talents have nothing to do with her discomfort. Or her united idea of a vocation vouchsafes her belief that success in the business world *is* God's plan by lending comfort amidst an uncomfortable working situation.

Additionally the gradual diminishment of work itself from the theological history of the idea of vocation is on display in Mims's book. Throughout the recounting of her working career, she never mentions the kind of work that she is doing. Actual day-to-day activities or the material end to which a certain job is directed are relatively unimportant when compared to the attainment of the "end" of generalized success. Hence, the fulfillment of her vocation as coterminous with success in the business world is ultimately unable to help her distinguish between fitting jobs nor apparently able to prompt a challenge to specific business practices. When actual work is no hindrance nor even informative to the means of abiding in a calling, a calling can be more easily adapted to self-serving ideologies with minimal cognitive dissonance.

In fairness, Mims's work should not be subjected to the kind of scrutiny reserved for academic theologians. Her audience and purpose differ radically than that of academic theology. Hers is included, though, as a final installment in our history to



expose not only an upshot of the idea of vocation but also to invite an inquiry into cultural conditions that make such an idea of vocation resonant today.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have traced a selective theological history of the Protestant calling with attention to the role of work within a vocation. Through the gradual amplification of the power of God's general call over the special call, we see a growing inability of the actual work that one does to inform the idea of vocation. Since the original bifurcation of the calling at the Reformation, the tight connection between general and special calling (bound by a God controlling both) began to loosen during the Puritan era. An emphasis on individual talents and "choosing a calling" that finds its way into Puritan discourse involving vocation undermines the idea that divine muscle alone can restrain the human desire to align a calling with the marks of "worldly" success.

The Industrial Revolution, with its deleterious impact on the expression of individual talent as well as on the freedom to choose a calling of one's liking, forced theologians to question the suitability of Luther's instantiation. The predominant reaction was a retrieval of a "proper" calling in which the authority of individual work, which lent credence to a special calling, was said to have been exaggerated. Excepting the Social Gospel response, Barth established the need for God through a general call to redress the abuses allowed by misapplied individual freedom within the special calling. Succeeding treatments of vocation are variations on this Barthian theme.

The final example of Mims's book at once reveals a recent meaning of a vocation when the work that one does is inconsequential to the discourse of vocation. What, then, animates Mims's spirited language? Clearly a notion of God underwrites much of her

program, but her god differs considerably from that of everyone from Luther to Volf. Hers more resembles that of the Gilded Age success writers: God's vague presence serves to stabilize the individual's experience of a volatile work environment. God somehow steers Mims's boat through the choppy waters on an unstable career path. The reasons for the choppy sea are neither stated gratefully nor criticized through analysis by her; they just are.

It is the cultural climate of the contemporary work world left unquestioned by Mims and condemned or dismissed by her "fellow theologians" that demands our attention. The idea of vocation minus work, whether it is forcibly removed on orders taken from a certain theological framework or blithely glossed over in the name of success, is an empty concept. The idea of vocation that is culturally embedded, on the other hand, can simultaneously retain much of its religious content *and* fittingly participate in the material reality of work. Arriving at such an idea necessarily includes an honest reckoning with the culture that likewise embeds the idea of work.

Since calling language persists to this day in American cultural vernacular and work still operates off a powerful ideology, a calling must be able to relate to work. If theologians detach work from a calling in favor of emphasizing the power of God to issue vocations, what colors Mims's as well as Warren's unique articulations of the idea of vocation? The next chapter will not so much highlight the role of God in current expressions of vocation as it will examine the cultural forces that help explain the expressions. Divine weight still burdens a calling (over Weberian protestations) yet God's action or the belief thereof within the selection and execution of a vocation provide

only a part of the complex makeup that comprises the contemporary calling. It is to the additional cultural component of calling that we now turn.

## CHAPTER 2—WORK AND A VOCATION IN A CONSUMER CULTURE

The absence of a sense of calling means an absence of a sense of moral meaning. When they do not find it in their work, people like Brian and Margaret seek for such meaning, as we might expect, in some form of expressive individualism, to be pursued with the like-minded and loved ones. But the ties one forms in the search for meaning through expressive individualism are not those of the moral community of the calling. They are rather the ties of what we might call the lifestyle enclave.

Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*

The use of the idea of vocation by authors of more recent popular motivational literature, both Christian and non-Christian alike, points our study down a different path. Academic theological forays into the subject have either redeemed vocation *in spite of* work (God is bigger than any human activity) or have redeemed it *because of* work (changes in the material conditions of work will align work with vocation once more). Yet in self-help books and business motivational literature, we find an avoidance altogether of the quandaries that plague theological renderings through a less complex use of theological concepts.<sup>139</sup> For instance, Steven R. Covey, author of the bestselling business motivational book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, asks readers to use the power of the idea of a vocation for improving their potential in the corporate world in his follow-up book, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. He quips:

Perhaps the most important vision of all is to develop a sense of self, a sense of your own destiny, a sense of your unique mission and role in life, as a sense of purpose and

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<sup>139</sup> Examples include Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); Herbert Alphonso, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn and Dennis Linn, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning Through the Spiritual Exercises* (Matwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001); Noel Tyl, *Vocations: The New Midheaven Extension Process* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Press, 2006); Gregg Michael Levoy, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997).

meaning. When testing your own personal vision first ask yourself: Does the vision tap into my voice, my energy, my unique talent? Does it give me a sense of ‘calling,’ a cause worthy of my commitment? Acquiring such meaning requires profound personal reflection, asking deep questions and envisioning.<sup>140</sup>

Covey’s notion of a calling is devoid of the kind of content that would reflect a theological reckoning with the God/human/work relationship. Not that we should expect this kind of depth—his intended audience needs not a treatise on the etymology of the word “calling.” Nonetheless Covey needs the religious *gravitas* that accompanies the idea of vocation to underwrite what amounts to the long and trying road to material success. Even though climbing the corporate ladder requires a “sense of self,” apparently it also requires something beyond the push towards material success to motivate the climb.

The reason for using calling language in projects such as Covey’s is clear enough: the endowment of an otherwise mundane and purely secular job with other-worldly meaning is an appealing addition. He is, however, parasitic on the original force of Luther’s idea as Covey’s calling is only as deep as one’s own “personal vision.” Despite Covey’s interpretation, his move leaves a crucial question unanswered; namely, “why, beyond mere motivation of lost souls, is calling language effective at all in contemporary society?” Bookstore shelves are lined with enough self-motivation books that draw on less explicitly religious techniques for finding meaning such as “correct thinking” and the tapping of personal energies. Indeed, with such techniques for infusing life with meaning, it would seem that the need to cloak a concept with a kind of divine aura in a self-help book is a relatively superfluous one.

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 72.

For an explanation of calling language and its meaning in self-help books, an investigation is required into the kind of culture in which it gains purchase and, moreover, to whom it is being tailored. The predominant lack of explicit theological reckoning with the cultural impact on the meaning of vocation, as seen in the previous chapter, leaves the idea of vocation to fend for itself in culture. Covey's articulation stands as one particular instance of this phenomenon.

More pointedly, Covey's calling language is an indicator of what happens when the idea of vocation is abstracted from its material context and permitted to be used as a motivational tool in the service of material success. I argue that Covey's usage and others' like it are facilitated and even molded by the effects of *consumer culture* on Western life. Consumer culture shapes not only the meaning of one's work but also the meaning of the very word "vocation." Material forces, such as technology and globalization, exert tremendous influence on the nature of much work today. However the shift from a society that was organized primarily around *production* to one organized around *consumption* serves as the primary means for understanding popular expressions of vocation.

From the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the idea of vocation relied on a *homo faber* anthropology. This way of conceiving human nature relied on the idea that worker identity is forged by what one produces and how one relates to the materials of production through social relationships. In this chapter I lay out an alternative to this dated anthropology arguing that consumption rather than production guides cultural expressions of vocation as well as other concepts now. In consequence,

the meaning and application of calling, while once dependant on a culture of production, is now constructed according to the *homo consumens*.

To support this claim, I draw on the work of historians and sociologists who are attuned to the cultural implications of the shift from producer to consumer society. Once the ascendancy of consumer culture is established, I look at several explanations of the shift. The “why” of consumer culture will prove to be informative for further illuminating life in a consumer culture as well as instructive as to suitable responses to it. I then apply the working of consumer culture to a discourse that directly impacts the meaning of vocation: that involving modern work. While a shift in culture has occurred, *productive relations* between employers and employees are still responsible for structuring most working environments despite the cultural ascendancy of the consumer. I explore how consumer culture acts to enlarge the role of choice when it comes to work, yet, through the analysis offered by Richard Sennett, also suggest that this enlarged role may not equate to an enlarged amount of power within a company for the employee *cum* consumer. This suggestion is more fully taken up in chapter 4 as it relates to the use of religious ideas as consumer items to maintain hierarchical productive relations between employers and employees.

Mike Featherstone identifies three main ways to view consumer culture. The first is the economic perspective, or more generally, the material perspective. Here, consumer culture is taken as the result of the expansion of capitalist commodity production. Cheaper goods combined with effective mass advertising collude to make consumption easy and empowering to the consumer. Second is the sociological view that sees consumer culture as the primary crucible in which social bonds are forged, broken,

conceived and lived through. Not only are personal relationships, both real and imaginary, an indicator of the function of consumer culture, but also institutions that purportedly help fasten social bonds. Third is the psychological perspective that focuses on cognitive explanations for individual desires and decision-making that are driven by consumer culture.<sup>141</sup>

I focus on the second option, the sociological view, because it provides the most appropriate means to connect vocation with consumer culture.<sup>142</sup> The strength of a vocation, as we have seen, is linked to the strength of the bonds that hold an individual to his or her job, to fellow employees, to the boss and to the kind of work one does. Scholars who are attuned to the means by which consumer culture transforms these relationships add valuable contributions to the study of vocation. This contribution is felt in two ways. One, the shift from a society organized around production to that of consumption mirrors the shift in the meaning of vocation over this same time frame. Two, as we will see, the explanation of consumer culture in social terms includes the explanation of how the idea of vocation itself can become an object of consumption. Hence the selection of the socio-cultural perspective on consumer culture is not to dismiss politics, the economy, technology or even psychology as relevant factors; all of these have been important in the development of a consumer culture. Yet my goal of

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<sup>141</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991), 13.

<sup>142</sup> The sociological view also alleviates the need to view contemporary consumers as either “dupes” or “heroes.” Don Slater remarks that consumers within a consumer culture have typically been seen as unwitting slaves of advertising who bend to their own, shallow desires or as supreme human agents who, over and against the consumer in an earlier stage of capitalism, are finally asserting their power to choose goods in a rational manner. Slater argues for neither, based largely on the Foucauldian problematization of the dichotomy between self-identity and freedom, stating that the “dupes” vs. “heroes” argument contains a false dilemma. He, however, relies primarily on an economic model of consumption (whether consumers are acting rationally or not) which, while important, does not elucidate the effects of consumer culture on social bonds. See Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997), 33-34.



elucidating the current appropriation of vocation requires an analytical framework that is most closely tied to the form and function of the idea.

Because the idea of the Protestant calling necessarily, albeit reluctantly at times, engages the culture that shapes the meaning of daily activity, analysis of the predominant cultural authority, that of our activity as consumers, is warranted. This chapter seeks to give voice to the general cultural conditions that modify the appropriation of vocation where theology has been silent.

### **The Emergence of *Homo Consumens***

Cultural historian T. J. Jackson Lears uses a hyperbolic comment by Virginia Woolf in 1910 in which she claimed that, “human character changed,” to signal the emergence of consumer culture as we now know it. According to Lears, she sensed the beginnings of a breakdown of more stable cultural institutions that were already leading to a fragmented cultural reality. Lears explains the reasons for Woolf’s reaction:

In the United States as elsewhere, the bourgeois ethos had enjoined perpetual work, compulsive saving, civic responsibility, and a rigid morality of self-denial. By the early twentieth century that outlook had begun to give way to a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity, and apparently permissive (but subtly coercive) morality of individual fulfillment. The older culture was suited to a production-oriented society of small entrepreneurs; the newer culture epitomized a consumption-oriented society dominated by bureaucratic corporations.<sup>143</sup>

How the production-oriented society gave way to a consumption-oriented society can be seen in the changing relationship between production and consumption. Lears’s quote highlights the activities and overall attitudes that stem from consumer society, but the question of exactly how this shift occurred needs to be answered before describing the results of the shift.

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<sup>143</sup> Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," 3.

Typically, production and consumption have been understood as two sides of the same coin. Working in symbiosis, production feeds consumption; consumption dictates what is produced and how much. Neoclassical economic thought is largely responsible for emphasizing the role of the consumer in the relationship with the producer as opposed to focusing on the producer alone, as its predecessor, classical economics, tended to favor. According to neoclassical theory, prices, incomes, and personal tastes combine to steer the consumer towards a rational choice. The theory of marginal utility sums up the neoclassical breakdown of consumption: the consumer seeks to maximize her satisfactions through consumption by weighing costs and benefits of consuming product X. And as product X is consumed repeatedly, its consumption begins to yield diminishing utility to the consumer who is now near the margins of consumptive benefits. That which is chosen and consumed should provide more benefit than cost, despite the subjective quality of this calculation. In turn, production of consumer items or commodities is rationally undertaken to meet and at times, drive, consumer preferences.

Before neoclassical economic theory emerged roughly in the late nineteenth century, Karl Marx had already begun to formulate a less straightforward relationship between production and consumption.<sup>144</sup> Instead of consumption being the result of rational calculation which then influences production, Marx problematizes such a relationship through an analysis of the entity that binds both activities: the commodity. The commodity, among other qualities, appears to us as something other than what it really is. The way a commodity primarily expresses itself and hence bears meaning in the capitalistic market is in the relationship to the prices of other commodities. Marx

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<sup>144</sup> This can be seen early on in *Grundrisse*, the work that sketches out a foundation for his *Capital*. On the relationship between production and consumption, see Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 90-4.

claims that the commodity is fetishized in this way. It *appears* as mere exchange value, yet its true value, as given by the labor that went into the production of the commodity, is concealed.<sup>145</sup> Of course Marx goes on to critique capitalist production after his gambit, yet on a more limited level, his analysis of the commodity establishes a new role for consumption in the cultural landscape. With his unmasking of the fetish-quality of commodities, Marx opens up lines of thought that begin to move objects of consumption into the realm of culture, not just as an object of the satisfaction of needs based solely on the rational calculation of the consumer.<sup>146</sup> The consumption of commodities, for Marx, is not essentially an individual act—it carries social freight.

Thorstein Veblen expands on the implications of Marx's analysis to argue for the role of consumption in the construction of social class. Writing just before the turn of the twentieth century, Veblen claims that "conspicuous consumption" is not simply motivated by the use of a commodity's intrinsic value but consumption for the purpose of ostentation of wealth which in turn could result in a higher social status. The "pecuniary strength," as he calls it, of the consumer is the level of wealth attained as expressed by the kind and amount of consumer goods purchased. The leisure class represents the peak of pecuniary strength as well as the envied class that many strive to emulate through consumption.<sup>147</sup> In other words, keeping up with the Joneses through conspicuous

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<sup>145</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 163-167.

<sup>146</sup> There is, of course, much more to Marx's analysis as he uses the commodity as the starting point for his entire argument in *Capital*. I use his "fetishism of the commodity" only as an early and profound example of an idea of a consumer product that is able to transcend its status as simply an object of consumption. Marx does not develop a theory of consumer culture as he did not live in one. But his analysis of the commodity in a capitalistic economy sets the stage for consumption to take on a greater role in cultural development.

<sup>147</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912), 149.

consumption occurs apart from any intrinsic use value of the consumer good; the value of consumer goods is symbolic for Veblen.

The satisfaction gained from the consumption of certain, luxury consumer goods adds another variable into the cost/benefit analysis of neoclassical economics. However, the measurability of such a benefit is made more complex because Veblen's commodities have now explicitly entered the cultural realm. When satisfaction is registered in symbolic instead of physical terms, where are the margins of utility? Can conspicuous consumption ever meet its expected ends when the line demarcating the leisure class is constantly expanding and shrinking?

Veblen's argument further expands the scope of consumption in important ways. He signals the beginning of a real consumer culture. Veblen's consumer goods outrun sheer material utility—they have the power of socialization. His expansion of the potential of commodities to mediate social relations opens the possibility of more far-reaching social effects of consumption over production. Yet the line drawn from conspicuous consumption to the current role of consumption in our consumer culture is not necessarily a continuous one.

### **Hedonism and Consumer Inexhaustibility**

In his study of the origins of contemporary consumer culture, sociologist Colin Campbell cites the contributions of Veblen's work as a needed corrective to the utilitarian explanation of consumer behavior.<sup>148</sup> Yet Campbell notes that the placement of conspicuous consumption as the stage following "consumption as satisfaction of basic needs" leaves out some necessary intermediate stages. The sudden appearance of the

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<sup>148</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 49-57.

desire to “one-up” one’s neighbor through consumption needs more sources and time to develop than Veblen allows. In addition, it is unclear to Campbell whether the desire for elevated social status is connected to consumption at all, for Veblen himself does not connect the two satisfactorily.<sup>149</sup>

Campbell’s problem is based on the vast distance between conspicuous consumption and consumption today. According to Campbell’s reading of Veblen, consumer desire is reduced to emulation of others. This may explain some consumer motivations today, but it cannot fully account for either how many of today’s fashion trends often originate from lower rather than higher social strata, for instance.<sup>150</sup> Neither do the needs satisfied by conspicuous consumption match up with those of our current consumer culture.<sup>151</sup>

Campbell alternatively defines the character of contemporary consumer behavior as,

an activity which involves an apparently endless pursuit of wants; the most characteristic feature of modern consumption being this insatiability . . . which arises out of a basic inexhaustibility of wants themselves, which forever arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of their predecessors. Hence no sooner is one satisfied than another is waiting in line clamoring to be satisfied; when this one is attended to, a third appears, then subsequently a fourth, and so on, apparently without end. The process is ceaseless and unbroken; rarely can an inhabitant of modern society, no matter how privileged or wealthy, declare that there is nothing that they want.<sup>152</sup>

His idea of the insatiability of the consumer strays from classical economic theories of consumption that needs are limited, and hence that there must be corresponding “ends” to

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<sup>149</sup> Lears also refutes Veblen’s description of conspicuous consumption, though more on historical grounds than explanatory ones. Veblen’s association of conspicuous consumption with an upper crust leisure class is problematized by Lears as he cites that the kind of consumption ascribed to the leisure class was being practiced widely by those in the middle class too. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 37.

<sup>150</sup> An example is the popularity of hip-hop clothing styles worn by middle and upper class youth.

<sup>151</sup> Campbell, 56-57.

<sup>152</sup> Campbell, 37.

consumption. Campbell also extends consumer insatiability far beyond the ever-rising need to be conspicuously wealthy in society. Veblen's conception of conspicuous consumption does move consumer goods into the symbolic realm, but it still circumscribes the meaning of consumer goods as supplied by social norms—the Joneses stand as an unmovable embodiment of the final satisfaction of needs, even if those needs can never be met. And in turn, the embodiment constitutes the “home” in which needs ultimately remain needs—that is, desires that were *possible* to satisfy. For Campbell, the circuit of need and satisfaction of need assumed by Veblen remains one that, in theory, is closed thus conflicting with open-ended consumer insatiability.

In addition, Veblen's conception of needs that are met through conspicuous consumption have a singular mediator of the meaning of consumption—the leisure class. By contrast, the insatiability of needs that Campbell describes is permitted and sustained by an incalculable number of mediators of consumptive meaning. The need for multiple mediators of consumer culture is fed by the shift from *needs* being the source of consumption to *desire*. The multiplicity of mediators (advertisers and marketers primarily) meets the human imagination that is fueled by an unending desire to create new desires continually. Through this alliance, modern consumer culture is sustained. Jean Baudrillard, in an early essay on consumption, states the limits of reducing modern consumption to the satisfaction of needs succinctly. If consumption,

was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction. But we know that this is not the case: we want to consume more and more. This compulsion to consume is not the consequence of some psychological determinant, etc., nor is it simply the power of emulation. If consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is precisely because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with

the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle; it becomes energized in the project that is always dissatisfied and implicit in the object.<sup>153</sup>

What, then, is the remedy to the shortcomings of Veblen's theory that, when spelled out, explain modern consumer culture? It is understandable to look for the source of consumer culture in either the expanded technology that began to produce affordable goods for the masses or to the proliferation of advertising that cloaked simple goods in a seductive aura. Campbell argues that while both have contributed to the emergence and sustenance of consumer culture, neither is able to explicate consumer insatiability. The "technological argument" relies on an "instinctivist" model that assumes a biological basis for certain human needs. While it is difficult to deny the universality of basic human needs, instinctivism asserts that the sudden abundance of goods merely unleashes latent needs. The argument that blames or credits advertising for creating a consumer culture is based on what Campbell calls, "manipulationism" whereby needs are not latent, but created by advertisers. Again, not that advertiser manipulation of the consumer is a negligible factor in the manufacture of consumer culture. The problem with both approaches is their explanatory power regarding consumer insatiability.

With instinctivism,

the presentation of individual consumer wants as the emanation of pre-formed, inherited inclinations makes it extremely difficult to understand either the variation or changeability which characterize human desires . . . If, in addition, a latent want only becomes manifested once the appropriate product is presented to the consumer, how is it that consumption of the product often appears to extinguish the want altogether?<sup>154</sup>

Or instinctivism relies on a theory of pre-existent needs that are cleverly tapped by the presentation of consumer goods. This theory would imply that, like other instincts, these

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<sup>153</sup> Baudrillard, "The System of Objects," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 24-5.

<sup>154</sup> Campbell, 45.

needs are limited in number and are geared towards a certain task or object of satisfaction. Though if the insatiability of needs is predicated on the mutability of needs (quick extinguishing of needs followed by new ones) how can a theory of limited and relatively fixed needs hold true?

With manipulationism, Campbell argues that the reduction of the consumer mindset to exploitation begs the question of, “what exactly is being exploited?” The answer is typically a utilitarian one—that consumers consume rationally; advertising encourages irrational consumption. But again what, exactly, are advertisers exploiting? Campbell similarly points out flaws with manipulationism. Manipulationism cannot explain modern consumer culture because,

it is not the basic motivational structure of individuals which is being ‘manipulated’. On the contrary, that is precisely what the ‘manipulation’ is being accommodated to take into account. Thus, although one might argue that the desires and dreams of the consumer are ‘exploited’ in this way, one cannot claim that they are simply constructed by the actions of advertisers . . . what the producers of goods and services actually manipulate, through their agents, are not consumers or their wants but . . . the symbolic meanings which are attached to products.<sup>155</sup>

Again like instinctivism, manipulationism can identify what advertisers do, but it leaves untouched the actual desires that are the foundation of consumer culture.

Manipulationism is dependent on an anthropology whereby humans are puppets and advertisers and marketers pull the strings. Yet the real exchange between consumer goods and consumer desire is authored by consumer imagination, according to Campbell. It is the symbolic meaning of consumer items that is “manipulated” by the consumer in order that this meaning is tailored to his or her own expectations; not the other way around. Hence the theories of instinctivism and manipulationism offer explanations of

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<sup>155</sup> Campbell, 47.



the origins of modern consumer culture that are unable to explicate its main feature: consumer insatiability.

Over and against strict utilitarian explanations, Campbell finds the source of consumer insatiability, which spread outward from Europe, at the nexus of the hedonistic spirit that animated the Romantic era and the cold, impersonal reality of the Industrial Age. By hedonism he generally means the seeking of pleasure for its own sake. In contrast to the satisfaction of needs realized by the consumption of material goods, Campbell asserts that the realization of pleasure can happen without the consumption of material goods. The concepts of need and satisfaction

relate to a state of being and its disturbance, followed by action to restore the original equilibrium. Hence a state of need is a state of deprivation, in which one lacks something necessary to maintain a given condition of existence, and realization of this leads to exploratory activity in the environment in order to find whatever is capable of remedying this lack.<sup>156</sup>

The satisfaction of needs through consumption has a clear end, that of a state of equilibrium that has overcome a lack. In contrast to the satisfaction of needs, pleasure, as the experience of a satisfied desire

is not a state of being so much as a quality of experience. Not properly in itself a type of sensation, pleasure is a term used to identify our favourable reaction to certain patterns of sensation . . . [The satisfaction of needs is] being ‘pushed’ from within to act so as to restore a disturbed equilibrium, whilst [the attainment of pleasure] implies one of being ‘pulled’ from without in order to experience greater stimulation.<sup>157</sup>

Being “pulled from without” exposes desire to a virtually unlimited amount of sensations from which to derive pleasure.

Campbell historicizes the cultural ascendancy of pleasure over satisfaction of needs by locating its emergence in the late Victorian era. The pre-existent Romantic spirit that valued the emotional experience drawn from aesthetic sensibilities met the

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<sup>156</sup> Campbell, 60.

<sup>157</sup> Campbell, 60-1.

countervailing world of factory work to produce the seeds of modern consumer culture. Day-dreaming offered the ability to imagine other realities and fantastic mental journeys that was insulated from the drudgery of factory work. Insulation of this kind afforded the opportunity for self-regulation when the regulation of one's circumstances was not possible.<sup>158</sup> It is, then, the gap between fantasy and reality in which this hedonistic spirit sits and self-regulation attempts to bridge. External reality obstructs public manifestation of desire, but it also provides the materials with which one can write one's own preferred story.

Although employing material from memory, the hedonist can now imaginatively speculate upon what gratifications and enjoyments are in store, and thus attach his favoured day-dream to this real object of desire. In this way, imagined pleasures are added to those already encountered and greater desire is experienced for the unknown than the known.<sup>159</sup>

And the ability to experience pleasure without direct need of the world serves as the primary source of the modern consumer mindset for Campbell.

The upshot of the hedonistic spirit in the Industrial era is that consumption now relies less and less on material consumer items and more on the experience of consumption or the anticipation of it.<sup>160</sup> These experiences provide a different kind of satisfaction. Untethered to material objects or even the external world, consumption is now self-regulating as it is beholden primarily to individual desire. Consumer culture is that which comprises this kind of consumer as well as the producers that respond to the consumer appropriately. Campbell sums it up:

The inexhaustibility of wants which characterizes the behaviour of modern consumers has to be understood as deriving from their permanent desiring mode, something which, in turn, stems from the inevitable gap between the perfected pleasures of the dream and

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<sup>158</sup> Campbell, 71.

<sup>159</sup> Campbell, 86.

<sup>160</sup> Campbell's assertion has been confirmed most recently by Martin Lindstrom. See Martin Lindstrom, *Buyology: Truth and Lies About What We Buy* (New York: Broadway Business, 2008).

the imperfect joys of reality. No matter what the nature of the dream or, indeed, of reality, the discrepancy between them gives rise to a continuing longing, from which specific desires repeatedly spring.<sup>161</sup>

With this, Campbell provides an explanation for the emergence of *homo consumens* that helps elucidate the wellsprings of the kind of culture in which the idea of vocation now swims. In order for consumer culture to sustain consumer insatiability, it must be able to transcend the consumption that has measured ends or the consumption that can satisfy. Constant, seemingly endless dissatisfaction is a hallmark of the modern consumer—consumption with an end or a society marked by social institutions that are able to proscribe insatiability must be made immaterial. Neglected in his study, though, are not only the effects on society of consumer insatiability but also the way that changing work patterns mirrored the slow inheritance of the Romantic hedonistic spirit.

### **Hannah Arendt and Labor as Consumer Item**

Hannah Arendt, writing thirty years before Campbell, arrives at some similar conclusions, though by a different route. Her primary goal in her work, *The Human Condition*, is not to provide an explanation for consumer culture. Hers is the more general goal of articulating the forces that have hindered a modern manifestation of the *via activa*. Using Greek and Enlightenment sources, Arendt argues that the active life is predicated on the idea that *action* is a general term that has been submerged by the modern subsumption of *labor* into *work*. Hence a way to understand the modern appearance of the *via activa* is through a study of the changes in the relationship between labor and work. One emergent manifestation of this relationship is a consumer society.

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<sup>161</sup> Campbell, 95.

Labor, for Arendt, is, “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor.” Work is, “the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life cycle.”<sup>162</sup> Labor is cyclic yet fleeting; work is punctuated yet durable. Labor self-regulates in as much as one is alive, hence its necessity; work is creation in negotiation with the world, hence its contingency. The products of labor are consumed or used up in the service of sustenance whereas the products of work are used (or not used at all) suggesting their durability. Both labor and work employ generalized action to fulfill their tasks and fill out the active life. Yet the balance between the two as it impacts the human condition is beholden to historical and cultural influences.

Here drawing on Marx, though highly critical of his historical determinism elsewhere, Arendt argues that the Industrial Revolution drastically altered the relationship between labor and work. Workmanship of *homo faber*, as expressed in pre-industrial craftsmanship, could enlist action for the purpose of the production of durable products and consumption based on their use-value. The use of these products naturally fed the cycle of survival demanded by labor, yet a space was carved out for work to have social legitimacy as well as provide for a family. With industrial jobs and the division of labor that obtains in them, using Marx’s notion of alienation and his labor theory of value, Arendt claims that labor came to replace work. Labor of *animal laborans*, with its cyclical “goal” of mere self-sustenance and survival to work another day, is the end to

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<sup>162</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.

which factory work is designed. This in turn modifies the appropriation of the products of what used to be work and is now labor. Or production patterns bear directly on consumption patterns.

The industrial revolution has replaced all workmanship with labor, and the result has been that the things of modern world have become labor products whose natural fate is to be consumed, instead of work products which are there to be used.<sup>163</sup>

Alternatively, production by Arendt's "work" impacts the way in which products are used by workers. Work finds its ends in the production process and hence use of products has a directed end as well. Production by labor, even though its products may not be directly consumed by the laborer, has no end; hence its products are consumed accordingly. She elaborates:

The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lost their use character and become more and more objects of consumption, or if, to put it in another way, the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance . . . we must consume, devour, as it were, our houses and furniture and cars as though they were the "good things" of nature which spoil uselessly if they are not drawn swiftly into the never-ending cycle of man's metabolism with nature.<sup>164</sup>

Labor communicates urgency to the active life. If products that were thought to be durable when *work* was the source are now mere means to survival when *labor* produces them. Hence, all products not only become instrumental, but they also must be consumed as if life depended on it.

Arendt acknowledges along with Marx that this transformation has resulted in an emancipation of labor from the confinements of indentured work. However, the space that freer labor has moved into is one that can collect production and consumption into a systematic whole. Arendt's conclusions about consumer society mirror Campbell's in

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<sup>163</sup> Arendt, 125.

<sup>164</sup> Arendt, 125-6.

that they both arrive at a consumer society that is self-sustaining based on its capacity to satisfy endless needs and desires. Her explanation for the rise of consumer culture articulates a way that the hedonistic spirit marries the way labor functions to find its home in a consumer society.

### **T.J. Jackson Lears: “Unreality” and the Consumer Self**

One final explanation of the emergence of consumer culture that dovetails with Arendt and Campbell is from Lears. He traces the emergence of consumer culture back to the Gilded Age where the idea of the self began to undergo substantial changes. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the Gilded Age, while marked by a weakening of Calvinist proscriptions on a vocation through a strengthening of human agency, still operated under the binding ideology of the self-made man. Though weakening, Calvinist remnants of a moral ethos of self-control and temperance added extra security to patrol the perimeter of the self by maintaining a clear distance between humanity and God.<sup>165</sup>

Alienation from factory work at the American *fin de siècle* in conjunction with a disenchantment of the world contributed to a breakdown of the autonomous, more unified self so emblematic of the mythology of the “self-made man.” According to Lears, the conditions of work, not only in the factories but also in bureaucracy-driven white collar jobs, combined with the waning authority of traditional religious institutions to render reality of the “industrial self” discontinuous with past self-experience and hence “unreal.”<sup>166</sup> A revolt against the current cultural milieu or an “antimodernism” set in with individuals looking in unfamiliar places for direction. Uncomfortable feelings of “unreality” were mitigated by a burgeoning therapeutic ethos that promoted self-

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<sup>165</sup> Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," 10.

<sup>166</sup> Lears, 6.

reflection on and treatment of one's own health, mental state and success, thus bringing aspects of life more under control.<sup>167</sup> And increased self-control helped to create an internal reality that could insulate itself from jarring external conditions—at least experientially.

In this way, the self became a *project* to be gauged, judged, and finally improved. Ironically, increased control that an individual could exert in self-creation resulted in a less rigid core of the self.

As success became more dependent on evanescent “impression management,” selfhood lost coherence. The older ethic had required adherence to an internalized morality of self-control; repressive as this “inner-direction” had been, it helped to sustain a solid core of selfhood. The newer ethic of “other-direction” undermined that solidity by presenting the self as an empty vessel to be filled and refilled according to the expectations of others and the needs of the moment.<sup>168</sup>

Utilizing David Riesman's archetypes of “inner” and “outer direction,” Lears argues that the softening of the self's core left the self with no choice but to look outside of itself for replenishment.<sup>169</sup> As the “needs of the moment” began to be satisfied through the purchase of consumer goods, the modern consumer is born.

The new orientation to the self as a project to be fixed met with a deluge of advertising messages scripted to play on a resident insecurity by claiming cure-all promises. With the increased consumption of everything from advertised material goods, both for utility and luxury, to advice that contributed to overall salubrious health,

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<sup>167</sup> This idea has its basis in Philip Rieff's 1966 study of the rise of the therapeutic ethos. In fact, Rieff presages consumer culture with language that is strikingly similar to contemporary commentators. “With the decline of a civilization of authority, the therapeutic requirement shifted toward an action which would take place, first within the circle of personal relations . . . A new kind of community could be constructed, one that did not generate conscience and internal control but desire and the safe play of impulse.” See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 52.

<sup>168</sup> Lears, 8.

<sup>169</sup> See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

individuals began to look to consumer goods as the building blocks of their identity.

Lears writes,

In the embryonic consumer culture of the late nineteenth century, more and more Americans were being encouraged to “express themselves” . . . not through independent accomplishment but through the ownership of things. It was a far different and in many ways diminished sense of selfhood from that embodied in the image of the headstrong self-made man.<sup>170</sup>

If “embryonic consumer culture” is marked by the self-identification with owned consumer goods, the “fully birthed” consumer culture cultivates a self that constructs its identity not so much in the ownership of things, but in the process of consumption itself.

Lears avers that the deterioration of the self’s core has only continued up to the present time. Its waning is now met with a waxing number of products and services claiming to compensate for the loss. Yet Lears avoids the pitfalls of Campbell’s manipulationism by asserting that the origins of consumer culture are found in the self confronted by a sense of unreality, not from advertisers’ messages. It is from this “diminished sense of selfhood” that advertisers exploited, however needs were not *created* by this exchange. Hence the power of advertising is preceded and still dictated by the self attempting to establish its core. Yet the discontinuity between the promise of a new self and the absence of a pre-existent one creates a gap that cannot be bridged—except experientially through the reigning power of consumer choice.

As self-fulfillment and immediate gratification have become commodities on the mass market, calls for personal liberation have begun to ring hollow. The quest for alternative values gradually has become a casual choice among “alternative lifestyles.”<sup>171</sup>

And Lears is unable to steer clear of harsh judgment:

The effort to re-create a coherent sense of selfhood seems fated to frustration. Every failure inaugurates a new psychic quest, until the seeker is embroiled in an interminable series of self-exploration. This continually frustrated search is the logical outcome of

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<sup>170</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 37.

<sup>171</sup> Lears, 306.



antimodernism in America: the vision of a self in endless development is perfectly attuned to an economy based on pointless growth and ceaseless destruction.<sup>172</sup>

Important is Lears's emphasis on the endlessness of self-creation in a consumer market that feeds off of the energy of a kind of perpetual motion machine while it simultaneously feeds it. In the absence of a self that can feed itself, everything becomes a potential object of consumption. Durable selves need durable goods; ephemeral selves need the kind of ephemeral "goods" that match the self that it nourishes.

Though Lears makes a general assessment of the current cultural situation, questions surrounding the actual effects of consumer culture on society still remain. How does consumer insatiability spin back on work or the self? What are the general social implications for the results of these analysts' investigations? And items today? finally, beyond the way in which we consume, what is the nature of consumer

### **Zygmunt Bauman and Liquid Modernity**

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has crafted a useful metaphor to aid in the understanding of the shift from the society organized around production to one organized around consumption. He describes the social bonds that constitute consumer society as *liquid* and the bonds that held together the society organized around production as *solid*. Bauman's language is particularly useful not only because his metaphor is general enough to cover everything from consumption practices at the mall to personal relationships, but like Campbell's and Arendt's, it also refuses to take consumer culture at face value. Bauman's schema draws in the preceding cultural climate to foreground contemporary consumer culture—a needed perspective for showing the correspondence between cultural changes and vocation. He does not attempt to capture all of these

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<sup>172</sup> Lears, 306-7.

relationships since the dawn of civilization, but instead uses this metaphor to illuminate two relatively recent phases of Western modernity. Solid modernity, for Bauman, refers loosely to what most call “modernity” that begins with the Enlightenment and ends around the mid-twentieth century. Liquid modernity is a later stage of modernity beginning roughly in the mid-twentieth century up to the present.<sup>173</sup>

Bauman chooses solidity and liquidity as informative concepts used to describe the nature of social bonds or the qualities of the relationship that people have with themselves and their surroundings. The bonds that were solid but have melted or are in the process of melting are

the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions—the patterns of communications and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other.<sup>174</sup>

Generally speaking, the solid social bonds that have melted are ones that used to tie individual choices and desires to traditional institutions making both more permanent and durable. Alternatively, liquidity suggests malleability, speed and weightlessness. Hence, liquid social bonds are able to adapt to given social environments by “spilling into” social spaces as well as “flowing around” obstinate relics from solid modernity.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> He uses “modernity” in his term “liquid modernity,” which more closely resembles postmodernity, to connect two phases of one large historical epoch. The way to understand what is commonly called postmodernity is to see the distinctive features of solid modernity as melting (or perhaps deconstructing). Hence Bauman still considers these times to be “modern” though the melting of its qualities certainly spells its demise. In addition, Bauman is ambivalent about whether we are really fully in one epoch or another. Solids are still being melted. This use of the word, “modernity” is also used by Slater to describe the stretching of the older concept of modernity that occurs under consumer culture. See Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 10-11; Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*.

<sup>174</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 6.

<sup>175</sup> Bauman, 1-15.

Society used to be able to lock individuals into solid, long-term projects and belief systems through operating ideologies.<sup>176</sup> Bauman admits that solid modernity could well be understood as a project that undertook a grand melting of the solids by use of reason and new notions of freedom that once stood fixed and immovable—for example, institutional religion, monarchies and dictatorships, remnants of feudalism, and class structures. It may be forgotten that Marx’s famous line that under capitalism, “All that is solid melts into air,” was not meant to assign a destiny for capitalism that allows it to melt all things for all time. Communism was a replacement solid intended to be fire-proof. As such Bauman uses the term “solid” to describe this phase of modernity because solids under solid modernity were melted only to be replaced with better solids. Or the melting of solids was meant, “to replace the inherited set of deficient and defective ‘solids’ with another set of ‘solids,’ which was much improved and preferably perfect, and for that reason no longer alterable.”<sup>177</sup> More specifically,

‘[m]elting the solids’ meant first and foremost shedding the ‘irrelevant’ obligations standing in the way of rational calculation of effect; as Max Weber put it, liberating business enterprise from the shackles of the family-household duties and from the dense tissue of ethical obligations . . . leaving solely the ‘cash nexus’ of the many bonds underlying human mutuality and mutual responsibilities.<sup>178</sup>

So while bothersome solids were melted, solid modern ideologies, such as the capitalistic one that rested on rationalization, stepped in to recast and redefine the nature of human bonds, or as Bauman terms it, “re-embed” them.

Early [solid] modernity ‘disembedded’ in order to ‘re-embed’ . . . the individuals of ‘classic’ [pre-solid] modernity, left ‘disembedded’ by the decomposition of the estate-order, deployed their new empowerment and the new entitlements of autonomous agency in the frantic search for ‘re-embeddedment.’<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Marxism, nationalism, Fordism, phallocentrism, colonialism, or the ideology of the “self-made man” are examples of such solid ideologies.

<sup>177</sup> Bauman, 3.

<sup>178</sup> Bauman, 4.

<sup>179</sup> Bauman, 32-3.

The new sense of empowerment emerged with the loosening of the grip held by traditional institutions, such as the church and family, followed by the strengthening of the grip of capitalism. The new “re-embedded” arrangement that individuals found themselves in was “more ‘solid’ than the orders it replaced, because—unlike them—it was immune to the challenge from non-economic action.”<sup>180</sup> Therefore, the motivations of the revolutionaries that ushered in solid modernity were not iconoclastic alone, but constructive as well.

The new constructions were believed to be able to parry the blows of old solids with new, more reinforced social bonds. The bond between the society and the state that would supposedly occur when social classes are no more (as promised by communism)<sup>181</sup> or the bond forged between the rational bureaucracy and employee (under Fordism),<sup>182</sup> serve to fashion stronger bonds between people, hence institutions are reinforced.

According to Bauman, solid modernity engaged its members primarily in their capacity as *producers*. Echoing Arendt’s description of *work*, Bauman explains that production, the time needed to produce a product and the actual product produced, are tangible entities which convey a more or less set of parameters for life.

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<sup>180</sup> Bauman, 4.

<sup>181</sup> Bauman asserts, “in the *classes*, the frames which (as uncompromisingly as the already dissolved *estates*) encapsulated the totality of life conditions and life prospects and determined the range of realistic life projects and life strategies. The task confronting free individuals [in solid modernity] was to use their new freedom to find the appropriate niche and to settle there through conformity: by faithfully following the rules and modes of conduct identified as right and proper for the location.” See Bauman, 5.

<sup>182</sup> Bauman writes that, “among the principal icons of that [solid] modernity were the *Fordist factory*, which reduced human activities to simple, routine and by and large predesigned moves meant to be followed obediently and mechanically without engaging mental faculties, and holding all spontaneity and individual initiative off limits; *bureaucracy*, akin at least in its innate tendency to Max Weber’s ideal model, in which identities and social bonds were deposited on entry in the cloakroom together with hats, umbrellas and overcoats, so that solely the command and the statute book could drive, uncontested, the actions of the insiders as long as they stayed inside . . .” See Bauman, 25-26.

Life organized around the producer's role tends to be normatively regulated. There is a bottom line to what one needs in order to stay alive and be capable of doing whatever the producer's role may require, but also an upper limit to what one may dream of, desire and pursue . . . Whatever rises above that limit is a luxury, and desiring luxury is a sin.<sup>183</sup>

Notice that the space that the producer moves is delimited normatively by what are considered “proper” needs. Bodily needs that must be satisfied in order to produce goods supply the lower limit. To not to satisfy those needs constitutes a violation of one's identity as producer—one cannot produce. The upper limit is drawn by the cultural dictates of producer culture. Production is limited by the concrete means to produce. To consume beyond what is needed to produce is culturally sinful because luxuries are unnecessary for production.

In contrast, liquid, consumer society puts desire first, hence the norms that monitored the upper limits in producer society are ineffective or removed altogether. Generalized desire, without solid boundaries to keep it in check, flows like liquid into social space and expects the satisfaction that can come only from consumption. And the liquid society provides few social norms that could restrict the flow of desire in consumer culture, as opposed to the situation in solid modernity. Affirming Campbell's criticism of Veblen, Bauman writes:

Life organized around consumption . . . must do without norms: it is guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes—no longer by normative regulations. No particular 'Joneses' offer a reference point for one's own successful life; a society of consumers is one of universal comparison—and the sky is the only limit.<sup>184</sup>

Without solid norms, the consumer market meets individual desire to provide a mutually reinforcing system that encourages the consumption of all of life's “objects” that has no

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<sup>183</sup> Bauman, 76.

<sup>184</sup> Bauman, 76.

end. Bauman points out that the norms that regulate solid modernity must be melted in order for desire to be able to flow.

While solid replaced solid in societies organized around production, in liquid or fluid modernity, melted social bonds remain liquid.

The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions<sup>185</sup>

In the culture of liquid modernity, the “interlocking” bond between individual choice and collective projects has been melted leaving individual choice unhinged from any binding authority. The insatiability that drives consumer culture is permitted to flourish in this permissible environment, hence Bauman is able to equate consumer society with the liquid modern society.

Liquid life is consuming life. It casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption: That is, objects that lose their usefulness (and so their luster, attraction, seductive power and worth) in the course of being used. It shapes the judging and evaluating of all the animate and inanimate fragments of the world after the pattern of objects of consumption.<sup>186</sup>

Bauman does not restrict these fragments of life to inanimate objects of consumption that relate to the basic needs of producer society. “Animate fragments” include other people, belief systems, and life projects that have become objects of consumption. Because desire is not restricted to that for material, inanimate objects, nor are objects of consumption similarly restricted. All of these inanimate objects can be consumed like animate ones: decide on the fitting object, consume, discard waste, and then begin the search anew. This is possible because the solid bonds that used to prevent such a fleeting

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<sup>185</sup> Bauman, 6.

<sup>186</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 9.

appropriation of these inanimate objects have become liquid ones forged by individual desire and choice: the hallmarks of consumer culture.

This kind of consumption is directly related to the machinery of life in consumer culture. When individual choice fueled by desire is the primary source of decision and action in a society, life projects, worldviews, even personal relationships cannot be restrictive so as to eliminate the ability to choose a more enticing alternative. Liquid life, as it were, flows around obstacles, settles on appealing situations, consumer goods, and worldviews only to flow out quickly in search of newer and better versions of what was just left behind.

Liquid life, though, is not lived without any direction at all. Bauman asserts that the primary means of control that consumer culture wields over the populace is that of *seduction*. Consumers of material and immaterial products are seduced at first by the sheer volume of possible objects of consumption. Enticing advertisements simultaneously incite and channel desire towards certain products, but for Bauman as for Campbell, it is a mistake to reduce the seduction of consumer culture to the seductive advertising of affordable goods. In step with Campbell, Bauman argues that seduction of the consumer is instead predicated on the fact that there is *no* end to the satisfaction of consumer desire.

Consumer choice is now a value in its own right; the activity of choosing matters more than what is being chosen, and the situations are praised or censured, enjoyed or resented depending on the range of choices on display.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Bauman, 87.

Bauman cites pleasurable as the fuel for the positive feedback loop that runs consumer culture. But unlike Campbell, Bauman emphasizes the lack of external regulating norms as the cause instead of internal day-dreaming.

What sets the members of consumer society apart from their ancestors is the emancipation of consumption from its past instrumentality that used to draw its limits—the demise of ‘norms’ and the new plasticity of ‘needs’, setting consumption free from functional bonds and absolving it from the need to justify itself by reference to anything but its own pleasurable. In the consumer society, consumption is its own purpose and so is self-propelling.<sup>188</sup>

In this way, the act of choosing, as opposed to the actual act of consumption, is an end in itself.

Bauman’s metaphor illuminates the effects of consumer culture on lives that are caught in an endless loop of consumption. But his picture leaves us with some bothersome questions. If liquid life can pour into any social space and vacate when consumer desire gives the signal, is perspective possible? If ideas are susceptible to consumption, from where can a critique of consumer culture stand if anywhere?

Bauman, throughout his numerous books on the social implications of consumer culture, rarely offers value judgments; consumer culture just is, as producer culture was.<sup>189</sup> If we are all now mere interpreters of culture instead of law makers, our fate seems sealed. The integration of Bauman’s general contention here and his assessment of liquid consumer culture gives the appearance of a total foreclosure of the possibility of

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<sup>188</sup> Bauman, “Consuming Life,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1 (2001): 12-3.

<sup>189</sup> His predilection for a kind of conservative resignation can be traced back to a work that precedes his current preoccupations with consumer culture. In an essay entitled, “Legislators and Interpreters,” Bauman consigns current intellectuals to the status of interpreters when legislation occupied their time in solid modernity. Along the general lines of his solid/liquid schema, Bauman argues that the making of laws by intellectuals was possible when solid social bonds encouraged and protected such offerings. Now in liquid society, the only recourse to intellectuals is interpretation of existing phenomena. This is so because the diversity of cultural authorities in a liquid society prevents overarching universal judgments. When these judgments are not permitted and interpretation is the only avenue, critique must be measured and contingent, if any is offered at all. Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1-25.



cultural transcendence. Yet in several of his works on consumer culture, Bauman expands his matter-of-fact description of consumer culture into a discussion of the social effects of such a culture. Here, Bauman contends that the benefits of consumer culture, that of actually being able to indulge in fleeting, yet insatiable desire, does not extend to all equally. A precondition of full participation in consumer culture is the minimal requirement that one's desire actually is met with the *possibility* of satisfaction under the terms given by consumer culture. For the poorest classes in the West, this is not possible. They are "flawed consumers," not as much because of financial inability to consume but because the poor are unable to choose freely amongst consumer items.<sup>190</sup>

To meet the social norm, to be a fully-fledged member of society, one needs to respond promptly and efficiently to the temptations of the consumer market; one needs to contribute to the 'supply-clearing demand' and in case of economic trouble be part of the 'consumer-led recovery'. All this the poor, lacking decent income, credit cards and the prospect of a better time, are not fit to do. Accordingly, the norm which is broken by the poor of today, the norm of the breaking of which makes them 'abnormal,' is the norm of consumer competence or aptitude, not that of employment. First and foremost, the poor of today are 'non-consumers', not 'unemployed'; they are defined in the first place through being flawed consumers, since the most crucial of the social duties which they do not fulfil is that of being active and effective buyers of the goods and services the market offers.<sup>191</sup>

Unable to participate as functioning consumers, the poor are true outcasts. In a producer society, employment was the ticket for entrance into the game played by functioning members of society. In a consumer society, it is the ability to consume that qualifies full participants. Again, because the object of consumption is subordinated to the ability to choose itself, it is the fact that the poorest in a liquid society are barred from choosing freely that draws the real dividing line between classes.

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<sup>190</sup> Fred Hirsch makes the same point, but on economic grounds. See Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 71-96.

<sup>191</sup> Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Berkshire, GB: McGraw-Hill Education, 2004), 112-113.

While both refusing to view the distribution of class status through an ethical lens and avoiding policy suggestions for a remedy, Bauman does conclude that until the market is dislodged as the predominant cultural framework, nothing will change. His is not a suggestion delivered from an Archimedean point. Nor is it very developed. It is more provocative than substantial. However the problem of the poor in a consumer culture is real and nothing short of a complete cultural overhaul is warranted for Bauman. His conclusion speaks to the comprehensive nature of consumer culture and its ability to do the work of socialization.

Not all are beneficiaries of the radical freedom or the “emancipation of labor” afforded by consumer culture. Bauman’s idea of “good” and “bad” consumers suggests that living in a consumer culture is neither a zero-sum game nor one in which the inexhaustibility of consumer desire necessarily translates into inexhaustible political power for the ordinary consumer. However, Bauman’s reluctance to get specific on the causes of the class division between good and bad consumers can be partly explained by his commitment to the idea that the shift from solid, producer culture to liquid, consumer culture is *complete*. Of course production of goods and services still continues at a clip consistent with that of fifty years ago.<sup>192</sup> Conspicuously absent in Bauman’s account is the admission of *any* role that social relations of production still exert on society. Class divisions may express themselves in the kind of consumption that is performed, but how are they sustained? Can the difference between good and bad consumers fully explain the widening wealth gap in American society?

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<sup>192</sup> Despite a common belief that Americans work more hours now than they did fifty years ago, a Gallup Poll recently found that time spent at work has not changed significantly over the last half century. Alex M. Gallup and Frank Newport, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2005* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 339.

## Consuming the All-Consuming Job?

As we have seen in the theological renderings of the historical development of the Protestant calling, work has gradually been displaced from its place as a primary source of meaning on which a vocation can draw. The shift from producer to consumer society discloses not only some of the reasons for the theological response but also the kind of work that a current idea of vocation must incorporate and the kind of working environment that it must engage, if this is still possible.

Again for Bauman, work in producer society served to hold, “together individual motivation, social integration and systemic management, and as the major institution responsible for their mutual congruence and coordination.”<sup>193</sup> The replacement of producer culture, consumer culture, pushes out production as the primary cultural activity and the meaning of vocation is altered with a matching intensity.<sup>194</sup> Bauman characteristically frames the nature of the shift:

It is from this central place that work is being gradually dislodged, as capitalism moves into the consumer phase of its history. Into the vacated room, individual freedom (in its consumer form) has moved. First, perhaps, as a squatter. But more and more as the legitimate resident . . . work has been progressively ‘decentered’ on the individual plane; it has become relatively less important compared to other spheres of life, and confined to a relatively minor position in individual biography; it certainly cannot compete with personal autonomy, self-esteem, family felicity, leisure, the joys of consumption and material possessions as conditions of individual satisfaction and happiness. Work has been, however, ‘decentered’ also on the social and systemic planes. On every level, consumer freedom moves into its place.<sup>195</sup>

With work “de-centered,” it, like all other “spheres of life,” is now vulnerable to the machinery of consumer culture.

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<sup>193</sup> Bauman, *Freedom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1988), 74.

<sup>194</sup> “Replacement” here refers to function, not substance. In fact, substantially, it could be argued that consumer culture did not replace producer culture, but emerged in direct reaction to it. Lears writes that the “bureaucratic world of work” of late nineteenth, early twentieth century America abstracted work from the “hard, substantial reality of things” causing a search for self-identity to move from work to consumer goods. See Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 60.

<sup>195</sup> Bauman, *Freedom*, 74.

One way to see the relationship between contemporary work and consumer culture is through the changes in the meaning of the work ethic. With the onset of liquid modernity, the norms that contained and animated a work ethic in America have melted allowing consumer culture, and hence individual choice, to guide the meaning of work.<sup>196</sup>

Bauman, again, asserts that,

[i]f, in a life normatively motivated by the work ethic, material gains were deemed secondary and instrumental in relation to work itself (their importance consisting primarily in confirming the adequacy of the work effort), it is the other way round in a life guided by the 'consumer ethic.' Here, work is (at best) instrumental; it is in material emoluments that one seeks, and finds, fulfillment, autonomy and freedom.<sup>197</sup>

Of course a work ethic is necessarily present in those who sustain a taxing number of working hours—despite the level of satisfaction on the job and despite its instrumental nature.

One consequence for the alteration of the work ethic is the reciprocal change in the way authority in general, and specifically in the workplace, is appropriated. If work is now a means to satisfy consumer demand, as Bauman claims, authoritarian structure must respond accordingly (or perhaps its alteration is a causal factor in the emergence of consumer society). Bauman again:

Light, consumer-friendly capitalism did not abolish the law-giving proffering authorities, nor did it make them redundant. It has merely brought into being and allowed to coexist with authorities too numerous for any one of them to stay in authority for long, let alone to carry the 'exclusive' label . . . When the authorities are many, they tend to cancel each other out, and the sole effective authority in the field is one who must choose between them. It is by courtesy of the chooser that a would-be authority becomes an authority. Authorities no longer command; they ingratiate themselves with the chooser; they tempt and seduce.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> It is important to note that this cultural shift in the meaning of work is still occurring, and that elements of consumer culture (even the kind we find today) existed side by side with the "producer culture" from the eighteenth century on that Weber describes.

<sup>197</sup> Bauman, 75.

<sup>198</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 63-4.

Sociologist Richard Sennett largely agrees with Bauman's assessment of shifting authority structures in the workplace. Yet unlike Bauman, Sennett is reluctant to proclaim total victory for consumer culture as it regards work. Sennett uses consumer culture as a means to talk about new cultural appropriations of work and its practices. Though underneath these cultural directives still lie the agents of social relations of production that have merely found new ways to sustain similar power dynamics at work found in societies organized around production. It is the *flexibility* with which businesses must currently run and the reciprocal flexibility that employees must embody that ties the workplace to consumer culture.<sup>199</sup> Flexibility describes necessary tactics of any business hoping to survive—not the willingness of employers to relinquish any modicum of power to employees.

Sennett refers to the “Weberian triangle” to describe the early twentieth-century form of authority that dispenses commands from a distance through bureaucratic channels but whose message is clear as relayed through a chain of command. The triangle expanded outward from the boss, who sits at one of the points, as productivity increased. In order for the boss to be able to control the production process while labor was increasingly being divided, individual jobs were relatively unchanging. “The chain of command within this triangle operated on the principle that each niche had a distinctive function; efficiency dictated that there be as little duplication as possible.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Sennett draws on David Harvey's early use of “flexibility” to describe postmodern culture in general and applies it to the political economy. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1991), 121-199.

<sup>200</sup> Sennett, “Capitalism and the City,” 118.

As such, individual work ethic matched the satisfaction of “doing one’s job the best as one can” even when working conditions were less than ideal.<sup>201</sup>

Twenty-five years ago, businesses began to shed the Weberian triangle model.

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sought to destroy the practice of fixed-function work, substituting instead teams which work short-term on specific tasks—teams which are shuffled when the organization embarks on new projects . . . instead of each person doing his or her own particular bit in a defined chain of command, you have duplication of function, many different teams compete to do the same task fastest, best.<sup>202</sup>

“Flexible” best sums up not only the way businesses must be in order to respond quickly to a rapidly changing market, but also the quality that employees must possess if they are to keep a job. Instead of a triangle, a circle with a dot in the center more aptly depicts the power structure of many modern businesses. Sennett writes,

At the center, a small number of managers rules, makes decisions, sets tasks, judges results; the information revolution has given it more instantaneous control over the corporation’s workings than in the old system, where orders often modulated and evolved as they passed down the chain of command. The teams working on the periphery of the circle are left free to respond to output targets set by the center, free to devise means of executing tasks in competition with one another, but not free to decide what those tasks are.<sup>203</sup>

How and why does the “dotted circle” model work? Sennett describes three facets of any business attempting to employ such a model and flexibility is the thread running through each part: “discontinuous reinvention of institutions” (companies routinely deconstructing ways of doing business and constructing anew), “flexible specialization” (companies producing widely varying products or providing highly differentiated services to cover more and more of the market), and “concentration without

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<sup>201</sup> Sennett, 119.

<sup>202</sup> Sennett, 118.

<sup>203</sup> Sennett, 119.

centralization” (small units of work groups are networked together and run by a diffuse authority instead of an authority that is delivered down in pyramid/triangle fashion).<sup>204</sup>

All three, when executed faithfully, help a company to adjust promptly to market volatility but often at a cost to mid- to lower-level employees, or those at the edge of the circle. Workers in a flexible company must forego the security of consistent and durable tasks on the job; they must be ever-ready for change. More drastically, change can mean everything from an unexpected lay-off, to a transfer, to a radical alteration of the job itself. Sennett explains that, “[c]areer . . . applied to labor meant a lifelong channel for one’s economic pursuits. Flexible capitalism has blocked the straight roadway of career, diverting employees suddenly from one kind of work into another.”<sup>205</sup> In fact, non-flexibility or stubborn loyalty to a company can actually act as a detriment to one’s career. Barry Schwartz notes that, “job-switching has become so natural that individuals who have worked for the same employer for five years are regarded with suspicion. No longer are they seen as loyal; instead, their desirability or ambition is called in to question . . .”<sup>206</sup>

Echoing Bauman, Sennett writes that the work ethic has undergone drastic changes to compensate. “The work ethic, as we commonly understand it, asserts self-disciplined use of one’s time and the value of delayed gratification . . . Such a work ethic depends in part on institutions stable enough for a person to practice delay. Delayed gratification loses its value, though, in a regime whose institutions change rapidly . . .”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 47-57.

<sup>205</sup> Sennett, 9.

<sup>206</sup> Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2004), 35.

<sup>207</sup> Sennett, 99.

The work ethic that Weber relied on for his argument took its directive from a clear chain of command, whether it be bureaucratic, theological or both, in form. As Weber points out, delayed gratification is possible only when the benefits of a resolute work ethic are underwritten by an unambiguous authority.<sup>208</sup> Lacking a trust in the authority to guarantee a delayed payback, the incentive to apply a resilient work ethic would quickly lose its justification.

Replacing this old work ethic is a new ethic that can no longer rely on consistent institutional support for its energy and direction. And absent the kind of stability inherent in jobs of producer culture, today's work ethic must apply itself to tasks that are vague and protean. When frequently-changing job tasks are coupled with general job insecurity, the lack of a central, binding authority at work can explain it. And with a lack of such an authority, a softer way of maintaining productivity and efficiency is needed. Instead of a dictatorial, top-down management mediated through a thick bureaucracy, the work of channeling employees towards maximum productivity and efficiency is increasingly being exerted through responsibility to one's team. Individual responsibility that corresponded with individual work ethic in more of a one-to-one relationship is replaced with social responsibility to the success of teams; hence the work ethic has undergone corresponding alterations. Sennett describes what is necessary to be successful in such a work situation as well as a sad consequence:

The modern work ethic focuses on teamwork. It celebrates sensitivity to others; it requires such "soft skills" as being a good listener and being cooperative; most of all, teamwork emphasizes team adaptability to circumstances . . . Teamwork is the group practice of demeaning superficiality.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 170-2.

<sup>209</sup> Sennett, 99.



As the primary unit of work becomes increasingly “team-based,” the nature of power and authority in the work place also shifts. Power still exists within the social machinery of the corporation. However, rather than emanating unilaterally from the corporate brass, power is now far less centralized as it is dispensed multilaterally. Arrangements of power, in other words, are delivered more in “shotgun style” than single rifle shot, and deployment of power is more hegemonic than dictatorial. Sennett explains,

People still play games of power in teams, but the emphasis on soft skills of communication, facilitation, and mediation changes radically one aspect of power: authority disappears, authority of the sort which self confidently proclaims, “This is the right way!” or “Obey me, because I know what I’m talking about!” The person with power does not justify command; the powerful only “facilitate,” enable others. Such power without authority disorients employees; they may still feel driven to justify themselves, but now there is no one higher up who responds. Calvin’s God has fled.<sup>210</sup>

The reduction of job success to mere social dexterity in the face of a lack of direction from above serves to minimize the role of actual work as a barometer for such success.

When tasks within a job vary from day to day coupled with the elevated part that general social skills play in the rise or fall in the modern corporation, work and its material context are relatively unimportant.

One could argue that the shift from individuals being at the mercy of a large bureaucracy to that of working within a team in competition with other teams is a desirable one. In terms of social capital, it seems as though there is strength in numbers and lacking unionization within corporations, team-based work can provide the opportunity for workers to gain social capital (if their team wins). However, Sennett contends that social inequality between those at the top and everyone else can and does grow in flexible companies as it did in the Industrial societies. He states the current situation forcefully:

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<sup>210</sup> Sennett, 109.

Inequality has become the Achilles' heel of the modern economy. It appears in many forms: massive compensation to executives, a widening gap between wages at the top and the bottom of corporations, the stagnation of the middle layers of income relative to those of the elite.<sup>211</sup>

Instead of the removal of bureaucracy as articulated in the Weberian triangle in favor of team-based authority of the dotted circle ushering in a more equal sharing of the financial pie, social inequality between executives and all others still exists. Teams competing with each other for the prize, at first glance, appear to be a desired alternative to the individual striving against an intractable bureaucracy. However, not only is individuality minimized in team efforts, the “winner-take-all” scenario enables executives to promote or reward only the winning team.

In the Weberian triangle of bureaucracy, rewards came for doing one's job as best one can; in the dotted circle, they come to teams winning over other teams—which the economist Robert Frank calls winner-take-all organization; sheer effort no longer produces reward. This bureaucratic reformulation, Frank argues, contributes to the great inequalities of pay and perks in flexible organizations, a material reality of inequality entirely at odds with work-place democracy.<sup>212</sup>

Effort is certainly exerted in team projects; however team success may or not be equated to individual effort within a team. Likewise, actual work done by an individual is not a guaranteed factor in the success or failure of a team; more important is the ability to get along with team members. In addition, structuring worker success in terms of a winner-take-all reward system allows executives to rely on an all-or-nothing dispersal of perks and pay to only one team. Not only does the disparity grow between the small number of winners and the large number of losers, but the executives are also insulated from criticism based on the perceived fairness of the game.

Another means of widening the social capital gap that simultaneously protects executives from accountability is the use of consulting. Sennett provides an instructive

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<sup>211</sup> Sennett, 54.

<sup>212</sup> Sennett, “Capitalism and the City,” 119.

example. In the 1990s, the BBC hired the consulting firm of McKinsey to restructure the way the BBC was run. They basically redesigned, “who reported to whom, what they reported, what they had to report.”<sup>213</sup> Hired on a contract basis, yet given a massive responsibility to the future of the company, McKinsey acted as another team within the BBC that was assigned a specific task. But because McKinsey’s ultimate allegiance was to McKinsey and not the BBC, problems resulted from implementation of their “winning strategy.”

The McKinsey consultants took too little responsibility, however, for implementing these changes, nor did they deal with the human consequences of change; among these consequences were large numbers of people shifted from areas in which they had developed expertise to areas in which they were driving blind . . . The consultants were paid, then departed, leaving the organization in turmoil, increasing social distances within the BBC. These human disconnections in the midst of change in turn dramatically increased employees’ feelings of anxiety.<sup>214</sup>

The social distance here is the one between the executives who hired McKinsey and the employees who had to abide by the new rules laid down. If employees felt greater anxiety over the changes or worse, the changes did not work, the executives’ hands are clean.

By hiring consultants, executives . . . can shift responsibility for painful decisions away from themselves. The central unit commands but avoids accountability.<sup>215</sup>

Under the Weberian triangle, at least there was a known place where worker grievances could be levied whether they were taken seriously or not: one’s superior. When consultants step in between executives and employees, exercise the power to alter the working environment drastically, and then vacate the premises, where are grievances filed?

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<sup>213</sup> Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 56.

<sup>214</sup> Sennett, 56-7.

<sup>215</sup> Sennett, 57.

In creating social distances which divorce control from accountability, consulting reveals a fundamental shifting of bureaucratic ground, a reformatting of inequality, increasing social distance. Power can become concentrated at the top, but authority does not thereby increase.<sup>216</sup>

In an odd twist, power is temporarily ceded to an outside contract group and when power returns to the executives, it has actually grown like the successful buying and selling of stock. The result, according to Sennett, is an increase in the social inequality of the workplace with those at the top shielded from direct criticism and freed from direct responsibility for the welfare of the employees.

One effect of team-based business that Sennett highlights is revealed in the way potential employees search for a job and employers search for employees. When soft skills needed for ensuring a winning team are emphasized, the ability to do the actual job is secondary. In fact, potential ability is the item sold by the prospective seller and what is sought by the buyer.

The search for talent, in particular, focuses on the people with a talent for problem solving no matter the context, a talent which skirts becoming too ingrown. Potential ability emphasizes the prospect of doing things one has yet to do; achievement and mastery are self-consuming, the contexts and contents of knowledge used up in being used. Consumption of goods plays a key role in complementing and legitimating these experiences.<sup>217</sup>

Because both the actual job that many apply to will morph and that success is largely determined by team success, the qualifications needed to get a job in a flexible business need not be primarily connected to the actual work that one would do. Hence consumption, rather than production, is the activity that complements and legitimates the experience of searching for a job and for employees.

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<sup>216</sup> Sennett, 58.

<sup>217</sup> Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 141-2.

It is here that Sennett's use of consumer culture diverges from Bauman's. Sennett seems to agree with the idea of consumer inexhaustibility in principle,<sup>218</sup> but he is more inclined to emphasize the end game of the consumption of individual items instead of the desire that fuels continual consumption. Or the "self-consuming" passion, while being stoked by unlimited desire and imagination, is one that that, through perpetual dissatisfaction, can tire.<sup>219</sup> Consumer inexhaustibility is never fully extinguished as desire is always active, as Sennett concurs. Yet he implies that consumer desire goes through ebbs and flows as opposed to Bauman's "always-flowing" liquid consumer culture.

Sennett's more measured assessment of the punctuated power of consumer culture is reflected in his interpretation of the relationship between consumption and the workplace. Consumption "complements and legitimates" the experiences of working in a flexible capitalistic economy and the tactics employed when looking for a job and searching for job talent, according to Sennett. Yet if consumer culture serves to complement and possibly legitimize workplace experiences, this means consumer culture merely *works* with pre-existing structures of the workplace as opposed to pre-figuring them. In other words, the demand for unlimited choices may animate the approach to work and certain experiences of it, but as Sennett demonstrates, consumer culture is unable to empower the employee *qua* job consumer in terms of social capital. Or consumption acts as a cultural mediator that aids in authorizing not only the elevation of team-based skills but also the way in which jobs are approached. Yet the power of the

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<sup>218</sup> Sennett, 150.

<sup>219</sup> Sennett, 137-42.

consumer to choose to erase the divide between employers and employees clearly has its limits.

Bauman would probably agree with Sennett's assessment. However in his description of the shift from societies organized around production to that of consumption, Bauman leaves little room for social relations of production to remain. It is as if liquid society has been successful in melting all solids permanently. If we force Sennett into using Bauman's metaphor, liquid is certainly flowing and melting some solids. But despite the appearance of a liquid society, other solids are unable to be melted. The liquid informs the way that we appropriate work in the way that the lack of choice will frustrate; the expansion of choice (or at least the appearance of it) keeps us going. Despite our approach to work via consumption, the power relations forged under solid modernity have remained solid.

### **Working to Work on Oneself**

If consumer culture has its limits, what is its role in perpetuating class distinctions in the workplace as it relates to self-help literature? Or how does a book like *The Purpose-Driven Life* utilize the tactics of consumer culture while contributing to social inequality at work? A return to Micki McGee's work on the "belabored self" and self-help literature is needed. Recall her argument that the motivation to have consumer culture legitimate working experiences is backed up and infused by the prevailing effort to "work on oneself." She contends that self-help literature has risen up to meet the challenge posed by feelings of insecurity in the consumer self by reinforcing the consumer mindset.

The appeal of this literature is understandable: the tremendous growth in self-help publishing parallels an overall trend of stagnant wages and destabilized employment

opportunities for American workers . . . To manage this anxiety, individuals have been advised not only to work longer and harder but also to invest in themselves, manage themselves, and continuously improve themselves.<sup>220</sup>

Hence work on the job and work on the self act in symbiosis with each other. Recall that self-help literature targets the themes of the, “self as a project to be worked on,” or as she calls it, the “belabored self,” as that which in actuality can never fully be fixed, but nevertheless must demand our full attention and effort.<sup>221</sup>

The belabored self functions off of a bifurcation of the self into an ideal or authentic self that puts the inauthentic or tainted self into relief.<sup>222</sup> The project of the belabored self, with its momentum guaranteed by a protracted battle between the authentic and inauthentic self, can even insulate itself from social exigencies, such as those that stem from work. McGee writes that, “[T]he imperative of inventing the self that is found in the literatures of self-improvement is often cast in the form of discovering or uncovering an authentic, unique and stable self that might function—even thrive—unaffected by the vagaries of the labor market.”<sup>223</sup> In fact, the vagaries of the labor market can fuel the drive to work on oneself in that a constantly changing job situation provides new opportunities to re-make oneself through work. If the tasks within a job changes or a job is lost altogether, while frustrating on one level, when enlisted in the service of the belabored self, these situations are fodder for consumption in the building of an identity.

The belabored self that engages self-help literature, then, approaches itself as a project in which consumption of the *means* to better itself is akin to the consumer

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<sup>220</sup> McGee, 12.

<sup>221</sup> McGee, 15-17.

<sup>222</sup> For Deepak Chopra, attention to nature allows the true self to emerge; for Eckhart Tolle, it is the overcoming of our “delusion of time” that returns us to the authentic self of the “now.”

<sup>223</sup> McGee, 16.

approach to work. Consequently, both one's job and one's identity are subject to consumer choice when once both were subject to certain societal norms that furnished rules and boundaries for the socially legitimate expression of each. Absent such norms, the meaning of work and the self are open not only to interpretation but also to creation by the consumer.

Additionally, the job itself must be able to replicate the experience of consumption that is felt in the process of working on oneself in spite of changing labor conditions. A job, if it is to participate in consumer culture successfully, must be able to reproduce consumer satisfaction. Bauman clarifies:

Like everything else which may reasonably hope to become the target of desire and an object of free consumer choice, jobs must be 'interesting'—varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, containing certain (thought not excessive) measures of risk, and giving occasion to ever-new sensations. Jobs that are monotonous, repetitive, routine, unadventurous, allowing no initiative and promising no challenge to wits nor a chance for self-testing and self-ascertaining 'boring.' No full fledged consumer would conceivably agree to undertake them<sup>224</sup>

When a job is treated as a commodity in a consumer culture, the usefulness of what is produced or the good that a service can render is in the service of the *experience* of production. The measure of the quality of a job has less to do with concrete work activity and more to do with the kind of stimulation that work spawns. Again, material work is made immaterial, in both senses of the word, when a job is approached as a consumer item.

With this and the context of flexible capitalism, consumer culture infects much of working life. The work to improve oneself, which runs on an endless loop of consuming new and better self-images, uses a job instrumentally to provide satisfaction to consumer desire which simultaneously insulates oneself from the disquieting exigencies of work in

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<sup>224</sup> Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*, 34.



a flexible capitalistic economy. When actual work is rendered immaterial in the push to consume life, working on oneself, pursuing jobs that entertain, and complacency with job flexibility and insecurity can be tolerated so long as the ability to choose is never immobilized.

### **Conclusion**

The engagement of work with consumer culture yields several key insights for my project. The cultural ascendancy of consumption over production has had wide-ranging effects on society. The decreasing emphasis on production to act as the basis of one's identity as a worker parallels the evaporation of norms that used to guarantee consistency on the job as well as continuance in a job or trade. The work ethic that internally sustained the society organized around production morphed into one that falls in line with the dictates of consumer culture. Predicated on the unmooring of work from its material context, variable tasks on the job and variable jobs within a long career reinforce the expanding role of consumption at work. They do so by placing the authority to choose a job and the way to experience it squarely with the individual. Jobs and the work that follows become objects of consumption and are accordingly expected to satisfy individual desire.

Yet as Sennett demonstrates, consumer culture primarily serves the role of mediating the experience of working in businesses participating in flexible capitalism while the power dynamic between employers and employees stays intact. This is not to diminish the influence of consumer culture. As cultural mediator, its authority must be granted and dealt with if any redressing of social inequality at work is to occur.

What is the fate of a vocation when it interacts with work thus construed?

Bauman states the problem succinctly:

What possible purpose could the strategy of pilgrim-style 'progress' serve in this world of ours? In this world, not only have jobs-for-life disappeared, but trades and professions which have acquired the confusing habit of appearing from nowhere and vanishing without notice can hardly be lived as Weberian 'vocations'—and to rub salt into the wound, the demand for the skills needed to practice such professions seldom lasts as long as the time needed to acquire them.<sup>225</sup>

Generally speaking, Sennett's terms such as "linear narrative" and "long-term goals" characterized the calling that Weber uses for his argument. The work ethic, now being informed by the consumer mindset *writ large* on the job, can only but spin back on the current meaning of vocation.

Two primary consequences emerge. One, with institutions no longer able to communicate authority with a unified voice, vocation loses its ability to fix life projects in terms of God's call as well as fuel a work ethic. Gone is the binding authority of the Lutheran estate as well as the power of overarching ideologies such as that of the "self-made man," that guided vocation. When the meaning of a calling is not restrained and hence defined by solid social norms, it, like a job, cannot escape the clutches of consumer culture.

A vocation is also relatively free to be appropriated as the individual sees fit. Self-legitimizing acts of consumption that animate identity formation as a worker spill over into the meaning-making ability of a vocation converting it into a consumer item in the process. With the solid social environment, which worked in conjunction with institutions to connect long-term plans with God's plan, out of the way, consumer culture is able to easily unhinge the idea of vocation from its past and its material context. Then

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<sup>225</sup> Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist—Or a Short History of Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 24.

the idea of vocation can be offered as an abstract concept to be “purchased” and applied according to individual desire, as Covey’s usage indicates.

Two, with actual work displaced by variable tasks and interpersonal skills, the means by which work can fulfill the duties of a calling are now unclear. In contradistinction to Ellul’s call for the removal of work from a vocation based on its meaninglessness, work is now a means to satisfy consumer desire whether instrumentally or substantively. Dissatisfaction with a job is a sign that one has chosen badly, or more importantly, been a bad consumer. Hence the odd juxtaposition of the cultural significance of work is contraposed with the insignificance of what one actually does at work.

If a vocation is still able to address social inequality at work *and* bundle these two aspects of modern work coherently, perhaps the idea of vocation is being stretched too thin. Or perhaps the problem rests in the hurried expectation that a calling *must* participate in consumer culture in order to remain relevant. This chapter has disclosed the difficulties that a calling must endure if it insists on galvanizing modern work. The task of the final chapter is to question the wisdom of this insistence.

It should be clear that the analysis of consumer culture that foregrounds its social consequences against the backdrop of its predecessor, producer culture, sheds light on the current meaning and appropriation of the idea of vocation in ways that strict theological renderings cannot. Yet these cultural effects on vocation, similarly, cannot serve as the sole authority guiding the meaning of calling today; the religious content of vocation necessarily plays a role. Hence, consumer culture may not have the final say on the meaning of vocation today.

As stated in the introductory chapter, religious concepts have an unusually stubborn relationship with “secular” culture unlike non-religious concepts such as the “self” and “work.” Hence the religious import of vocation *can* operate dialectically with consumer culture to produce a fuller and in my case, a political idea of vocation. *The Purpose-Driven Life* is a version of a synthesis of this dialectic. Though Rick Warren would be loath to admit the effects that consumer culture has had on his message in the book, consumer culture, as expected, has left its mark. Warren’s purpose is purported to be given by an omnipotent God that stands above culture—as is our own life purpose. If liquid consumer culture melts everything in its path, what is status of religious concepts such as Warren’s version of vocation? How does his version of the idea of vocation bear the burden of functioning dutifully in our consumer culture when not only a job has become a consumer item but also the very idea of vocation itself? In my treatment of the relationship between religion and consumer culture generally and *The Purpose-Driven Life* specifically in the next chapter, I attempt an answer to these questions.

### CHAPTER 3—THE “PURCHASE-DRIVEN” LIFE

It’s not about you.

Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*

Rick Warren wrote *The Purpose-Driven Life* in 2002 as a follow-up to his book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*.<sup>226</sup> *The Purpose-Driven Church* was written specifically for pastors as a guide to recovering and maintaining the health of their existing institutions as well as building new ones. The theme of guidance runs through *The Purpose-Driven Life* too, but Warren expands his audience to include all people who are seeking to find a sense of meaning and purpose. To date, more than thirty million copies have been sold making it the best selling non-fiction hardback in U.S. history.<sup>227</sup> My interest in this particular book is understandably piqued by the sheer number of people who have read it and have potentially used it. Yet my primary task in this chapter is not to analyze *why* *The Purpose-Driven Life* has generated so much interest, nor is it to dig into *who* Rick Warren is for insights. The goal, rather, is to evaluate the *contents* of *The Purpose-Driven Life* as it stands at the crossroads of a theology of vocation and consumer culture. Hence this analysis is not grinding a theological or even a personal axe, but simply throwing a different light on the book.

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<sup>226</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>227</sup> [http://www.christianpost.com/article/20070704/28293\\_Christian\\_Books\\_Still\\_Dominate\\_All-Time\\_Best-Sellers\\_Lists.htm](http://www.christianpost.com/article/20070704/28293_Christian_Books_Still_Dominate_All-Time_Best-Sellers_Lists.htm).

I contend in this chapter that Warren's purpose is the functional equivalent of vocation in a commodified form. And when utilized in its commodified form, the idea of vocation lacks the capacity to engage the political environment of the workplace, thus leaving social inequality intact—an environment that a vocation must be able to engage. I support the claim of purpose being a commodified vocation by exploring several ways to scrutinize the relationship between religious concepts and consumer culture. *The Purpose-Driven Life* is carried by the river of consumer culture that is fed by three streams: self-help literature, seeker-sensitive religion and a de-contextualization of the notion of purpose that is necessary for its commodification. Both Christian self-help literature and seeker-sensitive religion accommodate in their own separate ways to consumer culture. Religious accommodation to the techniques of consumer culture, while deemed necessary to communicate self-help techniques or adopted as a survival strategy for dying churches, comes at a high price according to its critics. Some consider the cost is incurred at the expense of a biblical theology that should never bend to culture, no matter the payoff. Others view the price paid in terms of the societal damage resulting from the loss of the ability for religion to confront the culture with which it has allied itself.

After laying out the structure of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and situating it in the context of self-help literature and the seeker-sensitive movements respectively, I analyze the merits of the arguments of those worried about Warren's cultural accommodation. I contend that interlocutors who attack it on the grounds that accommodation conflicts with biblical principles actually argue themselves into a cul-de-sac created by consumer culture itself. Instead, a more accurate portrayal of the relationship between *The*

*Purpose-Driven Life* and consumer culture relies on an analysis of the commodification of the *ideas* contained in the book and not the container that may or may not divulge accommodation to consumer culture.

More in line with the logic of consumer culture, Vincent Miller argues that in order for religious products to become consumer items in the West, the packaging and distribution of such products must encounter little resistance. The muddled and jagged history of long-standing religious ideas and practices is such an obstacle because it makes complex the act of religious consumption. Simplicity equals palatability when it comes to consumption in a consumer culture. The commodification of religious ideas, then, is a process that necessarily includes the injury that consumer culture must inflict on religious ideas and their history in order to make them palatable to consumers. Largely drawing on Miller's claims, I problematize certain criticisms of *The Purpose-Driven Life*—specifically those that are based on suspicions of Warren's ability to transmit a "true Gospel" when in fact it is the commodification of the idea of purpose that precedes such usage.

Over and against these critiques, I assert that it is neither "a Gospel without teeth" that Warren supposedly peddles nor the marketing strategy that Warren and his publisher employ that connect the idea of purpose to consumer culture. It is, instead, the expression of Warren's notion of purpose that discloses its disembeddedness from the material and social context of the workplace that betrays its identity as a consumer item. As we will see, Warren's purpose possesses a kind of slipperiness that invokes the spirit of a Lutheran vocation, yet at the same time is detached enough from the material conditions of work, both past and present, that have provided and continue to provide the

context in which vocations must engage. As Miller points out, shorn of its context, consumer-friendly religious concepts and practices lack the ability to inform the material culture in which they function. As such, Miller additionally provides ways to frame Warren's notion of purpose that aid my overall project because of the political implications of his analysis.

### **It's Not About You *and* About You**

The popular success of *The Purpose-Driven Life* may tempt the casual observer to attribute its popularity to its self-help quality. Indeed, the typical refrain of self-help books—namely, that pre-existent forces, abilities or entities (both internal and external), can be tapped to give meaning and direction in life—is present in *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Yet interestingly, the self-help qualities of the book are veiled by an unremitting worldview whose players are an omnipotent, omniscient God and powerless, confused human beings. Such a worldview atypically frames traditional self-help books.<sup>228</sup> If God is a part of a self-help book, personal meaning is typically found through a kind of God/self cooperation in which God is more of a warm-hearted friend than austere parent.<sup>229</sup> When an omnipotent God is the main player in a Christian self-help book or

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<sup>228</sup> Yet some do exist. For examples, see Charles Swindoll, *Simple Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); Charles Stanley, *Landmines in the Path of the Believer: Avoiding the Hidden Dangers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); James C. Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough: New Hope for Marriages in Crisis* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing, 2007); Gary Chapman, *Hope For the Separated: Wounded Marriages Can Be Healed* (Chicago: Moody Publishing, 2005).

<sup>229</sup> Classic examples include Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*. An incredibly popular current book that exemplifies this angle of Christian self-help is Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*. For a more explicit Christian example, see Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (New York: Warner Books, 2004). For one that leans more towards general New Age spirituality, see Neale Donald Walsch, *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue* (New York: Putnam, 1996).



devotional designed for laypeople, any meaning to be had for one's life is gained primarily through revelation, not self-reflection.<sup>230</sup>

Is *The Purpose-Driven Life* in fact a self-help book? Malcolm Gladwell states in a *New Yorker* piece that it does not appear so:

It is tempting to interpret the book's message as a kind of New Age self-help theology. Warren's God is not awesome or angry and does not stand in judgment of human sin. He's genial and mellow . . . The self-help genre, however, is fundamentally inward-focused . . . Warren's first sentence, by contrast, is "It's not about you," which puts it in the spirit of traditional Christian devotional literature, which focuses the reader outward, toward God.<sup>231</sup>

Indeed, Warren himself confirms Gladwell's observations when he declares,

This is not a self-help book. It is not about finding the right career, achieving your dreams, or planning your life. It is not about how to cram more activities into an overloaded schedule. Actually, it will teach you how to do *less* in life—by focusing on what matters most. It is about becoming what *God* created you to be.<sup>232</sup>

In fact, Warren goes on to classify all attempts to discover purpose on one's own as pure speculation. Self-exploration for the truth is speculative in nature for Warren because the true source of purpose and meaning in life is not the self. Accordingly, he rejects self-help books,

because they approach the subject from a self-centered viewpoint. Self-help books, even Christian ones, usually offer the same predictable steps to finding your life's purpose: Consider your dreams, Clarify your values, Set some goals, Figure out what you are good at, Aim high! . . . these recommendations often lead to great success. You can usually succeed in reaching a goal if you put your mind to it. But being successful and fulfilling your life's purpose are not at all the same issue!<sup>233</sup>

Hence any hunt for purpose that remains within the borders of the self, nature or others' advice is literally an exercise in futility. Life's purpose is given only by God's revelation, not self-revelation.

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<sup>230</sup> Examples include any of the works of Billy Graham and the classic, *My Utmost for His Highest*, by Oswald Chambers. See Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2008).

<sup>231</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "The Cellular Church: How Rick Warren Built His Ministry," *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2005.

<sup>232</sup> Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 19.

<sup>233</sup> Warren, 18-19.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to speculation about the meaning and purpose of life. It's revelation. We can turn to what God has revealed about life in his Word. The easiest way to discover the purpose of an invention is to ask the creator of it. The same is true for discovering your life's purpose: Ask God.<sup>234</sup>

The individual's task, then, is first to cease looking in the wrong place for purpose in life, and second, to turn one's full attention to the revealed Word of God for the answers to life's questions. Warren's circular logic is the basis for the rest of the book: we find our purpose in God's revelation because God created and designed us; God created us for purpose. Self-help books misdirect readers inwards where the Creator does not reside, hence they break this circle.

There is nothing in Warren's theology that is particularly novel or even earth-shattering. Mistrust of the "world" that nudges Christians towards other-worldly truth has been rehearsed since St. Paul. By drawing on this common exhortation, any self-help quality of *The Purpose-Driven Life* is not explicitly admitted by Warren nor recognized by Gladwell. Accordingly, the desire to fashion a life based on consumer needs and market supply that propels self-help literature is most certainly at odds with Warren's own words. Individual desire for "worldly" success stands in stark opposition to the divinely mandated imperative for humans to live out the purpose that God, alone, has laid out for each individual.

I contend, however, that *The Purpose-Driven Life* divulges certain hidden self-help qualities. It does so by putting forward an ambiguous anthropology that in turn permits more of a role for human agency than Warren would admit. Warren's all-powerful, all-knowing God follows both the "God-as-friend" and the "God-as-distant-legislator" models. Warren alternates between the two Gods with seamless facility and

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<sup>234</sup> Warren, 20.

thus leaves room for the self to choose either as the manager of life's purposes. With God-as-distant-legislator, we are first and foremost powerless to find our own purpose through our own efforts—this is God's task alone.

God was thinking of you long before you ever thought about him. His purpose for your life predates your conception. He planned it before you existed, *without your input!* You may choose your career, your spouse, your hobbies, and many other parts of your life, but you don't get to choose your purpose.<sup>235</sup>

Yet despite his stated hard distinction between what can and cannot be chosen, Warren effectively blurs this separating line throughout his book. Our life journey progresses due to our participation in a cooperative effort with a God that desires our friendship, happiness and finally success (in whatever way we define it). Consequently, our own happiness is a sure sign that God's purpose is being lived out.

How do you know when you are serving God from your heart? The first telltale sign is *enthusiasm*. When you are doing what you *love* to do, no one has to motivate you or challenge you or check up on you. You do it for the sheer enjoyment.<sup>236</sup>

Even though feelings, such as happiness, are dismissed by Warren as human-centered at one point,<sup>237</sup> he simultaneously honors feelings as a means of communicating with God.<sup>238</sup>

Human volition is similarly cast. Our life purpose is written by God without our input, yet somehow the ability of God to ensure that a purpose is lived out is entirely dependent on our own choice to let God into a relationship with purpose. Warren claims, "The truth is—you are as close to God *as you choose to be*. Intimate friendship with God is a choice, not an accident. You must intentionally seek it."<sup>239</sup> By contrasting human choice with mere accidents, Warren elevates our choices in matters of purpose to the kind

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<sup>235</sup> Warren, 21.

<sup>236</sup> Warren, 238-9.

<sup>237</sup> Warren, 109.

<sup>238</sup> Warren, 110.

<sup>239</sup> Warren, 98.

of status given to God's non-accidental dictates. The "God-as-friend" model discloses Warren's desire to leave some of the biggest decisions to us; what kind of friend would coerce friendship?

Though God is a unique friend—one who, once friendship is freely engaged, commands compliance. Summed in his phrase, "I must choose to obey God in faith," Warren posits a God who demands our obedience to God's will yet again places the onus on the individual to choose to do so.<sup>240</sup> In this way, the authority of the self to make major life decisions based on the choice to be happy is honored and additionally legitimated by a God that wants just that.

The anthropological ambiguity (humans as free agents *and* dependent beings) that results from Warren's theology provides space for the self-creation and self-improvement that is promoted in self-help books. If Warren unwittingly allows the choices of careers and spouses to legitimate themselves outside of God's determined world, there is little to stop the activity of choosing all the components of a purpose-driven life. Then, God's overarching purposes can step in to underwrite those choices, as long as they abide by a general framework. Choice and obedience flow on an alternating current, however it is the lack of control that God exerts over the details of life choices that permit us to pick and choose such details. Or, obedience to God accomplished through the adherence to general principles such as, "be like Christ," "serve God," and "make God happy."<sup>241</sup> Such admonitions are broad enough to incorporate a wide variety of ways to satisfy God's commands, including those which originate in individual desire. Hence, the self that is authorized to make the choices that constitute one's own version of purpose on

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<sup>240</sup> Warren, 95.

<sup>241</sup> Warren, 171, 227, 63.

earth faces few obstacles in the manufacturing of oneself. The fact that God has already sanctioned the choices that align themselves with God's general principles only serves to empower such choices.

This approach appeals to those intrigued by the promise of self-help books that meaning and direction are within grasp *and* those who are utterly skeptical of the self's capacity for such grasping. Self-invention that is subtly promoted by Warren plays off of the needs of McGee's belabored self. Recall that "working on oneself" presupposes a bifurcated self in which the aspects of an inauthentic self are constantly scrutinized and ideally sloughed off to reveal the authentic self below. For Warren, authenticity is found in the part of the self that is created by God; the inauthentic self is that which has taken cultural, "worldly" cues for the contents of its identity. Yet instead of locating these two selves on opposite sides of an unbreachable wall, as Calvin does, Warren's theology and attendant anthropology leads to a semi-permeable partition between them. The fixed status of each human being in Calvin's thought is traded for the purpose-driven self that, while instructed to reject self-exploration, is simultaneously told to embark on a search for purpose. Even though the final destination of the search is that which God intends the self to be, the difference between the *how* of working on oneself found in more clear examples of self-help literature and means to find purpose in *The Purpose-Driven Life* is minimal.

That the stated goal of the purpose-driven life is one that stands transcendent over the self while the means of achieving this goal does not restrict human initiative and pluck explains *The Purpose-Driven Life's* status as a particularly successful seller. The potential for the pursuit of excavating an authentic self to end in a solipsistic blind alley is

averted by Warren. Yet by concomitantly allowing the activity of working on one's self to proceed in reality, Warren is still able to satisfy the needs of the belabored self. Hence in the end, the purpose-driven person is authorized to continually remake herself through the consumption of self-images as long as the effort is conceived of as having its source in God, not the self.

Yet the questions that involve the religious cultural context in which motivations to write such a book are still unanswered. How does the social context of *The Purpose-Driven Life* illuminate Warren's words in ways that a textual interpretation that labels the book as an example of self-help literature cannot? The push to attract seekers to a church or to Christianity in general has correlates to the incentive to attract consumers in the market. Establishing this correlation is an effort to position *The Purpose-Driven Life* in a cultural context that informs the language of the book in ways that textual criticism alone does not.

### **Navigating the God-Steered Boat to the Seeker's Shore**

Forty years ago, Peter Berger tied secularization to the increased role of the capitalist market in framing religious decisions. He remarked that consumer freedom to choose suitable commodities in conjunction with a religious marketplace includes religious choices as well. Consumer culture shapes everything from the selection of a denomination, to whether to attend church at all, to the formation of a religious worldview, according to Berger. Yet there is an obstinacy to religious products that resists complete manipulation by consumer desire. Berger writes that,

the dynamics of consumer preference does not, in itself, determine the substantive content—it simply posits that, in principle, they are susceptible to change, without determining the direction of change.<sup>242</sup>

Yet as Berger remarks, the stability of religious ideas, when thrown into the religious marketplace, has little slowing-down effect on the expectation that the ideas will move in a direction that conforms to the desire of consumers.

The terms, “seeker-sensitive” or “seeker-friendly” currently describe the methods used by religious organizations that move religious ideas in the direction that Berger initially described. Seeker-sensitive churches and pastors often amend their liturgy, building structure, and even theology to appeal to needs of religious seekers and the unchurched.<sup>243</sup> Hence, the connection between the seeker-sensitive approach and consumer culture is forged by the methods employed by such churches to gain members.

To woo consumers and hence seekers, seeker-sensitive churches often choose to mimic the tactics used by companies to attract consumers. This often uneasy alliance between the tactics of the business world and those of the church, given their presumably different goals, is allowed if the religious institution is not confined to traditional directives. Richard Cimino and Don Lattin write that

the underlying concept of “seeker” congregations is that churches should meet the wider consumer culture on its own ground. Ideas and practices—however strongly they may be tied to one’s denominational tradition—may be abandoned if they stand in the way of drawing new members.<sup>244</sup>

Again, consumer culture is able to overcome traditional boundaries within which many churches used to reside. With the ties between traditional authority and the authority of

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<sup>242</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 146.

<sup>243</sup> Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Non-Traditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>244</sup> Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 68.

pastors to grow their churches severed, pastors are free to mold their medium and at times their message to the needs of the consumer in order to best attract new members without institutional interference. The seeker model, like consumer culture, can be seen as mutually beneficial to seekers and pastors alike. Seekers are freed from institutional restrictions to search for a church until a comfort level is reached; pastors are freed up from institutional restrictions to employ wide variety of techniques to get seekers in the door. The onus is on the church to provide satisfaction, but if it fails, when stacked up against the seeker's expectations, loyalty to a denomination, community or even a set of theological precepts can be breached quickly in order to start a new search.

The seeker-sensitive model has theological consequences as well as practical ones. Robert Wuthnow states that

[a] spirituality of dwelling emphasizes *habitation*: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure. A spirituality of seeking emphasizes *negotiation*: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality.<sup>245</sup>

Habitation within a spirituality of *dwelling* evokes the idea that God lives with humanity in a home with boundaries. The home connotes not only limits that circumscribe the relationship between God and the inhabitants but also the security and reliability that comes with such limits. A spirituality of *seeking* is animated with similar longings for security in the quest for "sacred moments." Yet these moments experienced by the seeker are not lodged in a fixed metaphysical home and hence are always up for negotiation, are potentially fleeting, and are subject to abandonment. As a result, the

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<sup>245</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3-4.



commitment to a fixed, unchanging theology is less likely for the seeker. The serial renter of homes is, in a way, homeless and consequently uncomfortable with the kind of commitment that is bolstered by the kind of belief that forecloses other competing beliefs.

Wade Clark Roof similarly notes in his study of Baby Boomers and religion that

[a] surprising number of people we interviewed, upward of one half, move easily from a discourse of seeking to one of believing, or vice versa, from believing to seeking. This would appear to be an important characterization of the present religious scene, and clearly strong evidence of how permeable the boundaries between believing and seeking have become.<sup>246</sup>

In other words, permeable boundaries surround not only decisions involving which religion or church to choose, but matters of faith itself. Hence, *seeking* has a strong family resemblance to *choosing* in consumer culture.

In such a context, many religious institutions must follow the direction given by potential members (for attraction purposes) and actual members (for retention purposes) of a congregation to survive. With control over the direction of religious content needed by consumers wrested out of the grasp of traditional religious authorities and into the market, the *method* chosen to sell the religious *message* becomes paramount. The effort to attract seekers, though, is typically considered independent from the true goal of seeker-sensitive ministries. The presentation of a core message, such as the Gospel in Christian churches, is perhaps the only non-negotiable activity in the cultural accommodation process.

### **The Customer Is *Almost* Always Right**

In fact, the maintenance of a core message amidst the quickly shifting consumer preference can become an asset rather than a liability. In an ironic twist, it is the ability

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<sup>246</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 131.

of certain religious ideas to convey unchangeability that makes them appealing to religious consumers.<sup>247</sup> Warren has adopted such an approach in the structuring of his Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California and his ministry. He echoes the need to adapt the medium to the needs of the congregation and his readers as long as the message remains untouched. In an answer to the question, “Do you advocate watering down the Gospel to cater to seekers?,” Warren says in an interview, “Absolutely not! . . . The message must never change, but the methods must change.”<sup>248</sup> The subtitle to *The Purpose-Driven Church, “Growing Without Compromising Your Message and Mission,”* underscores this dynamic. Warren’s own church is uniquely equipped to house the methods needed to connect the Gospel message to the shifting needs of the congregation.

In an oft repeated story, Warren tells how he began Saddleback. Instead of the “build it and they will come” tactic, Warren began building his church in 1980 on the basis of the needs of the “unchurched” in the area. When he went door-to-door in the surrounding neighborhoods to announce the young church’s presence, Warren asked people what they wanted in a church as opposed to telling them what Saddleback would be. Richard Abanes writes that Warren specifically went after the “unchurched” and asked them four questions: “Why do you think most people don’t attend church?,” “If

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<sup>247</sup> This argument is made tangentially by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge. They argue that the success of Christianity is largely based on presenting appealing concepts, or “compensators,” that many other competing religions do not. These compensators, such as the idea of communion with God after death, provide reassurance amidst a world that may not compensate good behavior at times. See Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). In addition, some recent writings on the relationship between consumer culture and religion credit the rise of consumer culture with the persistence of religion. For an example, see the collection of essays in John Michael Gigge and Diane H. Winston, ed., *Faith in the Market: Religion and the Rise of Urban Commercial Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>248</sup> Richard Abanes, *Rick Warren and the Purpose That Drives Him* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 2005), 29.

you were looking for a church, what things would you look for?,” “What advice would you give to me as the pastor of a new church that really wants to be of benefit to the community?,” and “How could I, as a pastor, help you?”<sup>249</sup>

All of these questions bestow authority on the persons being questioned thus legitimating their answers. Whether Warren took their responses to heart is beside the point; it is the “customer-is-always-right” attitude that helped draw in church members. But Warren is careful to not reduce his early ministry down to marketing techniques.

Even though I know what these people *really* needed most was a relationship to Christ, I wanted to listen first to what *they* thought their most pressing needs were. That’s not marketing; it’s just being polite . . . Intelligent, caring conversation opens the door for evangelism with nonbelievers faster than anything else I’ve used. It is *not* the church’s task to give people whatever they want or even need. But the fastest way to build a bridge to the unchurched is to express interest in them and show that you understand the problems they are facing.<sup>250</sup>

In other words, Saddleback was constructed around an Evangelical message. Yet in order to grow the church with the unchurched, a kind of bait and switch was employed where the Gospel needed to be initially hidden. The pressing needs of the unchurched had to be met first (or at least the impression had to be given that the Gospel was not going to be shoved down their throat) for growth to occur.

Saddleback is now a testament to Warren’s original impulse to cater to the needs of the unchurched as long as the Gospel message stays intact. To counter the feeling of being lost in a 20,000 member church, Warren draws on the cellular church model that encourages small groups to form and perform many of the duties ascribed to the whole church. In addition, the Saddleback campus has five separate houses of worship, each with their own custom-fitted worship setting. For the edgy, energetic member, a heavy

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<sup>249</sup> Abanes, 47.

<sup>250</sup> Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, 39-40.

metal service is offered. For a laid back atmosphere, a service in an on-campus coffee shop covers you. For the member put off by the massive television screens and contemporary music, a traditional service gets back to basics. With this division of labor, Saddleback is an anticipator and deliverer of almost whatever needs exist for its diverse membership.

*The Purpose-Driven Life* likewise follows this overall strategy. Employing non-threatening methods of Gospel transmission, Warren uses colloquial language such as, “God wants to be your best friend,”<sup>251</sup> and even user-friendly Biblical translations, such as Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. Such wording is justified by Warren as simply an attractive, accessible husk that entices people to find the kernel inside. Marshall McLuhan notwithstanding, Warren’s separation of the medium and message is needed to expose unlikely seekers to the Gospel, while leaving the Gospel intact.

Purpose itself can be considered a concept that is friendly to the religious seeker. The concept is general enough to resonate with people of all faiths as well as non-believers. The idea of purpose can also generally be applied to all of life’s tasks without recourse to religion. Purpose and the weight it carries on its own registers without religious coercion. Like the non-menacing entrance to Saddleback, the relatively non-threatening idea of purpose can get seekers in the door. Despite Warren’s contention that difficult demands of the Gospel are the core of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, this does not take away from the fact that purpose, like all other aspects of his overall message, is “housed” in a welcoming package for the seeker.

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<sup>251</sup> Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 85.

Warren has been successful in retaining members of his church with seeker-sensitive methods. Yet holding readers to the commitment that they are asked to maintain at the start of *The Purpose-Driven Life* is more difficult than keeping congregants in the pews. The sales of the book prove that Warren has largely succeeded in attracting seekers of all kinds. And the context of the seeker-sensitive movement sheds light on the initial impact of the idea of purpose on a general population of seekers/religious consumers. Yet Warren intends that purpose be more than consumer bait. Left unexplained is the actual mechanism that allows purpose to remain a commodity long after the initial purchase. Or needed is an explication of how a religious idea is able to engage the religious consumer beyond acting merely as a billboard.

### **The Commodification of Religion**

Vincent Miller, in his book *Consuming Religion*, reckons with the way consumer culture actually reaches down into the *habits* and *dispositions* of consumers to shape the very substance and function of religious practice and belief. His primary claim is that consumer culture reframes the modern consumer's orientation to religion by modifying not only the meaning of many religious cultural products, but also the underlying habits and dispositions that fuel and maintain consumer activity.<sup>252</sup> These habits and dispositions are the product of the socializing forces of consumer culture and are characterized by an engagement with cultural products, religious and otherwise, that are disengaged from the material context that have historically contributed to their production and use. Because consumer culture promotes such engagement, the consumption of the mere symbolic content of religious items, be they ideas or even belief

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<sup>252</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 32, 73.

systems, cheats the consumer out of a fuller religious experience by prohibiting the possibility that the “consumed” ideas can actually inform and alter material practices. For Miller, it is this latter effect that establishes the basis of his critique of consumer culture. Moreover, his approach distances his description of the relationship between religion and consumer culture from other critiques that cast the debate in terms of a culture war with the right to claim proprietorship of orthodox religious meaning as the spoils.

Miller’s gambit is intended to counter other religiously framed criticisms of consumer culture that justifiably express dismay at the shallow engagement with religion that consumer culture fosters. One problem, Miller asserts, is that these critics counter the thin meanings that consumers take from religious traditions and practices with deeper, more theologically or Biblically grounded meanings of religious products.<sup>253</sup> According to Miller, fighting fire with a bigger fire, while honorable in spirit, operates under the assumption that it is possible to draw clear battle lines between those engaging the sacred as consumers and those who engage it “properly.”<sup>254</sup>

Miller invokes Foucault along with Talal Asad’s critique of Clifford Geertz to challenge the usefulness of such critiques. Because power, mediated through structured

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<sup>253</sup> Miller, 15.

<sup>254</sup> Miller focuses primarily on scholars in the radical orthodoxy tradition, such as Graham Ward and D. Stephen Long, who may not rely solely on a certain biblical interpretation for their analysis, yet still do not touch the real problem. Both Ward and Long trace the development of modern consumer desire to the seeds planted by liberal economics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The assumptions of classical economics that place the individual at the center of consumption choices perpetually connect desire with a lack that consumption cannot satiate. Miller contends that while the radical orthodox critique moves beyond mere biblical hermeneutics, it leans on the classical economic description of consumer behavior as rational in order to describe current consumer behavior. There is not a useful critique because it is unable to square with the irrationality of consumer choice that is the result of the marketing and advertising apparatus that mediate consumption. The reality, for Miller, is that any straightforward historical line drawn from a set of events in the past to today is made crooked by power that asserts itself into social discourse concerning the meaning of consumer culture. See Miller, 111-14.

institutions, is always caught up in any discourse, the intended meaning of a discourse often deviates from the actual effects of the discourse.<sup>255</sup> Consequently, the practices that inform and result from discourse are rarely consonant with the meaning of the surface of discourse or what the stated intention of a discourse is. Hence Geertz's "thick descriptions" that rely only on the meaning of religion may not actually tell us anything about how this meaning came to be, according to Asad.<sup>256</sup> It is, of course, *power* that issues from what Foucault calls discursive regimes (primarily institutions) that act behind the scenes to generate different effects than what the intended meaning of a discourse claims to have produced. Hence a hermeneutic that takes little account of the relationship between power and meaning is severely limited in its interpretation of religious phenomena.

Foucault's power/meaning/knowledge dynamic serves two primary purposes for Miller as he attempts to understand the relationship between religion and consumer culture. One, because meaning and practice are often at odds with each other, he questions the ability of some consumer culture critics to arrive at a clear meaning of consumer culture (it is shallow, it fosters greedy materialism, it is undermining "true" religion, etc.) strictly by observing consumer practices and behaviors. Miller, for instance, remarks that consumer culture has engendered practices that do not have any of the above-mentioned pejorative qualities.<sup>257</sup> Miller is not declaring that the disconnect between meaning and practice obscures our view of consumer culture rendering *any* statement about it meaningless. He certainly has some substantial and critical comments

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<sup>255</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979) and *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

<sup>256</sup> Miller, 20-1.

<sup>257</sup> Miller, 18.

about the effects of consumer culture.<sup>258</sup> Miller simply posits that the discrepancy between meaning and practice disallows an *interpretation* of consumer culture to act as a comprehensive, final say on the matter.

This discrepancy guides Miller into an exploration of how power is wielded in the construction of consumers and the culture that they inhabit. With consumer culture and religion, Miller considers the relationship between power and consumer desire to be the primary locus for socialization of the modern consumer. The power supply for running consumer culture comes from both the institutions, such as corporations and their marketing apparatus, and the ideology that promotes unfettered consumer freedom which stimulates desire and empowers human agents. Miller argues that the twin strategies of seduction and misdirection stoke consumer desire and direct it away from consumer items themselves and towards the act of consuming.<sup>259</sup>

Consumers are seduced, not necessarily by the product itself, but by images that may have nothing to do with the product, yet play on desire nonetheless. Because the desire evoked by seduction is one that cannot be satisfied by the simple consumption of a material product (i.e. drinking Budweiser will not make you the life of the party), the marketing of many products misdirects the *specific* need to buy a product into a vague desire to consume in *general*. Miller argues that desire, when manipulated in this way, loads the act of consumption with so many unrealistic consumer expectations that the act can never deliver on what is promised. Hence the act of consumption is “overdetermined

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<sup>258</sup> Miller, 179-228.

<sup>259</sup> Miller, 109-10; 116-21.



and undecidable” to the point that “the inevitable failure of the commodity’s promised synthesis drives us back into the marketplace for endless, futile repetitions.”<sup>260</sup>

Echoing Bauman, Miller concludes that it is simply the act of consuming for consuming’s sake that constitutes the *primary practice* of consumers in a consumer culture. For neither seduction nor misdirection, “has much to do with the vulgar attachment to material things; in fact, both militate against such attachments . . . Individuals become increasingly indifferent to particular wants and objects of consumption,” as they focus their attention on the act of consuming itself.<sup>261</sup> Miller, however, extends Bauman’s analysis by including *religious* commodification. The consumption of religious products for consumption’s sake follows the overall trajectory of liquid modernity, yet the means by which religious products become commodified differ from their secular counterparts.

Miller arrives at the means of religious commodification by way of the analysis of insufficient scholarly approaches to the relationship between religion and consumer culture. He contends that the source of the mistake that many Christian critics of consumer culture make is the reduction of religion to *beliefs* alone. When this happens, “correct” belief systems become the primary weapon against the “meaning-making machine” that is consumer culture. Such attacks are based on the misunderstanding that one, consumer culture has a moral axe to grind against Christian orthodox beliefs, and two, that beliefs *compose* religion. In fact, consumer culture can easily assimilate abstractions, from religious to anti-consumerist ones, then package them as intriguing, salable consumer items. “Jeremiads against the excesses of capitalism sell quite well as

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<sup>260</sup> Miller, 121.

<sup>261</sup> Miller, 121.

consumer goods,” Miller writes, “as do evocative accounts of more properly orthodox ontologies or anthropologies.”<sup>262</sup> Hence when religion is reduced to beliefs, it meets the problem of consumer culture on consumer culture’s own turf.

The inability of this line of criticism to do real damage to consumer culture leads Miller to discuss the real culprit: the thin substance of religious commodities as they circulate through a consumer culture. Because consumer culture brokers in symbolic exchange that is geared to meet individual desire, the mediators of consumer culture (buyers, sellers and promoters) are able to lift out the marketable elements from the traditional context of any religion and “sell” them to religious consumers. In turn, consumers are suited to complete this circuit of exchange because they have been educated in the ways of choosing and consuming the symbolic content of a consumer good for its beneficial properties. As a result,

consumer culture encourages a shallow engagement with the elements of religious traditions because we are trained to engage beliefs, symbols, and practices as abstract commodities that are readily separable from their traditional contexts . . . They [elements of religion] are reduced to shallow bricolage, not because such popular cultural production is necessarily shallow, but because members of consumer cultures encounter cultural objects shorn of their connection to traditions and communities and are trained by their consumption of commodified culture to treat them in a shallow manner.<sup>263</sup>

“Deeper” religious beliefs, for Miller, are *always* intertwined with the social contexts from which they emerge. And material practices that are informed by beliefs and inform the beliefs themselves make up an essential component of the social context.

Consequently, the relationship between consumer culture and religion can be seen as one where consumer culture damages religion by cleaving belief and practice then dis-embedding certain elements from religion. Detached, abstracted components of religion

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<sup>262</sup> Miller, 18.

<sup>263</sup> Miller, 30.

can then move freely into the consumer market and land into a host of social contexts with little or no resistance and with little or no teeth.

Miller argues that when religious ideas and practices are completely unmoored from their traditional contexts, they are more susceptible to commodification. The contexts from which some of these religious ideas and practices are extracted include the material and social realities that generate such ideas and practices. Hence “consuming” the religious symbol is made easy when it is disembedded from its thorny and complex social context. The historical social context includes not only the ethical and political conflicts that inhere in the formation of a religion but also the effects of such formations. “[T]raditions are pillaged for their symbolic content, which is then repackaged and recontextualized in a way that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political consequences.”<sup>264</sup> Hence the lack of ethical *gravitas* in commodified religious products that can only be forged in a material negotiation is accompanied by a lack of muscle to inform and challenge existing social norms.

In a classic “chicken or egg” dynamic, it is difficult to say if cultural producers are responding to the consumer mindset or if they are creating it, according to Miller.<sup>265</sup> Whether the consumer is the “dupe” or “hero” and whether the producers of consumer items are malicious or simply market-savvy is largely irrelevant to Miller because of the impossibility of settling the matter. As a result, despite his remark that consumer culture encourages a “shallow engagement” with cultural products, Miller is quick to point out that consumers themselves are not necessarily shallow, nor is cultural production itself.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Miller, 84.

<sup>265</sup> Miller, 29-30.

<sup>266</sup> Miller, 18.

Focus, instead, should be on the ability of consumer culture (as it includes both consumer and producer of commodities) to socialize its participants through the cultivation of certain habits and dispositions that then facilitates the commodification of religious products.

For an example, Miller calls our attention to the “Joseph Campbell phenomenon.” Here not only Campbell himself, but also the book publishers and the producers of the PBS special that popularized him in a series of interviews with Bill Moyers contribute to the commodification of Campbell’s ideas. Campbell’s ambitious study of the hero archetype that he finds in history and literature *itself* represents an abstraction of sorts.<sup>267</sup> In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell culls the internal character qualities of a variety of figures that fit a hero typology at the expense of ignoring the historical context.<sup>268</sup> Thus Campbell is guilty of his own de-contextualization that greases the wheels for a full commodification of his idea of the hero. *The Power of Myth* is the culmination of Campbell’s initial effort. This glossy, illustrated publication comprises Campbell’s reflection on the hero archetype and its association to Jungian psychology as expressed in his interviews with Moyers. A combination of hagiography and motivational speech, *The Power of Myth* fully domesticates Campbell’s ideas and makes them ready for market. And in conjunction with the fertile ground of a hungry and prepared consumer populace, Campbell’s ideas of the hero were readily consumed.<sup>269</sup>

As with other examples of a religious commodity, the hero motif has only a superficial connection to any one religious/historical tradition. Hence the idea of the hero

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<sup>267</sup> See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>268</sup> See Walter B. Gulick, "The Thousand and First Face," in *Paths to the Power of Myth: Joseph Campbell and the Study of Religion*, ed. Daniel Noel (New York: Crossword, 1990), 28-43.

<sup>269</sup> Miller, 83-4.

can be recontextualized in the life of the consumer who wishes to find the hero within. Miller states, “Campbell’s debts to Jungian psychology and the *philosophia perennis* incline him to reduce all traditions to manifestations of fundamental archetypes, all religious figures to another instance of the “hero with a thousand faces.”<sup>270</sup> In this way, the meaning of Campbell’s hero is not tethered to any one religious context and hence “floats free” leaving it able to be appropriated to individual desires while conveying a universality. Religious ideas and figures lifted from millennia of history are seamlessly intertwined with pithy admonitions to better one’s life. For instance, Native American beliefs, Christ on the cross, the Buddha’s teachings and the chivalry of the Green Knight are all enlisted to send the message to all people to “follow your bliss.”<sup>271</sup> The differences between these figures, both in historical and geographical location, are minimized which enables Campbell to crystallize and dispense a particularly pleasing message to the masses.

Miller briefly enumerates several other relevant examples:

Buddhist meditation serves as a stress management tool in a capitalist business world devoted to endless acquisition; Yoga is reduced to a physical fitness regimen; the crucifix becomes a brand symbol for the niche marketing of Catholic education.<sup>272</sup>

These as well as the “Joseph Campbell phenomenon” suggest that while consumers may be therapeutically helped by such appropriation, a certain kind of violence is done to the ideas themselves. Miller reasons that the sheer symbolic content of religious ideas cut loose from its social context, will, in turn, be unable to inform the practices of the life of

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<sup>270</sup> Miller, 84.

<sup>271</sup> The leading quote in the chapter entitled, “Sacrifice and Bliss” reads, “If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are—if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.” Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1991), 113.

<sup>272</sup> Miller, 84.

the consumer of such content. Religious products are then used instrumentally while consumer ways of life proceed unobstructed. “As a result, they [religious beliefs and practices] are in danger of being reduced to abstracted, virtual sentiments that function solely to give flavor to the already-established forms of everyday life or to provide compensations for its shortcomings.”<sup>273</sup> Ways of life not only continue unmolested but are also energized through the consumption of commodified religious products.

Christian self-help books meet the activity of consumption for consumption’s sake through a presentation of a self that improves itself through endless consumption, even when a divine plan is set. Seeker-friendly religion similarly promotes consumer activity through the encasing of an unchanging message in an ever-changing package geared to satisfy consumer demand. Miller, though, scratches beneath the surface of these two phenomena to get at the mechanism used to offer the religious products that can be used to fill self-help books and motivate the effort to attract religious seekers. Before applying Miller’s core ideas to *The Purpose-Driven Life*, it is necessary to critically analyze some of the commentary on the book that does not operate off of the kind of nuanced description of consumer culture that Miller provides. These commentators share Miller’s general concern about religious accommodation to consumer culture, yet they argue from a very different set of premises. Closer scrutiny into the predominant, yet deficient, literature that takes *The Purpose-Driven Life* head on will serve to reveal the usefulness of Miller’s approach over theirs.

### **Love the Purpose-Driven Person, Hate *The Purpose-Driven Life***

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<sup>273</sup> Miller, 105-6.

Popularity, particularly that gained by a pastor, often begets criticism. Despite the millions who have bought his book and the thousands who attend his church each Sunday, Rick Warren has received his share of disapproval as well. Everything from his ambitious program to build churches to his invitation of pro-choice then-Senator Barack Obama to his church's AIDS conference has been recent fodder for criticism by many in the conservative Evangelical camp.<sup>274</sup> Along the same lines of these criticisms, critics of *The Purpose-Driven Life* claim that Warren sells out the Gospel in order to make it palatable to the largest number of potential followers.<sup>275</sup> Some of these critiques are strictly theological—Warren's God is an adulterated God. Some go further and label Warren's theology as a New Age spirituality in Evangelical clothing. The latter claim is really a single circular argument that is connected to their problems with his theology—Warren's theology, as built on an unsound Biblical hermeneutic, is supported by his New Age leanings; his New Age worldview is grounded on his inadequate theology.

A part of the strong reaction to Rick Warren can be attributed to the perception that Warren's seeker-sensitive tactics dangerously mix the things of the divine, permanent world with the things of the impermanent, protean world of consumer society. A revisit of David Wells's general criticism of seeker-friendly Christianity helps frame the overall argument that most critics of *The Purpose-Driven Life* utilize. Recall that Wells warns that if seeker-sensitive Evangelical pastors and authors adopt the ethos of

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<sup>274</sup> In addition to Evangelicals, Warren has garnered criticism from a wide-ranging group. For a Catholic response, see Joseph M. Champlin, *A Catholic Perspective on The Purpose-Driven Life* (Totowa, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 2006). For a more secular response, see Alan Wolfe, "The Limits of the Purpose-Driven Life: Can Twenty Million Readers Be Wrong?," *In Character*, Winter 2005.

<sup>275</sup> James Davison Hunter captures both the critic and the critiqued in the Evangelical community with his claim that, "contemporary Evangelicalism contains both sectarian and accommodationist tendencies." James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 196.

consumer culture willingly, their God becomes “weightless;” able to be easily picked-up, shaped and molded at the caprice of consumer culture.<sup>276</sup> Given that consumer choice must be as unencumbered as possible, the weightless God, after the shaping and molding, is left without the ability to constrain the expansion of human demand for any need to be met. Wells laments this development:

What has been lost in all of this, of course, is God’s angularity, the sharper edges that truth so often has and that he has preeminently. It is our fallenness fleshed out in our modernity that makes God smooth, that imagines he will accommodate our instinct, shabby and self-centered as they so often are, because he is love.<sup>277</sup>

This is the god of New Age religion, and as Wells boldly suspects, for a growing number of evangelicals as well.

New Agers are very eclectic in gathering bits and pieces of worldviews according to personal preference, and so too are many of the baby boomers fished into evangelical churches by marketing techniques . . . New Agers tend to gloss over the realities of sorrow, pain, aging, disease, and death out of a constitutional idealism that disparages the importance of the material world<sup>278</sup>

Here and elsewhere, Wells makes explicit the connection between seeker-friendly tactics employed by Evangelical churches and tactics of New Age religions.<sup>279</sup> The New Age God that is the handmaiden of self-actualization made manifest through the satisfaction of desires is the weightless God, according to Wells. And to the extent that Evangelicals have adopted the god of New Age spirituality, Wells foresees the end of Evangelicalism as we know it. It is precisely the association between New Age/self-seeking religion and the group of Evangelicals who bend to consumer culture that Wells uses as way to judge pastors like Rick Warren. While Wells does not discuss Warren specifically, his

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<sup>276</sup> Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 101.

<sup>277</sup> Wells, 114.

<sup>278</sup> Wells, 222.

<sup>279</sup> See Wells, 27, 55-6, 188-9, 212.



suspicions about the New Age trajectory in Evangelicals like Warren are shared by several critics who focus on *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

For example, Warren Smith takes great pains to expose Rick Warren as a closet New Ager who thinly veils his true identity with Evangelical buzzwords. Less careful and more rhetorical than Wells, Smith cites evidence that relies on tenuous connections between Warren and New Age Thought. The part of *The Purpose-Driven Life* that Smith uses as his chief piece of evidence to implicate Warren is his usage of the *New Century Version* translation of Ephesians 4:6: “He rules everything and is everywhere and is in everything.”<sup>280</sup> Smith charges Warren with promoting a pantheistic worldview with this softer translation as opposed to the more exclusive bent of the King James translation which reads, “One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” The “you,” in the latter translation, according to Smith, refers only to believers to whom Paul was addressing. Warren expands God’s involvement to all of creation, which Smith claims borders on the kind of pantheism commonly espoused by much New Age literature.<sup>281</sup> Other indictments include the mere mention of the word “force” by Warren,<sup>282</sup> the similarities between Warren’s language in *The Purpose-Driven Life* and that of selected texts from *Possibility Thinking* by pastor Robert Schuller,<sup>283</sup> and quotes from Aldous Huxley or New Age writer, Bernie Siegel used in the book.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Warren, 88.

<sup>281</sup> Warren Smith, *Deceived on Purpose: The New Age Implications of the Purpose-Driven Church* (Magalia, Cal.: Mountain Stream Press, 2005), 81-5.

<sup>282</sup> “Force,” according to Smith, is used by many prominent New Age thinkers such as Neale Donald Walsch and Marianne Williamson to describe a universal life energy that all living things possess as well as God. This force is divine, and hence permits an equation between humans and God as expressed in some New Age literature. See Smith, 65, 77-78.

<sup>283</sup> Smith, 103-113.

<sup>284</sup> Smith, 47.

More generally, Warren's use of more colloquial biblical translations, especially *The Message* by Eugene Patterson, suggests a watering down of the Gospel to Smith. Predictably, Smith jumps on this translation and accuses Warren of slyly encoding older translations into language that is understandable to New Agers. And while Smith may seem hyper-sensitive and reactionary to Warren's language, he warns us that no element of New Age spirituality can infiltrate the Gospel, lest it be completely contaminated.

A "little" arsenic can kill any of the possible good that might come from drinking that water. And a "little" leaven can kill any of the possible good that can come from *The Purpose-Driven Life*. And what I discovered is that there is more than a little leaven in what Rick Warren is teaching.<sup>285</sup>

It is this kind of totalizing metaphor that leaves no room for degrees of difference between interpretations of the Gospel to be present. If Rick Warren fails the "true Gospel" test on one count, this peccadillo cannot be forgiven and his entire ministry is justifiably labeled "New Age" by Smith. Smith's intention is not to explain Warren's popularity and hence he does not explicitly charge Warren with using the purported New Age content to attract religious seekers and/or consumers. Yet important is that Smith's relentless, albeit thin, attack on *The Purpose-Driven Life* is based on the belief that Warren's expresses New Age tendencies through a purported straying from biblical truth.

Nathan Busenitz takes a more measured, less ham-fisted stance towards *The Purpose-Driven Life* than Smith, yet manages to link concerns over Warren to the seeker-sensitive, consumer-friendly movement more directly. Busenitz is careful not to label Warren's book as heretical, noting that *The Purpose-Driven Life* puts forward an overall message that corresponds with biblical teaching.<sup>286</sup> Yet Warren makes mistakes by

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<sup>285</sup> Smith, 173.

<sup>286</sup> Nathan Busenitz, "A Sense of Purpose: Evaluating the Claims of *The Purpose-Driven Life*," in *Fool's Gold*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 48, 60.

omission that results in a pliable theology meant to adapt to seeker mentality rather than to the God of the Bible. Busenitz echoes Smith by chiding Warren for using “soft” biblical translations as well as for applying them too casually.<sup>287</sup> Busenitz’s concerns are more of the theological sort than Smith’s.

Warren, Busenitz concedes, does mention themes that could offend seekers such as hell and sin. But unfortunately, Warren’s use of harsher themes is nominal as he quickly turns his focus exclusively to God’s loving, merciful qualities after giving lip-service to God’s judgmental qualities. For instance, when grace or salvation is broached in *The Purpose-Driven Life*, the benefits of each are underscored with conditions, such as our sinful nature, that make these benefits more the subject of human need and not as gifts from God. Then our sin, as opposed to having ontological weight, is used as a mere instrument to get what we want.

Warren’s God is “unbalanced” as a result. A God who relates to humanity by only attracting people instead of balancing the good with the bad is off-balance. Such a God fills out a theology that Warren can deliver to those who may want a sense of divine purpose but also want to feel good about themselves. It is here that Busenitz connects Warren’s theology to his ability to attract seekers and religious consumers. He concludes,

Seeker-sensitive churches tend to minimize the gospel message in order to soften topics such as sin, repentance, divine wrath, and eternal punishment. The goal is to make unbelievers feel comfortable until they are ready to accept Jesus . . . By embracing *The Purpose-Driven Life*, some readers and churches may become unwittingly entangled in the seeker-sensitive movement—a philosophical system that is inherently unbiblical.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Busenitz, 49.

<sup>288</sup> Busenitz, 59.

Again, the tight association between Warren's God, who does not interrupt the comfort of believers, is, like Wells's weightless God, one that also will not interrupt the exchange between seekers and that which is sought. Hence, like Smith, the source of Busenitz's problem with *The Purpose-Driven Life* is its divergence from a more literal interpretation of the Bible. Busenitz, though, refrains from accusing Warren of smuggling in New Age spirituality through his theology. Warren's theology is problematic enough without going this far. Warren's unbalanced God results from an interpretive misstep; his seeker-sensitive language serves an explanatory role as to why he steps in this direction.

Finally, Marshall Davis's book, *More Than a Purpose: An Evangelical Response to Rick Warren and the Megachurch Movement*, provides the fullest treatment of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and its place in a consumer culture. Like Smith and Busenitz, Davis mines the book for deviations from orthodox Evangelical theology and correct biblical usage. Yet Davis makes more explicit the association of these deviations with the authority of consumer culture than the other two critics.

He begins with a blunt assault on the first words of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren's line, "It's not about you," is countered by Davis with the claim that despite Warren's intention to turn our attention away from ourselves and onto God, *The Purpose-Driven Life* never accomplishes this task. Instead of de-centering the self and centering God, Davis asserts that Warren places human beings on relatively equal footing with God.

Warren's world is a man-centered universe. Although God plays an important supporting role, man is the center—or at least one of the centers . . . Whereas he repeatedly declares that God is the only true focus, it seems like the *Purpose-Driven* universe revolves

around us . . . In spite of statements to the contrary, *The Purpose-Driven Life* is about you. It is all about your life and how you can make it better.<sup>289</sup>

Davis provides several pieces of evidence for his claim. First, lines in *The Purpose-Driven Life* like, “God waits for us to act first,” or “[S]piritual growth is a collaborative effort between you and the Holy Spirit” are semi-Pelagian according to Davis.<sup>290</sup> They speak of a God/human cooperation in the effort for salvation.

Secondly, in similar fashion to Smith, Davis ties Warren to New Age spirituality through the supposed family ties between Norman Vincent Peale, Robert Schuller and Warren. Peale’s “positive thinking” is a known influence on Schuller’s “possibility thinking,” and Warren has written of Schuller’s early influence on him.<sup>291</sup> The influence is expressed through Warren’s way of defining such activities as repentance before God. That repentance is achieved by the overcoming of thinking that is self-defeating, which by necessity is God’s way of thinking, is enough of an indication that Warren has adopted Peale’s and Schuller’s model. Davis writes, “Repentance is no longer the biblical idea of turning away from sin; it is simple a change of mind. Warren says that we repent whenever we modify our way of thinking to conform to God’s way of thinking.”<sup>292</sup> Consequently, if this kind of mind-meld is possible, Davis concludes that there exists no

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<sup>289</sup> Marshall Davis, *More Than a Purpose: An Evangelical Response to Rick Warren and the Megachurch Movement* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2006), 18.

<sup>290</sup> Davis, 70.

<sup>291</sup> Warren participated in one of Schuller’s seminars in 1984 and several others in the early 1990s when Warren’s Saddleback Church was growing. Warren has said in the past that Schuller’s style of ministry had an impact on his own ministry and thought about church building. Though since the publication of *The Purpose-Driven Church* in 1995, Warren has consistently denied any substantial connection to Schuller as he began to suspect Schuller’s connection to New Age spirituality. Schuller’s invitations to the Mormon motivational author, Stephen Covey, disturbed Warren and implied to him that Schuller was stretching the boundaries of Christianity to include those who are distant from Evangelical principles. Schuller was disturbed by this rejection and in a series of letters, asked Warren to speak at Schuller’s church repeatedly in the late 1990s, the Crystal Cathedral. Warren has rejected all of these offers. From Abanes, 99-106.

<sup>292</sup> Davis, 25.

real difference between God and humanity. And this lack of difference can only occur if there is a, “downplaying of biblical theology in favor of self-help techniques.”<sup>293</sup>

The downplaying is revisited by Davis in a chapter called, “Doctrine for Dummies,” in which he more explicitly attributes Warren’s elevation of the self over God to a, “carelessness in doctrinal matters.”<sup>294</sup> Warren leaves out repentance altogether, according to Davis, in his laying out of the path to salvation. This runs counter to biblical admonitions to repent before baptism as articulated in Matthew 3: 7-8.<sup>295</sup> More significantly, Davis charges Warren with advocating a spirit/body dualism as evinced by excerpts from *The Purpose-Driven Life* such as, “You are a spirit who resides in a body,” and, “Like God, we are spiritual beings—our spirits are immortal and will outlast our earthly bodies.”<sup>296</sup> This constitutes a kind of Gnosticism to Davis. The Chalcedonian formulation of Christ being fully human and divine, and by implication, that all Christians will be bodily resurrected is effectively rendered moot.

Warren’s doctrinal adulteration enables the advancement of the “the lowest common denominator theology” which minimizes theological differences that people (and denominations) may have. Warren’s intent, however, is not to arrive at a sounder theology, but to attract the largest number of readers by not scaring them off, Davis concludes. Again, Warren marries his ministry to a seeker-sensitive model that takes cues from human wants and needs in his theological formulations over divine dictate.

It is both the psychologizing of the Gospel and the avoidance of doctrine that leads Davis to link *The Purpose-Driven Life* with consumer culture. In his chapter, “The

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<sup>293</sup> Davis, 25-6.

<sup>294</sup> Davis, 51.

<sup>295</sup> Davis, 65-6.

<sup>296</sup> Davis, 68-9.

Market-Driven Life,” Davis locates two primary forces that work in tandem to build up and maintain consumer culture: the authority of personal choice and the institutional willingness to satisfy customers. Davis rehearses these common themes of the seeker-sensitive movement before applying them to *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Interestingly, Davis traces Warren’s tie to consumer culture through his seeker-sensitive language back to an adherence to pragmatism. Pragmatism, to Davis, subjects all religious truths to a test; if they work, they are true. Hence absolute truths, which may register no apparent beneficial consequences, are subordinated to pragmatic ones that do. So if *The Purpose-Driven Life* sells well, makes people happy and brings people to Warren’s version of the Gospel, the content of the book is pragmatically true.

*The Purpose-Driven Life* does not use the Bible as an authority. It quotes it as a supporting witness when it is useful to do so. When the Bible is used in this manner, its authority is undermined just as certainly as if its cardinal truths were blatantly contradicted.<sup>297</sup>

Hence honoring pragmatic success overrides the possibility that inherent truth resides in properly interpreted Biblical concepts despite the consequences of the idea. More importantly, Davis contends that applying pragmatic principles to the truth permits Warren to define for himself what consequences are favorable and which are deleterious. Warren has clearly demonstrated to Davis that the satisfaction of religious customers is the desired goal of his ministry. Hence pragmatism in the service of seeker-sensitive methods wins out over absolutism.

The coupling of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and consumer culture by Davis, then, is forged solely by the *means* by which Warren reinforces the underpinnings of consumer culture. Though Davis mentions that the clever marketing of *The Purpose-Driven Life*

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<sup>297</sup> Davis, 106.

plays a role in yoking Warren to the desires of consumers, he, like Smith and Busenitz, look to Warren's distancing from the true Gospel as the tie that binds.

What is at stake for all three of these critics of *The Purpose-Driven Life* is the Gospel itself. It is one thing if a New Age author twists God's Word inappropriately, but when a powerful Evangelical such as Warren commits similar errors, the damage is potentially far worse. Important for my study is not whether these critics are standing on solid theological and biblical footing when they launch their critiques, but what their grievances about *The Purpose-Driven Life* say about their understanding of consumer culture. In all three, the substance of the criticisms centers on claims that Warren has traded biblical truth for a message that appeals to seekers. This is accomplished by the subtle empowering of the self by means of enlisting God in the self's projects instead of the other way around. Consumer culture then becomes a catch-all term used to draw the battle lines between the things of God and all else. Because consumer culture is charged with the transgression of encouraging individuals to authorize their own search for meaning, God is obviated. Hence despite Warren's pleadings to the contrary, consumer culture provides the cultural environment for *The Purpose-Driven Life* to flourish in the minds of these critics. It is the inflation of the powers of the self in conjunction with the enlisting of God's powers in the self's tasks that tips Smith, Busenitz and Davis off to the alliance between Rick Warren and consumer culture.

While there is a valid connection between the expansive self and consumer culture, the problem is that this connection is made based on the premise that Warren and presumably the seekers who adopt a purpose-driven life operate with a flawed theology. Miller argues that the problem with critiques such as these is that they reduce consumer



culture to that which offers a competing set of beliefs that then drives the seeker-sensitive movement. Then, only a better belief system built on what they perceive is the true Gospel can legitimately confront books like *The Purpose-Driven Life*. This approach to the relationship between religion and consumer culture is a problem for Miller for the simple reason that beliefs do not drive our behavior.<sup>298</sup>

Recall that Miller stresses that there are plenty of devout people who allow their beliefs to inform an anti-consumerism stance, yet still act and think primarily as consumers. Simple realignment of beliefs may have little effect on the *actions* of consumers in a consumer culture. The problem here, apart from the theoretical difficulty of dividing belief systems up into “Gospel-loyal” and “Gospel-disloyal,” is that this binary forces the hitching of consumer culture to more clear value-laden ideologies, the primary one being materialism.<sup>299</sup> When consumer culture is reduced to the selfish drive to organize one’s life around the acquisition of material goods, it becomes a straw man, as Miller shows. Consumer culture, as more of a value-neutral cultural reflex to the interaction between individual desire and marketing, can actually take up an anti-materialism stance, which is in part the result of a desire, and strip it of its moral weight thus making it a choice amongst others.<sup>300</sup>

This insight is lost on these critics of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Instead of grounding their criticisms on a consumer culture that works at its base level by brokering

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<sup>298</sup> Miller, 15.

<sup>299</sup> Wuthnow, “A Good Life and a Good Society: The Debate Over Materialism,” in *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension*, ed. Robert Wuthnow (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 1-21.

<sup>300</sup> Wade Clark Roof notes that, while an “anti-materialism” stance, may not solely guide the worldviews of most seekers, materialism certainly is not whole-heartedly embraced either. Despite the fierce striving for material comfort or perhaps luxury, “there is a yearning for something that transcends a consumption ethic and material definitions of success.” Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 128.

in abstracted religious ideas and practices, Smith, Busenitz and Davis quickly link *The Purpose-Driven Life* to consumer culture by virtue of the book's perceived deviance from orthodox doctrine. Their neglect of this facet of consumer culture generates two primary problems for the arguments contained in this line of criticism. One, the underestimation of the power and scope of consumer culture to absorb even the shop-worn stance that they take up—that of the anti-secular, anti-consumerist position—can render their critiques impotent. Consumer culture has no moral compass as it only seeks to respond to individual desires. Anger towards Christians who sell out to the New Age or towards those who use seeker-sensitive methods can be packaged to compete against other commodified ideas. Or the position of transcendence that these critics claim to be arguing from can be converted to another immanent position quite easily, thus radically altering the nature of the battle.

Two, when a critique of *The Purpose-Driven Life* stays at the level of belief or theological doctrine, the primary way that the book's message merges with the way in which consumers actually live as consumers is missed. As Miller asserts, consumer life is driven by the ability of consumer culture to abstract and commodify certain religious ideas and practices—not establish its own competing ideology.<sup>301</sup> Hence when consumer culture is criticized on theological grounds alone, it can be linked to New Age spirituality more easily, and the real mechanism of consumer culture in its relationship with religion is bypassed. Their style of attack stays on the surface of the discourse involving religion and consumer culture and never reckons with the ways in which consumer culture works *below* one's beliefs about it. As a result, these criticisms of *The Purpose-Driven Life*,

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<sup>301</sup> Miller, 18.

while consistent with a general Evangelical suspicion of the authority of the self in consumer culture, nonetheless attempt to treat the symptom while the cause of the problem is left untreated.

An understanding of the relationship between *The Purpose-Driven Life* and consumer culture must, as Miller puts it, “attend to the nonintentional aspects of social and economic systems, how they frequently work without any supporting ideology or implicit ontology.”<sup>302</sup> The implication that Warren is simply taking cues from marketing strategies to “sell” his message to the widest audience does not further our understanding of the dynamics of consumer culture. Nor can it magnify the meaning of a concept like purpose to the point that it can be contrasted with a concept like vocation.

*The Purpose-Driven Life* participates in the dynamics of consumer culture on a fundamental level; that it has seeker-sensitive qualities is predicated on the availability of ready-made, commodified religious products, not the other way around. Miller’s deeper investigation moves us beyond a kind of “culture war” between those guardians of the “true Gospel” and the apologists for seeker religion—a helpful step towards a clearer understanding of purpose, and hence towards the kind of vocation that can possibly move beyond its commodified form.

### **Purpose and Vocation**

Warren’s purpose is a contemporary rendering of the Reformation idea of vocation. Without expressing this equation outright, Warren’s phrasing and intention of his idea of purpose mimic those found in the original idea of the Protestant vocation.

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<sup>302</sup> Miller, 18.

Warren echoes Luther's expansion of vocations to include all jobs so long as love for one's neighbor is the fruit of labor.

You are called to serve God. Growing up, you may have thought that being "called" by God was something only missionaries, pastors, nuns, and other "full-time" church workers experiences, but the Bible says every Christian is called to service. Your call to salvation included your call to service. These are the same. Regardless of your job or career, you are called to *full-time* Christian service.<sup>303</sup>

Despite his evocation of Luther's terms of a calling, simply assuming that Warren inherits a pristine Reformed notion of a calling ignores historical changes that the idea of vocation has undergone. Warren, in many ways, remains loyal to the tenets of Reformation theology. He does not, however, have easy access to its concepts. Any claim to the contrary ignores the fact that the meaning of vocation has always been forged in negotiation with the meaning of work. And as go the changes in the work world fashioned by its cultural and economic environment, so go corresponding, often reactionary, articulations of a vocation. Absent an understanding that the content and meaning of the idea of vocation have fluctuated and that these changes bear directly on the ideas that Warren utilizes, and "purpose" will be misunderstood.

Like a calling, purpose serves as a mediator between God and humanity that translates God's will into proper human activity. Instead of elaborating a singular call, through which God summons all of humanity to participate in the divine plan, *The Purpose-Driven Life* depicts God's will according to five broad purposes. These purposes make up the foundation off of which human purposes are granted their own legitimacy. The purposes are as follows: one, that humans bring enjoyment to God, and two, that humans participate in God's family, three, that humans become like Christ, four, that humans serve God, and five, that humans fulfill our mission in the world. All five

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<sup>303</sup> Warren, 229.

are *general* in that they apply equally to all and speak to the baseline activities that align individual purposes with God's will. For instance, the second purpose states that the tripartite Godhead reveals that God "treasures relationship," and hence one of God's general purposes is to have all of creation included in the divine family.<sup>304</sup>

With a proper response to God's purposes, our own individual purposes in life are made manifest. Just as an individual's calling gains its direction and fuel from the original call from God, so too purpose is found and lived out based solely on God's purposes. For instance, Warren asserts that God's purpose in sending Jesus is so that humans emulate Him.<sup>305</sup> Likewise, he claims that the purpose behind God's insistence that the Gospel be spread is so that humans find their purpose in mission work.<sup>306</sup> A purpose, like a calling, conjoins God's will to proper human activity so that God's demands are satisfied through responsive human activity.

Purpose also disciplines the human tendency to wander off the righteous path. Recall Calvin's description of a calling that includes its function as a governor of the fickle mind. Warren, too, ascribes this function to purpose.

Knowing your purpose simplifies your life. It defines what you do and what you don't do. Your purpose becomes the standard you use to evaluate which activities are essential and which aren't . . . Without a clear purpose you have no foundation on which you base decisions, allocate your time, and use your resources. You will tend to make choices based on circumstances, pressures, and your mood at that moment. People who don't know their purpose try to do too much—and *that* causes stress, fatigue, and conflict.<sup>307</sup>

It is God's plan, in both purpose and Calvin's calling, that quells the worried mind. And by binding followers to a direction in life that reliably accords with God's overall plan,

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<sup>304</sup> Warren, 117.

<sup>305</sup> Warren, 171.

<sup>306</sup> Warren, 281-319.

<sup>307</sup> Warren, 31.

Warren likewise leaves little room either to ignore the charge put before those called or to expropriate freely how God's purposes are to be fulfilled.

Yet Calvin's *Institutes* are a far cry from *The Purpose-Driven Life*. While *The Purpose-Driven Life* agrees in principle with Calvin's assertions of the total depravity of humanity and the absolute sovereignty of God, the sharp edges of Calvin's expression are smoothed out considerably by Warren. Much of Warren's modification of more unforgiving theological ideas can be attributed to his desire to attract readers to the Gospel—not repel them. And when these theological ideas are enlisted in the service of aiding the reader's search for purpose in life, instead of explicitly arguing for their truth, Warren also enlists the help of consumer culture.

### **Purpose as Commodified Vocation**

Purpose, as an ersatz vocation, is found and lived out in a purpose-driven life at arm's length from the activities of daily work and the social context that animates them. In general, Warren minimizes talk of how one's purpose in life negotiates with the socioeconomic reality. When Warren does address more tangible life situations, he abstracts from these situations reducing them to emotional or psychological states. Warren continually asserts the additive therapeutic function of purpose, as opposed to a more subtractive role of fighting off bad circumstances. For instance, purpose, "gives meaning to your life," "simplifies your life," "focuses your life," and "motivates your life."<sup>308</sup> Here, purpose marshals a collection of tactics for navigating the minefield that is the world without demanding that the world inform the navigation process. Left behind is the admission that the successful search for purpose/meaning involves more than the

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<sup>308</sup> Warren, 31-3.

surmounting of insidious thoughts and emotions. Purpose enables the avoidance of the fact that troubling emotional states are always tied to the material conditions from which they arise. Not that we should expect a Rauchenbuschian wrestling with social reality from Warren. However, if the purpose-driven life was informed in part by its material context, it *should* be able to account for the ability of some to find their purpose more easily or more frustratingly within the socioeconomic context in which they inhabit. Yet for Warren, finding and living the purpose-driven life can be fulfilled in spite of these realities.

More specifically, when Warren does confront aspects of the world's material context, he does so superficially. The role of money in our lives is dealt with by Warren as that which competes for God's demands for allegiance. Money can stand in the way of surrendering fully to God or sacrificing one's own purposes to those of God. He focuses on the damaging ways of *orienting oneself* towards the issue of money instead of the ways that money and its flow in a capitalistic economy alters the socioeconomic context in which purposes are realistic for readers. The extent of his treatment of money is:

The most difficult area to surrender for many people is their money. Many have thought, "I want to live for God but I also want to earn enough money to live comfortably and retire someday." Retirement is not the goal of a surrendered life, because it competes with God for the primary attention of our lives. Jesus said, "*You cannot serve both God and money*" and "*Wherever your treasure is, your heart will be also.*"<sup>309</sup>

Then,

[m]oney has the greatest potential to replace God in your life . . . When Jesus is your Master, money serves you, but money is your master, you become its slave. Wealth is certainly not a sin, but failing to use it for God's glory is . . . The Bible is very clear: God uses money to test your faithfulness as a servant. That is why Jesus talked more

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<sup>309</sup> Warren, 81.

about money than he did about either heaven or hell . . . How you manage your money affects how much God can bless your life.<sup>310</sup>

Fair enough, yet in Warren's version of the God/Mammon problem, he reduces the complicated issue of money down to a question on a test that must be answered correctly. Money thus becomes a symbol whereby readers of *The Purpose-Driven Life* merely have to tamp down its *significance* in their lives. In order for Warren to present money in this way, actual money and its ability to convey class differences, for instance, must be condensed to its symbolic function as it fights other symbols in a kind of spiritual warfare. The person attempting to live a purpose-driven life must only put money in its rightful place within the divine economy and in one's mind while the ways that money actually operates in the world go on without interference.

On the issue of materialism—terrain that could permit Warren to state how one's purpose can plot a course between the real need for material things and the exaggerated significance placed on accumulation—Warren again pits the issue against that which stands outside “real” purpose.

Many people are driven by materialism. Their desire to acquire becomes the whole goal of their lives. This drive to always want more is based on the misconceptions that having more will make me more happy, more important, and more secure, but all three ideas are untrue. Possessions only provide *temporary* happiness . . . Your value is not determined by your valuables, and God says the most valuable *things* in life are not things.<sup>311</sup>

Materialism is positioned as a separate drive that stands in stark opposition to the drive guided by God's purposes. This positioning allows Warren to capture the act of acquiring material things with non-controversial descriptions and plausible criticisms. Categorized thusly, materialism is easily discredited by the drive that is injected with

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<sup>310</sup> Warren, 267.

<sup>311</sup> Warren, 29.



purpose from God. Materialism, once overcome by a purpose-driven person, is rendered symbolically powerless. Yet left unanswered is an explanation for the rise of materialism.

How has materialism come to vie for our attention over God? An honest answer to that question could force Warren into a more nuanced discussion of the difference between the legitimate need for things and ideology of materialism, which could impact how a purpose is lived out in the material world. Such a discussion could then lead to questions about what forces have worked to distance materialism from material need. Yet when materialism as an ideology is solely in competition with God's will, it is the proper orientation to material things that figures into the living out of one's purpose; material things are idolatrous symbols or utterly irrelevant. When put this way, the purpose-driven life that has "put materialism in its proper place" is ill-equipped to challenge capitalistic institutions that benefit greatly by our materialism. If it is merely the *attitude* towards materialism that needs adjustment, purpose can play no role in the adjusting of the material context of the purpose-driven life.

With other drives that compete for God's attention, Warren moves from actual material obstacles, such as money and material things, to psychological and emotional obstacles to the purpose-driven life. Guilt, anger, fear and the anxious need for approval constitute Warren's problem emotions. On fear, he states:

Many people are driven by fear. Their fears may be a result of a traumatic experience, unrealistic expectations, growing up in a high-control home, or even genetic predisposition. Regardless of the cause, fear-driven people often miss great opportunities because they're afraid to venture out . . . Fear is a self-imposed prison that will keep you from becoming what God intends for you to be. You *must* move against it with the weapons of faith and love.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Warren, 28-9.

It is not that fear is unnatural; of course every human experiences it often. The point is that Warren contrasts the life driven by purpose with the life driven by emotions without accounting for the social context in which they arise in twentieth-century America. And therefore, his notion of purpose hovers above the social fray, here too. Fear, here, is unhinged from its possible causes as it is set up as a kind of amorphous enemy of “faith and love.” Then Warren can deploy purpose as that which drives readers through and around crippling emotional states. When purpose is situated as such, it never has to overcome concrete aspects of a social context such as a, “traumatic experience” or a “high-control home”—only the emotions that result from them. Again, purpose poses no challenge to the causes of overblown emotional states. In fact, those living a purpose-driven life can conceivably consider issues that generate emotional trouble as excuses to be offered as to why a purpose is not being lived out.

Several more brief examples are equally suggestive. When addressing globalization and the connection that American consumers have with people all over the world, Warren writes, “Probably most of the clothes you are wearing and much of what you ate today were produced in another country. We are more connected than we realize. These are exciting days to be alive.”<sup>313</sup> Or on the subject of multinational corporations, he states, “The largest media and business conglomerates are all multinational. Our lives are increasingly intertwined with those in other nations as we share fashions, entertainment, music, sports, and even fast food.”<sup>314</sup> When reaching out to a suffering global community is called for, prayer is sufficient. Yet the prayer (and subsequent

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<sup>313</sup> Warren, 300.

<sup>314</sup> Warren, 300.

mission work for some) is geared strictly to effecting the salvation of those who have not heard the Gospel:

The first way to start thinking globally is to begin praying for specific countries. World-class Christians pray for the world. Get a globe or map and pray for nations by name . . . People may refuse our love or reject our message, but they are defenseless against our prayers. Like an intercontinental missile, you can aim a prayer at a person's heart whether you are ten feet or 10,000 miles away.<sup>315</sup>

Again, we should not expect a leftist rant from Warren that tackles unjust business practices and exploitation of cheap foreign labor.<sup>316</sup> Nor should we expect Warren to downplay evangelism as a way to relate to those not saved. But left out of his equation are the working conditions of many producers of our imports as well as the issues that stem from the coalescence of power within the multinationals.

Lastly, and most important for this project, Warren makes clear that a purpose-driven life can be lived fully despite the nature and conditions of one's job or career. In lock-step with later articulations of vocation, the actual activities of work and the material conditions that shape them fade into the background when prioritizing that which contributes to living with real purpose. As with material things, preoccupation with one's work is judged to be another orientation towards the world that is not only excessive, but also that which unjustifiably competes with the drive to align with God's purposes.

Again, it is comportment towards or approach to one's work that Warren disparages—not the actual work that one performs in a job or career.

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<sup>315</sup> Warren, 300-1.

<sup>316</sup> Since the writing of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Warren and his wife Kay started their P.E.A.C.E. plan to begin to combat the AIDS epidemic in Africa. While their efforts have directly targeted the causes and spread of the disease in Africa, the *overall* effort still echoes his statements in the book. On the P.E.A.C.E. plan website, five "giants" are identified as the primary hindrances to living a full life in countries ravaged by AIDS. Admittedly, three of these (extreme poverty, pandemic diseases and rampant illiteracy) represent a stark departure from the emotional hindrances to purpose-driven living. Yet the P.E.A.C.E. plan's overall purpose is to provide more emotional peace than political peace. See <http://www.thepeaceplan.com/>, (Accessed January 27, 2008).

We become preoccupied with making a living, doing our work, paying bills, and accomplishing goals as if these tasks are the point of life. They are not. The point of life is learning to love—God and people. Life minus love equals zero.<sup>317</sup>

Warren's point is well taken—workaholism is not a healthy way to approach work. It is, however, the contrast between work and the real “point of life” that enable such an approach. Minus a fleshing out of how one's purpose interacts with a dissatisfying job, the status of work on that job is denigrated.

Further on in the book, he lumps the exaggerated orientation towards one's career in with more obviously trivial pursuits that more clearly do not (or should not) stack up against purpose. Warren writes, “You are going to give your life for something. What will it be—a career, a sport, a hobby, fame, wealth? None of these will have lasting significance.”<sup>318</sup> By grouping a career in with these more inconsequential activities such as a hobby or superficial goals such as fame, by extension, Warren succinctly classifies work as another activity that will fade away with time. Of course it is true that no job lasts forever, but significant is that the finiteness of a career is enough to relegate it to insignificance when compared to an ever-lasting purpose.

With purpose thus situated, the work that fills out a job or career has little to do with the fulfillment of one's purpose. If it is the symbolic significance of one's career (or a hobby) that matters, purpose is freed up to realize itself apart from the material details of one's career. As such, increased job volatility wrought by flexible capitalism is one such detail that cannot derail the purpose-driven life. Or that a growing number of employees are disengaged from partaking in meaningful decision-making at work could be similarly ignored. If one consistently feels anxious and powerless on the job, the

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<sup>317</sup> Warren, 125.

<sup>318</sup> Warren, 232.

purpose-driven attitude towards a career may seem out of touch at best, disingenuous at worst. These workplace realities would certainly affect the realization of a life's purpose when construed more broadly than Warren's articulation.

It is the freeing up of purpose from the messiness of the concrete work world that contributes most heavily to its appropriation by readers as a consumer item. As the functional equivalent of vocation, a purpose cannot be found and lived out in the absence of meaningful work without manipulating its meaning. To get around the reality that the material conditions of many jobs militate against the experience of meaningfulness on the job, Warren offers the promise of a purpose-driven life that does not worry itself with such concerns. Along the lines of Miller's argument, purpose-*qua*-vocation is salable as a commodity precisely because of its detachment from any material context.

True, Warren uses the format of a self-help book and the methods of the seeker-sensitive movement to deliver the idea of purpose. The publishers of Campbell's *The Power of Myth* perform a similar maneuver by ensconcing the archetype of the hero in an easy-to-read book that additionally compels the search for the "hero within." However the delivery of both the concept of purpose and Campbell's hero is necessarily preceded by the production of that which is being delivered. Like purpose, the idea of the hero is disciplined for the market through its abstraction that, in the end, can be used as inspiration to "follow your bliss." Similarly, the idea of purpose functions as a commodified version of vocation through its ability to guide readers to emotional stability that is possible only if the idea has been sufficiently cut loose from a material context. And because it is purpose that is delivered to and finally consumed by readers,

the process of its commodification stands as a clearer indicator of the role that consumer culture plays in the interpretation of *The Purpose-Driven Life* than the delivery apparatus.

### **Conclusion**

Like Joseph Campbell's hero archetype, purpose in *The Purpose-Driven Life* can be consumed by anyone and be applied to almost any life project. The absence of any wrestling with how purpose must engage the context of work in order to be realized suggests that purpose is able to flow in a consumer culture. It is the particular ability of consumer culture to commodify everything from actual physical objects to religious beliefs that encourages the connection between purpose and consumer culture.

And yet the predominant articulation of the connection between *The Purpose-Driven Life* and consumer culture has been that of Warren's complicity in the seeker-sensitive movement. The shortcomings of such critiques are made evident by utilizing Miller's alternative way to grasp the connection between *The Purpose-Driven Life* and consumer culture. Yet Miller's project is not merely descriptive; prescriptions geared towards redressing the social injustice that issues from the relationship between religion and consumer culture follow his description.

The consequences of the success of a book like *The Purpose-Driven Life* are related to the effective silencing of responses to the social and material conditions of work in a capitalistic consumer culture. If we take Miller and Bauman seriously, consumer culture operates ideologically to achieve its cultural hegemony over certain aspects of religious life. And if we take Sennett seriously, consumer culture possesses the capacity to act as insulation that relieves those at the head of a corporation from responsibility for the welfare of their employees. The idea of vocation and its Warrenian

permutations carry the *potential* to act as points of resistance in the current cultural sea, but only if they can engage their adherents in a non-commodified form.

## CHAPTER 4—TOWARDS A POLITICAL VOCATION

... the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all.

Max Weber

Our aim is to recognize what Lincoln pointed out: The fact that there are some respects in which men are obviously not equal; but also to insist that there should be an equality of self-respect and of mutual respect, an equality of rights before the law, and at least an approximate equality in the conditions under which each man obtains the chance to show the stuff that is in him when compared to his fellows.

Theodore Roosevelt

Weber's final salvo in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* contains much that can be salvaged—even one hundred years after he fired it. He correctly postulated that a calling would linger on in our lives despite the disenchantment of the world and our flagging attempts to justify its burden. Yet today, instead of “prowling,” it moves in broad daylight. And instead of settling in like a “ghost of dead religious beliefs,” if the success of the *The Purpose-Driven Life* is any indication, vocation language is animated with serious God-talk and spoken loudly in the mainstream. Whether a calling is connected to our highest spiritual values or not in reality, it appears as if the connection has not been fully severed.

Exactly what is the problem with vocation *qua* purpose? Does not Warren's packaging of the idea of vocation enable *some* benefits to his readers despite their individual work conditions? Is not equanimity with purpose more helpful than the



allowance of an unsatisfying work experience to prevent *any* participation in a calling as Ellul would have it? Is a de-contextualized calling better than no calling at all?

While answering “yes” to the latter two questions is justifiable, it is nonetheless a conservative answer. This is not to say that Warren’s book and ministry have not helped millions of people tap deeper meaning in their lives. Purpose could be strictly interpreted as a life-strategy that acts as a steady moving ship plowing through the choppy waters of ephemeral life projects and general meaninglessness. Warren himself would likely be satisfied with this interpretation as no doubt countless readers of *The Purpose-Driven Life* have used the book in this way. Yet such an interpretation foregrounds the meaning of purpose not against the context of one’s working environment, but against a therapeutic one. Satisfaction with or even resignation to Warren’s purpose as the *best* that a vocation can now aspire to puts stock in a kind of individuated and therapeutic confirmation that one is in line with God’s plan. The concrete details of work do not participate in God’s plan thus construed. Hence the attenuated version of a calling offered in Warren’s writing makes negligible demands on the social context of work.

In this chapter, I argue the idea of vocation contains latent political content that, when evoked, can inform and challenge certain norms that operate in the social context of the modern workplace. After presenting opportunities for a vocation to engage the political dynamics operating in many working situations, I draw on aspects of Calvin and Rauschenbusch’s articulation of a calling. Their articulations uniquely give theological permission for a vocation to function politically. Finally, utilizing Casanova’s idea of public religion, I delineate the kinds of norms that the concept of vocation can bring into the workplace. An idea of vocation emerges that at once is true to its status as a

culturally embedded theological product, yet is able to contest certain norms that fix workplace hierarchies by deploying the commodified idea of vocation.

Weber's primary support for his claims about a calling in a capitalist economy was the practice of delayed gratification acting as a holdover from the psychological impact of Calvin's doctrine of predestination. The delay enabled, amongst other things, a long-term adherence to a job, whether religious belief played a role or not; the "iron cage" of bureaucracy ensured compliance. In this social environment, individual identities were more or less stabilized around prescribed social roles.

Yet defying Weber's assessment that capitalism and a religiously-imbued vocation cannot coexist, consumer culture has deftly tapped the religious import of a calling and merged it with capitalist ideology. One way this has been accomplished is by a breakdown of stable individual identities that now float in Bauman's liquid modernity. Fragmented identities compiled in piecemeal fashion through consumption present the idea of a stable and durable vocation with a difficult task. This is especially so because the idea of vocation has become either the concept that can purportedly hold the fragments together or worse, merely one of the fragments added to one's identity in its commodified form.

### **The Current Situation**

Coupled with the trend towards neglecting the concrete realities of a job in recent theological treatments of vocation, current popular appropriations of vocation lack the ability and will to enter the political environment of the contemporary work world. So what, then, is the problem with the work world that demands addressing? Generally, muscle is needed to confront and redress an uneven power dynamic in the workplace

between the sellers (employers) and consumers (employees) of vocation.<sup>319</sup> Thomas

Geoghegan summarizes the current situation for workers in the United States:

The Economic Policy Institute reports that, since 1972, the median hourly wage for men has remained basically flat, and has actually declined for the bottom fifth of workers. (Women saw more of an improvement, but that's only because women were grossly underpaid in 1972.) What is more astonishing is that in this very same period, when workers were losing financial ground, their productivity—their output per hour—nearly *doubled*. They were doing twice as much work for the same wage or less.<sup>320</sup>

When increased productivity does not translate into increased wages, how are we to explain it? Certainly economic ups and downs contribute to the inability at times for companies to compensate effort fairly. However since 1972, the overall GDP in the United States has risen higher than adjusted increases in overall hourly wages. The money is going somewhere, but not into the checking accounts of workers. It is the ever-growing wealth gap between the very richest in the United States and everyone else that reveals where the money is going. Robert Reich cites that,

[s]ince the 1970s, the nation's richest 1 percent—comprising roughly one and half million families in 2004—have more than doubled their share of total national wealth. In 1976, they owned about 20 percent of America. By 1998, the latest date available, they had accumulated over a third of the nation's wealth—more than the entire bottom 90 percent put together.<sup>321</sup>

Unevenness between the players in any work environment is inevitable—the primary goal of any business is to generate profit and leadership is usually required to accomplish this task. However, the fact of radical disparity between the haves and have-nots when

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<sup>319</sup> Though the widening gap between those at the top and the bottom in the workplace is an exhibit in the case for democratizing the economic realm, it must be noted that the workplace is not the only locus of activity. Gary Dorrien writes that, “the common project for America’s various progressive social movements is to expand the modern democratic revolution by democratizing social and economic power. In a postmodern social context, however, it is not enough for this project to focus on either workplace or electoral issues.” Gary J. Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 293-4.

<sup>320</sup> Thomas Geoghegan, “Infinite Debt: How Unlimited Interest Rates Destroyed the Economy,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2009, 33-34.

<sup>321</sup> Reich, *Supercapitalism*, 113-14.

worker productivity has increased may be able to square with market principles, but if continued, begins to impinge on the political and even the moral status of such a society.

Market ideology that routinely justifies the widening of the power gap between the top and the bottom can move a society to the point of injustice. Gary Dorrien provides a general way of connecting unequal power between the controllers of the economy and the controlled with social injustice, of which workplace inequality constitutes a subset of his concerns:

[I]t is terribly mistaken to think that any serious challenge to existing relations of power can ignore the factors of production. We cannot significantly advance the cause of social justice by writing off the seemingly hopeless problem of inequality. Those who control the terms, amounts, and direction of credit largely determine the structures of the society in which we live. The question of who controls the process of investment is therefore no less crucial or pressing today than it was when “socialism” seemed an innocent ideal. Gains toward social and economic democracy are needed today for the same fundamental reason that political democracy is necessary: to restrain the abuse of unequal power.<sup>322</sup>

Many factors contribute to the situation that Dorrien describes. However the lack of power that employees are increasingly forced to accept in large corporations most certainly is one of these factors. When the workplace is one of these loci, the current meaning of vocation can be and is used to perpetuate widening power disparities. Yet the idea of vocation is also a powerful idea in its own right and, I argue, can alternatively contribute to “gains toward social and economic democracy.” However, it must first and foremost rejoin the effects of consumer culture that has rendered vocation language impotent in the face of “unequal power.”<sup>323</sup>

The mechanism of consumer culture alone does not *explain* this power differential. Nor does the equation of seeker-sensitive methods and consumer culture

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<sup>322</sup> Dorrien, “Social Salvation: The Social Gospel as Theology and Economics,” in *The Social Gospel Today*, ed. Christopher H. Evans (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 112.

<sup>323</sup> And while consumer culture is not the lone culprit here, its cultural pervasiveness as well as its deep connection to religious ideas, generally and vocation, specifically justify a look at its role.

necessarily shed needed light. While instructive, such analyses are neutral on the question of the real winners and losers in a work world that is animated by consumer culture.<sup>324</sup>

With more forceful tones than Vincent Miller, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King state that the exchange between buyer and seller of commodities is not a zero-sum game. The concerns of Carrette and King focus exclusively on the power exerted and gained by the real controllers of consumer culture (corporate elite and its marketers) rather than that of the consumer. Generally the widespread consumption of religious ideas under the broad term, “spirituality,” insulates the grand beneficiaries of free market capitalism from criticism by the consumers, according to Carrette and King. In our case, consumption of the idea of vocation is *domestication* of the idea. Further, Carrette and King’s conclusions help establish the connection between purportedly harmless consumption of religion and the growing amount of social and economic capital that those at the top continue to amass. Their unflinching argument dovetails with Sennett’s claim of the increasing uneven authority in the world of flexible capitalism to frame the social environment in which the idea of vocation operates as well as provide a launching pad for critique.

After exposing the power dynamic that issues from consumer culture, I move towards a concept of vocation that can stand as a critical concept. As noted in chapter 2, consumer culture, in conjunction with the dictates of flexible capitalism, works to force any meaning of vocation to conform to a work world where stable employment and

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<sup>324</sup> I am referring here only to Bauman’s analysis of consumer culture as it follows producer culture. He is far from value-neutral in his statements as to the effects of consumer culture. See Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 83-98; Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 129-153.

consistent tasks on the job are things of the past. Consistent, durable identities are unable to congeal through work, as a result. The consumption and adoption of identities or parts of identities not only proves practical when on-the-job tasks mutate with frequency, but also places the onus on the individual alone to “work on oneself” constantly. In addition, “shopping for a self,” when the commodities are religious, is made easier when those items are abstracted from their material context and adopted without consultation from that context. Hence identity fragmentation combined with continual consumption, of which the idea of vocation serves as a conceptual commodity, can make for a pliable employee within the capricious world of business. Consequently, a notion of vocation that short-circuits this vicious circle is one that must be able to resist commodification if it is to have any chance of politically engaging the social context of the business world.

Richard Roberts shares these concerns but adds that a kind of neo- and even radical orthodox approach that theologically distances itself from the world leaves the job of forming identities either in the hands of a ghettoized Church or the secular market.<sup>325</sup> Roberts also echoes the assertions of Miller, Carrette and King: the unhinging of religion from its origins exposes it to consumer culture at the costly expense of religion.

In societies and cultures which, in late modernity, have lost contact with their origins, have ceded active democracy to invasive managerial hegemony, have been seduced by postmodern, consumerist conceptions of the formation of identity, and which slide into ever deeper dysfunctionality, the discovery—or recreation—of these primal processes of renewal may prove impossible for all but a small and oppressed minority; but the obligation to try to discover them nonetheless remains.<sup>326</sup>

Roberts’s idea of “identity as vocation” is a provocative starting point to fulfill his stated obligation. If vocation can check the authority of, “consumerist conceptions of the

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<sup>325</sup> He writes, “a postmodern Augustinian quasi-fundamentalist theology, so-called ‘radical orthodoxy’, now provides a refuge within which a quasi-Messianic elite hibernate until their eschatological ‘moment’ comes: meanwhile the world degrades.” Roberts, *Religion, Theology, and the Human Sciences*, 296.

<sup>326</sup> Roberts, 305.

formation of identity,” then it counters the dematerialization of religion in two ways. One, if a necessary component of a vocation is the ensuring of certain material and political conditions of work, then the conception of vocation should be able to bring together the current usage of the term (a calling brings better feelings about my job) and the political side of vocation (a calling brooks no unjust working conditions). Two, this kind of unity will not permit a commodified vocation to hold sway in the workplace. A concept of vocation must emerge that transcends consumer-based identity formation and at the same time critique the material realities of the corporate workplace.

### **Winners and Losers in the Modern Workplace**

Even though all cultural terrain *is* a contested space for power, it does not follow that all participants are on an equal playing field. This assertion runs counter to the fact that consumer culture has been considered to be a particularly fair cultural game in comparison to its predecessor, producer culture. The market, when operating in a hospitable social environment, seemingly offers an equal chance for all producers of consumer items to put their wares on the market, so long as their finances permit. And this equality of opportunity is matched by a corresponding equality amongst consumers who freely choose what they will consume, as long as their finances permit. The cultural contest in consumer culture, when put this way, is won by the producer who produces the more appealing product and by all consumers who benefit from the producers’ battle for consumers attention and money. Put in this way, the contested space of consumer culture is fought largely amongst the producers. The producers are engaged in a struggle with each other and consumers receive the spoils.

However, consumer culture can also be seen as a larger battlefield that directly puts producers in conflict with consumers. The consumer can fight for cultural territory against the encroachment of advertising into every conceivable social space. On an economic level, by leveraging their most powerful weapon, their decision to consume a product or not, consumers may force producers to lower their price or change production direction altogether. On a cultural level, consumers can attempt to regain colonized social space by using subversive tactics against corporations. Kalle Lasn, the founder of *Adbusters Magazine*, calls subversive practices against the producers of consumer culture, “subvertising”—a subcategory of the overall practice of “culture jamming.”

Corporations advertise. Culture jammers *subvertise*. A well-produced print “subvertisement” mimics the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double take as viewers realize that they’re seeing is in fact the very opposite of what they expected. Subvertising is potent mustard. It cuts through the hype and glitz of our mediated reality and momentarily, tantalizingly, reveals the hollow spectacle within.<sup>327</sup>

Here, Lasn describes the manipulation of a purchased consumer item or public advertisement that counters the corporation’s desire for the use of their brand name. One example of subvertising is the direct alteration of a company logo on clothing by the consumer. This sends the somewhat paradoxical message that while the consumer assisted the producer in the original purchase, the consumer then “damages” the company with a transgressive act. Culture jamming in general is a set of tactics designed to stake out a modicum of cultural space in the hotly contested landscape of consumer culture.

The ability of consumers to employ tactics of resistance as a result of consumer freedom to take their money where they please, has led some to celebrate consumer

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<sup>327</sup> Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge—and Why We Must* (New York: Quill, 2000), 131-32.



culture.<sup>328</sup> Yet the fact that it is consumers who are the ones using tactics of resistance and not the producers begs several questions about the nature of this contested space. What is being resisted? Does the reveling of some in the “triumph of consumer culture” betray the reality that power distribution between producers and consumers is entrenched and not really up for grabs? Do tactics absent a strategy reveal that consumers may win some battles but lose the war? And finally, are the consumers of *religious* items subject to the same fate as all consumers or does the entrance of religion into consumer culture comprise a different contested cultural space?<sup>329</sup>

### **Spirituality’s Silent Takeover of Religion**

Vincent Miller, whose critique relies in part on deCerteau’s tactics as a means of resistance, takes much of the injurious effects of free market ideology into account. The act of consumption for consumption’s sake is reinforced in a society that is run by the market. The marketplace, for Miller, is where all consumers must return after frustration with what has already been consumed, whether durable goods or lifestyle enhancements.<sup>330</sup> And with the role of corporations, Miller laments extreme abuses enacted in the name of consumer satisfaction and shareholder happiness. For instance, the shameless ability for corporations to push consumption at the expense of environmental degradation and global human rights violations is a driving concern of

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<sup>328</sup> See James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>329</sup> Naomi Klein is skeptical of the real effects of culture jamming that alters advertisements to undermine their message. “But after a while, what began as a way to talk back to the ads starts to feel more like evidence of our total colonization by them, and especially because the ad industry is proving that it is capable of cutting off the culture jammers at the pass.” They silence the protest by co-opting the protest spirit itself for its own ad campaigns. See Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2002), 297-8.

<sup>330</sup> Miller, 121.

his.<sup>331</sup> Egregious corporate acts enacted in the push to sell commodities that perpetuate endless consumption contribute to his criticism that the market has too much power.

These insights are highly instructive, to be sure. Certainly Miller does not support James Twitchell's triumph of consumer culture.<sup>332</sup> Nor does he work towards his conclusions by instrumentally using the power of consumer culture for an ultimate good, as is the case for Jane Bennett or Tom Beaudoin.<sup>333</sup> Yet Miller rarely takes his grievances to the fight against free market ideology and to those who pulls its strings. Recall that consumer culture, for Miller, refers to the, "cultural habits of use and interpretation that are derived from the consumption of commodified cultural objects."<sup>334</sup> Hence, consumer culture is viewed from the perspective of the consumer *alone*. Miller responds to corporate abuse via consumer culture by offering tactical maneuvers by consumers that can only follow a breaking of consumer habits and dispositions.<sup>335</sup>

His emphasis on the consumer response over the producer's role in consumer culture is actually supplemented by his critique of corporate abuses. Miller's concerns over corporate power evoke more of an expected emotional response to the extreme examples he cites—who is not upset with tales of corporate exploitation of Chinese children working in a sweat shop? Tales of this sort can run cover for more subtle

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<sup>331</sup> Miller, 16-18.

<sup>332</sup> See Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, 17, 22.

<sup>333</sup> See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (Lanham, Md.: Sheed and Ward, 2003).

<sup>334</sup> Miller, 30.

<sup>335</sup> Miller suggests using a "sacramental operation" that has a "subversive tactical value against commodity abstraction." Engagement in sacraments, communion for instance, force the consumption of items to reckon with the items deep religious significance, thus reintegrating the material of religion with its symbolic value. When expanded into consumption practices, Miller desires that a "sacramental imagination" can similarly engage consumer culture as a subversive tactic against the abstraction of commodities. Miller, 188-92.

corporate machinations that factor heavily in the formation of the consumer mindset, which Miller largely neglects. The role of the producer in modifying consumer habits and dispositions is thus minimized. Or the *how* of consumer culture is answered one-sidedly. Then in combination with the most flagrant sins of some corporations, his analysis leaves the question of the role that the corporation in general plays in fueling the mechanism of consumer culture unanswered.<sup>336</sup>

Alternatively, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in a highly critical book on consumer religion, lay their charges squarely at the feet of sellers of consumer items arguing that popular usages of the term “spirituality” operate as a handmaiden to corporate capitalism. They operate off of the same foundation as Miller: religious elements wrenched out of their contexts expose those elements to commodification. Yet they lodge a wider, more trenchant claim that religion has been rebranded as spirituality then bought and sold by the corporate world. A thought experiment is offered:

Let us imagine that ‘religion’ in all its forms is a company that is facing a takeover bid from a larger company known as Corporate Capitalism. In its attempt to ‘downsize’ its ailing competitor, Corporate Capitalism strips the assets of ‘religion’ by plundering its material and cultural resources, which are then repackaged, rebranded and then sold in the marketplace of ideas.<sup>337</sup>

On their way to this claim, the authors assert that the individualization and privatization of religion that occurred over two centuries in the West dovetailed with the domination of corporate capitalism. Religion, along with its power to resist and critique existing injustice, could not compete with the power of corporate capitalism and hence succumbed to it. Religion survived the transition but only in its sublimated and

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<sup>336</sup> It must be noted that Miller did not set out to address the power differential that may exist between producer and consumer. His invocation of Foucault serves to reveal how power can disconnect what we intend by our beliefs and practices and what they actually do. Yet he does not investigate the nature and motive of the discursive regimes supplying the power. See Miller, 21-22.

<sup>337</sup> Carrette and King, 15-16.

accommodating form: spirituality. Upon its arrival, spirituality and everything that goes with it can be packaged, sold and consumed for individual use to satisfy individual desire without ever challenging the issues surrounding the selling and consuming of such “goods.” Carrette and King’s goal is to challenge the current appropriation of spirituality as adulterated religion because of its powerlessness to critique social injustices that occur in our political economy.

Important for us is not necessarily the implications of their Marxian overtones but that Carrette and King closely tie contemporary spirituality to a liquid consumer culture. Moreover, they posit the spirituality that caters to consumer desire against a backdrop of an earlier, more solid appropriation of spirituality. They contrast what they call “capitalist spirituality,” that which is detached from a social context in order to be fed to us by the sellers of spirituality for consumption, with a spirituality of *modernity* that was engaged with a material social context. Capitalist spirituality

represents a shift from the earlier phase of ‘consumer-led’ spiritual enquiry, which emphasised the individual’s freedom to choose his or her own pathway in life (the bedrock of modern liberalism), to a ‘corporate-led’ consumerism that subordinates the interests of the individual to consumerist ideology and the demands of the business world.<sup>338</sup>

They track the beginnings of this “earlier phase” to what they call “the first privatization of religion.” The psychologization of religion, helped in large measure by the influence of William James, encouraged an individual reckoning of one’s spiritual state, sending religion into an internal theatre. Yet Carrette and King claim that the first privatization did not sever the individual’s spirituality from awareness of the wider social context which includes religious and state institutions.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Carrette and King, 45.

<sup>339</sup> Carrette and King, 45.

Such an orientation [in this “earlier phase”] is clearly not in itself incompatible with a socially engaged perspective, but it becomes so once ‘the individual’ is conceived as an independent, autonomous and largely self-contained entity within society. Such closure, establishing the impermeable boundaries of the modern, individual self, undermines an awareness of interdependence and erodes our sense of solidarity with others.<sup>340</sup>

This “closure” (they locate its occurrence in the 1980s) represents “the second privatization of religion” and is given ideological protection under neoliberalism.<sup>341</sup>

Here, individualism is made total as it cuts off individual projects, such as religion, from their social context. Religion becomes spirituality when individual choice is fed and contained by the market. The result is the second and final privatization of religion which constitutes, “the tailoring of spiritual teachings to the demands of the economy and of individual self-expression to business success.”<sup>342</sup>

Carrette and King’s historical sequence fastens the transition from “religion” to “spirituality” to Bauman’s articulation of the shift from solid to liquid modernity.<sup>343</sup> The first privatization ushered in a heightened (and relatively new) role for individualism, but

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<sup>340</sup> Carrette and King, 41.

<sup>341</sup> David Harvey defines neoliberalism as, “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (New York: Oxford, 2005), 2. Neoliberal advocates push for the substitution of markets for the state and consequently for the reduction of the role of government in the lives of its citizens. Critics of neoliberalism, including Carrette and King, typically claim that the political dimension of the individual, when replaced by the economic dimension (as consumer/investor), loses out. Neoliberalism protects those who stand to gain the most by the market while muzzling the voice of the only possible threat: the democratic citizen. See also Reich, *Supercapitalism*; Carl Boggs, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000); Henry Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics Beyond the Age of Greed* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

<sup>342</sup> Carrette and King, 44.

<sup>343</sup> Bauman is not as quick to connect definitively the implications of consumer culture to a socioeconomic power dynamic that elevates corporations and subjugates consumers as Carrette and King do. He is more concerned with describing the effects of consumer culture on the way social relationships now function, as opposed to prescribing some kind of call to action against corporate capitalism. For Bauman, the kind of vaulted and unique ontological status given to corporations by Carrette and King would be to establish a “solid” institution in a liquid society. While Bauman is critical of some of the effects of consumer culture, he refrains from making categorical statements about the almost unquestioned power of corporations to dictate completely the rules of consumer culture (which Carrette and King suggest). Bauman

in this phase, solid social bonds, while weakening, drew up an accepted cultural space in which individuals could operate. The second privatization signals the move to a liquid society where the social context provides no restrictions on what religion can mean for the individual or protection from the market. For Carrette and King, spirituality is the congenial destination for religion in a liquid society where traditional religion elements can be retained, but only if they bend to the specifications of consumer desire.

Carrette and King move their historical analysis to the contemporary relationship between the corporate workplace and consumer religion. With access to the term “spirituality” open to any institution participating in corporate capitalism, Carrette and King claim that many corporations have strategically begun to poach and co-opt spirituality. They assert that spirituality has become a successful brand built largely by way of contrast to the perception of religion as authoritarian, rigid and dated. Spirituality, set loose from institutional bondage, conveys freedom as it can be adopted according to individual wishes. In addition to individual consumer appropriation, spirituality is now available for corporate use as well.

McGee similarly states that the motivation for the usage of a term like spirituality by corporations is to distract employees from the realities of job insecurity by shifting the responsibility of business success to the employee alone. The works of business guru, Tom Peters, serve as a window into such usage.

Although Peters recognizes the need for job security as a prerequisite for a motivated and flexible workforce, he asserts that to remain competitive, businesses must cut their costs by eliminating employees . . . What is required, then, is some means of making employees feel secure even though they know they’re not. One solution to this is to place the onus of employment security on the individual worker by making each and every worker responsible for his or her own “career.”<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> McGee, 133.

Spirituality is one term that helps individuals match up their sense of purpose on the job without forcing a confrontation with the vagaries of the job market. Carrette and King draw on high-selling business motivation books to make a similar case.

Everything from “God as CEO” to Voodoo to Taoism has been employed to further the success of business at the expense of employees.<sup>345</sup> Laurie Beth Jones describes the premise of her book, *Jesus, CEO*, in the preface. The book is

a practical, step-by-step guide to communicating with and motivating people. It is based on the self-mastery, action, and relationship skills that Jesus used to train and motivate his team. It can be applied to any business service, or endeavor that depends on more than one person to accomplish a goal, and can be implemented by anyone who dares.<sup>346</sup>

Jesus’s leadership style is Jones’s model for corporate leadership. If the model is followed, the stern task-master boss, who is not getting results, is replaced with a leader who taps employees’ “energies” and “passion” in order to move a business in the right direction.

Discourse involving spirituality in the business world functions as a kind of “‘human-centered’ safety valve” that “allows workers to ‘let off steam’ when faced with increasingly oppressive and insecure job conditions.”<sup>347</sup> Carrette and King enumerate several ways in which this works. First, introduction of spirituality into such things as business mission statement, corporate retreats, job training, etc., is intended to foster a sense of community and company loyalty amongst employees that transcends identity as a mere group of co-workers. In turn, employees’ job tasks are cloaked with an aura of spirituality, “obviating the increasingly dehumanizing environment that they find

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<sup>345</sup> See Rene Carayol and David Firth, *Corporate Voodoo: Principles for Business Mavericks and Magicians* (Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2001); E. Thomas Behr, *The Tao of Sales: The Easy Way to Sell in Tough Times* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2007).

<sup>346</sup> Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), xi.

<sup>347</sup> Carrette and King, 134.

themselves in as a result of the application of purely economic or calculative rationality to their value to the company.”<sup>348</sup>

Second, and in conjunction with the first, “spirituality provides the all-important ‘feel-good’ factor that is so important for improving worker efficiency and loyalty.”<sup>349</sup> According to Carrette and King, the translation of an employee’s true mission of improving the company’s bottom line into a kind of spiritual quest helps with worker satisfaction, hence increases efficiency and productivity. The more pressing the needs are of an employee, such as long-term job security, fair salary/pension and equitable participation/ownership in the company, the more these needs can be subordinated to a kind of therapeutic spiritual satisfaction at work. Far from the intended use of spirituality of many religious traditions, businesses can simply use spirituality as the latest (and relatively inexpensive) tool to boost their profit margins.

Though Rick Warren rejects the legitimacy of the term “spirituality” out of hand, *The Purpose-Driven Life* could have been cited by Carrette and King as well. As noted in the previous chapter, purpose, as the idea of vocation in its commodified form, is vague enough, yet also conceptually powerful enough to energize a workforce in need of finding meaning in work. It is well known that *The Purpose-Driven Life* was sold using an aggressive and novel marketing technique called pyro-marketing.<sup>350</sup> But beyond this technique, the real question that Richard Sennett has provoked is how can purpose be utilized in the corporate world that furthers the widening of the difference in social capital between employers and employees? In fact Warren boasts that *The Purpose-*

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<sup>348</sup> Carrette and King, 134.

<sup>349</sup> Carrette and King, 134.

<sup>350</sup> [http://edbrenegar.typepad.com/thepresbyterianopolis/2007/01/interview\\_with\\_.html](http://edbrenegar.typepad.com/thepresbyterianopolis/2007/01/interview_with_.html)



*Driven Life* has extended beyond the churches and been employed by companies like Coca-Cola, Ford, Disney and Wal-Mart.<sup>351</sup> It is unwise to hazard a guess as to how the book has been used by these corporations. Yet whether the 40 days of Purpose was a part of a required program for all employees, a voluntary program that was encouraged, or merely a plan that was followed by the executives alone is not important.

What matters is that purpose can serve the interests of the employers in two ways. First, if both employer and employee are living a purpose-driven life, each has access to the fruits of living with purpose without having to question what they actually do on the job. Both the power held by an executive and the relative lack of power held by the employee are rendered irrelevant in the actualization of the purpose-driven life. Second, if working conditions rise to the level of causing anxiety, the idea of purpose offers a means to allay the feelings and get back to business. The levels of social capital possessed by both employer and employee at work can stay constant. Yet this is overlooked or even justified by the rising personal capital accrued through the living of a purpose-driven life.<sup>352</sup>

Carrette and King are quick to point out that the real travesty is that religion has been and should be able to meet the ideology of the status quo head-on. The infusion of a softened spirituality into the workplace silences the prophetic element of religion when in fact a jeremiad is needed.

Spirituality is appropriated for the market instead of offering a countervailing social force to the ethos and values of the business world. This is not to assume that we can ever escape the influence of the market, but rather to recognize that the utilisation of a 'spirituality' tailored for business enterprise ignores vital aspects of those traditions upon

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<sup>351</sup> Cited in Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 99.

<sup>352</sup> Recall the similar usage of calling language in Ana Mollinedo Mims's book, *Keeping the Faith*.

which it relies—aspects that directly challenge the privatization and commercialization of life.<sup>353</sup>

Used in this way, spirituality in business has the double effect of eviscerating the political capacity of religion, thus protecting corporate ideology, as well as disciplining religion so that it can support the interests of capitalist ideologues.

Underneath this perhaps overly cynical and sometimes hyperbolic manifesto, the connection between the commodification of religion and the salutary windfall for corporate elite is effectively made clear by Carrette and King. Specifically their treatment of the instrumental use of spirituality in the workplace identifies the status of the winners and losers unmistakably. Unlike those who neglect this crucial consequence of consumer culture as it applies to the workplace or those who are sanguine about the power differential that obtains between peddlers and consumers of commodities, Carrette and King speak forcefully. The sellers of spiritual goods to consumers stand to gain the most and are able to withstand consumer tactics against them. While Miller's argument never explicitly denies the uneven power in this type of exchange, the tactics he offers for mitigating problems associated with consumer culture and religion do not substantially move the battle lines. Carrette's and King's response alternatively centers on the need for religion to resist marketability via political avenues that give power back to those who merely believe and practice.

Admittedly, their proposals for revising “the silent takeover of religion” are more of an addendum to their primary task of exposing the problem. Consequently, their solutions are more provocative than programmatic. They presuppose the necessity of religion regaining its political teeth. For instance, Carrette and King suggest that help

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<sup>353</sup> Carrette and King, 126-127.

may come from without instead of from within the West. With much of the non-Western world still practicing religion that has not been completely overcome by corporate capitalism, religious political resistance can still gain a foothold and perhaps spread virally to the West given new global communication networks.<sup>354</sup> Or in the West, if a critical mass of people realizes that the God of cherished religion has been replaced with the God of Money, “new atheisms” of the latter can act as a powerful entrance point into political action.<sup>355</sup>

Despite the feasibility of their suggestions, important is Carrette’s and King’s call for religion to assert its ability to exercise its political will; failure to answer this call risks the permanent establishment of corporate capitalism as the legislator of *all* norms, both public and private. A similar call is issued to the idea of vocation to present its political brawn in the face of a work environment dominated by corporate capitalism. When cast in terms of the disparity in social capital that employees possess in the types of businesses immersed in flexible capitalism, a vocation has this opportunity.

My concern for the rest of this chapter is to introduce a religious component into the discourse that fuels the politics of work in corporate America. Because a commodified vocation serves to maintain and even widen this gap, I seek to offer a non-commodified concept of vocation that can contribute to the realization of a kind of “workplace democracy” without overstating the impact of my project. Only a vocation that is capable of entering and informing the political sphere is worthy of this task.

A new notion of vocation cannot emerge *ex nihilo*; its history necessarily impinges on any current articulation. The theological history of the Protestant version of

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<sup>354</sup> Carrette and King, 177-8.

<sup>355</sup> Carrette and King, 179.

the term, while primarily expressing a quietism towards actual work itself, does contain elements that can inform a more politically engaged vocation in the workplace. No one thinker supplies sufficient theoretical content to fill out a concept of vocation that can respond to the modern workplace. However, a cobbled-together theological front from relevant sources distills out the political component of the idea of vocation indispensably well.

### **Calvin and the Conditions of a Political Vocation**

Ernst Troeltsch's reading of Christian theology extracts the social and political consequences of Calvin's treatment of vocation in ways that may not present themselves *prima facie*.<sup>356</sup> Troeltsch uses the differences between the theologies of vocation of Luther and Calvin to arrive at several useful conclusions about Calvin. Interestingly for Troeltsch, the most profound point of departure that Calvin takes from Luther is found in their respective attitudes towards vocation.<sup>357</sup> When situated in Calvin's overall theological and social framework, his notion of vocation, while not straying too far from Luther nominally, acquires political traction that Luther's notion does not possess. This leads Troeltsch to conclude that Calvin, while far from promoting democracy explicitly, used the idea of vocation along with other theological ideas to turn Geneva and other

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<sup>356</sup> Both Luther and Calvin address the relationship between their respective theologies and society in their writings. Yet I primarily rely on Troeltsch's reading of both theologians as opposed to the primary texts for several reasons. One, as with the use of Weber for those concerned with the economic impact of theology, more is gained from a careful analysis that has the benefit of a centuries-long hindsight. Two, Luther and Calvin are primarily concerned with establishing correct theologies, not with political world alone. Hence Troeltsch's attention on the sociopolitical world that emerged as a result of their theologies serves as a more fruitful source than the original sources. Troeltsch conveniently cuts out the middle man. For Luther and Calvin's own treatment of the relationship between their thought and the larger society see *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. and trans. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>357</sup> Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 610.

Calvinist societies, “in the direction of democracy.”<sup>358</sup> Hence Calvin’s theological deviations not only from the Catholic Church but also from Luther, permit a linkage of vocation to the kind of political activity needed today, however tenuous this linkage is.

Troeltsch centers on three features of Calvin’s thought that serve as the basis for this conclusion. The doctrine of predestination, the promotion of individualism and his desire for the establishment of a worldly “Holy Community” converge to drive Calvinist societies in a new direction. All three features can only be understood through the prism of Calvin’s fundamental theological assertion: the majesty of God subordinates *all* other human concerns.

For Troeltsch, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination is the supreme statement of Divine Will—unaffected by human reason or effort, stubborn and supreme. Troeltsch elaborates:

In entire and arbitrary freedom He lays down the law for Himself; and this law is the law of His own glory which is served both by the gratitude of the undeserved bliss of the elect and by the misery of the merited despair of the damned.<sup>359</sup>

Proof of justification before God that manifests itself in appropriate inward *feelings* of happiness or certainty is no longer valid evidence of one’s justified status. Divine Will acts to save or damn despite these feelings, which in turn rearranges the order of Luther’s divine hierarchical qualities.

This means that no longer, as in Lutheranism, is the idea of Love at the center of the conception of God, but the idea of Majesty, in which the impartation and influence of the Love of God is only regarded as a method of revealing the Majesty of God.<sup>360</sup>

With God’s love acting as a means to an end and not the end itself, the relationship between God and humanity is accordingly reconfigured by Calvin.

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<sup>358</sup> Troeltsch, 628.

<sup>359</sup> Troeltsch, 582.

<sup>360</sup> Troeltsch, 582.

In Lutheranism the real proof and verification of justification is that happiness which the world cannot give, which reaches its highest point in close connection with the Christ who substantially unites Himself in the Eucharist with the believer in the *Unio Mystica*, in a mystical union with God. In Calvinism, with its emphasis upon the transcendence of God, such a proof could not be imagined; union with God can only be understood in the sense of surrender to the electing and renewing will of God, and as an activity of the ever active God in the believer. . . <sup>361</sup>

This distinction between the theology of Luther and Calvin “contains a wealth of implications” for Troeltsch, but most significant is that Calvin’s reordering carries new implications for human action in the world. The sheer activity of the divine will may or may not spark feelings of joy (and for Calvin, it is sacrilegious to ponder this casuistry), but it establishes the terms of the divine/human contract that leads to Troeltsch’s second point.

On the subject of individualism, Troeltsch repeats the theme of contrasting Luther’s need for faith to be bolstered by inward signs of justification with Calvin’s contention that Divine Will requires no such mediation.

In Calvin’s view the individual is not satisfied with mere repose in his own happiness, or perhaps with giving himself to others in loving personal service; further, he is not satisfied with an attitude of mere passive endurance and toleration of the world in which he lives, without entering full into its life.<sup>362</sup>

“Mere repose” can translate into “mere passive endurance and toleration of the world” under Luther. Yet the individual who properly discounts emotional confirmation or repudiation in the standing with God is one who can then properly be used as an instrument for God’s Will. Certainty of one’s standing, then, is not susceptible to the turbulence on a sea of emotions. In other words, Calvin’s individual is one who

knows that his calling and election are sure, and that therefore he is free to give all his attention to the effort to mould the world and society according to the Will of God . . . His duty, therefore, is not to preserve the “new creation” in its intimacy with God, but to reveal it.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Troeltsch, 584.

<sup>362</sup> Troeltsch, 588.

<sup>363</sup> Troeltsch, 589.

Calvin's individual must still work out the question of whether he or she is acting in accordance with God's Will. But with the ability to alter one's heavenly status as a member of the elect taken completely out of the individual's jurisdiction, the earthly kingdom is the only realm that is able to be molded.<sup>364</sup> Predestination extends to one's eternal status; finite matters of the world seem to skirt a hard, predestined order for Calvin. Yet if the molding of the world must always abide by God's Will, a potential inconsistency in Calvin's thought is overcome with his unwavering emphasis on God having dominion over all reality. How, then, is the molding to occur so that God's will is done and what should the final product look like?

Calvin answers with the third component of Troeltsch's analysis: the "Holy Community." Clearly, for a community to be holy by Calvin's definition it must fully reflect the Will of God. However, the reflected image will be opaque if it is refracted through a society made up of Christians who merely *believe*. Belief alone cannot transform the world into an adequate reflection of divine will; action induced by belief can. Luther's "belief-to-action" idea, which centers on care for one's neighbor, is extended by Calvin to include productive, Godly work that may not *directly* serve one's neighbor. When work is performed in conjunction with correct belief, for Calvin, God's Will is reflected by a Holy Community that has integrated varied forms of work towards a systematic, fully functioning whole. Hence even if one's work does not directly help others, a job indirectly helps all members of a society when it harmonizes with other jobs

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<sup>364</sup> Troeltsch points out that an unintended consequence of activity in the world in later expressions of Calvinism, "drove the individual to the practice of self-examination and to systematic concentration on his own independent achievement;" an egocentrism that gradually drove a wedge in between God's Will and achievement. Troeltsch, 590.

in this way. If a job is performed in the service of individual gain instead of communal good, it is unholy. Luther's conception of proper Christian action can exist with indifference to the advancement of the *common good*; Calvin's Holy Community cannot.

Troeltsch argues that the primary conceptual instrument that Calvin uses to ensure a functioning Holy Community is his idea of vocation. A vocation can bring individual action into line with divine will. And when God's will is followed through individual jobs working towards the common good of all, albeit never perfectly, a vocation has social import. Following his friend, Max Weber, Troeltsch argues that it is the Calvinist emphasis on an "ascetic self-discipline in work" that enables work to be placed in the service of the formation of a Holy Community. Calvin encourages an "inner-worldly asceticism" that generates a dogged work ethic to be applied within a working society, not in the desert where "other-worldly asceticism" used to confine itself.<sup>365</sup> Despite the cooperation between one's work and God's will that is fostered in Calvin's society, the vast distance between the value of human effort and justification before the sovereign God foments a psychological uneasiness in the individual. The un-answerability of the question, "is my hard work a sign of my status as a member of the elect or is it all for naught?" understandably contributes to an anxiety in Calvin's adherents. Yet this anxiety only redoubled the effort to align one's work with God's will as the striving in this world is the only valve left to believers through which stress can be released, according to both Weber and Troeltsch. The Calvinist individual may have no control over his or her standing before God, but at least control over the kind of work performed can still be

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<sup>365</sup> Troeltsch, 611.



exerted. Calvin can thereby sanction enlistment of work in the effort to fashion a Holy Community more easily.<sup>366</sup>

Luther certainly sees jobs fitting into his own version of a Holy Community. However, the human element that contributes to a functioning society is absent in Luther's community which is solely the product of divine arrangement. Troeltsch explains that Luther attributes the maintenance of an ordered community

to the wise ordering and the kindly guidance of Providence, and not to deliberate human initiative . . . The individual, moreover, regarded his work, not as a suitable way of contributing to the uplift of Society as a whole, but as his appointed destiny, which he received from the hands of God.<sup>367</sup>

Social order is justified by a pre-existent divine order and monitored by a providential eye, hence work in Luther's system can easily be seen to fit likewise into a corresponding certain social stratum.

This is why it was possible for the Lutheran to regard the work of his vocation in an entirely traditional and reactionary way—as the duty of remaining within the traditional way of earning a living which belongs to one's position in Society.<sup>368</sup>

Work, on the contrary in Calvin's Holy Community, is relatively freed from such restrictions in order that it may *continually* carry out the charge laid upon it by the community. Vocation, then, becomes the vehicle with which Calvin carries Christian beliefs into the wider world for the purposes of establishing a Holy Community.<sup>369</sup> Like the nature of one's job, Calvin's idea of vocation needs to be supple enough to negotiate with the sociopolitical environment in order that a Holy Community can be achieved.

Troeltsch avers:

And since the Church as a whole could not be fully constituted without the help of the political and economic service of the secular community, it was urged that all callings

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<sup>366</sup> Troeltsch, 611.

<sup>367</sup> Troeltsch, 610.

<sup>368</sup> Troeltsch, 610.

<sup>369</sup> Troeltsch, 610.

ought to be ordered, purified, and enkindled as a means for attaining the ends of the Holy Community. Thus the ideal was now no longer one of surrender to a static vocational system, directed by Providence, but the free use of vocational work as the method of realizing the purpose of the Holy Community.<sup>370</sup>

Thus Calvin's vision for a Holy Community requires a freer conception of vocation to do the heavy lifting. Yet this lifting is expressed more by example than by brute force which leads Troeltsch to state, "[T]o what extent this rationality and mobility of the conception of vocation was carried through in detail, in the presence of the opposing conception of life with its 'guild' and 'police' spirit, is quite another question."<sup>371</sup> In other words, Calvin's conception of vocation, while mobile and relatively expansive, is not permitted to challenge the norms of the emerging merchant guilds, even when their practices run counter to the kind of work that is calling-worthy. Societal unrest that would follow such a confrontation only serves to fragment the delicate whole of the Holy Community. Thus more importantly, a disruptive idea of vocation would upset the association between the Holy Community and the expression of God's will.

Therefore Troeltsch argues that while Calvin's idea of a Holy Community necessarily engages vocation with the social institutions that support the community, it is finally Calvin's non-negotiable allegiance to a sovereign God that yields a political conservatism. The detachment of a vocation from its place in a certain stratified social layer does not mean that it is completely without tether to authority in general. As Troeltsch reminds us, sovereignty of God cements the lot of humanity in general as limited, flawed and ultimately impotent in matters divine for Calvin. Work should be politically consequential, but those consequences are always tailored to Divine Will as

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<sup>370</sup> Troeltsch, 610-11.

<sup>371</sup> Troeltsch, 611.

expressed through the Holy Community. Vocations only gain their power to affect the world in subservience to divine authority. Troeltsch sums it up:

Thus the whole social ideal of Calvinism is controlled by the sense that human beings are unequal by Divine appointment, and that the only equality which exists is that of incapacity to do any good in one's own strength, and the obligation to render unconditional obedience to the Divine Will. The result is that the main features of this social ideal are essentially conservative and authoritative.<sup>372</sup>

Hence Troeltsch's open question about the confrontation between secular institutions that conflict with the directives of Calvin's vocation is answered with a retreat of vocation on the political front. Or the corollary of a vocation gaining real political cache is that God's plan for society always humbles the belief that political gains won by a vocation actually follows this plan.<sup>373</sup> Vocations are embedded in Calvin's polis, but their political clout cannot result in the kind of work revolution; such activity would indicate an exaggeration of human ability to redefine the nature of the Holy Community.

Despite a political conservatism, not only does Calvin furnish the idea of vocation with components that enable an engagement with the political structures of a society, but he also identifies vocations as the primary levers that can transform a society into a Holy Community. This new role disallows a vocation to manifest itself merely in acts of charity which can quickly become private acts alone. Calvin's vocations are necessarily public. Additionally, Calvin establishes the conditions by which a vocation can engage the political world through its ability to contribute to the Holy Community. The result is an expanded role for vocations when compared to Luther's conception, even though Calvin's more general acceptance of secular authority is expected based on an utter

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<sup>372</sup> Troeltsch, 620.

<sup>373</sup> For Calvin's fullest treatment of the relationship between religious and secular authorities, see Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 1485-1521.

deference to God. And with this kind of deference, the power of a vocation to confront authorities like merchant guilds is diminished in kind.

### **Rauschenbusch and Social Equality on the Job**

Though 350 years and an ocean separate Calvin from Walter Rauschenbusch, their overall programs have resemblances. Rauschenbusch similarly wants God's will to be reflected by society. And neither Calvin nor Rauschenbusch argues that a retreat into a Christian ghetto is the way to accomplish the goal of alignment of society to God's plan for it. Yet Rauschenbusch's assessment of not only the kind of world he envisions but also the nature of the forces that have militated against his vision compels a different approach. Calvin's delimiting of the political work that a vocation can perform to bring about a Christian community is authorized by the social direction issuing from a transcendent, sovereign God. Thus Calvin takes his first cues for appropriate social activity and for the architecture of the Holy Community from a rigid doctrine of God alone. Rauschenbusch, on the other hand, takes his first cues from society which then gradually summons him into quasi-doctrinal positions. Rauschenbusch's reversal of Calvin's order is precipitated by what he sees as the unfair class structure and deplorable working conditions of early twentieth-century America. Rauschenbusch's idea of vocation, if containing any divine content, must be able to instruct us on how to rectify these injustices instead of operating in society *in spite of* social inequity.

Rauschenbusch addresses many of the problems that stem from industrial capitalism that Marx raises yet with a very "un-Marxian" solution. Class consciousness plays a significant role in the ideological protection of capitalism for Rauschenbusch, but his ideas of the bourgeoisie and proletariat lack the kind of ontological stability that Marx

affords them. Because Rauschenbusch reduces the antagonistic political relationship between the working class and the owners of the means of capital to “social sin;” only *religion* can supply the solution to the social crisis wrought by capitalism.

Rauschenbusch’s reasoning rests on the contention that capitalism has allowed a systemic form of social sin to spread unchecked and damage human social relationships so drastically that mere human proposals, such as Marx’s, to redress the damage lack the power to get very far.

In his exposition on the social crisis, Rauschenbusch scatters blame around; the Church, the capitalists, the government are all culpable. Still his focus never roams far from the state of work and the worker. The “present crisis” is the result of a diminishing pride in the worker’s work under the conditions of industrial capitalism. Rauschenbusch lists several important reasons for the diminishment. Products are often shoddy and do not reflect craftsmanship,<sup>374</sup> the products made in factories are not the worker’s in any sense of the word, “ownership,”<sup>375</sup> there is a constant fear of losing one’s job due to capricious downsizing,<sup>376</sup> and working conditions give rise to excessive mental and physical deterioration.<sup>377</sup> All of these contribute to an alienation of the worker from work itself along with a severely weakened worker morale.

Rauschenbusch connects the loss of satisfaction gained through work to a moral loss, as opposed to just an economic or social one. To extract the sense of pride from a worker is to leave her with less of a sense of right and wrong. For instance, the humiliation and despair experienced after working long hours for years on end with little

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<sup>374</sup> Rauschenbusch, 193.

<sup>375</sup> Rauschenbusch, 194.

<sup>376</sup> Rauschenbusch, 194.

<sup>377</sup> Rauschenbusch, 197-202.

to show for it often results in alcoholism, petty thieving and even suicide, by Rauschenbusch's account.<sup>378</sup> And it is the erosion of collective virtue that calls out for a spiritual solution to the problem.

Any solution must reckon with the true source of the problem. Widening class distinctions that are the consequence of the productive relations between employer and employee are underneath the moral failings, not some intrinsic human weakness. Aided by the reward system of industrial capitalism, the power differential between the company elites and its employees grows greater in Rauschenbusch's eyes. His analysis is reliant on history like Marx's, yet Rauschenbusch calls for a return to a "fundamental democracy" premised on "social equality" so endemic of the American political economy—not for a kind of Bolshevik revolution.<sup>379</sup> By social equality, Rauschenbusch means the state in which all people can meet and have real authority in the relationship. He answers the naysayers that cite the impossibility of social equality based on intractable factual differences such as biological makeup that naturally, and permanently lock people into social strata. Rauschenbusch offers an example:

In a college community there are various gradations of rank and authority within the faculty, and there is a clearly marked distinction between the students and the faculty, but there is social equality. On the other hand, the janitor and the peanut vendor are outside of the circle, however important they may be to it.<sup>380</sup>

Here, he is not calling for equality in all areas of human life; inequalities naturally and at times, necessarily exist. The student is clearly "below" the professor, but social equality dictates that two people of differing ranks relate to each other with mutual respect. Social equality demands an honoring of real distinctions in rank but with a deeper recognition of

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<sup>378</sup> Rauschenbusch, 196.

<sup>379</sup> Dorrien, "Social Salvation: The Social Gospel as Theology and Economics," in *The Social Gospel Today*, ed. Christopher H. Evans (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 111.

<sup>380</sup> Rauschenbusch, 203.

equality that cannot permit an abuse of the power held by the ranking member of the relationship. The reason that the janitor and the peanut vendor do not enjoy the “socially equal” environment of the university is that economic differences between classes (that have always been with us) frame social differences too (which has not always been the case). The economic disparity between classes is becoming so vast for Rauschenbusch that the ability for citizens that reside on lower rungs of the economic ladder to make claims to social authority and hence mobility is severely undermined.

Important for Rauschenbusch is that social equality is a necessary condition for democracy. When economic differences cannot translate into the diminishment of social equality, people from up and down the economic ladder can exercise the political power needed to underwrite a democracy in the true sense of the word. Then democracy, in turn, alone provides the conditions for Christian morality to thrive once again. He writes, “Approximate equality is the only enduring foundation of political democracy. The sense of equality is the only basis for Christian morality.”<sup>381</sup> Or if there is no social equality between the employer and employee, the concept of “neighbor” is empty.

In addition, social inequality fosters a sense of hopelessness in the downtrodden, immobile class which then generates an apathy towards the question of whether society is a moral one or not. Arguing for a return to Christian moral behavior without addressing social inequality first (which Rauschenbusch accuses Evangelical pastors of recommending) is tantamount to posturing and even worse, complicit in the falsehoods of industrial capitalism.<sup>382</sup> Because falsehoods, such as, “the poor are poor through their own fault,” are protected by an, “integument of glossy idealization,” the first task of the

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<sup>381</sup> Rauschenbusch, 203.

<sup>382</sup> Rauschenbusch, 285, 289, 298.

Christian is to use the principles of faith, as delineated by prophetic Christianity, to cut through the ideological bluster.<sup>383</sup> A “regenerated personality” emerges which alone is able to serve as a conduit for God’s will. The Christianization of society driven by the moral character of its citizens is chronicled by Rauschenbusch in a lengthy passage:

The greatest contribution which any man can make to the social movement is the contribution of a regenerated personality, of a will which sets justice above policy and profit, and of an intellect emancipated from falsehood . . . If any new principle is to gain power in human history, it must take shape and live in individuals who have faith in it. The men of faith are the living spirits, the channels by which new truth and power from God enter humanity. To repent of our collective social sins, to have faith in the possibility and reality of a divine life in humanity, to submit the will to the purposes of the kingdom of God, to permit the divine inspiration to emancipate and clarify the moral insight—this is the most intimate duty of the religious man who would help to build the coming messianic era of mankind.<sup>384</sup>

Here, religion and politics are mutually reinforcing. In order to radically alter human relations under industrial capitalism, social equality, that is only possible in democratic societies, must originate in the “eyes wide open” Christian of character. A change of character, though, needs the Church not only to nurture the regeneration of personality but also to be a vehicle that carries the collective regenerated will towards an actualized societal goal.<sup>385</sup> The Church can then bring institutionalized power to the table to buttress the moral behavior needed to actualize God’s kingdom on earth.

How does Rauschenbusch’s idea of vocation assist in this process? The reconstruction, or perhaps restoration, of the idea that Rauschenbusch performs is by no means the only instrument that he uses for his purposes; the Church and State play essential roles as well. Yet given the accent that Rauschenbusch puts on the state of work

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<sup>383</sup> Rauschenbusch, 286.

<sup>384</sup> Rauschenbusch, 287.

<sup>385</sup> Rauschenbusch, 289.



and the repercussions for the worker, he needs an idea of vocation that is up to the task, no matter what the Church and State can additionally provide.<sup>386</sup>

A calling, if anything, must be able to reattach work to the well-being of the worker if it is to aid in the furthering of the common good. A vocation is able to bring one's work into the overall equation which counters the view that work in a vocation only nourishes the soul or more generally that the Church is the only institution that can mediate the idea of vocation.

If now we could have faith enough to believe that all human life can be filled with divine purpose; that God saves not only the soul, but the whole of human life; that anything which serves to make men healthy, intelligent, happy, and good is a service to the Father of men; that the kingdom of God is not bounded by the Church, but includes all human relations—then all professions would be hallowed and receive religious dignity. A man making a shoe or arguing a law case or planting potatoes or teaching school could feel that this was itself a contribution to the welfare of mankind, and indeed his main contribution to it.<sup>387</sup>

Several important ideas are conveyed here. The goal is the redemption of “the whole of human life.” The means to achieve this goal is the inclusion of proper, Godly human relations within the kingdom of God. And the primary facilitator of proper human relations is work, despite the nature of the job itself, that feeds into the societal common good.

Rauschenbusch is a social Calvinist here, though without the heavy authority of God's will working on society from above. His emphasis on varied jobs functioning in harmony for the kingdom of God mirrors Calvin's desire for individual jobs to collaborate in the making of the Holy Community. Yet Rauschenbusch's kingdom is not so much a reflection of God's will as it is *God's will itself*. When the destructive nature

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<sup>386</sup> Admittedly, Rauschenbusch does not offer a robust notion of a calling, as do Luther and Calvin, which could more fully explicate how he sees it in operation. Still, his treatment of vocation furnishes us with enough to work into his overall vision for the kind of work that can generate social equality.

<sup>387</sup> Rauschenbusch, 290.

of industrial work is deemed social sin, working conditions and vast social inequality serve as clear evidence of the inability of God's kingdom to be realized. Calvin's concern about *how* one did one's job is converted into *what* one does for a job with Rauschenbusch. And because what one does for work and its meaning for the worker is dictated by uneven power distribution between employer and employee, Rauschenbusch's notion of vocation is required to repair this set of human relations.

A calling places work under the jurisdiction of religion which forces a new set of standards onto what is considered acceptable forms of work and business practices. Rauschenbusch's quote about the discrepancy between a calling and certain business practices bears repeating.

If a man's calling consisted in manufacturing or selling useless or harmful stuff, he would find himself unable to connect it with his religion. Insofar as the energy of business life is expended in crowding out competitors, it would also be outside of the sanction of religion, and religious men would be compelled to consider how industry and commerce could be reorganized so that there would be a maximum of service to humanity and a minimum of antagonism between those who desire to serve it.<sup>388</sup>

Religion, through a calling, reorders the individual's approach to work so that it serves the common good, for Rauschenbusch. Both the production of shoddy goods and the selfish motives for profit fall outside the sanction of religion. These drive a wedge between people, when the goal of religion by definition is to bind people together. A vocation, if properly lived out, will brook no such activity. Nor can professions that promote these activities and motives ever constitute a vocation. Then if the standard of the kingdom of God demands that only true callings fill its realm, a house-cleaning will be in order.

As soon as religion will set the kingdom of God before it as the all-inclusive aim, and will define it so as to include all rightful relations among men, the awakened conscience

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<sup>388</sup> Rauschenbusch, 290.

will begin to turn its searchlight on the industrial and commercial life in detail and will insist on eliminating all professions which harm instead of helping, and on coordinating all productive activities to secure a maximum of service. That in itself would produce a quiet industrial revolution.<sup>389</sup>

The idea of vocation is enlisted in Rauschenbusch's "quiet revolution" to carry out the redemption of work by channeling all work towards the common good and away from harm. Since harm is the direct consequence of radically unequal relations between the working class and the business owners, when work is performed under harmful conditions or causes harm itself, a calling should be able to respond.

Rauschenbusch's idea of vocation engages the realm of workplace politics directly. When the distance between employer and employee grows to the point that they are social unequals and the employee can do little about it, a calling can inform and challenge the relationship. Rauschenbusch implies that if the business world is subjected to religious scrutiny, a vocation, lived out by both the worker *and* the boss, will bring both parties closer to the point of social equality. Social equality in the work world that is predicated on workers possessing enough of a stake in a company to "own" their work is the desired end of a Rauschenbuschian vocation. Economic inequality will always exist, but if social inequality continues on the path cut by industrial capitalism, the kingdom of God on earth is permanently put on hold. A vocation, if honored by a critical mass of workers and employers alike, can alter the politics of the workplace making social equality on the job a reality.

If John Calvin opened the door for vocations to have political import; Rauschenbusch walks through it. But what kind of world did Rauschenbusch walk into? The qualities of the early twentieth century American work world most certainly differ

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<sup>389</sup> Rauschenbusch, 290.

from ours. Moreover, Rauschenbusch's appropriation of religion as it relates to the socioeconomic realm was informed by solid modernity, not modernity in its liquid form. Do these differences between his time and ours alter, constrain, amplify, or perhaps have no effect whatsoever on the political power of a vocation?

Along with the shift from societies organized around production to that of consumption there came an attendant shift from manual factory work to jobs in the service industry. Hence, most jobs in early twenty-first-century America do not entail crushing physical labor—a key component of Rauschenbusch's crisis.

In addition, Rauschenbusch introduces a teleology that is somewhat contradictory in nature. He envisions an eventual kingdom of God on earth that has a kind of metaphysical reality (it, in ideal form, pre-exists the current real world) that is only temporarily camouflaged by industrial society. The signs that Rauschenbusch's idea of this kingdom is being assembled on earth have a different point of origin than those which are conditioned by modernity alone, such as human rights and democracy. Hence Rauschenbusch's interpretation of these signs can largely pass over historical development of modern notions, even though he uses these notions as an interpretive grid at times. As a result Rauschenbusch relies solely on "this-worldly" actions to bring forth the kingdom, while somewhat paradoxically, religion acts functionally as an entity that is independent of the worldly political economy. Religion, while necessary for Rauschenbusch's argument, is more or less added *ad hoc* to the industrial society in order to redeem the human relationships that make it up. Consequently, despite his emphasis on human agency to alter this world, Rauschenbusch, insists that God's kingdom, not a

human one, must be the end point of the alteration. And the theological confusion that results from this kind of divine/human cooperation is not sufficiently worked out.

If we take the cultural embeddedness of religious concepts seriously, a separation of religion from the culture that encases the political world is no longer possible. Hence we can work around the dilemma that Rauschenbusch's methodology presents. More compromise (though not total) is needed with the dictates of the modern political economy in order for the idea of vocation to engage it fruitfully. The current corporate work world engenders a different kind of moral climate than that occurring under Rauschenbusch's watch. What are the necessary features of a twenty-first-century idea of the Protestant vocation that can maintain the contours of its original ideational content, yet productively respond to political environment of the modern corporation?

### **The Political Idea of Vocation**

#### **Identity as Vocation?**

Richard Roberts's idea of "identity as vocation" serves as a provocative starting point in the process of constructing a political vocation. His idea is meant, first, to counter "managerial hegemony" and "consumerist conceptions of the formation of identity." In a particularly profound passage, Roberts states the current situation bluntly and rather pessimistically.

The so-called free market (including the entertainment industry) colonises and extracts from every conceivable (and newly conceived) dimensions of the human and natural life-world that which may in turn be harnessed to exchange and surplus value. This is an immensely powerful and many-sided mechanism that consumes humankind and once, as is increasingly the case, the managerial imperative elides the separation of powers and provides the hinge connecting both jaws of the machine, then resistance may seem futile.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Roberts, 298.

Despite the dire verdict, it is not a final one for Roberts. Resistance may seem futile, but appearance is not reality. Roberts enlists the idea of vocation as an instrument that can uniquely fight for social space that is gradually being lost to the “managerial imperative” that is at the service of an almost inescapable free-market.<sup>391</sup> The loss of any sense of a rooted vocation in the modern work world lands employees at the end of a *cul-de-sac* where identity formation is largely at the mercy of either the market or a manager or both.

The destruction of the idea and the reality of vocation and the voyage is consummated in a managerialised modernity, especially when this paradigm is welcomed into such public sacred space as remains. This is because the obedience required of an employee or operative is in principle total: there must . . . be no ‘secret pockets’ left for the spontaneous or the unexpected . . . Under these conditions the ever-frustrated search for a viable, rooted identity has thus become the normal, rather than the exceptional, ‘vocation’ of our time.<sup>392</sup>

Roberts’ conclusions are confirmed at several junctures in my paper. First, the separation of a calling from actual work that one does on a job as seen in the Protestant theological history of vocation begins the ceding of labor over to secular entities. Second, the shift of production to consumption robs vocation of its staying power over a career and exposes the idea to the market for sale. Third, when commodified and hence domesticated, a vocation is disciplined for the market and can be sold back to the consumer by self-help authors and employers alike.

Roberts ends his book with a desperate call for the materialization of an identity that is able to bolster the weakened position of modern humanity whose market-controlled projects “vocations” now serve. His diagnosis of the practical totality of managerial control of our lives through the market and the foreclosure of religious space

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<sup>391</sup> Roberts, 298.

<sup>392</sup> Roberts, 298.

that results directs him to suggest a genetic solution. The vocational quest for identity must go subterranean as Roberts digs below the current cultural milieu and unearth primal sources of religion.

If, as I believe to be the case, much main-line institutionalised religion has in reality lost touch with the primal religious function, then what must now concern us is the investigation of those dimensions of human becoming and mutual existence that precede tradition.<sup>393</sup>

These sources, while not explicitly identified by Roberts, need to be rediscovered and reappropriated into modern identities despite the difficulties that inhere in a rediscovery project. Roberts concedes that his proposal is merely suggestive (his future work will pursue this line further) but what are we to make of it? His suggestion, while the upshot of a meticulous dissection of the state of religion and theology in the modern world as well as his own personal struggle, amounts to resignation to that world and a retreat into an a-cultural enclave. It remains to be seen how he will chart a path of escape, but suffice it to say that a part of Roberts's motivation involves a reluctance to pursue the political possibilities of the idea of vocation.

In addition, his use of the term “vocation” is adjectival; identity-formation is given a jolt when it becomes *vocational*. Or the idea of vocation is instrumental for Roberts; the contents of an identity make up the substance.<sup>394</sup> The concept that I move towards is that of “vocation” as noun. Or “vocation” is used as an idea that contains

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<sup>393</sup> Roberts, 302.

<sup>394</sup> Vocation is used similarly by Weber in his twin essays, “Politics as a Vocation,” and “Science as a Vocation” and to a lesser extent by Fichte in *The Vocation of Man*. Playing with the title of Weber’s essay, Frank Gamwell’s book, *Politics as a Christian Vocation*, makes political activity the center piece of the life of a Christian. This activity is to be pursued with the kind of fervor that infuses activity when it is vocational in the Lutheran sense. The title of my project discloses my different intention. See Weber, *The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation, Politics as a Vocation*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004); Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. William Smith (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1910); Franklin I. Gamwell, *Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

content, not as a term meant to lend credence to an activity such as identity-formation by monitoring its proper development.

### **Casanova and the Contested Public Terrain**

Jose Casanova's theoretical work provides avenues for the idea of vocation to travel into the political arena of the business world that force cultural negotiation all along the way. As mentioned in the introduction, Casanova's critique of the secularization theory exposes the misrepresentation that religion is to be sequestered in private bunkers due to secularization. Recall that modernity "trains" religion to communicate its specific normative concerns to fall in line with modern discourse. In turn, religions confront the normative frameworks of secular institutions. Specifically, Casanova highlights the need for religion to act as a corrective to the theories that support a highly individualized society which too often devalues morality as the tie that binds. Therefore,

[a]s long as they [individualist modern liberal theories] respect the ultimate right and duty of the individual conscience to make moral decisions, by bringing into the public sphere issues which liberal theories have decreed to be private affairs, religions remind individuals and modern societies that morality can only exist as an intersubjective normative structure and that individual choices only attain a "moral" dimension when they are guided or informed by intersubjective, interpersonal norms.<sup>395</sup>

Casanova describes modern society as one that has traded an intersubjectivity that is bound by *some* form of morality, whether religious or not, for one that permits market value to define human relationships. Hence one of the most relevant roles of deprivatized religion is its questioning the oft unquestioned cultural dictates of the capitalist market.

The market, under the prevailing neoliberal ideology, is certainly one of secular spheres that has differentiated and emancipated itself from a religious worldview. The

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<sup>395</sup> Casanova, 229.



ideology of *laissez faire* capitalism has also contributed to and fostered the privatization of religion. And though the autonomous market has surely generated success in areas, it has also cultivated an unresponsiveness to collective human concerns that do not have “market value.” Or “worker as citizen” is traded for “worker as commodity.” Market culture, then, is an area of contestation that religion can and should enter for Casanova:

[B]y questioning the inhuman claims of capitalist markets to function in accordance with impersonal and amoral self-regulating mechanisms, religions may remind individuals and societies of the need to check and regulate those impersonal market mechanisms to ensure that they are accountable for the human, social, and ecological damage they may cost and that they may become more responsible to human needs.<sup>396</sup>

Casanova’s bone of contention is not capitalism itself but the kind of harm to the public wrought by market ideology. In the name of individual gain or consumer happiness the logic of the market does not include the “common good” as a part of its calculation. But the “obstinate insistence of traditional religions on maintaining the very principle of a ‘common good’ against individualist modern liberal theories which would reduce the common good to the aggregated sum of individual choices” should be a part of the deprivatized religious response.<sup>397</sup>

Casanova is intentionally vague on exactly what norms are offered to further the “common good” or what society will look like if religion succeeds in checking the flow of market culture. Casanova’s reluctance to prognosticate is based on his idea of how social integration takes place in a society where the public/private barriers are permeable.

Modern social integration emerges in and through the discursive and agonistic participation of individuals, groups, social movements, and institutions in a public yet undifferentiated sphere of civil society where the collective construction and reconstruction, contestation, and affirmation of common normative structures—“the common good”—takes place.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Casanova, 229.

<sup>397</sup> Casanova, 229.

<sup>398</sup> Casanova, 230.

Because the definition of “the common good” is contextually bound, contestation over which set of norms (or parts of a normative framework) are the best candidates to advance it is an ongoing process. Casanova is merely arguing that because religion is not nor ever has been entirely privatized by secular institutions or ideologies, it is able not only to be a participant in the negotiation but also to push self-regulating institutions into working towards the public good over the private.

### **A Vocation *as* Politics**

The work environment is one such locus for social integration. Employers and employees in businesses participating in flexible capitalism must be supple in order to survive. Though as Sennett makes clear, the “dotted circle” model of corporate authority serves to maintain and even enlarge the diameter through winner-take-all, team-based projects and consultation firms acting as a buffer zone between executives and everyone else. The distance between classes in flexible businesses puts excessive strain on those in the middle and at the bottom who must endure widely variable tasks and little job security while having to deal with an amorphous, decentralized authority above them. The market is often the stated scapegoat in both situations. Its ideological status as a self-regulating and self-justifying institution serves as the pretext for the often shaky working conditions as well as a cause of the way that power is distributed in many modern corporations.

Consumer culture, as the primary vehicle for conveying market logic to the social sphere, acts to perpetuate the employer/employee distance. Lacking the stability of employment secured under societies organized around production, consumer culture indoctrinates workers to accept work conditions as long as one’s ability to choose is not

infringed. In addition, de-materialization of work at the hands of consumer culture paves the way for the consumption of ideas like “purpose” that purportedly coalesce the fragmented pieces of a personal identity and hence palliate the experience of work. In both cases, the market serves as the always-adapting provider of choices whether it be a better job or a new idea that makes the current job palatable.

Extending Casanova’s insights to cover the work world, the idea of vocation has the capacity to offer an alternate set of norms to the set of corporate work world norms that currently obtain.<sup>399</sup> Hence the applied idea has to accomplish several tasks in order to provide a normative framework that can challenge the framework of the current work world.<sup>400</sup> First, the idea of vocation must be able to resist full commodification. This means that a reversal of the recent theological distancing of a calling from actual work itself must occur. When a calling is only cast in terms of a *way* to do one’s job that is obedient to God’s will, it is susceptible to the kind of packaging and selling that Rick Warren carries out. Second, à la Carrette and King, a vocation must also call attention to the power differential that may exist within the political structure of a company. If an employee is not able to gain a substantial stake in the company, either economically through stock or collectively in order to assert political might, then his or her vocation is not being lived out. Spiritual retreats to stoke employee motivation are tantamount to window dressing. Hence, in work situations where the obstinacy of the market, “winner-

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<sup>399</sup> Admittedly, Casanova’s analysis applies to religions on the whole and world religions at that; not religious concepts *per se*. This, it seems to me, presents only a semantic issue. For instance, Casanova talks of American Catholicism as a religion entering the public realm, yet actually focuses on the theological and moral principle of human dignity as the wedge into the public arena. In other words, Casanova does not make the distinction between religions and religious concepts explicitly, but in his argument he makes clear that religious concepts can “do the work” of a religion *writ large* even when other principles remain private.

<sup>400</sup> This idea offered is an ideal type that contains more prescriptive features than descriptive ones.

take-all” team-based competitions and consultants as scapegoats are used to justify and perpetuate radically uneven power differentials, the common good is not being furthered.

Rauschenbusch’s use of vocation to counter material work conditions can be reconfigured and translated into the propagation of a new common good within corporate America. The twenty-first century use of vocation should *still* be able to promote more satisfaction on the job. Yet satisfaction should be predicated on the possession of a reasonable amount of social capital at work. It is the establishment of a workplace democracy conditioned on more equal distributions of social capital that would stand as one of the signs that Casanova’s common good is being advanced. By workplace democracy, I mean a political arrangement within a business whereby employees have enough collective and financial power to alter working conditions.<sup>401</sup> Financial power extends beyond wages; it must include a stake in the company. Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs), where employees own the majority of the outstanding stock, have been implemented in about 2000 American companies.<sup>402</sup> According to Seymour Melman, these plans help “disalienate” workers from the capital generated by the business. As well, Melman shows that productivity actually increases under such arrangements.<sup>403</sup> However, the installment of a workplace democracy involves more than ESOPs. Owning stock does not equate to control as ESOPs are not binding on employers

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<sup>401</sup> For some analyses and proposals see Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Rudolf Meidner, “A Swedish Union Proposal for Collective Capital Sharing,” in *Eurosocijalism and America: Political Economy for the 1980s*, ed. Nancy Lieber (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); John Roemer, “Market Socialism: A Blueprint,” *Dissent* 38 (Fall 1991), 562-69; Severyn T. Bruyn, “Beyond the Market and the State,” in *Beyond the Market and the State: New Directions in Community Development*, eds. Severyn Bruyn and James Meehan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>402</sup> Seymour Melman, *After Capitalism: From Managerialism to Workplace Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 259.

<sup>403</sup> Melman, 273.

regards layoffs, increased mechanization, outsourcing or simply moving the company to a destination where cheaper labor exists. This is where collective power amongst employees provides safeguards against such action. Expectedly, increased unionization is a principal tool in the fight for workplace democracy, as Melman points out.<sup>404</sup>

How exactly can a political vocation play a role in push towards a workplace democracy in the battle for increased collective power? A brief example serves to illustrate. The Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) is a bill introduced into Congress in March of 2009.<sup>405</sup> Basically, the law stated in the bill would permit employees to form unions on their own without employer tampering or restrictions on what union demands can be recognized by a company. The law (as of this writing) permits a company to refuse to negotiate and bargain with any union that is voluntarily formed by workers. The EFCA would force companies to deal with voluntary unions (when they reach a majority-based critical mass) in the same way that they do with established, largely non-voluntary unions such as the AFL-CIO.

A political vocation can inform the motives to pass and maintain the EFCA in significant ways. Talk of equal rights and increased worker social capital that currently animates the language of the bill's advocacy groups leaves out the question of whether having these rights on the job is an integral part of that job fitting into one's vocation.<sup>406</sup> Beyond the absence of the power to unionize voluntarily that registers strictly a sense of *political* injustice, when put into the context of a vocation, the struggles of employees gain a religio/moral ally that has already figured political injustice into its own

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<sup>404</sup> Melman, 277-89.

<sup>405</sup> For the actual wording of the bill, see <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h109-1696>

<sup>406</sup> For an extended argument in support of this claim, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008).

equation.<sup>407</sup> The corporate machinations that may seek to slowly strip these rights under the aegis of market viability are fighting not only on legal terrain, but a moral one as well.

This can only happen when vocation carries with it a Rauschenbuschian set of religious norms that work the need for social equality into the workplace to mitigate the deleterious effects of flexible capitalism. Vocations, when responding to the call for social equality within the corporation, enter the public, political space of the workplace carrying the norms that help actualize the goal.

In line with Casanova's requirements, though, this new idea of vocation must be able to be enlisted in advancement of the overarching goals of modernity. If the norms that a vocation brings into the public are grounded solely on a transcendent divine authority (Calvin), they cease to be public in the modern sense. Moreover, if a vocation is used as an instrument to Christianize the secular workplace (Rauschenbusch), no longer is the workplace a site of genuine contestation when the "winner" is prefigured. Additionally, the idea of vocation loses its capacity to contest the norms of market ideology when it becomes just another commodity in the marketplace. It is not a contestation at that point but essentially two entities, a commodified vocation like Warren's purpose and the norms of the same market in which purpose gains its potency, speaking the same underlying language.

Instead, a vocation that adapts its long history (that meaningful work is, in fact, godly work) to the honorable objectives of modernity, such as freedom, human rights and

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<sup>407</sup> Interfaith Worker Justice is an organization that employs similar arguments. See <http://www.iwj.org/template/index.cfm>; Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid—And What We Can Do About It* (New York: New Press, 2008).

democracy, enters the contested space of the work world as a desperately needed voice. That voice, however, is not monolithic but protean. It carries religious weight, but must be willing to remain silent when “anti-religious” norms that also promote “the common good” are offered; loud when competing norms attempt to justify unjust measures. Absent the moral muscle that a vocation of this kind brings, it is difficult to say whether a self-regulating institution that is rarely questioned like the market would ever truly be contested.

### **Conclusion**

I attempted to accomplish one primary goal in this dissertation. I sought to demonstrate that the theological concept of vocation is able and even compelled to engage the material environment of the modern corporate workplace. The cultural embeddedness of the idea of vocation does not destine vocations either to obedience to cultural forces or to the complete surrendering of its religious credibility. Instead, and perhaps ironically, a culturally embedded idea of vocation is uniquely capable of drawing on its history and entering culture armed with selective qualities that can challenge competing cultural norms.

In part, the contemporary status of the idea of vocation is the victim of a long-standing impasse at the juncture of religion and culture. If the secular realm of work begins to override the meaning of the concept of vocation, theologians tend to attempt a retrieval of its divine qualities that may have little to do with modern working conditions. When the idea of vocation is given over to culture too much, it can quickly be translated into that which is palatable to consumers. Therefore, even if culture (in this case consumer culture) is playing an active role in the construction of the meaning of a

vocation, working conditions are treaded lightly over if at all. Only a theological concept that admits of its cultural embeddedness can avoid being lodged within God's jurisdiction alone. And only a concept of vocation that can resist being converted into a consumer item can engage the corporate workplace in a politically meaningful way. The vocation that gathers in the political components of a job as a part of what it means to "abide in a vocation" is one that helps counter the identity-splintering power of consumer culture *and* make work more satisfying at once. The politicization of vocation serves to embed a calling in the material circumstances that heavily impinge on daily work—a powerful antidote to the machinery of consumer culture.

Rather than the *pursuit* of stable identities being a vocation, which Roberts suggests, I have argued that the *idea* of vocation *itself* is able to do the work that Roberts expropriates to primal religion. Roberts cites a passage from Bauman to make his case.

The vagabond does not know how long he will stay where he is now, more often than not it will not be for him to decide when the stay will come to an end . . . What keeps him on the move is disillusionment with the last place of sojourn and the forever smouldering hope that the next place he has not visited yet, perhaps the place after next, may be free from the faults which repulsed him in the places he has already visited . . . The vagabond is a pilgrim without a destination, a nomad without an itinerary.<sup>408</sup>

If a vocation is to be the driving force behind the journey of Bauman's *pilgrim* instead of a handmaiden to the drifting *vagabond*, it must boldly enter the realm of workplace politics and not simply color the way in which the journey is undertaken. Yet if the idea of vocation continues to be championed for its transcendent qualities or therapeutic value alone, it is a mere travel guide for the cultural vagabond and fodder for the winners in the game of consumer culture who can continue to exploit it for their own gain to the benefit of exploiters alone.

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<sup>408</sup> Roberts, 301-2. Cited from Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 240.



Typically not considered a religious problem, the growing power differential between employers and employees is one that *needs* religion as a player in the debate. With the help of Casanova, it was shown that religion has always contained the potential for entry into the public square—it is just that its entry must be performed carefully. And as long as the idea of vocation remains a consumer item that is utilized for meaningful experiences at work alone, vocations also remain privatized. However the non-commodified vocation is one that is able to escape conceptualizations such as that found in Warren’s idea of purpose and cooperate with the noble norms of modernity.

Channeling a Rauschenbuschian spirit, I say that a vocation is *compelled* to enter the political fray of the corporate workplace because of both its history and the situation at hand. The growing difference in social capital between employers and employees cannot be reduced to economics alone—it bears moral weight as well. If questions of fairness and justice are left unanswered by a vocation as it is lived out at work, then an adulterated version of a vocation is being employed. “The political” is merely one component of the idea of vocation. However it is the one element that must emerge if a vocation is to leave the privatized realm of consumer satisfaction and provide all of work with the characteristics that make it calling-worthy.

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