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The Vocation of a Christian Scholar: How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind

Richard T. Hughes

A Review by Todd C. Ream and Lauren E. Sheehan

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As of late, the notion of vocation has received an increasing amount of critical attention. Of course, vocation, or the concept of calling, has always proven to be a central feature of Christian identity. Previous works addressing this theme include Lee Hardy's *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), Mark Schwehn's *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000). However, the Lilly Endowment's "Theological Exploration of Vocation" initiative has recently infused life into a conversation which was perhaps previously underemphasized. A couple of recent books such as Douglas V. Henry and Bob R. Agee's *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) and Douglas J. Schuurman's *Vocation: Discerning Our Calling in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) were likely influenced in some fashion by this initiative. Perhaps the Lilly Endowment's initiative is what inspired Richard Hughes to write *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar*—the revised edition of *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*. Hughes frequently speaks on the nature of vocation and even hosted the Lilly Fellows Program's conference on vocation during the fall of 2002.

The emphasis on vocation appears throughout the three main components Hughes chose to add to the revised edition. First, Hughes addresses the idea of vocation in the "Preface to the Revised Edition" by explaining the intrinsic importance of vocation in terms of scholarship. The notion of vocation, according to Hughes, is that it helps scholars understand themselves at the core of their being and, in turn, prepares them to begin a discussion about Christian scholarship. Second, this idea inspired another contribution to the revised edition which was a very personal and autobiographical section about his "journey toward vocational integrity." Finally, the revised edition includes a chapter entitled, "The Vocation of a Christian College; or, What Makes the Church-Related Education Christian?" This chapter addresses educational institutions as a whole and gives practical advice and commentary about the relationship shared by faith and teaching.

The concept of vocation which Hughes describes in the revised edition is one born out of two opposing sets of methodological practices which were also employed in the first edition. First, in a manner similar to that of an existential philosopher, Hughes addresses what the act of teaching might look like in light of ultimate questions.

Hughes contends that pedagogical practices change if both the ageless notion of wonder and the reality of death were part of our curricular (and perhaps co-curricular) efforts. Drawing upon the work of Madeleine L'Engle, Hughes claims that she “stimulates our creativity and asks us to ponder the meaning of life and the meaning of God” (p. 75). One way to bring such forms of meaning into clear relief is to turn to the question of death. According to Hughes, death is what allows students “to be acutely aware of their own limitations – and of my limitations. In that way, we know – I and they – that we have much to learn, and we can begin our journey together” (p. 77).

Second, in a manner similar to that of a sociologist of religion, Hughes offers a descriptive overview of how various Christian traditions (the Catholic, the Mennonite, the Reformed, and the Lutheran) nurture the ability of their respective scholars to draw faith and learning into a common conversation. An example of this within the Reformed tradition would be “the doctrine of the sovereignty of God often finds expressions in the attempt to transform human culture into the kingdom of God on earth” (p. 50). By contrast, “the starting point for Mennonites has more to do with holistic living than with cognition and more to do with ethics than with intellect” (p. 55). At other times in his book, Hughes indicates how the Lutheran and Anabaptist traditions have shaped his own sense of identity as a scholar.

The tension which persists between the methodological practices of existential philosophy and the sociology of religion ironically proves to be the strength of the book. Despite the uneven tone produced by such a tension, Hughes brings the lessons learned by both sets of practices into conversation with one another. For example, he writes, “On the one hand, we embrace the particularities of our respective denominational traditions” (p. 32). However, he also notes that unless these traditions “point beyond themselves to the living God, [they] can do little to sustain the practice of Christian higher education” (p. 33). Existential questions such as death propel the Christian scholar to break through the particularity of his or her own tradition. To his credit, Hughes even discusses the impact of his own experience with mortality in terms of how it shaped his sense of vocation. In the end, Hughes provides an articulate portrayal of how these experiences bring forth not only a heightened awareness of the paradoxical nature of the gospel but also an awareness of the very nature of one’s vocation as a Christian scholar.

Overall, Richard T. Hughes’ *The Vocation of the Christian Scholar* proves to be a helpful contribution to the growing base of literature dealing with matters of vocation and particularly the vocation of the Christian scholar. His methodological mix of practices reminiscent of both a sociologist of religion and an existential philosopher helps the reader to appreciate both the necessity and the limitations inherent in the various Christian traditions. Hughes acknowledges that “I am finite and completely contingent on a power that transcends myself” (p. 142). In the wake of such an acknowledgement, the vocation of the Christian scholar is born. The question that remains for those of us who read Hughes’ book is whether we possess both the humility and the courage necessary to follow his lead.