

A Plentiful Harvest:

The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocation

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Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

— Mark 4:8

The Lilly Endowment scatters a great deal of seed. Perhaps not quite so indiscriminately as does the sower of Jesus' parable; very few of the grains seem to fall on rocky soil or among weeds. But neither is the Endowment especially parsimonious; its officers seem well aware that, in order to reap a plentiful harvest, one must sow the seed abundantly without assurances that any particular grain will sprout. Scattering seed, like teaching and preaching and much else, is an act of faith: one simply trusts that at least some of what one broadcasts will encounter reasonably good conditions for growth, and thereby produce good fruit.

Rarely, however, has any philanthropic organization launched a program that involved as much faith as did the Lilly Endowment's Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) initiative. At each of the plenary conferences that brought together the awardees in each of the three years in which institutions initiated their PTEV programs, the Endowment's Vice President for Religion, Craig Dykstra, memorably remarked:

The "theological exploration of vocation" is meant, first of all, to be an honest inquiry. What does Lilly mean by "theological exploration of vocation"? The honest answer to the question is this: we don't exactly know. That is what we hope *you* will figure out.

Surely it was a remarkable act of faith on the part of the Lilly Endowment to scatter this much seed when no one knew exactly what was being planted, let alone whether it would bear any fruit.

But like many acts of faith (and like many faithful acts), this one led to an enormously abundant harvest. Over the past ten years, the very word *vocation* has been excavated from its location among the ruins of medieval- and Reformation-era theological concepts and has been granted new meaning and new life. Increasingly, it marks the various ways that church-related colleges and institutions are talking with

¹ Many thanks to my research assistant, Andrew Mead, formerly of Hope College and now of Western Theological Seminary, who helped to gather many of the resources cited in this essay, provided much useful feedback, and prepared a first draft of the bibliography.

their students about the future directions of their lives and talking with their faculty, administrators, and trustees about how such conversations might best be conducted. No longer relegated to a narrow range of religious occupations, the word *vocation* is now frequently used to describe the entire orientation of a person’s life, in ways that are truly holistic and deeply attentive to the entire spectrum of the human psyche. The deepening and widening of this concept has resulted from the programs, the courses, the literature, and the ways of thinking that have been inspired, encouraged, financed, and brought to a successful conclusion by the Lilly-sponsored PTEV initiative.

Of course, to speak in these terms about the rehabilitation of the word *vocation* is only to scratch the surface of the profound effects that this conversation has had over the past decade — effects that have resonated well beyond the realm of church-related higher education. Not only the word *vocation* itself, but the concepts and conversations that surround it, have been immeasurably enriched and significantly deepened. Exploring these riches, and sounding these depths, are among the chief goals of the present essay. My goal is to review the recent literature and to account for the rather significant paradigm shift that seems to be taking place particularly on church-related college and university campuses.

The Historical Journey of a Concept

The word *vocation* is rooted in the Latin verb *vocare*, to call. A vocation is a calling, which naturally prompts the question: who is calling? The obvious answer, at least in the Western world up through the Middle Ages, was God. Therefore, a person was described as having a “vocation” when one’s calling had a specifically religious focus. Priests and members of religious orders were “called;” they had a vocation. Even today we see the residual effects of this usage as denominations refer to their efforts at recruiting people into the professional ministry as work in the area of “vocations.”

Over time, however, the concept of vocation did not stay still.² According to the standard historical account of this matter, things took a significant turn at the time of the Reformation, when certain negative trends (such as an increased suspicion of the Church’s clericalism) joined with more positive forces like Luther’s emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers”) to widen the scope of what counted as a vocation. Now the word began to be applied to every profession, although still seen through a specifically theological lens. One’s calling, even if not to the professional ministry or to a religious order, ultimately came from God. So butcher, baker, and candlestick-maker could all understand their trades as a response to God’s call upon their lives and, therefore, could undertake their work to the greater glory of God.

² For more on the historical developments mentioned in this paragraph and those that follow, see Douglas Schuurman, *Vocation*, and especially the selections drawn from the respective relevant periods in William C. Placher, *Callings*; both books will be discussed in greater detail below.

This development, of course, marked a significant increase in the relevance of the language of vocation, since it could potentially apply to all people. At the same time, it made the language that much more fragile; anything that could apply so broadly to everyone could be easily appropriated for any purpose whatsoever. One wonders, for example, whether a person in a particularly poorly-paid and poorly-esteemed trade might come to see the language of “vocation” as merely a form of pacification, deployed to keep the have-nots from questioning their lot in life. Even at a more benign level, the very broad employment of the word *vocation* has led some people to wonder whether it has simply become a synonym for “profession” or even for “career.”

At any rate, the concept has experienced at least enough secularization to allow the word *vocation* or *calling* to be employed without ever raising the possibility that *God* might be the one doing the calling. On the other hand, the decision to use the word *vocation* (as opposed to words such as *profession*, *career*, or *job*) can sometimes suggest that, for the user of the word, something more is at stake; the decision to pursue a certain path seems to have a significance that goes well beyond satisfying one’s curiosity or responding to a simple economic calculus. But what, precisely, is this “something more”? Most people seem to have some difficulty in naming precisely what that might be. This conundrum is nicely addressed in a number of the works under review here; see, for example, Al Gini’s *My Job, My Self*.

As a result of this secularization process, a good deal of the literature on “vocation” up until about a decade ago fell largely into the category of self-help books. This is not to say that the literature failed to explore the larger questions; in fact, some of the most successful of these books like Richard Bolles’ long-running series *What Color is Your Parachute?* were quite intentional in urging people to think about their particular gifts and talents. This is certainly one way of getting at the question of vocation. But very few of these authors were drawing on the extensive resources of the Christian *theological* tradition in order to address questions about vocation and calling, whether in terms of career choice or general life direction.

Hence, one of the explicit goals of the Lilly-funded PTEV programs was to mine specifically theological resources and to present them as viable tools for understanding and exploring vocation in the contemporary setting. This took place, first and foremost, on the eighty-eight campuses where PTEV programs were funded. The work of these programs is an enormous resource in itself, and much of it is collected on the initiative’s website (www.ptev.org). While these programs were scattered across the country and, in some cases, specific to their own particular emphases or denominational traditions, much has been learned through these programs that can transfer across campus borders. This article will focus primarily on published work that has drawn on the Christian theological tradition in order to develop resources for supporting the theological exploration of vocation.

Some readers may be surprised to discover that the literature under review in this article does not include very many books that set out to offer “a Christian theology of vocation” in a broad theoretical sense. While a few recent offerings could certainly be described in these terms, most of them address the theological exploration of vocation in less straightforward ways. The reasons for this tendency in the literature are many and varied, but four strike me as particularly important. The first of these has already been alluded to: the steady secularization of the concept of *vocation* has made it more challenging simply to promulgate a theology of vocation and to assume that readers will find this persuasive. But in addition to the fact that the word is widely used by many people without reference to its theological roots, the broader secularization of culture has made it more difficult for authors to assume that Christian vocabulary and biblical references will have the kind of meaning that they once had. Even those readers who would describe themselves as Christians may not be as theologically literate, or as thoroughly steeped in the narratives and practices of the faith, as were those of previous generations. Moreover, the very fact that one’s readers are interested in vocational discernment suggests that some of them are probably at a point of transition, which may involve the exploration, re-evaluation, and possible questioning of their faith commitments. For some audiences, any attempt to guide vocational discernment by appealing to exclusively Christian categories may be a difficult undertaking — rather like using a lever to move a large weight when the shape and consistency of the fulcrum is in serious doubt.

Second, it has become increasingly difficult to set forth a “theology of vocation” that can account, in a thoroughgoing and responsible way, for the wide variety of callings to which the term vocation is applied. Since the Reformation, terms like vocation and calling have gradually broadened to include not only the laity’s professions, careers and trades but also other elements of one’s life like the shape of one’s family, where to live, what religious and spiritual disciplines to follow, and what communities to engage.

Third, disagreements are more likely to arise over the *application* of vocation to particular life stages and situations, rather than the *theory* of vocation as such. Thus, rather than producing more conceptual “theologies of vocation,” many writers have been more keen to show how the language of vocation might be applied in the concrete situations that people face today.

Fourth and finally, a number of new issues have arisen in recent years that have forced Christian theology to explore regions of knowledge that were not traditionally a focus of the theological conversation about vocation. These new issues have altered the context in which our contemporaries discern their vocation, and they have, in some instances, required writers to rethink precisely what might count as a “theology of vocation” in the contemporary setting. It is to that changed context for vocational discernment that we now turn.

The Changing Context for Vocational Discernment

Only a century ago, one’s vocation was often determined by one’s parentage, socio-economic class, and other large-scale societal forces; the process of “discernment” would only have been available to a privileged few. Many people who were marginalized on account of their race, gender, or class would have found that the future direction of their life had already been determined for them. Even a person with a deep grasp of the Christian theology of vocation and a real willingness to listen for God’s call might have found himself (or, especially, herself) unable to imagine a future beyond the narrow range of options that society dictated. And while many of these constraints have faded in significance over the past century (particularly in the West), their residue is still felt; moreover, other constraints have sometimes arisen to take their place.

Over the past two to three decades, three elements have emerged that are noteworthy in shaping the context for the theological exploration of vocation. They are what some have called “emerging adulthood,” changing gender patterns in vocations and a moralistic therapeutic deism prevalent among adolescents.

Emerging Adulthood

Trends clearly indicate that increasingly, young people are staying mobile longer, marrying later, and waiting until their late twenties to settle into their first career. This has created a new phenomenon in the way that we think of the stages of life. Rather than moving directly from adolescence into adulthood with a four-year stopover in college as the transitional period for many, we now find that people in their mid- to late-twenties still do not really see themselves as “adults.” Obviously they are no longer adolescents, but they bear the marks of adulthood less fully than was once the case: they stay single, move around, and may even try to remain in their parents’ homes (or at least on their health insurance policies!).

This new phenomenon, sometimes described as “emerging adulthood,” has significant implications for how we think about the process of vocational discernment. Although college (or at least college-age) discernment opportunities have been typical, many more young people are going through this discernment process later and later in life. Causality can be difficult to establish here; it may be that a lack of a clear emphasis on vocational discernment during college has led to more young adults without definite plans. Or, it may be that generally positive economic conditions in the industrial West (regardless of intermittent downturns and shifts) have given twenty-somethings a degree of freedom to experiment that their parents could not even have imagined. In any case, the implications for vocational discernment are profound.

“A Plentiful Harvest:
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The work of Jeffrey Arnett is very important for our understanding of this new phenomenon. Arnett is a sociologist who has studied the matter in intricate detail, and he has produced a number of works on the subject. These include detailed texts geared for scholars and graduate students (*Emerging Adults in America*, with Jennifer Lynn Tanner, and *Exploring Cultural Conceptions*, with Nancy Galambos), a more popular work for the general reader (*Emerging Adulthood*), and a collection of key texts (*Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*). Arnett’s work is data-driven, but he writes in a readable style and seems to have a grasp of the larger cultural shifts at work behind the empirical circumstances. By providing a detailed description of the trends described in the previous paragraph, he provides a wealth of detailed information about the segment of the population that is most likely to be undertaking vocational exploration. Obviously, religious questions are only a part of the series of issues that Arnett explores in these works, but they are given serious consideration. Other writers (Jeremy Langford, *God Moments*; Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions*; and many people writing within the Emergent Church movement) address the theological questions associated with emerging adulthood more explicitly, but these texts are not (yet) in direct conversation with the extensive data that Arnett and his colleagues have compiled. (However, some interesting work being done in this area is reviewed, alongside Arnett’s work, in Christian Smith’s brief and useful article “Getting a Life.”). While we can hope for additional dialogue in the future, these works are already asking us to re-think the context within which vocational discernment occurs.³

Gender Patterns

A generation ago, the relationship of gender to vocation would have focused primarily on the special circumstances of women. Excluded from many careers for centuries and marginalized in vocations to the ministry in many denominations, women in the mid-20th century wrestled with questions of vocation in ways that they had hitherto been prevented from even considering. Evidence indicates that most women felt the contrary demands of work (i.e., inside and outside the home) in a deeper way than did most men. Obviously, none of these matters has been definitively resolved; the special vocational challenges of women remain a factor in the early 21st century.

However, the new development has been the realization that, in contrast to the increased attention focused on women and a concomitant expansion of their vocational opportunities, the corresponding “trend line” for men has been relatively flat. A number of writers have suggested that where women have heard the clarion call to explore vocational options, men tend to ignore or set aside such work, or fall into older patterns of simply taking over the family business or pursuing whatever life path seems to have

³ In particular, what would seem to be required at this point would be a deeper *theological* engagement with the question of emerging adulthood – not merely the sociology-of-religion approach found in Arnett’s chapter on the subject, but an account of how these new cultural directions should be understood in light of scriptural wisdom and ongoing Christian witness.

been prepared for them by factors and forces that leave little room for active discernment.

Many of the Lilly-funded PTEV programs have observed considerably stronger participation by women than by men. Their participation is even more out of proportion to the well-documented fact that most institutions of higher education now enroll a majority of women. Many PTEV directors have reported difficulties in enlisting men in vocational discernment activities, and this *ad hoc* observation is now being backed up with data. In particular, a new grant program headquartered at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, is attempting to understand and address the relatively lower male participation in PTEV programs. A book-length treatment of this project is forthcoming in 2010; some preliminary findings with respect to the student-services side of academic institutions can be found in Gar Kellom’s *Developing Effective Programs and Services for College Men*.

The literature on this topic is in the earliest stages of development. Two relevant texts are Donald Capps’s *Men and their Religion* and *Losers, Loners, and, Rebels* by Dykstra, Cole, and Capps. Both books are fairly impressionistic in their approach, speaking more out of the authors’ experience than from a deeply theological or sociological perspective. However, books such as these can help alert us to the fact that, while we have (rightly) focused our attention on the special vocational-discernment needs of women, the present context may require us to develop some parallel attention to the particular needs of men in this area.

“Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”

This phrase was coined by Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton in their important book *Soul Searching*. It describes the “majority view” of many adolescents when it comes to matters of religion. Their work is based on hundreds of interviews with teenagers who self-identify as being connected to a wide variety of religious communities (or to none). They describe the primary contours of this worldview in the following five-point “creed” (pp. 162–63):

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

In other words, young people tend to believe in God but they have very little sense of who this God might be or anything particular about God; and they believe that the

purpose of God (and religion in general) is to provide moral guidance and to improve one’s life. Smith and Denton emphasize that this basic creed is *not* limited to teens who feel disconnected from the religious faith of their upbringing or who are rebelling against it; rather, it cuts across religions, denominations, and cultural differences. Their findings are easily corroborated at an institution such as my own. Although the overwhelming majority of our students would identify themselves as Christians (and often as “evangelical”), and they would insist that their faith is important to them, their own conception of God and religion would, in the majority of cases, roughly mirror the description offered by Smith and Denton.

The implications of this new contextual reality for the work of vocational exploration is clear. The distinctive narratives and practices of Christianity, together with its traditional theology of vocation, may sometimes fail to find a foothold. This is true even among those who have been raised in church contexts and consider themselves to be deeply formed by that experience. But equally important, this further explains why the majority of new work on the theological exploration of vocation has not simply promulgated a “theology of vocation.” Instead they gestured toward a wide range of resources of the Christian faith for vocational discernment only implicitly. Let us now turn to an exploration of how this new literature goes about this.

Emerging Literature on the Theological Exploration of Vocation

I want to suggest that much of the recent literature can be identified by one or more of four primary markers:

- A. an appeal to a diverse range of resources;
- B. an awareness that its primary audience is young, easily distracted, and anxious about commitment;
- C. an effort to translate traditional Christian language into something less specific; and/or
- D. an appeal to a changing theology of work.

While this fourfold description is hardly exhaustive of recent literature on the theological exploration of vocation, it does provide a useful framework for exploring some of the most important material to emerge over the last ten to fifteen years. A number of these texts could have been listed under more than one category. But to avoid repetition I will limit most books to a single appearance.

Appealing to a Plethora of Diverse Resources

In spite of the general secularization of the concept of vocation and the increasing popularity of highly generic accounts of religious belief, much recent literature is nevertheless willing to appeal to specifically Christian resources in order to

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
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<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

explore the idea of calling. In doing so, this literature typically avoids offering a single, univocal understanding of what constitutes “the Christian faith”; nor does it present a narrow range of resources that are considered essential to the work of vocational discernment. Instead, these works gesture toward the breadth and diversity of resources within the Christian tradition, such that this tradition emerges as abundant and inclusive in its ability to empower the exploration of one’s calling in life.

A particularly striking example of this approach is William C. Placher’s *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. This book offers a broad collection of primary texts that, taken together, present a fine synopsis of the Christian theology of vocation. Anyone wishing to gain a real grasp on the historical journey of the concept of vocation within the Christian theological tradition should begin with this book. Organized historically, it begins with the most significant biblical passages on the concept and then moves from the early church through the Reformation and into the present day. The section on the Reformation is, appropriately, the largest; as noted above, this is the period during which the concept of vocation shifted such that every form of work was seen as a Christian calling.

While Placher’s book is unique in bringing together a diversity of figures across two millennia, his book can be usefully paired with texts that concentrate on a single figure. In this way, specific Christian theologians can be understood as one aspect of a larger story, rather than as offering some exclusive claim on what vocation must be. So, for example, when assessing Martin Luther’s crucial role in the development of the Christian notion of vocation, one might supplement Placher’s account with Gustav Wingren’s compact collection of Luther’s writings on the topic (*Luther on Vocation*, recently reprinted by Wipf and Stock), or with Michael Bennethum’s concise rendering of Luther’s insights. Similarly, Placher’s inclusion of a brief excerpt from *Pilgrim’s Progress* might be read in conjunction with Mark McIntosh’s essay on the significance of Bunyan’s text. Even though these works point to a single writer, the Placher volume helps to set them in historical context and to allay the anxiety that some readers feel when the range of resources seems too narrow.

A particularly striking feature of Placher’s book is that, in spite of its diversity, it is not merely a “menu” of various theologies of vocation from which readers are encouraged to choose those that match their personal tastes. Rather, its broad range of resources are gently woven together in a kind of tapestry; the overall picture emerges as coherent and appealing, while the threads from which it is woven retain their individual colors and textures. Even those readers who consider themselves dubious about, or even hostile to, the Christian tradition may find themselves attracted by its breadth and diversity as Placher presents it here.

A second way that a book can appeal to diverse resources is by collecting a set of essays on vocation that examine the question from theological, biblical, historical, and/or cultural perspectives. A particularly good example is *Revisiting the Idea of*

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
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Vocation, edited by John C. Haughey. This book contains the McIntosh essay mentioned in the previous paragraph, a chapter exploring how our understanding of the created order shapes our accounts of calling (Camilla Burns), and two essays exploring the relationship between Christian accounts of vocation and those of the other Abrahamic traditions (Edward Breuer on Judaism, and Marcia Hermansen on Islam). While this book grew out of conversations about vocation at a Roman Catholic institution, the diversity of its contributors as well as the variety of topics addressed gives it an appeal well beyond any particular denominational focus. Another fine collection, also denominationally focused but clearly helpful to anyone wishing to engage the issues on a deeply theological level, is the book *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, edited by Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides.

While books of this sort are not intended to provide direct guidance to those actually engaged in the process of vocational exploration, they can be very stimulating for the pastors, teachers, counselors, professors, and colleagues who are often asked to provide mentoring and guidance. Many other collections could be mentioned here. Wider in scope and focusing on church-related higher education or Christian practices more generally, they include essays that bear directly on the concept of vocation (see, for example, Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*; Michael Budde and John Wright, *Conflicting Allegiances*; John Dunaway, *Gladly Learn, Gladly Teach*; Stephen Haynes, *Professing in the Postmodern Academy*; L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, *The Scope of Our Art*).

Other texts have presented a broad account of the Christian theological tradition on vocation by synthesizing the material in monograph form, rather than by presenting excerpts of primary works. Douglas Schuurman's *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* is particularly comprehensive since it combines biblical and historical survey with a theological analysis of what he calls “abuses and proper uses of vocation” (chapter 4). The latter half of the book crosses over into the field of Christian ethics as it examines the relationships between vocation and the moral life. As a one-volume, single-authored text providing a thorough and balanced account of the Christian theology of vocation, this book provides a thorough and concise starting-point for the general reader. Its focus is on the protestant account of vocation, but the book is broadly ecumenical and draws on a wide range of Christian resources to offer a contemporary restatement of the classical theology of vocation.

A similar goal is pursued by Paul Marshall in his book *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man*. His treatment delves more deeply into the historical sources and is therefore aimed at an audience interested in pursuing the deeper theological background of the concept of vocation, particularly in post-Reformation thought. The subtitle of his book, *From Tyndale to Locke*, can be misleading since he ranges well beyond the English Reformation and its immediate predecessors and progeny. In addition, he looks at 20th-century figures and considers the relationship of vocation to work, social order, and economics. Another very fine single-author “theology of vocation” is Gary Badcock's

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

The Way of Life. Written in 1998 at the very beginning of the PTEV initiative, the book took on new life in the wake of the renewed interest in vocation, and it has recently been re-issued. Badcock’s approach is thematic rather than historical, but he draws on a wide range of important historical figures to flesh out a specifically Christian theology of vocation. His account is particularly useful in describing how calling shapes identity and in balancing God’s role as the “source” of one’s vocation alongside the human necessity of making choices and committing oneself to following one’s call.

Robert Benne’s book, *Ordinary Saints*, explores a wider range of issues. He employs the language of “calling” throughout the book as a means of helping Christians to think about the entire shape of their lives as a response to God. The first part of the book focuses on Christian identity as shaped by God’s call, whereas parts 2 and 3 describe the Christian life as a response to that call — first in a general sense, and then within the more specific spheres of family life, work, public life, and life in the church.

All three categories of books — readers that focus on the primary literature, collections of contemporary essays, and single-author summaries — function as helpful resources for those seeking to understand, in the most explicit terms possible, the role of Christian theology in the development of the concept of vocation. Thus, when I work with college professors, pastors, and others who want to get a solid grasp on a Christian theology of vocation, these are the texts to which I encourage them to turn first. The scholarship, historical depth, and comprehensive nature of these books is first-rate, and they have helped to give the field of vocational exploration a much firmer footing in the literature than it had before the PTEV initiative began. At the same time, the diversity of resources to which these books appeal, and their broadly inclusive account of the tradition, makes their accounts persuasive in a culture that is often suspicious of narrowly conceived accounts of a univocal tradition.

Tailoring the Text to the Audience

A second feature common in some recent works on vocation is an orientation toward college students and others who are undertaking significant vocational discernment in their late teens and early twenties. This represents an important category of the literature because this is the age and stage of life when many people are encouraged, or perhaps forced, to think about the future direction of their lives. Even if that period of discernment is now being extended into the mid- to late twenties as noted earlier, the process still begins in the late teens. The importance of the college years as a time for vocational discernment was clearly on the minds of the officers of the Lilly Endowment when they chose to make institutions of higher education the primary vehicles through which the PTEV program would be implemented. A number of writers have responded to that initiative by addressing texts very explicitly to the proclivities of college students while still encouraging them to consider a variety of theological resources as they seek to discern their callings.

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
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on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

Quentin Schultze’s *Here I Am: Now What on Earth Should I Be Doing?* is a particularly good example of this genre. Written by a long-time teacher and mentor and particularly attentive to student expectations, it, like many other books described in this section, assumes that the reader is already convinced that vocational discernment will take place in an explicitly Christian framework. The author’s goal is to help readers understand how to fulfill their calling as a follower of Jesus. At the same time, it addresses complex issues with a light touch as the form of its title might lead one to expect. Its rather winsome style may help to draw in some readers who might otherwise be skeptical. Other books in this category include Cornelius Plantinga’s *Engaging God’s World* and an older book by Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*. Not surprisingly, most such books are written by current or former professors at Christian colleges.

Gordon T. Smith’s *Courage and Calling* is also in this category. Although reasonably accessible, it is more “thickly” Christian. It relies almost exclusively on biblical and theological warrants and not as attentive as the previously-mentioned books to the specific contours of contemporary culture. The book may also be helpful to adults who are committed to the Christian faith but find themselves re-evaluating their own vocational directions.

At the opposite end of the spectrum we find a book that takes for granted that its readers will have some serious doubts about the traditional claims of the Christian faith. Michael Duffy’s *The Skeptical, Passionate Christian* ranges widely. He includes a chapter specifically focused on vocation and refers to the concept at various points throughout the book. Duffy helped to run a Lilly-funded PTEV program at Hanover College. Consequently, his writing reflects a blend of academic, pastoral, and vocational-discernment-oriented elements. He demonstrates how the Christian faith and Christian doubt can provide an important context for a broader, non-career-focused form of vocational discernment.

Somewhere between Smith’s strongly assured Christianity and Duffy’s passionate skepticism is Jerry Sittser’s *The Will of God as a Way of Life*. Although the book is actually a revision of an older work entitled *Discovering God’s Will*, its content very much reflects the wide-ranging discussions over the past decade concerning issues of vocation and calling; section titles include “Knowing God’s Will,” “Making Decisions,” “and Discerning Our Calling in Life.” This book has gained a wide readership among a diverse range of college students and other young adults. It is attentive to the significance of God’s role in a person’s life, while not expressing this in terms that would be incomprehensible to a young person immersed in “moralistic therapeutic deism.”

Another approach to vocation that is particularly appealing to college-age readers stresses the elements of social justice and service to others as key elements, not only in

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

one’s eventual profession, but also within the process of vocational discernment. By engaging in acts of service and examining the larger implications of one’s actions for the creation of a just society, a person is automatically drawn more deeply into theological questions like the nature of God, the structures of the created order, and the work of reconciliation. Not surprisingly, a great many Lilly-funded PTEV initiatives at various campuses brought together academic study, theological reflection, and active service to others as a way of encouraging vocational discernment.

A good introduction to this line of thinking is John Neafsey’s *A Sacred Voice is Calling*. Neafsey blends Christian reflection on service with more generalized discussions of social justice in order to weave together personal vocation and social conscience. In addition to the more theoretical approach of texts such as these, a number of recent books offer detailed accounts of how a person comes to find his or her own vocation while responding to a call to serve others. College-age readers often respond very positively to such books, partly because of their narrative structure. Even if the particular vocation being pursued is not precisely what the reader would seek, the story itself can inspire a person to explore other avenues of vocational discernment. Books in this category that have proven particularly effective in the undergraduate setting include Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* about Paul Farmer’s call to medical missions and *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relling. Even novels can be of use in this regard. Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* is a fine example of one that has found resonance among students who find themselves in the midst of their own journeys and quests.

Before moving on from this category of books, I should mention the very large number of recent works that focus on the environments within which vocational exploration often occurs, namely colleges and universities. These books often make the case for forms of higher education that are shaped by profound theological convictions—usually Christian ones—on the grounds that such contexts are ideal for exploring vocation in ways that are not merely instrumental. All colleges and universities have some kind of Career Services Office where students are assisted in matching their talents and enthusiasms to particular fields of endeavor or, sometimes, just encouraged to get a job. Colleges and universities are in a position to offer a somewhat broader perspective on the questions of calling and vocation either because they are actively church-related or because of a mission-driven commitment to the spiritual health of its students. These institutions increasingly see themselves as the ideal environment within which students can explore their deepest passions and their spiritual and intellectual gifts. Moreover, they are doing so in ways that are not restricted to helping students find post-graduation employment opportunities; they are helping to deepen students’ spiritual well-being and even their sense of the transcendent.

Here Classic works such as those by George Marsden (*The Soul of the American University*), Mark Schwehn (*Exiles from Eden*), and James Burtchaell (*The*

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

Dying of the Light) were sounding this theme long ago. But they are no longer voices in the wilderness. Several recent works describe various forms of institutional self-reflection on these matters, and much of it is more optimistic and hopeful about the future of church-related higher education than was some of its predecessor literature. Some of this material is denominationally focused, but still contains much wisdom that could easily be transported across such borders. Two particularly exemplary collections are Keith Graber Miller’s *Teaching to Transform*, which focuses on the Mennonite tradition, and *Enhancing Religious Identity*, edited by John Wilcox and others, examining issues in Roman Catholic higher education. While other works are not denominationally specific, they still suggest that those environments where faith and learning are well integrated can become the most effective crucibles for vocational discernment as its own reward. Here I would particularly recommend section 2 of *Professing in the Postmodern Academy* edited by Stephen Haynes, Robert Benne’s *Quality With Soul* focuses on six successful institutions, and Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby explore *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*. Many of the books already cited have a significant practical component as well as a grounding in the theoretical literature on vocation, spiritual practices, and church-related higher education. But others are written with this practical element in the forefront, designed to encourage academic professionals to create environments in which open exploration and discernment can occur. In this category, *Putting Students First* by Larry Braskamp *et al.*, is worthy of note, as is Arlin Migliazzo’s collection *Teaching as an Act of Faith*. Finally, a few books offer an outsider’s perspective on church-related higher education. They are not necessarily unsympathetic, but they observe the situation with a sociologist’s eye and trying to understand why and how these institutions provide important space for more and more of America’s college-aged students. For a typical example of this category, see Naomi Riley’s *God on the Quad*, and, in a somewhat different vein, *The Good Life* by Harvard university minister Peter Gomes. This last book manages to offer an insider’s and outsider’s perspective simultaneously, showing how a large secular university can provide the kind of space that students need to think through vocational questions in ways that go well beyond the job hunt and often touch on specifically theological themes.

While a full accounting of recent work on church-related higher education would take us very far afield, I want to suggest that some lines of convergence might be drawn between, on the one hand, the recent renewal of interest in and optimism about church-related higher education, and on the other, the recent focus on the theological exploration of vocation. In the work that has been inspired and financed by the Lilly PTEV program, church-related colleges have found an area of focus that draws deeply on the insights of the Christian theological tradition, while also resonating deeply in the hearts and minds of their students and demonstrating its own obvious practical application. I do not think it would be going too far to say that, by taking a renewed interest in the theological exploration of vocation, many church-related colleges and universities have (re)discovered an essential element of their own identity, with obvious consequences for institutional mission. As a result, the work of “tailoring the message

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

to the audience” far transcends the literature that is being produced on vocational exploration; it is being undertaken at the structural level by institutions that were specifically designed to address the particularities of those who are at an age and stage of life in which such exploration is of the essence.

Translating the Christian Tradition

Among the texts mentioned thus far, most appeal quite explicitly to various elements within the Christian tradition. They often do so in ways that are attentive to the diversity of that tradition, and attentive to the sometimes skeptical, sometimes even hostile reception that it can be accorded in the contemporary setting. But for some audiences, even these rather generous and broadly inclusive accounts of the Christian tradition may be too specifically confessional to find a foothold. Recognizing that the vocabulary and syntax of the Christian faith no longer permeates our culture to the extent that it once did, many authors have sought out other rhetorical avenues for appropriating the key insights of the theological tradition. Many of these authors are themselves committed Christians who, nevertheless, recognize that reaching their less theologically informed audiences will require them to find other language for framing both their theoretical accounts of vocation and their practical descriptions of how one might go about discerning one’s calling. The key to this approach has been to make use of a concept or element that is central to the Christian tradition, but to reframe it so that it becomes more broadly accessible to a wider public — including those unfamiliar with, or even hostile to, the Christian tradition.

So, for example, one traditional Christian claim is that *God* is the one who calls us into our various callings. But part of this claim is that our vocations come from outside ourselves; they are not primarily driven by the isolated human will, but rather we are drawn into particular walks of life by forces external to ourselves. Stated in this broader form, the *theological* exploration of vocation becomes accessible to people who might well have resisted the more explicitly Christian claims about God’s role in this process — even though they might, at some later point, come to think of this external force as, in fact, God. Such *implicit* accounts of the theological exploration of vocation have had the positive impact of broadening the conversation by bringing along various conversation partners who might otherwise have been tempted to ignore any specifically theological discussions of vocation.

Allow me to mention several forms that this implicit theological exploration of vocation has taken in the recent literature.

Gifts and Virtues. The Christian theological tradition has emphasized the primacy of grace: all that we have is a gift from God. Our lives, the people with whom we come into contact, the opportunities that we are given: none of these result from our meritorious efforts. Rather, we receive them through God’s gracious superabundance.

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

Even our virtues — the excellences of character that we develop over time through habitual practice — are in some ultimate sense the work of God in us. Hence, the discernment of one’s vocation often involves an inventory and assessment of one’s gifts and virtues in an effort to determine how these can best be put to use as we seek to lead meaningful lives that make a difference to ourselves and to others.

Yet in spite of the highly theological contexts in which the language of *gift* and *virtue* has been employed throughout the past two millennia, these words have also developed a highly secularized meaning. One’s “gifts” are redefined as “talents” or “innate inabilities,” and *virtues* are understood to be character traits that we achieve through hard work and perseverance. While these definitions are certainly distortions of the accounts of *gift* and *virtue* that are operative in Christian theology, this secular usage provides an opening where theological claims can be brought into conversation with more general descriptions of the shape and meaning of human lives. In this manner, readers can begin to rediscover the specifically theological contours of this language.

Here, an extraordinarily important book is the collection edited by Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass that is entitled *Leading Lives that Matter*. This book, described as a “companion volume” to Placher’s *Callings*, has helped to extend the conversation around vocation by employing terms such as *vocation*, *virtue*, and *gift* in the broadest sense, yet still pointing readers toward the theological nuances of these terms. The editors achieve this goal by placing explicitly theological texts (from the Bible and from authors writing from the perspective of their faith tradition) alongside texts in which the theological focus is more implicit. (They also include writers who would regard their work as largely secular.) The first section of the book examines certain elements of the vocabulary like authenticity, virtue and vocation that will be employed in the discussion of “lives that matter.” The second and much longer section is organized around some of the most important questions that surround this subject. Are some lives more significant than others? Should talent be the primary driving force in shaping one’s vocation? How should one’s life story be narrated such that these elements are made salient?

By operating with a fairly broad notion of what actually constitutes our “gifts” and “virtues,” *Leading Lives that Matter* seems likely to draw in readers who care about such issues, whether or not they would describe them in specifically theological terms. But a person encountering the excerpts in this book would be hard-pressed to avoid all theological questions; such questions are often specifically raised by the various authors, even when they are writing from an avowedly secular context. This book seems to me a particularly fine example of the successful “translation” of the Christian tradition into language that is more accessible (and perhaps more appealing) to a wider audience, but that can also help draw that audience in to a more theologically rigorous examination of the issues.

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

In this category, I would also mention the books that have grown out of the National Public Radio series entitled “This I Believe.” While the authors are not making an explicit effort to translate Christian theology into a wider framework, many of the essays focus on how the writers’ lives have been shaped by the gifts that they have discerned and the virtues that they have developed (sometimes in spite of themselves). Even the main verb, “believe,” in the title of these books can help readers enter into an important theological conversation about the nature of faith and what it means to “believe in” something. The book’s brief narratives demonstrate in a great variety of contexts how faith might be related to a person’s gifts and virtues. They also open up the possibility of initiating a more broadly public discourse on vocation, drawing on themes that resonate within the theological tradition but can be understood by those who may be less familiar with it.

Pull, Don’t Push. Another important development in the emerging conversation around vocation is the shift that is occurring with respect to the question: what is the source of the energy that drives human beings toward their respective futures? Throughout most of the modern era (and, residually, in our present “postmodern condition” as well), the answer to this question would have been focused on the subjective self: I, as a freely acting agent and as master of my own destiny, make the decisions that move me from one stage of life to the next. This includes decisions about where I will live, what career I will pursue, how I will spend my leisure time, whether I will marry, and how many children I shall have. Fueled by a vast array of cultural assumptions, sociological trends, and certain outcroppings of post-Reformation theology, the primary “engine” driving our decisions was taken to be the subjective human will. Needless to say, human beings often ran up against obstacles when attempting to exercise their will; but this was typically considered a mere stroke of ill fortune, rather than evidence against the more general voluntaristic principle that we can (and should) do just exactly what we decide we want to do. The motivation and power to achieve was thought to come from “inside.”

In contrast to this notion, a theological account of vocation tends to place most of the “energy” that moves us forward on the *outside*. It comes from a source largely outside of our “selves,” and it draws us onward by a kind of magnetic force, rather than by means of an internally-located engine. In many instances, this external force is identified as God. When we speak of our *vocation* in this respect, we focus on the Latin root of the word (*vocare*: to call) and think about the ways that God calls us into a particular profession or a particular form of life. Perhaps the touchstone of this perspective is Frederic Buechner’s well-worn aphorism from his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*: “The place God calls you is the place where your deepest joy meets the world’s deepest hunger.” Interestingly, however, many people seem to be willing to accept the language of vocation as signifying the work of an external force upon their lives, even when this force is not identified in theistic terms. This perspective is perhaps typified by Hermann Hesse’s observation in his *The Glass Bead Game*: “There are many types and kinds of vocations, but the core of the experience is always the same:

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

the soul is awakened, transformed, or exalted, so that instead of dreams from within, a summons comes from without: a portion of reality presents itself and makes a claim.”

This kind of focus on the “external” source of vocation — whether or not it is described in specifically theological language — represents the subtle re-introduction of a theological element into the more subjective language in which people often describe their own orientation toward their future. A person takes a significant step by accepting that the source of one’s call — even if it remains somewhat undefined — might be something that transcends the mere assertion of the human will. And this, in turn, opens the door for one’s understanding of vocation to develop a more theological orientation over time.

One example of a book taking full advantage of this shift is John Schuster’s *Answering Your Call*. Schuster’s life story and his approach in the book make it clear that he has Christian convictions of his own, but he does not assume that this will be the case for all his readers. Therefore, he sets the theological approach alongside psychological, sociological, and even biological descriptions of calling. Interestingly, though, his linguistic choices always *make room for* a theological description, even if they do not insist upon this as the only approach. So, for example, he speaks of “provocateurs” and “evocateurs” as a way of emphasizing the external source of one’s calling and includes a chapter entitled “Go Gently Against the Ego.” This allows him to emphasize the “pull” of one’s vocation and to resist the “push” of an account that relies heavily on the human will. In doing so, he allows space for his readers to understand this approach theologically (i.e., God may be the one who calls), while not excluding from his audience those who might not find such an account meaningful.

Other works have also been able to achieve this focus on the “externality” of the source of one’s calling. In Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass’s *Leading Lives that Matter*, for example, two of the questions that provide section titles for the second part of the book are “To Whom Should I Listen?” and “Can I Control What I Shall Do and Become?” These two questions seem designed to direct readers beyond themselves toward the external source(s) of our vocation, both in terms of their potential claims upon our lives and their control over our lives.

Another way of opening the conversation about the “externality” of the call is to help people see how they might serve as an external voice for others by becoming a mentor or guide. Sharon Parks’s *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* is a particularly strong example of this approach. The book encourages adults to allow themselves to provide a “channel” for vocational guidance for young people, thereby helping them recognize and acknowledge the importance of listening to voices other than their own. The person who takes up the role of mentorship with seriousness helps others to see that our callings often come to us from beyond. It also points us to an additional way in which the Christian tradition is being translated into language with a wider appeal.

Models and Mentors. Over the centuries, one of the most significant Christian sources for reflection on vocation and calling has been the tradition of the *saints*. Whether understood through a formalized calendar of the saints as in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican traditions in particular or in the broader sense of “witnesses” (as in *Fox’s Book of Martyrs*), their significance for vocational exploration is clear. Some people have led particularly notable lives that are worthy of attention and emulation. To put the matter another way, one of the best ways that I can think about my own calling in life is to hear the stories of how other people have responded to theirs. Within such narratives, I am bound to find some that resonate, allowing me to think about how I can draw on my own gifts and virtues in an integrated and responsible way.

Some recent literature connects sainthood with vocation in ways that help to “translate” this tradition into a broader conception of the authentically lived life. James Martin’s book *Becoming Who You Are* provides a good example; its subtitle is *Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*. Although his examples are largely drawn from the Roman Catholic tradition of Thérèse de Lisieux, Pope John XXIII as well as Thomas Merton, his broader claim will have wide appeal: namely, that living into one’s vocation has something to do with the authenticity of one’s life, with “becoming who we most truly are.” Many other recent books offer accounts of the lives of holy men and women as a means of exploring vocation. Two books in which this connection is particularly well articulated are Larry Cunningham’s biography of Francis of Assisi, subtitled *Performing the Gospel Life*, and a new book on Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Anxious Souls Will Ask* by John Matthews.

An older book on this topic, recently reprinted, is James William McClendon’s *Biography as Theology*. While ranging well beyond the specific language of vocation in order to develop a broader theological agenda, the book does demonstrate how a “life deeply lived” can become an important resource for others who are on their own spiritual and vocational journeys. In some sense, it offers a Protestant equivalent to the theology of sainthood. I can still vividly remember encountering this book in an undergraduate course on “The Idea of Sainthood in Christianity”; the book opened a door to a form of theological reflection that had been largely foreign to me, having been raised in a Protestant tradition. It certainly had an effect on my own vocational discernment.

Of course, even without a fully-articulated theology of sainthood, most people can resonate with the idea that particular lives may be exemplary for our own. A number of authors have chosen to think through the concept of vocation by focusing on lives that provide models of finding and following one’s calling. Two such books deserve mention here. The first of these is Martha Finney and Deborah Dasch’s book *Find Your Calling, Love Your Life*. This book uses interviews with ordinary women and men who have found personal fulfillment and growth through their work in order to focus on how their particular processes of discernment led them to their present point in life.

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

The second, though it looks at a more specific career choice, may be of particular interest to college students who are going through the process of vocational discernment. Edited by Ronald Alan Knott, *College Faith* provides stories of college-age discernment experiences in the lives of people who now serve as college administrators and faculty members. While neither book makes explicit use of the theology of sainthood, both are good examples of an accessible “translation” of this essential theological concept.

Finally, a closely related theological and relational category should be mentioned at this point: that of *friendship*. If the saints (and those like them) provide useful models through their exemplary behavior, our *friends* often do so by their very proximity — even if their lives might not always be categorized as especially “holy” ones. Some recent literature on friendship has taken its theological nuances much more seriously by helping readers to recognize the connections between abiding friendships and notions of transcendent communion. The work of Paul Wadell is particularly insightful in this regard. His work on the subject ranges from the deeply scholarly *Friendship and the Moral Life* to the broadly popular *Becoming Friends*. Drawing on the theology of Thomas Aquinas and his emphasis on Christian communion as a form of “friendship with God,” Wadell helps us to understand the theological ramifications of the concept. His emphasis is primarily on how our moral lives are shaped by our friendships, but this has deep implications for vocation. The very lenses through which we view various choices and directions in life are themselves deeply formed by those with whom we most closely associate. Becoming more aware of these formative influences is one path toward a more profound exploration of vocation.

All of the books explored in this section draw on significant theological themes, but they translate them into more widely accessible categories in order to draw in a wider readership. In the next section, I want to explore how this broad appeal can be developed in a different fashion where the theological issues are kept at the forefront, but the topic itself — work — is so deeply relevant to practically all human lives that it seems likely to appeal to a broad spectrum of the reading public.

Changes in the Theology of Work

What, precisely is the “end” of vocational discernment? The word *end* is employed here with two meanings in mind. First, exploration and discernment of one’s vocation is often seen as something that “comes to an end” somewhere (at least temporarily); what comes next? Second: what, precisely, is the “end” or *purpose* of vocational discernment? Is it really designed simply to land us in the career or profession that is most appropriate to our lives, our gifts, and our relationship with the wider world? Or is there more to the process than simply matching workers with appropriate work? This, in turn, leads to a wider question: what is the end, or purpose,

of work? What specific insights can the Christian theological tradition bring to the nature of work and the role of vocational discernment in relation to our work?

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, practically all of the published work on vocational exploration understood itself as a *means* by which a person could seek out the *end*, or *goal*, of steady employment in a suitable profession. Sometimes the focus would go well beyond work and career (e.g., Gregg Levoy’s *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*). But even here, the focus was still on self-improvement and personal empowerment. A few voices, however, were willing to raise the question of whether the work of vocational exploration might be seen as a kind of spiritual journey that has more than a merely instrumental function. Examples would include Annie Dillard’s *teaching a Stone to Talk*, Os Guinness’s *The Call*, Kathleen Norris’s *The Cloister Walk*, and many of Parker Palmer’s books, including *Let Your Life Speak*. Because they were the relatively rare exceptions to the rule, these authors were widely sought as speakers, and their writings were often employed as resources, particularly in contexts like churches, spiritual direction, and church-related higher education that wanted to think of vocational discernment through other categories than those of career choice.

Over the last ten years, however, the small explosion of works on the subject of calling and vocation has, perhaps ironically, shifted the focus away from “employment” and “career” as the most significant end of vocational discernment. Instead, the exploration of vocation is increasingly seen as something with value in and of itself, regardless of whether it issues in some kind of concrete decision about one’s profession or trade. Most of the books described in this essay, for example, are not primarily focused on helping people to find a job. Rather, they orient readers toward larger questions in their lives as a whole: questions about faith, about service to others, and about the human search for meaning and purpose. These books are less about “getting a job” than they are about “getting a life” or finding a sense of direction.

Part of the reason for this shift is, of course, the changing nature of employment in the contemporary setting. With young people being told time and again that they are likely not only to have a number of different jobs in their lives, but also a number of different careers, they are understandably skittish about expending all of their energy for vocational discernment energy on finding “that one profession that’s right for me.” The typical activities surrounding “the career search” may come to be seen as little more than a short-term solution to an immediate problem. The larger questions — who am I, what are my hopes and dreams, what do I hope will become of me — demand answers that are not wholly dependent on one’s particular career choice.

This, in turn, has prompted a fair amount of theological inquiry into the very nature of work. Just as the process of vocational discernment can be understood as an end in itself, so too can the idea of *work*. While we may at first regard work as instrumental to other ends like providing for ourselves and our families, stimulating the

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

economy, keeping people off the streets, many writers have found it worthwhile to contemplate work as its own end. In particular, they consider what the Christian theological tradition might have to offer in helping us think about the topic. Here, a number of valuable contributions were already in place before the PTEV initiative began. Works often cited in this regard include Miroslav Volf (*Work in the Spirit*), M. Douglas Meeks (*God the Economist*), and Mathew Fox (*The Reinvention of Work*). Shorter summaries of the Christian perspective on work can be found in R. R. Reno's essay "Participation: Working Towards Worship" and in chapter 11 of my own introductory ethics textbook, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law*.

However, the recent harvest of new work on vocation has spurred a number of additional book-length treatments of this subject as well. One is David H. Jensen's *Responsive Labor*. It focuses on the tendency of many Christians to compartmentalize their work lives, separating them off from questions of faith. The book uses interviews and other forms of research to assess the state of the question and goes on to propose an approach to work in light of the Christian faith. Similarly, R. Paul Stevens's *The Other Six Days* raises appropriately critical questions about the longstanding tendency of many Christians to relegate the "work of the church" to those in the professional ministry. By emphasizing the universal reality of vocation, he underscores the traditional claim that *all* believers are called to participate in God's work in the world and to carry this out in their work lives as well as during the (relatively fewer) hours that they spend in church. In this book, we see an interesting intersection of the renewal of the language of vocation with ongoing discussions in the fields of ministry and congregational development. It emphasizes that the ministers of the church are the whole people of God, and the whole church is sent by God for the work of mission even within the context of paid employment beyond the church. These conversations can work together and develop a synergy that, one hopes, will continue to develop and produce additional good work.

Some of the most intriguing literature in this area tries to help readers to reformulate the standards according to which they would declare a particular job to be a "good" one. They question, for example, the high value that we place on ambition. This is the upshot of Brian Mahan's book *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*. Other efforts like *Faith in Leadership* edited by Robert Banks and Kimberly Powell focus on the relationship between personal conviction and public responsibility. Finally, although I indicated above that I would try to avoid mentioning texts under more than one heading, I feel compelled at this point to return to Schwehn and Bass's *Leading Lives that Matter*. Two of the book's longest sections are prefaced by questions explicitly focused on work: "Must my job be the primary source of my identity?" and "Is a balanced life possible and preferable to a life primarily focused on work?" Questions like these can help to integrate the various strands of thought that are being woven together here: faith, work, and vocation in both its narrower and broader meanings ("specific profession or career" and "entire shape of one's life").

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

To conclude this section, I want to allude to the rapidly burgeoning literature that focuses on the challenges and rewards of certain specific careers, using the language of vocation to flesh out the particular shape of certain careers in the contemporary context. Some of this work is quite broad in scope since it looks at the professions in general. Here, a particularly valuable text is William F. May's *The Beleaguered Rulers*. It explores the contradictions inherent in some of the most highly prized careers of the present age like medicine, the law, academia, corporate leadership. While such professionals wield enormous power, they do not feel powerful at all. They feel under siege, and as a result, they do not always take very seriously the substantial degree of public trust with which their professions are invested. Professor May is a highly skilled thinker and critic on such matters, and his other work on the topic is worth seeking out as well, including his paper “The Theological Exploration of Vocation and Common Ground,” delivered at a recent conference designed to expand and extend the ongoing national conversation on vocation.

While a list of books on every profession or career would clearly be out of place in an article that is already far too long, allow me to mention three particular professions where the literature is rapidly growing and genuinely interesting. First, the area of business administration has recently received renewed attention. Once seen as a destination for those whose primary focus was maximizing their salaries rather than pursuing their calling, this field is being re-examined through a different lens. Books such as Mark Alibon's *Making a Life, Making a Living* look at the interrelationships among personal identity, career ambitions, and social responsibility, while Helen Alford and Michael Naughton's *Managing As If Faith Mattered* draws more explicitly on the traditions of Roman Catholic social teachings to challenge the double standard of public versus private morality that is often at work in business cultures. Particularly in church-related institutions, departments of business and/or management are more frequently working in dialogue with departments of religion and/or theology, such that students in both fields are gaining new insights from the other.

Second, the fields of medicine and nursing are receiving renewed attention as the interpersonal and spiritual/pastoral elements of these professions return to the forefront. After a generation of emphasis (some would say overemphasis) on training in the natural sciences to the near exclusion of other forms of preparation for this work, a great many undergraduate institutions and medical schools are again focusing on the doctor or nurse as a caregiver for the whole person. Students are often moved by accounts of doctors who have found ways of connecting their training in the natural sciences to a strong sense of social responsibility. A particularly clear example of this, already mentioned above, is Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. A thoughtful book on the nursing profession is *The Nurse's Calling: A Christian Spirituality for Caring for the Sick* by Mary Elizabeth O'Brien. Although not narrowly focused on the concept of vocation, its attention to the contemporary circumstances of the nursing profession make it a thoughtful guide for those who are considering this field based on a specifically theological interest. Similarly, Judith Shelly and Arlene Miller's *Called to*

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
by David S. Cunningham
on the website Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org>

Care examines how beliefs about God, the human person, and the nature of suffering dramatically shape a person’s understanding of the call to be a nurse.

Finally, the profession to which the word *vocation* was once applied almost exclusively is the ministry. Will Willimon’s *Calling and Character* is a particularly useful text as it focuses not on a particular skill set but on the *virtues* in which a person needs to be habituated in order to live into a calling to the ordained life. A wider range of voices is offered in Anne Svennungsen and Melissa Wiginton’s collection of sermons entitled *Awakened to a Calling*. Here pastors reflect on the process of discerning a call to ministry. These highly accessible texts would be ideal for young people who might be just beginning to entertain such a call. Similarly, James Chatham’s *Is It I, Lord?* provides a step-by-step approach for the earliest stages of the process of discernment and may be particularly valuable to those who want to explore the question broadly before initiating any kind of formal discernment process within a church body. Finally, Mark Constantine’s *Travelers on the Journey* uses the device of personal narrative to help readers think through the vocation of ministry. Exploring the lives of pastors in various denominations across the American South, this book may help to broaden some readers’ perspectives on what it “looks like” to be a minister in the contemporary context.

Conclusion and Commission

I began this essay by suggesting that the seeds planted by the Lilly Endowment in its PTEV initiative have issued in a plentiful harvest. I hope that the literature described in this essay, both by its sheer quantity and by its relevance and significance, has provided some corroboration for that claim. Clearly, most of the work described in this essay would not have been produced (or would have had a very different character) had it not been written amidst the groundswell of conversation about vocation that has been generated by the PTEV initiative. In particular, the literature that might have been produced in the *absence* of that initiative would likely have been similar in character to that produced a generation ago, namely books aimed at “self-help” and “career advice.” The deeply theological nature of the literature produced over the past ten years is testimony to the extraordinary impact of the Lilly initiative.

Nevertheless, I would venture to say that our work is not yet accomplished. I do not believe that the market is “flooded” with good books on vocation or that any additions to the literature would be superfluous. As I have noted earlier in this essay, the harvest is plentiful but it is also somewhat diffuse; the literature is scattered across a wide range of subcategories, some more specialized than others. What is now needed, perhaps, is a more concerted effort to collect these diverse insights and to write the comprehensive “theologies of vocation” that, I noted in the first section of this essay, have thus far accounted only for a small minority of the literature. While vocation remains a relatively less contested theological topic, its significance in the everyday

“A Plentiful Harvest:
The Fruits of Lilly-Sponsored Programs on Vocations”
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lives of Christians is such that it deserves further exploration and synthesis. New theologies of vocation that take into account the rapidly changing contemporary context would be particularly welcome. The generativity of the past decade has done much to prepare the way for such efforts.

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