

COMMENTS

Vocations?

Upon invitation, these three responses to David Loy's essay, "Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance," here create a conversation, which Loy then joins.

1. Response by Robert Benne, Roanoke College

I found David Loy's article provocative and helpful, but I have several reservations on some key items. His account of the integral quality of medieval life was fresh and interesting to me, but I wondered whether peasant life was as meaningful as he avers, given that the gap between churchly wealth and prestige and peasant life was wide. I doubt if peasants always found gratifying meaning in their designated role in the system.

Loy makes three main criticisms of the way vocation is currently promoted in the "literature of higher education" in this country. It is too individualistic in that it emphasizes the search for personal significance and satisfaction in whatever vocation one freely chooses. Second, it avoids taking up one's calling in the non-chosen contexts in which we are embedded—family, church, country. Third, it is "elitist" in that it assumes everyone will have work that is high level and consequential.

He then argues that an accurate rendering of Luther's doctrine of vocation avoids these problems by focusing on the task that God gives (not by one's own choice), by emphasizing the embeddedness of our callings in structures we did not choose, and that often our efforts in them are quite ordinary and even burdensome.

His critique of interpretations of vocation that emphasize individualistic significance and satisfaction is right on target. One only

has to look at the websites of many ELCA colleges to see what he is getting at. As sampling from one such school: "Discover your passion." "College sets you on the path for the life you want to lead." "The world needs people with passion." "Join us and we'll help you find and live a life that you love." On some websites there is no mention of serving others. And there simply is no hint of a divine caller who might give students a life's purpose to love. A recent book by a Lutheran college chaplain laments the absence of any transcendent dimension to the meaning of vocation projected in the Lutheran colleges he has surveyed.

Yet, I would quarrel a bit with Loy's downplay of the importance of a sense of meaning, significance, and satisfaction in one's calling. I think they are all important to the Christian life but they come in a different order than the "literature of higher education" assumes. It seems to me that God calls Christians to particular roles that he has in mind for one's life, roles that presumably serve others. When one assents to that call and lives out that role, then a great deal of meaning, sense of purpose, significance, and satisfaction are added, along with a good measure of struggle and suffering. A great insight of Luther was that when a person lives out his calling seriously, he will not have to seek the cross; it will find him.

I also appreciate his observation that many of our callings are not chosen, but embedded in the concrete "places of responsibility" in which God places us. Again, the "literature of higher education" avoids these "given" characteristics of our lives because it emphasizes freedom from such constraints. On the contrary, a realistic account of our callings simply must take these bestowed realities seriously. But there is still the joy and burden of freedom to choose (or consent to) our callings. And, of course, there is a measure of freedom in each of our given "places of responsibility" too. We have destinies in which freedom has an important role; we are not fated.

Finally, Loy, following Luther, is certainly correct in his insight that living out one's calling is often tedious and burdensome. But it is difficult to live out a calling that is not visited at times with joy and deep satisfaction.