

PAGANISM  
AND THE  
PROFESSIONS

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# **Paganism and the Professions**

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When a theologian of some note writes a popular book whose title proclaims *Business as a Calling*, we should be worried. We could conclude that the author, Michael Novak, is merely performing his function as the theological shill for corporate America. On the other hand, it is possible for us to see this as a sign that Catholic theology is in big trouble: in trying to write for laypersons, some theologians evidently are moving from the musty heights of academic obscurity to the humid swamp of pedestrian absurdity. Both conclusions would be wrong: the situation is much worse.

Of course Michael Novak is the primary water-carrier for American business gone global, and certainly theologians of all denominations have trouble writing significant books that non-theologians can read with understanding. (And let me hasten to point out that members of my profession, academic philosophers, do not even attempt to make themselves understandable to each other let alone the public at large.) But the view that work is a calling is not simply another bit of apologetic nonsense we have come to expect from Novak; nor is it merely a bit of flatulence from theology's attempt at relevance. This viewpoint happens to be the position of not only the Catholic Church but also the major Protestant denominations as well, expressed in a variety of the churches' documents addressing faith and economics published over the past twenty years.

In the prologue to *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II makes the claim explicitly, linking the "call" to work to both God and personhood:

Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth from the beginning, therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from creatures.... Thus work bears a particular mark of man and humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons.

Later, in section 23 of this encyclical, John Paul repeats the linkage between persons created in the image and likeness of God and working, and he elaborates on the claim that working is integral to the fullest development of human beings:

Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the “image of God” he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of this objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.

The *Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics* was issued by a large and diverse group of evangelicals in 1990. This document echoes the same themes and refers to some of the same scripture passages utilized by John Paul II in *Laborem*. The *Declaration* states:

Work belongs to the very purpose for which God made human beings. In Gen 1: 26 – 28, we read that God created human beings in his image “in order to have dominion over all the earth.” Similarly, Gen 2: 15 tells us that God created Adam and placed him in the garden of Eden to work in it.... As human beings fulfill

this mandate, they glorify God... they fulfill an original purpose of the Creator for human existence. [13]

Because work is central to the Creator's intention for humanity, work has intrinsic value. Thus work is not solely a means to an end.... [14]

For Christians, work acquires a new dimension. God calls all Christians to employ through work the various gifts that God has given them. [15]

The final key feature about work as a calling that is clearly expressed by the documents of the Christian churches is that work – the production of goods and services – promotes the common good. In meeting the needs of consumers and in providing opportunities for individuals to gain economic security, work benefits all members of human society. As the Presbyterian Church (USA) expresses it in *Christian Faith and Economic Justice*:

The doctrine of God's love teaches that we are created for *community*. Justice is a *community* concept. As it affirms our right to individual freedom, it equally affirms our corresponding responsibility for the good of the community as a whole. We are to manifest the basic solidarity that binds us into one family. We are not only to share our resources individually with one another; we are to help fashion institutions which foster justice and well-being in the community.... We are all responsible to work in some productive manner according to our abilities. Thus we contribute to the well-being of others. [29.131 – 29.132]

Thus, to summarize, the position the churches express that work is a calling or a vocation involves all of the following claims:

1. Work derives from God's command and expresses human dignity.
2. Work is a means of self-expression and creativity, and it is the means by which the glory of human beings as God's stewards shines forth.
3. Work provides for the common good.

I think that the experience of most Christians worldwide demonstrate the foolishness of these claims which are espoused, evidently, by persons who have long been far from the reality of American employment or who are pushing very hard to render their secular ideological commitments as compatible with the gospel.

I wish that the theologians and churches had commented on a later text in Genesis that pertains to the mandate to work. What the contemporary authors we have looked at say is true: our duty to work derives from God's command. But the source of God's command is best expressed not in Gen 2 : 15 but rather in Gen 3: 17 – 19. It is clear from this latter text that God intended work as a punishment for sin. Rather than asserting that all work is somehow good and blessed by its very nature, this passage demonstrates that God's displeasure is such that one of the worst fates he can set for us is to labor for our sustenance. “Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life.... By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat until you return to the ground from which you were taken; for you are dirt and to dirt you shall return.” No theology of work should ignore this passage nor fail to elaborate on it. The fact that we must work to survive does not express our dignity; it expresses our fallen nature and sinfulness.

Regarding the second claim, it is hard to maintain that, for the vast majority of us, work is intrinsically good. For most of us, work is instrumental; it is the means by which we can pursue other ends: feeding and housing ourselves and our loved ones, and purchasing things that make life more comfortable. It is rare to

find people who work at jobs where they find any but the most minimal types of fulfillment, or where they recognize that their work satisfies a higher purpose other than increased profitability for the firm, or increased productivity for the firm, or greater efficiency for the firm. In fact, we tend to feel fulfilled when these corporate goals are realized by our efforts, when we are lauded as good team players advancing the stock price a few percentage points this quarter – in other words, by some external source of praise and valuation. It is very hard to see how our work exhibits dignity when we, who work in low wage, low prestige jobs, serve French fries to rude teenagers, or solder computer components in Mexican factories 12 hours a day, or make the soles of Nike sneakers in southeast Asian sweatshops; or how our work expresses our stewardship when we, who work in high salary, high prestige jobs, figure out ways (using Generally Accepted Accounting Procedures) to shave a few thousands off the tax bills of our clients, or design SUV's with leather interiors for customers in Manhattan. The churches' documents are correct when they imply that all work is of equivalent value: there is really no distinction between serving fast unhealthy food to nameless clientele and serving the unhealthy appetites of fat-cat clients; nor in laboring to produce overpriced footwear for spoiled American consumers and designing luxury cars for the fantasies of the wealthy. No distinction other than salary and prestige: a whore is a whore whether for ten dollars or ten thousand. Most of our jobs are intrinsically the same: variations on themes of exploitation, catering to greed and promoting the greater comfort of the already comfortable. What we express is closer to the job of a restaurant's wine steward than stewardship over God's creation.

At this point one might object that if the notion that all work has intrinsic value is correct as the churches assert, then clearly work's importance should not be measured by its product, its results. But if work is also meant to further the common good, then just as clearly some jobs' product impacts more people and in better ways than do other jobs' product. It is difficult to understand how the intrinsic value of jobs can be separated from their extrinsic value in any way that's useful or that would lead to a better understanding of the nature of work, even granting that this intrinsic/extrinsic valuation has any relevance for Christianity and Christians' mission in the world. The very notion that work

ought to advance the common good implies a hierarchical structure for employment that undercuts the intrinsic value claim: some jobs are simply better than others.

Traditionally, these better jobs have been identified as the *professions*, jobs which entail years of study and training, and usually require some kind of certifying examination or licensure by the state or by a professional organization. We aspire to these professions – the high salary, high prestige jobs – as part of the American dream now dreamt worldwide. The professions, though, are no less instrumental. We work in order to shop and retire, and when we retire we hope that our 401(k)'s and 403(b)'s are sufficiently large to allow us to continue shopping when we no longer care to work.

But that is not the complete picture. Of course, many of us believe the myth the churches help perpetuate that the common good will be advanced by our work as teachers, physicians, lawyers and managers. But the reality is that physicians need to spend more time answering to HMO's and guarding costs than to patients' needs. And lawyers need to increase their billable hours to 100 or 150 per week to cover office expenses and partners' profits, leaving less time for family and community. And managers either worry about being downsized themselves or need to downsize others in a vicious game of productivity and survival. And teachers must adapt to increased class size, standardized curricula and standardized tests as a means of assessing their students and their own teaching effectiveness. And at the college and university level, more classes need to be taught to enable others to enter the professional ranks, as though the world really needs more plastic surgeons, corporate lawyers and professors of philosophy.

So what is this "common good" that we are promoting through the professions? Increased wealth, which translates into the ability of some few of us to shop more and retire earlier; hardly a Christian notion. And this "common good", if it is a "good" at all or shared by the "common", is achieved by the functioning of the entire global system. It is not reducible to a sum of its parts: the increase of global wealth does not moderate the every day demeaning, wearying, life draining activity of individuals responding to the pressure of markets, bosses and demanding clients.



The professions must be more than this picture portrays if we are to have any hope at all of leading “productive” lives as the churches tell us we should. Not only are the professions intrinsically valuable (the churches tell us that all jobs are intrinsically valuable), but they must also be distinctively more valuable than non-professional jobs.

The distinction, though, between the low-paying, low-prestige jobs and the professions has nothing to do with functional differences, nor does it have anything to do with the fiction of advancing the common good. The primary difference between them is that the professions incarnate a vocational idolatry in ways that are completely alien to low-prestige jobs. The professions are paganistic in their ritualistic practices; in the ways they govern, not only the business activities but also the familial and affective lives of their members; and in the way their members come to view themselves.

A fundamental characteristic of the professions is the long years of training on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. During this time, the pre-professionals (not “students;” they are already a class apart) explore the theoretical and practical foundations of their fields. Ultimately, some of these people are admitted into the ranks of the profession via an examination as in the case of physicians, accountants, lawyers, teachers, et al.; or through some other means of certification, such as the granting of MBA’s for managers. This period of study, trial and initiation resembles the preparation of priests and ministers: the professional schools operate as proto-seminaries. Indeed, the very term “profession” originally referred to the taking of vows by religious responding to clerical vocations, vows which could only be taken after years of postulancy and novitiate – analogs to internships and probationary employment. The study pre-professionals engage in parallels biblical study: there are certain sacred texts which characterize the professional fields – the basic and serial scriptures which outline and describe the history and development of the fields. And there are the “covenants,” or codes of professional conduct, which are binding and normative, i.e., they prescribe and proscribe behaviors, define excellence and determine value for the members of the profession.

After one leaves the secular seminary and is ordained (certified, accepted or licensed), the new professional dispenses

her specialized, sacramental knowledge to those clients, patients, etc., with whom she has a special relationship, characterized by specific duties and responsibilities over particular areas of life. This salvific mission is intended to help clients proceed to their own private eschaton of health, knowledge, wealth or legal security.

I can imagine some readers smirking at this picture, maintaining that it is a gross parody and exaggeration. And certainly no professional I have known has ever seriously spoken of herself in these sacerdotal terms. But virtually all professionals I have known or read about have *acted* as if they were priests bent on the salvation of their flocks. We professionals view ourselves as being so very important for the quality of life of those “in our care” that we must have cell phones, laptop computers and pagers just to be sure that we can work and be in contact with our offices or clients 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We work weekends and evenings, placing such a priority on our jobs that our families, friends, communities and churches compete for smaller slices of our time and attention. The professions govern our behaviors. We must always act like the idealized professional because we represent the whole of our colleagues; the misbehavior of one tars all, just as the virtuous behavior of one gives glory to all. We are, first and foremost, what we do for our work: our profession defines our selves. We engage not in self-realization but in professional-realization: the ways we approach all relationships, commitments and ordinary tasks are the ways our professions have schooled us to approach our jobs. The call to professions is a totalizing one.

Ironically, the churches have aided us in developing, maintaining and justifying this paganistic attitude. All of the churches’ documents were issued because of a deep concern about our increasing materialism and about the economic injustices that characterize our world. But the churches’ response is a glorification of the very work that demeans our humanity; the churches do not seem to come to grips that we are called to be in the image of Christ and instead ask us to become better market capitalists by allowing the poor to become better market capitalists, for this is what “common good” means.

We work at the professions, or aspire to, because the churches tell us that we must use all our skills and abilities in our

employments, and the professions call them out to the utmost. Professionals don't punch time clocks and know no limitation on the demands of their callings. Because our work is intrinsically valuable and the path to self-realization, we identify ourselves by what we do to earn a living; we become inseparable from our economic roles and the driving force of our desire for goods. Because we are called in our work to promote the common good and the common good is identified as wealth generation and equal opportunity to become professionals and generate more wealth, we come to only value ourselves by what we own and what we work at. The churches offer no alternative vision to what the secular powers define as good; the churches equate Jesus' call to discipleship with business as usual. And all of us, the churches included, have to try to fool ourselves that the world is really a better place, that we are acting as God's good stewards, because we have produced a better laxative commercial; or that we have proclaimed God's glory by selling another 400 units of stuff that no one needs; or that we have expressed our dignity and creativity by conducting an efficient title search. We ease our consciences by being called and serving the idol of the common good, well-burnished by our churches. And we truly do not believe any of it. We know that we are called to something better, some alternative to the call of the professions.

In the gospel there is only one instance when Jesus called a person to follow him and was refused. The rich man of the synoptics (Mk 10: 17 – 31; Mt 19: 16 – 30; Lk 18: 18 – 30) approached Jesus and asked what he had to do to gain eternal life. Jesus' response was a recounting of the first five commandments; he told the rich man what he already knew: that he must satisfy the Mosaic covenant. The rich man's response is significant. He told Jesus that he had kept the law from his youth. And then Mark recounts that Jesus looked at him and loved him.

Why did Jesus love the rich man? Clearly, here was a fellow who was good as defined by the world around him, who was doing his best by following the law and working to his fullest capacity. Through these efforts he had realized success: he was the finest kind of citizen. He had all the money and material goods that anyone could ask for. He was an upright member of the community, both religious and civil, and the authorities recognized him as such. Jesus did not love him for that, for that

must have been evident from the beginning of their encounter. Jesus loved him when the rich man said he had kept the law from his youth. In that statement, the rich man revealed that he knew something was missing from his life. He had done everything that society and his faith had asked of him and he was rewarded for that faithfulness, yet he came to Jesus because he was dissatisfied, and his dissatisfaction caused him to be demanding. Notice that he did not accept Jesus' initial response as adequate and leave it at that: the rich man knew that there must be something more than keeping the law, getting rich and becoming an upstanding member of his community, something more for him to do. He was serious and insistent and communicated this to the Lord.

Of course Jesus would love this man. His insistent question came on a particularly rough day: the Pharisees had earlier tried to trap Jesus with a difficult question about divorce, and the apostles had just tried to keep some little children from "bothering" the Lord. It was a day – like many others – when strangers tried to trick him and his friends did not understand what his ministry was all about. When Jesus looked at the rich man he saw someone who was trying very hard to be better, trying to understand what was required of him.

We know what happens next. Jesus told the rich man that he must give away all his wealth to the poor and then come follow him. The evangelists say that the rich man went away sad because he had many possessions. The man who was an honest searcher for eternal life refused the call to discipleship because the price was too high. Eternal life turned out to be a commodity that was too expensive to pursue.

The sad day for Jesus continued. When he looked at his disciples and told them that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, they were bewildered. It was ironic, and the irony must not have been lost on Jesus himself: the rich man, who understood the calling, did not respond to it; the apostles, who responded to the calling, did not understand it.

To label our work and the professions as "callings" or "vocations" is not only arrogant it also, and more importantly, cheapens the gospel. There is one calling we should recognize – discipleship – and one vocation – to follow Jesus. By placing such emphasis and importance upon our economic roles and by

sanctifying our economic functions is to behave like the pagans. We have constructed a very nice system of wealth production and it has become our idol; we exalt ourselves in our professions as the high priests of this religion, indispensable for the proper operation of the global system, but we don't quite believe it. In order to maintain our value within this valueless order, we hold that our dignity as persons derives from the prestige of our work, so we strive to become better professionals as though our dignity depends upon the regard of others. We believe that our true selves are expressed by the jobs that we do, and recognizing deep down that those jobs are meaningless, we strive to retire from them. We even believe that we are serving God's people best through serving the markets and their mechanisms, and we (not so secretly) strive for individuality and freedom from them, believing our salvation from the market gods can be purchased from the market itself.

Jesus calls us to give our wealth to the poor and come follow him. Somehow we have managed to translate that message into: attend a good graduate school, make lots of money doing useless things, live in a gated community and diversify your holdings in the stock market for your old age. Like the rich man, we look on eternal life as the ultimate return on investment. Like him, we think it is in our power to act in such a way that God will reward us with a wonderful celestial dividend at death. If we work at the right tasks – and the price is not too high – we can earn eternal life in the same way we can earn a secure retirement, and spend that eternity in heaven's mall.

In the fourth gospel (Jn 6: 27 – 29) Jesus makes clear what our job really is. He tells us that we ought not labor even for sustenance in this world – let alone pursue the professions. We should work for the food of eternal life. He tells us, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.” Obviously this call to “believe in the one he sent” is not merely some mental assent we make once or reserve for Sunday services. The call to believe is a call to be faithful to the gospel. When Jesus called the apostles and the rich man, he called them to a new way of being. He called them to set aside their power and possessions, their positions within the community and even their common understanding of what the good life is in favor of the kind of life that he led. It is a life that refuses to be defined by the categories

of this world but by the categories of the kingdom of God. It is a life that measures its value not by self-reliance, productivity and all the other qualities that make us good employees but by faithfulness, reliance on God and all the qualities that would make us good disciples.

Where does this leave us, then, if we want discipleship and eternal life? It is clear from the rich man texts that we need to approach the Lord with honest seeking and openness; with the recognition of our own incompleteness; and with the willingness to leave all, even our professions, behind in order to profess the gospel. It is also clear from those texts – because Jesus says it explicitly – that gaining eternal life is impossible for us to earn on our own: the grace of God is necessary. And we learn from the Gospel of John that we must be faithful.

Our work, the work of the faithful, must take place within the church. The role of the faithful within the church is to demand faithfulness from the church itself. We must stand as honest children of God and demand that the church help us precisely because we can not gain eternal life alone. Like the rich man confronting Jesus, we should not accept the easy, safe, pat answers from our theologians, ministers and bishops but push them as well as each other, towards a clearer understanding of the gospel and to a closer following of Jesus.

We are not capable of doing it alone. If work is demeaning and degrading and if the professions are a sell-out, it is not clear to any one of us what alternatives are open to us, if any are. If we are called to be followers of Jesus, it's hard for any individual to know what that will entail or how to follow him without compromise. We need the church to help us concretize Jesus' call to us today.

We are left with one last question: Why have the Christian churches not remained true to the call to discipleship that seems so apparent in the rich man texts and the life of Jesus itself? This question is a large one – certainly too large for this present work, and probably beyond my capability. Yet it seems there are two possible answers I can only indicate broadly. Either the churches are unable to offer an alternative to the secular economic order or the churches are unwilling to. If the latter option proves to be more likely, we need to examine why. Is it that comfort and security of being an accepted and valued part of society has

captured our souls? Have we bought into a theology that grants worldly power to the powers of the world and marginalizes God so that his word has no bearing on how we work and live? If so, how can we move our churches in the direction they were intended to go?

If the first option is the case, what does that mean? Is such a view consistent with Jesus' promise that he would always be with us? If we really can offer no economic alternatives to what the world mandates, then perhaps we need to develop a theology and practice which is appropriate to a hostage church, a theology and spirituality more akin to the persecuted churches of the first century which will enable us to keep faith with our call.

