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Reviving Vocation to Public Service

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Kathleen Cahalan on “Reviving Vocation to Public Service”

MARCH 15, 2017

Kathleen Cahalan

In an editorial a few months before the 2017 election, David Brooks argued that the failure of leadership in public service stems from the fact that people find themselves “enmeshed in a system that drains them of their sense of vocation.” Brooks appealed to vocation in its most common terms today: as something you feel called to, the use of your skills and gifts for the common good, something you cannot not do even in the face of hardship. He was looking for a “revival of vocation” in public and professional life.

Such a revival would have to take account of the multiple sources of calling in a pluralist context. Ranging from the purpose-driven life determined entirely by divine order to finding your bliss, the source of callings today vary widely. Nonetheless, religious traditions share five commonalities that press beyond sheer determinism or secular expressive individualism that hold a key to reviving calling to work for public service.

First, they view callings as communal, something shared in common. For Martin Luther, who redefined vocation during the Protestant Reformation, Christians have a general and a

particular calling. By general calling, he meant that believers share the same vocation to love God and serve their neighbor. Jews and Muslims share a similar notion, placing much greater emphasis on the communal rather than a particular vocation.

According to Rabbi Amy Eilberg, a calling is foremost a “direction for life addressed to all Jewish human beings rather than uniquely to any individual Jew” that begins “with the biblical commands that the Israelites are to be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Ex. 19:6).”

Similarly, the general calling in Islam is to be a Muslim. According to John Kelsay, “To be a Muslim—that is, to be ‘one who submits’—involves saying to God ‘Here I am, at your service’—a statement that opens up to a life of prayer (that is, calling upon God) and good works (including calling other human beings to serve God).”

Second, out of a sense of general calling, particular callings arise. Here Luther emphasized the particular station of a person’s life, and John Calvin picked up on Saint Paul’s emphasis on gifts for particular work. Hindus have a similar sense of the particular purpose of a human life.

Tulsi Gabbard, in 2012 was the first Hindu elected to Congress, as Hawaii’s Congressional Representative. As a karma yogi, she was sworn in using the Bhagavadgītā, the text that inspired her to a life of servant leadership. According to Anantanand Rambachan, “The Bhagavadgītā (18:41; 18:42; 18:47) speaks of and commends work that flows out of one’s nature (svabhāvaprahbavair), that is born of one’s nature (svabhāvajam), and that is even ordained by one’s nature (svabhāvaniyatam).”

Third, whether the source are divinely endowed gifts or inner nature, callings have a social and public purpose. In Mahayana Buddhism, the “primary calling is to manifest compassion for all beings in order to bring them to awakening first, and only then attain awakening for oneself.”

For a Hindu, life and work are part of an interdependent order. While callings may express one’s inner nature, roles, and obligations, such effort must be consistent with dharma, the values and actions that sustain existence in the whole universe. Furthermore, by connecting the individual’s work to the common good of society and universal well-being, all work becomes a form of worship. According to the Bhagavadgītā (18:46), “A human being attains life’s highest purpose by worshipping with his own work (svakarmanā), the One from whom all beings originate and who exists in all.”

Similarly, the Confucian tradition sees calling as “the cultivation of the self through ritual and learning” in accordance with “the moral Way (Dao) by which society is ordered and harmonized.” As a disciple of Confucius noted, “To avoid public service is to be without a sense of what is right.”

Fourth, callings may bring a person immense joy when a sense of community, gifts, inner nature, service, and context align. But such joy does not mean the absence of suffering.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer chose to leave the U.S. in 1939 and return home. “I’ve made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.” Clearly he knew such a choice could cost him his life, but then a calling is often something you cannot not do.

Finally, many traditions share the notion that work is not our sole calling, and that callings are limited and finite, not to be grasped or held too tightly. In Nikaya Buddhism, for example, the calling is to “seek liberation from the illusory opposition of life and death and to realize that there is no permanent or eternal self, a calling of no-calling from the self of no-self.” Even the sufferings faced through public service, Buddhists remind us, are an illusion.

Religious traditions offer important insights to a revival of vocation to work and public service. They can lead us to ask ourselves and each other:

- Who is the community with whom I share my sense of calling?
- What capacities, gifts, and inner qualities do I have for public work?
- What is the purpose of this work?
- What will it cost me?
- What illusions must I relinquish?

References are taken from Kathleen A. Cahalan and Douglas J. Schuurman, eds., Callings in Today’s World: Voices from Eight Faith Perspectives (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Pub., 2016).