

## Intersections

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Volume 2018 | Number 47

Article 8

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2018

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Thirumurthy, Vidya (2018) "Vocation and Dharma throughout Life's Stages: A Hindu Perspective," *Intersections*: Vol. 2018 : No. 47 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2018/iss47/8>

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VIDYA THIRUMURTHY

## Vocation and Dharma throughout Life's Stages: A Hindu Perspective

This essay is an attempt to unpack the meaning of the Lutheran concept of vocation in the context of Hinduism. Not an easy task, and an arduous journey! Anyone coming to the term *vocation* from a different religious tradition could have trouble grasping its deeper meaning—just as I did, and still do. Still, I think that Hinduism has ways of making sense of vocation and calling—and may prove especially helpful for considering how vocation (or one's duty) changes over the course of an individual's life.

My interpretations and reflections of Hinduism are based on my experiences and are modeled to me by my parents, extended family members, and elders of my Indian community. There are wide variations in how individuals practice the religion—some very religious and ritualistic, others more philosophical, still others characterized as atheists and agnostics. This essay is my take on my religious experiences with and philosophic understandings of Hinduism over the years.

I joined Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) in 2005. Even before I officially began my tenure as a faculty member in the education program, I was asked if I would be willing to attend a Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference in Columbus, Ohio. There I was introduced to the concept of vocation within the Lutheran context. For a Hindu, this concept was quite foreign. At PLU, often the conversations on vocation are orchestrated by the Wild Hope Project. The question, "What will you do with your one wild and precious life?" (from Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer

Day"), is used to facilitate a dialog between faculty members so they can, in turn, guide their students in identifying their vocations. The first step is for faculty members to illustrate how they chose *their* vocations. Since this concept puzzled me, it became one of the main themes of inquiry during my entire term at PLU.

The only definition I had of "vocation" was nonreligious, and in terms of "vocational programs." Eventually, I understood that *vocation* was complex, but I could not wrap my mind around it because I had no reference point within my religion or experiences. This led me to wonder how PLU's non-Lutheran or non-religious constituents—and especially our international students—could engage in a conversation on vocation. Does one need a cultural context or a Lutheran upbringing to grapple with the term? How then are we to help our students? How might I participate in the process?

I came to interpret vocation as "calling," and could connect this to an earlier experience. In the early 1980s, I had the privilege of meeting Mother Theresa in India. I was lucky to talk to her in person. That incident helped me anchor the concept of calling to her, a religious leader. *Calling* was something that true spiritual leaders, such as



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Mother Theresa, had in their own encounters with God. I have also read that Mother Theresa had a decisive, special *calling*, a moment of epiphany, where God called on her to serve the poor when she was travelling from Darjeeling to Calcutta on a train. Serving the poor became her divine calling. This raises the question that if religious gurus have such callings, can a common person also have one? Could the term vocation then simply mean service?

As I attended conferences and meetings on vocation at PLU and in other sister institutions, no one could really assist in clarifying and relating this concept to other religious contexts. There was an assumption that everyone understood what vocation meant. It therefore became my own journey, and it was important for me to grapple with it so I could have a deeper understanding.

## Doing One's Dharma

I began to think that, even if vocation's first home is within Christianity, there must be some equivalent terms in Hinduism. This is because I am a firm believer that all religions share some core, common tenets, even if the road we each take may differ. As I ponder it over now, there may be some bridges between finding one's vocation and doing one's dharma.

"In Hinduism, one's dharma varies with age, gender, and occupation."

Dharma, meaning *duty* (or living the right way), is one of the fundamental concepts in Hinduism or Hindu philosophy. The dictionary defines the Hindu notion of dharma as an "individual's duty fulfilled with observance of custom or law." The right way of living is to do one's duty; every individual has to do his/her duty as laid down by the religious scriptures. The key to doing one's duty is to do it without expecting any rewards (duty for the sake of duty), even if one has to make sacrifices in order to fulfill it.

Related to the theme of this particular issue of *Intersections* is the fact that, in Hinduism, one's dharma varies with age, gender, and occupation. India, like other patriarchal societies, still remains divided by gender. (They

have made some strides in breaking the gender divide over the centuries, but with limited success.) Similarly, respect is duly given to people who are older than you, like family elders, older siblings, and so on. Elders, in turn, have particular duties to their progeny. All of this provides something of the unsaid norms of the society.

If a Hindu were to explain the essence of duty/dharma to a child, odds are she or he would reference the *Bhagavad Gita*. Indeed, many believe the essence of Hinduism can be found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, also called *The Song of the Lord* or the *Divine Song*. Often referred to as Gita, it is written in Sanskrit language, and is part of the Hindu Epic *Mahabharata* ("Big Battle of Good over Evil"). The Gita is in the form of a dialog between the Pandava prince Arjuna, a warrior, and his chariot driver, Lord Krishna. On the battle field, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna why it is important to carry out one's duties.

The *Bhagavad Gita* calls for one to do one's duties without looking for returns, emphasizing detachment from selfish gains. This conflicts considerably with the motives of a careerist, one who works hard to achieve a goal with a reward and an ulterior motive. The careerist seeks advancement, promotions, and raises. Such ambition conflicts with dharma as described in the *Gita*. Again, there, the fulfilling of one's duty should be without expecting any reward. There is total surrender to fulfilling one's duties—duty to oneself (body, mind, and soul), and duty to others (society and environment). Duty calls for selflessness or sacrifice. So what are the duties of an individual, and what guidelines are provided in the scriptures?

## Different Duties over the Course of Life

Here we return to the theme of different vocations—that is, different duties—over the course of a lifetime. For the sake of everyday practices, dharma is commonly divided into four main stages. First there is the duty of children, students, and "bachelors" (or of *Brahmacharya*, typically one to 25 years of age), where one must focus on educating one's mind, respecting and being obedient to elders, and practicing self-discipline. Next, there is the duty of a family person (*Grihastha*, ages 26 to 50), when one has duty to one's spouse, to children and elders in the family, to fellow human beings, and to nature. Next,

there is the duty of grandparents or elders (*Vanaprastha*, 51 to 75 years of age), where one takes on more of a supporting and advisory role for one's family, but also slowly relinquishes responsibilities to the next generation. The fourth and final stage is that of an ascetic or renunciate (*Sanyasa*, 76+ years of age), when individuals are free from all worldly or material desires and prejudices. While *Sanyasa* traditionally refers to a hermit or recluse, most people in this stage today continue to live with their children. Thus, one's duty changes quite dramatically as one moves through life's stages. Still, it is believed that doing one's duty consistently demands selflessness and sacrifice over the whole of a life.

Of course, the division of duty into these stages gets complicated as Hinduism migrates and changes. Economic opportunities have compelled families to move to different parts of India or the world. I know of many families where siblings are scattered between, for example, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Still, when duty calls, many siblings take turns caring for their elderly parents. Often times, instead of having the elderly parents move from one place to another, each family may move temporarily back to the parents' home and provide the necessary care. In these cases, status and wealth have not prevented them from taking care of their elderly parents. Fulfilling their duty is given higher priority. No sacrifice is too big!

## Concluding Thoughts

I hope to have given the reader some understanding of the types of duties one has to fulfill throughout one's

life according to Hinduism. Dharma seems to be the driving force in Hinduism, just as vocation is the driver in Lutheranism.

When we interlace the concepts of vocation with duty or dharma, shared components come to surface. Both concepts focus on service to others, being selfless in this service, and the importance of sacrifice. One is called on to fulfill one's duty. Perhaps the biggest difference is that,

"Both contexts—Lutheranism and Hinduism—call on individuals to transform the lives of others while allowing such experiences to transform them."

in one religious context, one is largely introspective to find vocation, and in the other, it is assigned to you "from without" by society and by scripture. Still in both cases, duty and/or vocation is discerned first and foremost by considering oneself as nestled within a network of relationships—those between the young and the old, between me and what the Lutheran tradition calls "the neighbor." One could say that both contexts—Lutheranism and Hinduism—call on individuals to transform the lives of others while allowing such experiences to transform them. By working between and through religious differences, it is certainly possible for us to develop a more inclusive language and to promote the concept of vocation to a wider audience.