

# Vocation and the Liberal Arts

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EVEN WHILE REMAINING in the university's core curriculum in vestigial form, the liberal arts appear to the average university student, even to the graduate student, as wholly detached from any vocational meaning. They are the stuff of record keeping, of esoteric facts and texts and languages; they are the furnishings of life's attic. The liberal arts concern the university and nothing more, and the older part of the university at that. It is harmless activity for intellectuals and time honored hoops through which the student can prove a certain intellectual agility. But, alas, it has little to do with the life one lives outside the university. This typically modern dissociation of ideas—liberal studies and vocation, ideas strongly related in logic and tradition but uncoupled by the secularizing Enlightenment—begs for repair.

Too frequently this attitude is displayed *even by the academically trained*. Recently, a candidate for dean of our theological seminary was invited to address a group of students. While holding the aim of seminary to be practical and professional, he conceded it might be important for students to study theology, "because," he said, "you might have some

smart people in your congregation." Presumably, the fewer smart people you have in your congregation the less you need theology, it being primarily the kind of thing you do for the entertainment of people capable of engaging in that kind of talk. If your ministry, by that reasoning, is among the mentally retarded, the uneducated, or children, then theology is of little or no importance! Of course, one assumes here that the value of any subject has to do with its instrumental use. The idea that it is the *learner* who needs to be changed is not even on the radar screen.

Yet the classic understanding of liberal studies centers upon the work to be done *in* the learner, not *by* the learner. The liberal arts involve the kind of study that, as Thomas Aquinas explained, is "sought for itself," and is therefore not sought for another purpose. These are thus called "free arts" (or liberal arts), in contradistinction from the arts which serve another (and presumably higher) purpose, that are properly called "mechanical or servile arts." St. Thomas expands upon this definition of the liberal arts by saying, further,

...the expression may specifically indicate this philosophy or wisdom which deals with the highest causes; for the final cause is also one of the highest causes.... Therefore this science must consider the highest and uni-

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versal end of all things. And in this way all the other sciences are subordinated to it as an end. Hence only this science exists in the highest degree for itself.<sup>1</sup>

That which is truly beautiful, as Josef Pieper reminds us, is also “attractive.” The same can be said of what is “true” and what is “just” and what is noble in any other sense. What we are most concerned for in the liberal arts are not those things that we can use, but those things that can make us useful in that we are fitted for that “final” cause which has called us forth. The object is not to make us proper masters in the sense of Descartes’s notion of “masters and possessors of nature,” or some of Emerson’s ideas of human mastery; but the object is to make us proper servants of that which is higher than we are. It orients us; but more than that, it fills us with a longing for what is rightfully an object of our longing. Liberal arts do not cause us to employ the objects of our study, but to love them, to be drawn by them, and thus to be changed ourselves. The interest of liberal arts is not in training the practical man or woman so much as in stimulating the desire for what is best.

This does not at all mean that skill is unimportant; it may in fact be central. The *trivium* of liberal studies was precisely the acquiring of skill: grammar, in order to possess the tools of investigation and representation in language; dialectic in order to empower investigation through inquiry, definition, and discrimination; and rhetoric in order to represent to the affections what is their proper object and to the will its highest good, and so that the life of the community will be ordered by what is good, true, and beautiful.

In an essay on “beauty” Josef Pieper quoted Goethe to the effect that “Beauty is not so much a fulfillment as rather a promise.” Then he comments, “In other words, by absorbing beauty with the right disposition, we experience, not gratifica-

tion, satisfaction, and enjoyment but the arousal of an expectation; we are oriented toward something ‘not-yet-here.’ He who submits properly to the encounter with beauty will be given the sight and taste not of a fulfillment but of a promise—a promise that, in our bodily existence, can never be fulfilled.”<sup>2</sup> Yet this must not be reduced to mere “orientation” or “disposition.” Rather something arouses us and accustoms our appetites and our desires to that which expands our longing. Each experience of beauty, in a poem, for instance, is only a foretaste and a sign of what is still greater. Our life is affected because it cannot help being affected; it is energized by an unearthly—rather than an earthly—hunger. Gerhart Niemeyer used to emphasize what energy was evinced in the lives of the saints: no one accomplished what was accomplished by a St. Thomas, in the realm of the intellect, or a Luther, in the realm of practical and theoretic reform, or a St. Francis, in the awakening of the spirit and a passion for life, or (I would add) a Mother Teresa in a passion for the poor and dying.

#### *The Vocational Sentiment Embedded in Liberal Arts*

This change, this “journey” of the learner, so occluded from modern eyes, constitutes the reason we need to think of liberal arts together with the idea of vocation. Though it is now neglected or diminished, it is precisely what would in the Christian tradition be called “vocation” that always gave to the educational experience its dynamism. For good reason, a diminished sense of vocation leaves the province of liberal arts having to “prove its worth” in a world of pragmatic standards, one that can only understand instrumental values because it truly believes now only in power or force. This “vocation” so naturally imbedded in liberal education can be of immense help in restoring what was lost, in breathing life

back into a passive and dead body. Niemeyer has pointed out how basic the idea of the learner being “moved” or “called” is to both religious and intellectual experience. The idea of “reason,” for instance, under the regime of the Enlightenment, was critically changed from its earlier form. The “creators of philosophy never spoke of reason in the way Enlightenment thinkers did.” Instead,

Parmenides experienced the Is in a vision; Socrates, Plato, and others experienced being “drawn,” “pulled,” even “dragged” to the true reality beyond the cosmos. They respond to these experiences with something they call “the quest,” “the arduous way,” “the search,” clearly conveying that the authority of truth is not found in themselves, nor in their method, but in their participation in a higher reality. Their attitude was one of love of the cosmos and of divine wisdom. Where in the Enlightenment do we find mention of “love” to characterize the attitude towards the cosmos or divinity? Enlightenment focuses on the objects of knowledge which mind can convert from multiplicity to unity, or from unity to composing parts, all for the sake of human control and mastery over nature.<sup>3</sup>

What Niemeyer described here in regard to the “creators of philosophy” corresponds in some important ways to the Christian idea of “vocation.” We should dispense immediately here, of course, with what the term vocation has been reduced to in the street language of modern times. It does not refer simply to one’s “occupation” or “profession” in the sense of what someone might do for a living. It is at least as broad as Martin Luther insisted upon in his essay “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,” in which he protests the narrowing of Christian vocation to the priesthood.<sup>4</sup> Even broader than the work of the Christian is the vocation or calling to the Christian life, as suggested by the Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen Gentium* in recalling that

“all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness....”<sup>5</sup> Broader still is the vision suggested by the words of *Gaudium et spes*, that faith “makes manifest the divine plan regarding man’s full vocation.”<sup>6</sup> It is in this fuller sense, the very idea that being human bears within it the insinuation of divine vocation, that I want to make the case for “vocation” as the missing element, and therefore the restorative agent for liberal arts, even as liberal arts are necessary to a humane culture.

### *Vocation in the Christian Theological Tradition*

Christian theology of a divine calling, or vocation, begins with the disclosure in the first chapter of Genesis that “God created man in his own image.”<sup>7</sup> Christians, especially since Origen, one of the Greek Fathers of the Church, have understood this not as a completed act, referring it to the chronological past, nor have they seen it as a simple endowment of humanity with godlike qualities. It was understood as rooted in God’s design, but also as a promise. It is dynamic rather than static; something that draws the human being toward God, rather than placing him on his own beside God.

Origen made this point by indicating the two ways in which these words are used in Genesis. First the text says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....”<sup>8</sup> Then, as God fulfills this stated intention, the text says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”<sup>9</sup> Such was Origen’s respect for the very words of scripture that he believed the omission of “likeness” in the second statement could scarcely have been accidental. It must have been intentional; and it must therefore have meaning.<sup>10</sup> Origen concluded that, while one can say that man is created in the image

of God, the image is not yet perfected. That perfection of the *imago* is represented by the word *similitudo*, likeness. As Father José Alviar has stated the matter, "The task imposed by God on man upon creating him is, therefore, to become even more like the Maker, enriching and perfecting the original image." Thus the idea of "image" endows human beings with a "fundamental destiny." They experience existence in terms of a tension between what they intuit themselves to be destined for, and what they find themselves to be, between the justice and the goodness they are capable of imagining and where, in that regard, they live.

The Christian understanding of sin is often misunderstood precisely at this point. In confessing sin, we are not responding to, or faced by, the "minimal requirements" of a moral life; nor are we faced with the average or typical behavior of the community. The experience of sin is rather an awareness of falling perpetually short of a destiny for which we are created, of something that "calls" us beyond the experience or the expectations of this life; it is an awareness of having "betrayed," in this sense, something which we have never experienced, and which yet pulls us beyond ourselves. It is tied to the experience, one might say, of vocation. As Father Alviar expressed it, in referring to the "labile existence" of the image in which the human being is made:

It is "already" and at the same time "not yet" present. In one sense, man possesses the image from the start, as he is rational by essence; in another sense, he possesses the image tenuously, for the achievement of virtue is a contingent process. Man is expected to bring the image to fulfillment, sharing in the Word's attributes not minimally but fully.<sup>11</sup>

In the New Testament, and especially in the writings of St. Paul, the "vocation," is always toward a higher unifying reality, namely the body of Christ. It is further-

more an eschatological reality for which one might hope, and a reality for which one might long to suffer for its greater glory. "He must increase, but I must decrease" are words appropriate to this sentiment of a greater good calling for the suffering, longing, and diminishing of the person. The Enlightenment nation-state also calls for individual sacrifice, but it does so posing as a deliverer from the petty tyrannies of traditional authorities, such as the church, the tribe, and the family. The irony of this trade-off is apparent; for the state profits from diminishing the ties to which the individual is born, or in which the individual abides in common faith. What it accomplishes by preaching the enlargement of the individual's sphere of action and privilege is binding the individual more tightly to itself in the place of these traditional authorities. At the same time it requires the kind of sacrifice that is implied in the individual's relationship to family or community of faith.

Since the sixteenth century the state became a new kind of community. It is not a true nation, since it is made up generally of many nations, although there is a dominant national culture. Its influence then arises from the fact that it is organized in a way that dissolves what is organic and to some extent voluntary. It should not be surprising then that the concepts of "vocation" and the concept of vocation as it is embedded in the liberal arts has subsided in the public consciousness along with the rise of modern institutions. Organizations do not need such ideas or experiences, but organic communities do. It should not be surprising, therefore, that modernity has been marked by the exaggeration of the freedoms of the individual, the alienation of the person, the dissolution of families, and a culture of pathological loneliness: for these features are in the very design of the organized society which replaces the organic society.

*Monastic Influence on  
the Idea of Vocation*

There is no need here to rehearse the fact, lamented by various commentators on the doctrine of Christian vocation, that the concept has, by stages, been reduced to the calling to the monastic life, to the life of the priesthood or the religious orders. Protestants recall Luther's broadening of the idea of vocation to include the work of the laborer and the magistrate, as well as the minister of the church. The lesson was not a new one, but the emphasis was new. Calvin's genius for gaining the balance in a Christian teaching was applied to the idea of vocation as having a double focus, one upon the earthly duty and the other upon the heavenly destiny. In this way the common tasks of the Christian, as well as those more greatly honored in society, are held in new esteem. He writes in the *Institutes* of those tasks as bearing a certain nobility when the person "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." In this way, "no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."<sup>12</sup>

But the broadening of the concept of vocation was seen by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to have had its own reductionistic effect. Max Weber's definition of vocation as a "limited field of [secular] accomplishment" could be seen as the failure of the Lutheran view to retain vocation as more than "the justification and sanctification of secular institutions."<sup>13</sup> For vocation "in the New Testament sense, is never a sanctioning of worldly institutions as such; its 'yes' to them always includes at the same time an extremely emphatic 'no,' an extremely sharp protest against the world."<sup>14</sup> The monastic system had at least provided the death-defying "no," even if it

had failed to adequately provide the life-affirming "yes" of Christian vocation. The result of the division in Christendom, however, was seen by Bonhoeffer as having "two disastrous misunderstandings." Both misunderstandings, "the secular Protestant one and the monastic one," were less than the Pauline idea of vocation deserved, and less than the church has at times seen in its fullness.

*The Secular Misunderstanding of  
Imago Dei as Endowment*

Behind what is normally seen as an unwarranted reduction of the Christian idea of vocation, however, is a competing idea that is not usually fully appreciated by the biblical scholar and the theologian. The idea of the *imago dei*, with which the early formulation of *vocatio* was so strongly involved, was easily taken in a sense quite different from that expressed by Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther.

The word merely needed to be spoken in order that some, who would take it to mean that the human is *endowed* with a godlike character, would find it useful in all sorts of ways. Modernity is perhaps a legacy of just such a development. For the medieval period, especially the Renaissance, is replete with examples of overweening pride in the human place in the cosmos. Giovanni Pico, Count of Mirandola (1463-1494), is one who comes readily to mind, with his influential *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Frances Yates showed how deftly this most influential European, this leading thinker and guide of Popes and of the Medici of the Renaissance, transformed human dignity based upon the hope of overcoming fallenness into something quite different. "The fathers of the Church had placed man in a dignified position," Yates writes, "as the highest of terrestrial beings, as spectator of the universe, as the microcosm containing within himself the reflection of

the macrocosm.” But Pico’s oration goes a step further. “All these orthodox notions are in the oration on the Dignity of Man,” but these ideas are used to support the notion of the human being as “Magus, as operator, having within him the divine creative power, and the magical power of marrying heaven and earth” with the anticipation that since once human beings held such powers, they could once again become the masters of nature through the intellect, and this new Man could come into his proper role as “a divine being.”<sup>15</sup>

#### *Max Weber’s “Science as a Vocation”*

That such speculation about the nature of humanity was given many subtle, and not so subtle, variations is to be expected. The strength of the idea of the human being’s endowed preëminence in nature, and power over nature, is shown by the continuation of Renaissance themes into the Enlightenment idea of science as the power of becoming “the masters and possessors of nature” (Descartes). A later indication, however, of a certain Renaissance and Enlightenment theme coming with undiminished influence into our own times is the early twentieth-century impact of a certain address by Max Weber. This address, as a matter of fact, could be seen as a contemporary updating and reframing of Pico della Mirandola’s oration on the Dignity of Man. Like its Renaissance prototype, it is a peculiar blend of science and theology.

In 1919, Max Weber was invited to give an address to students on “Science as a Vocation.” This address comes down to us as both a very strange paper and an extraordinarily influential one. The influence of the piece speaks for itself. It has fostered a way of thinking about our world and the place of formal studies in that world that remains a strong prejudice in contemporary thinking. And I mean by “prejudice” not blind bigotry as it has

come to be used, but a settled conviction that, as Edmund Burke said, is necessary to conversations of a very high order. And when I say that it is “strange,” I am not suggesting that it is merely eccentric and for that reason easily dismissed. I happen to hold the rather conventional view that Max Weber is one of the most formidable intellectuals of the past century. As Leo Strauss said, “Whatever may have been his errors, he is the greatest social scientist of our century.” What I mean by strange is that it is profoundly ironic. It seems to advance the cause of modern science only by resurrecting the theology of polytheism. Weber properly sees that the questions of “meaning” raised by modern science are necessarily theological questions. But rather than attempt to answer those questions—which he admits science is incapable of doing—he said that “the different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another.”<sup>16</sup> The religious journey of the world that has led to monotheism, as well as mono-ethics, and which “dethroned this polytheism in favor of ‘the One that is necessary,’” has been faced with new contingencies in a modern world. Weber could as easily have said that the rationalizing and disenchantment of the world that are by-products of monotheism have now become superannuated; but because of an extraordinary reversal of world views, we must abandon monotheism and along with it, mono-ethics. What he did say was that “Just as Hellenic man sacrificed on this occasion to Aphrodite and on another to Apollo, and above all as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city—things are still the same today, but disenchanting and divested of the mythical but inwardly genuine flexibility of those customs.” For instance, he argues,

What man would presume to “refuse scientifically” the morality of the Sermon on the Mount, for example the sentence “resist no evil” or the image of turning the other cheek? And yet it is clear from the perspective of

this world that here an undignified morality is being preached. The choice is between the religious dignity which this morality confers and the dignity of man, which preaches something quite different; "Resist evil, for otherwise you will share the responsibility for its supremacy." For each individual, according to his ultimate standpoint, one is the devil and the other God, and the individual must decide which *for him* is God and which the devil. And so it is in all aspects of life.<sup>17</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that he quotes John Stuart Mill favorably to the effect that "if one proceeds from pure experience, one arrives at polytheism."<sup>18</sup> It is also important to see that the idea of vocation tends toward monotheism, as does the idea of liberal arts that always refers back to first principles and to higher unifying ideals. What is described here is the abstract design of a multicultural world view, where "different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another."<sup>19</sup>

It is serendipitous, from the standpoint of a researcher into culture and the sources of community, that in this essay a major shaper of modern thought brings together the issues of higher education, the vocation of human beings as "knowers" (scientists), and the meaning of the human community.<sup>20</sup> It is remarkable, further, that we have at hand an oration (that of Pico della Mirandola) appearing at the dawn, rather than at the decadent end, of modernity, that reflects upon these same issues in rather comparable ways. In between we have an abundance of evidence that the rhetoric of the divine powers and privileges of the human being work no matter how preposterous the form in which it comes to us. And preposterous is not too strong a term to describe Emerson's *Nature* or Kant's invitation for every man to think for himself, or Locke's presumption in making a *tabula rasa* (as Eric Voegelin put it) of two thousand years of Christian intellectual his-

tory replacing it with "an analysis of the New Testament as if it were a book that had been published yesterday."<sup>21</sup>

### *Vocation, Liberal Arts, and the Possibility of Community*

What is missing is not the simple idea of community, about which postmodernists never tire of speaking. Rather, the distinction that needs to come to light more clearly is the nature of that body, whether it is based on "love," and the longing for a higher unity—a basis for communing—or whether it is based on "equality" expressed as rights, which is a kind of calculation. In one, the person is indispensable. In the other, the individual is interchangeable, for if all are equal in every way, one will do as well as the other. But if we belong in different ways and for different purposes to the same body, then our gifts are needed and our lives are valued precisely because we are different.

The distinction here is highlighted when we once again detect the theological idea of *vocatio* as it is related to the liberal arts and to the task of a university. Through love, it is the lover that is changed, rather than the object of love. Thus, the learner—or the one who responds to vocation in this larger sense—is not "equipped" in the sense of being fitted for instrumental power, but is enlarged in the sense of becoming capable of refinement, discrimination, generosity of spirit, a discerning pathos, and a heightened expectation. The experience of beauty is not, as Pieper and Franz Rosenzweig explain, the experience of perfection but the provoking of a suffering for what is perfect. Just so, the one who is "called" and experiences life as a "call," can be said to suffer for that which is higher, nobler, better. It is the experience of love, hope, faith, the theological virtues: each of which expresses a certain "longing for" and a certain "suffering for" that which is unknown in the sense that

we have “mastered” it, but known in the sense that it has laid hold of our affections and our intellectual anticipation. It is unknown as an instrumental thing, as something subject to our power, but known as the object of one’s longing and suffering love.

What has happened, then, to liberal arts over time underlines as no other development—no matter how much more dramatic—the tension between two competing visions of community life, and that which forms community. These rivals have not just emerged in modern times, it is only that their rivalry has been clarified as never before. The options between them have always been present. The rivalry is between power in the sense of force as the means of social organization, and affection as the tie that binds people together, that binds them to their proper tasks, that binds them in creative and loving ways to their places and their things. Of course, both of these principles have their place, practically speaking, in the world as we know it. Power as coercion has its place because the world is fallen. The power of affection or love has its place because the world longs for redemption. Yet they are necessarily competing options, and each appeals to us with ecumenical designs; each is ambitious in an empire-building way, seeking to complete itself with world domination.

The Christian hope is that love will win out, binding everything together in a web of divine *vocatio*—all things called to their proper place in a celebration where it is possible to:

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
The world and those who live in it.  
Let the floods clap their hands;  
Let the hills sing together for joy....<sup>22</sup>

And because this *vocatio*, this call, has affected the world so strongly, it has often played into the hands of the rival, for force offers immediacy, it short-circuits those features of vocation which are characterized by a suffering-longing, a resistance to distraction, and a quest that leads into an eternal mystery. Power is the siren call that offers relief from the suffering of love: but it also proves the truth of Kafka’s fifty-word story entitled *The Sirens*:

These are the seductive voices of the night; the Sirens, too, sang that way. It would be doing them an injustice to think that they wanted to seduce; they knew they had claws and sterile wombs, and they lamented this aloud. They could not help it if their laments sounded so beautiful.<sup>23</sup>

In a fallen world power is needed as a prophylactic against violence. And though it is always sterile and unproductive of those virtues most needed in the social life, it tempts us to believe that it can accomplish quickly what love does only through patience and what it only fully accomplishes at the End of All Things. Liberal arts, on the other hand, restored to their proper relationship to the idea and experience of vocation, are a needed constant reminder of what is the true nature of ties that bind a people together and that call them along with the world itself to their God.

1. *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. by John P. Rowan (Chicago, 1961), 24-25. 2. “*Divine Madness*”: *Plato’s Case Against Secular Humanism*, trans. by Lothar Krauth (San Francisco, 1995), 48. 3. *Within and Above Ourselves: Essays in Political Analysis* (Wilmington, Del., 1996), 369. 4. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 44 (Philadelphia, 1966). 5. “Ideo in Ecclesia omnes, sive ad

Hierarchiam pertinent sive ab ea pascuntur, ad sanctitatem vocantur....,” *Lumen Gentium*, n.39. 6. Vatican II (Past. Const.) *Gaudium et spes*, n. 11. 7. Genesis 1:27 (NRSV). 8. Genesis 1:26 (RSV). 9. Genesis 1:27. 10. With regard to Origen’s doctrine of vocation, I have been considerably aided, and in this study am in debt to, the excellent monograph by Father José Alviar, *Klesis: The*

*Theology of the Christian Vocation According to Origen* (Dublin, Ireland; 1993). 11. *Ibid.*, 27. 12. *Institutes*, III, 10,6. 13. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York, 1995), 250. 14. *Ibid.*, 251. 15. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (New York, 1969), 111. 16. Peter Lassman, Irving Velody, and Herminio Martins, eds., *Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation'* (London, 1989), 22. 17. *Ibid.*, 23. 18. *Ibid.*, 22. 19. *Ibid.*, 22. 20. With regard to the "researcher into culture and the sources of community" I also have in mind that every Christian (and one might easily make an argument for every monotheist in this case, but I happen to be a Christian and a student of theology) is a re-

searcher into culture and the sources of community. This is so inasmuch as all who, through the teachings and the experience of faith, place themselves in the midst of a community practice (culture) and trust in the sources of community (love and justice, issuing in peace), find themselves the brother and sister of a catholic humanity and participants in (rather than masters of) nature. 21. Eric Voegelin, *Revolution and the New Science*, Vol. VI of *History of Political Ideas*, and Vol. 24 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia and London, 1998), 173. 22. Psalm 98:7,8 (NRSV). 23. Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York, 1958), 93.