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Vocation

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The word “vocation” derives from Latin *vocātiō*, signifying calling, which implies both mundane and transcendent meanings and motives of human service and self-realization in various spheres of life. The meaning of vocation has undergone considerable transformation from the Reformation era until the present day, in which the traditional sense of the word is coupled with the concepts of occupation, profession, career, and lifestyles. According to William Placher, four historical stages produced the dynamics in religious-secular connotations of vocation. First, “religious calling” (*klḗsis* in Greek) signified the religious choice of becoming a Christian in the alien socioreligious environment of the Roman Empire and the consequences of adopting a Christian identity for the family and public life. Second, during the Middle Ages, the process of Christian institutionalization added to vocation a new meaning of discerning the divine calling for becoming a member of monastic orders or clergy in opposition to living a family life. Third, the secular aspects in vocational choice appeared during the Protestant Reformation, when the concept of *vocation* was introduced by Martin Luther and John Calvin for revising the values of Christian responsibility and freedom beyond the religious sphere. In the 16th century, a new translation of biblical *klḗsis* into the concept of *Beruf* by Luther appeared at the time of growing cities, commerce, and mobility that brought everyday meaning, subjective, and pluralistic connotations to the vocational calling. Luther’s *Beruf* along with the secularization of spheres of vocational choices brought the idea of possible vocational change. Placher called the fourth stage “vocations in a Post-Christian age,” in which a variety of lifestyles and professions leave Christians to follow their callings in a religiously plural environment, very often against mainstream cultural values. Even though the external pressures on vocational choices have been diminished over history, especially in their religious dimensions, the search for one’s purpose in life and service still carries the urgent need to be addressed.

With the legacy of Max Weber (1864–1920), sociology underscored the theme of vocation and modernity by the understanding of one’s scientific, political, and economic activities concerning their external conditions and internal implications for the individuals who make professional choices. As David Owen and Tracy Strong noted about Weber’s essay “Science as Vocation,” the importance of understanding the external conditions of vocations is a starting point of Weber’s explanation of what is an academic career in a time of rationalization and bureaucratization of the universities. Weber wrote that such sociological conditions for scholarly vocation often affect the personality of scholars with negative *injuries* and lead the scholar to focus on their inner vocation. According to Weber, the elements of inner scholarly calling are revealed in a particular experience accompanied by devotion to the subject of research, disciplinary self-restriction, imagination, diligence, passion tied with inspiration, and achievements that *last*. The investing of one’s personality in a vocation requires a complete devotion to the subject of one’s research and work. The issue of individual vocation was developed in Weber’s sociology together with the necessity for the definition of the meaning of science and politics in society. In his other work, “Politics as Vocation,” Weber coupled vocation with the concept of charisma implying personal devotion and trust in leadership qualities of politicians in the world of *Realpolitik.*

As Andrew Weigert and Anthony Blasi stated, vocation implies long-term commitments and calling from a superior source that reveals for sociologists a significant personal event (calling) in the process of social structuration. Vocation came into the focus of sociology and social psychology through the definition of activities that create one’s personal history and define the relationship with the others. According to the social constructivist perspective, vocation is seen as a specific kind of identity or a mode of experiencing it that is continuous and capable of change and development. Weigert and Blasi explained that the meaning of *being called* can be understood in terms of activation of one’s identity and response, maintenance, perfection, or failure to follow that calling. Discerning the vocational calling is part of the human’s engagement in “quests for meaning” induced by the need for relationship with the transcendent and raptures in the routine of everyday life. The cognate to vocation, the concept of avocation, highlights that not only do work and service to others have a connection to greater significance, but that a time free of work also is meaningful. The interplay of the concepts of vocation and avocation provokes a question of where the center of one’s identity is to be placed. The designation of time *fulfilled through* vocation and *spent at* work, according to Weigert and Blasi, can indicate the center and periphery of one’s vocational choice. Changes in vocation or in modes of vocation imply sociological consequences for the individuals as the motives of esteem, worth, and authenticity scaffold vocational

identity.

The specifics of the interaction between individual vocational identity and structural vocational conditions also depend on broader social trends in the decline or growth of particular professions and related roles and statuses. The example provided by Giuseppe Giordan concerning the reduced number of vocations for the priesthood in Italy in the 1970s illuminates the importance of sociological conditions for religious vocational choices in a secularizing society. A vocational choice to leave the priesthood was accompanied by personal crisis and loss of one's identity, social exclusion, and stigmatization both in society and in religious institutions. This specific vocational crisis illustrated the necessity of redefinition and reestablishment of the relationship with the sacred for the former priests. Also, it showed the need to reassess their lives in terms of a mistaken vocational choice and subsequent change, along with the quest for a new vocational calling. The vocational narrative becomes central to one's biography, and as a dynamic force, it underlines the centrality of individual freedom and presence of immanent challenges in the process of (re)interpreting one's life gains and related social circumstances.

See also Charisma; Identity; Ordination; Sacred; Virtuoso

Further Readings

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