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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

BRANDON TSARK

Richard T. Hughes, *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar: How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind (Revised Edition)*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

Scholars have mourned the decline of the Christian intellectual life for some time now. At a juncture where church-related higher education in America is in decline and many a Christian academic finds his or her faith at odds with the practices and ideals of American higher education, Hughes aims to provide not only individual teachers but also both public and private institutions with the necessary theological tools to integrate education and scholarship with the Christian faith in deep and profound ways. While much of the material in this revised edition first appeared under the title *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Eerdmans, 2001) and focused on the theological exploration of the vocation of a Christian scholar, this updated volume also examines the vocation of a Christian college and/or university. In *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar*, Hughes seeks to answer the following questions: 1) In what ways is the Christian faith uniquely positioned to sustain the life of the mind; 2) What does it mean to teach from a Christian perspective; and 3) What makes church-related education distinctively Christian?

Hughes' vision of *klēsis* (call, calling) as the divine call found in the gospel that is of first priority in one's life¹ is paramount to understanding the conclusions he reaches here. His calling as a Christian stands at the core of his being and provides him with an identity and understanding of self that informs every other aspect of his life and provides a foundation on which every other aspect of his life is able to be integrated.² Two of the most prominent, if not *the* most prominent, theological beliefs that shape Hughes' faith are his understanding of paradox, and the infinite and eternal nature of God held in juxtaposition with the finitude and mortality of humanity. Thus the arguments Hughes presents are unique in their theological orientations toward these aforementioned principles.

In a new *Preface to the Revised Edition*, Hughes shares his own vocation story, which led him to be a Christian scholar. As an adolescent, he shared some similarities with the monastic Luther in that he was deeply troubled by his sinful nature and the implications it had on his salvation. It was not until he was well into his doctoral work that he discovered the Lutheran theology of justification by grace through faith. Moreover, in spirit of the Luther's conceptualization of paradox, Hughes also embraced the Mennonite (Anabaptist) view of "radical" discipleship as the taking up of one's cross and being wholly committed to Christ. The union of these two seemingly incompatible viewpoints of justification and sanctification via paradox has been paramount in shaping Hughes' faith and vocation, and serves as the inspiration for his conclusions regarding how the Christian faith is able to sustain and enrich those who are called to scholarship and education.

Hughes' deeply personal and compelling reflection on faith and scholarship begins with his addressing of the possible incongruities between the highly particularistic nature of Christianity and the pluralistic nature of the United States educational system and the principles on which this nation was founded. However, he

1. Richard T. Hughes, "Death and the Transformational Power of Vocation," *Leaven* 11.1 (2003): 35–36.

2. Richard T. Hughes, *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar*, xvii. This is the language with which he frames the topic of vocation.

argues that in the recognition of one's finitude before an eternal God and embrace of the paradoxical nature of faith, the Christian scholar is able to break free from the particularities of the Christian faith and his or her own faith traditions. Moreover, he argues that when the Christian faith is shaped by these very principles, both Christianity and the American educational system share an appreciation for critical thought, academic creativity, the wisdom and knowledge that comes from a plurality of voices and, above all, the commitment to a passionate search for truth—all integral in the process of sustaining and enhancing the life of the mind.

Yet the value of these principles and commitments does not end here, for they apply not only to the Christian scholar, but also to the Christian teacher. Hughes argues that these commitments are “precisely what enable us to resist sterile orthodoxies, to nurture imagination and creativity on the part of our students, and to encourage the free exchange of ideas. This, in my judgment, is at least part of what it means to teach from a Christian perspective.”³ To teach from a Christian perspective involves creating a dynamic learning environment that is open to the exchange of new ideas, and instilling a sense of wonder in students that awakens their intellectual imagination and creativity. Finally, one of the most important hallmarks of a Christian teacher is one's ability to acknowledge that one is able to achieve and maintain such standards of teaching and scholarship precisely *because* of one's identity as a Christian rather than in spite of it.⁴

Turning to the topic of the vocation of a Christian institution of higher education, Hughes demonstrates the many ways in which the Roman Catholic tradition and three of the most prominent Protestant traditions (Lutheran, Mennonite and Reformed) are able to provide strong foundations for the academic and administrative life at a Christian university and for its faculty, staff and students. The vocation of a Christian university is similar to that of a Christian scholar. In order for a church-related institution to be distinctly Christian, it must be able to embrace paradox and radical discipleship, and ground every aspect of its work within these theological orientations. Moreover, it must stand committed to diversity, intellectual creativity and excellence, and academic freedom, and allow its Christian identity and calling to be the primary ground and structure of these commitments.

The strength of Hughes' work lies in his ability to provide a compelling yet flexible argument in support of the idea that institutions of higher learning and scholars are able to cultivate the highest standards of academic excellence precisely because of their commitment to the Christian faith. Even if one does not agree with some of the particular conclusions he reaches, Hughes' work is anything but overly dogmatic or prescriptive. Rather, the theological vision he has crafted is both provocative and highly adaptable. For these reasons it should be of tremendous assistance to the administration and faculty of an institution of higher learning in generating new ideas on how to better integrate and simultaneously enhance faith, scholarship and education.

However, creating and sustaining a “deeply and profoundly Christian”⁵ institution of higher learning is a monumental undertaking given the numerous components necessary for its success, and the many and diverse parties who must all come together in order for such an endeavor to succeed. While Hughes never wavers in his confidence in the Christian faith being perfectly suited to sustain the life of mind, the caveats that are interspersed in his own analysis of church-related education may be indicative of a sense of guarded optimism regarding the ability of an institution of higher education to embody a truly Christian vocation.

Nevertheless, by his paradoxical affirmation of truth and ambiguity, and his embrace of the finitude of humanity in light of the limitless nature of the divine, Hughes well articulates “a concrete *theologia viatorum*, a theology of those on the way, who in the differing estrangements of this world and this history are searching for the one coming truth which will one day illuminate everyone.”⁶ As a Christian and young

3. Richard T. Hughes, *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar*, 95.

4. *Ibid.*, 98.

5. *Ibid.*, 129.

6. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 61.

theologian and aspiring scholar, I too, along with my former teacher, Professor Richard T. Hughes, have come to see the fullness of the truth that is revealed by God himself simultaneously given before me and perpetually eluding my grasp. Thus as a result, I find myself, with many others, always on the way.

Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*
(Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

The postindustrial, postmodern world is changing rapidly. Especially in highly developed nations, this rapid change is profoundly impacting people's identities, ways of living and the ways in which they understand and experience work.¹ Moreover, this change and its impact on society, when coupled with the many unresolved problems in the present reality of work, such as dehumanization and the increasing permanence of unemployment, can rightly be termed an objective crisis of work. Upon reflecting on this crisis and the alienating nature of such work, Miroslav Volf grew increasingly dissatisfied with the theology of work as vocation that continues to dominate Protestant thought. In *Work in the Spirit*, Volf argues that a theology of work grounded in eschatology, pneumatology and *charismata* (gifts) is more theologically sound and better equipped than the still dominant theology of vocation to address the modern nature of work² and facilitate the transformation (humanization) of work. The success of his pneumatology of work based on *charismata* lies in its ability to preserve the strongest elements of the theology of vocation³ while providing a platform to transform both the experience and understanding of work. Work is not simply toil and drudgery that humanity must respond to with dutiful obedience. Rather, it is a gift, because we are inspired and empowered by the Spirit to work in partnership with God as he brings into being the transformation and renewal of the world.

In Part I, Volf outlines the methodology of his theology of work. He begins by sketching the basic contours of twenty-first century work, its nature and the many unresolved problems within that contribute to the objective crisis of work.⁴ Also integral to this process is an understanding of how people have come to perceive the character of work and its role in their lives. In order to accomplish this, Volf provides an analysis of the two most influential philosophies of work in the modern world: capitalism, as presented in the major works of Adam Smith, and socialism, as presented in the major works of Karl Marx. His analysis helps the reader grasp how the majority of the world understands work.

In Part II, Volf moves toward a pneumatology of work based on *charismata* and its normative function on the modern world of work. He begins by providing a brief history of the theology of work. The church fathers used the doctrine of sanctification to ground their theology of work and created a system of ethics to guide Christian work. However, Volf argues that it is necessary to move beyond this and a strictly biblical

1. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 10–11. He provides the following definition of work from his published dissertation “Zukunft der Arbeit—Arbeit der Zukunft. Der Arbeitsbegriff bei Karl Marx und seine theologische Wertung” (PhD dissertation, Universität Tübingen, 1988), 28: “Work is honest, purposeful, and methodologically specified social activity whose primary goal is the creation of products or state of affairs that can satisfy the needs of working individuals or their co-creatures, or (if primarily an end in itself) activity that is necessary in order for acting individuals to satisfy their needs apart from the need for the activity itself.”

2. Namely the diachronic and synchronic plurality of employments that characterizes work, as people in highly developed nations can expect to change jobs and/or careers multiple times throughout the course of a lifetime, and many are forced to work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet.

3. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 104–106, 189. These are the primacy of God and his self-revelation in issuing the *klēsis* (call, calling, vocation) to become a Christian that is found in the gospel, and that one's vocation and work is defined as service rendered unto God and the world.

4. *Ibid.*, 35–42. Child labor, unemployment, discrimination, dehumanization, exploitation and ecological crises are some of the main factors that contribute to the alienating nature of the present reality of work.

theology of work, and create a comprehensive theology of work that views human work in relationship to the wider context of salvation history, anthropology and sociology, if it is to succeed in providing a lasting foundation for the transformation of human work. This task is two-fold. First, he selects the doctrine of eschatology, as developed by Jürgen Moltmann, to serve as the ground for such a theology of work.⁵ In doing so, Volf rejects an annihilationist view of eschatology, as well as the basic views of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth (that work is merely instrumental or only of secondary importance),⁶ in favor of the eschatological *transformatio mundi*. Because of the manner in which the present state of affairs is intertwined with the future of a new creation,⁷ human work, even in its most mundane forms, should be seen as an active anticipation of and proleptic cooperation with God in his effort to transform the world. Thus the eschatological significance of human work provides the inspiration and grounds for the transformation of the present reality of work. Second, Volf addresses the deficiencies in the theology of work as vocation⁸ by demonstrating that a pneumatological theology of work based on the Pauline theme of *charismata* is both more faithful to the biblical understanding of work and more relevant to the modern world of work, while possessing none of the weaknesses of the vocational understanding of work. “When God calls people to become children of God, the Spirit gives them callings, talents, and ‘enablings’ (charisms) so that they can do God’s will in the Christian fellowship and in the world in anticipation of God’s eschatological new creation.”⁹

After laying the foundation of his pneumatological theology of work, Volf explores its function and vision by addressing the problem of alienation and the humanization of work. Alienation in work occurs when it is performed, experienced and understood in such a way that is contrary to God’s plan for humanity and the world in the eschatological new creation. Contrary to this, the hallmarks of humane work are that it corresponds to the fundamental nature of human existence in light of the new creation, and also to one’s own nature, personhood and unique spiritual gifting. If God truly intends to bring about the transformation of the world in conjunction with human effort, then work is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human, and thus should be enjoyable, seen as a divine gift and treated as an end in itself.

In regards to the shortcomings of this text, Volf is more than humble throughout, leaving little else to be said beyond his own words. He is unequivocal in pointing out to the reader that his argument for a paradigm shift from the vocational understanding of work to a pneumatological theology of work based on *charismata* is still in its infant stages and possesses an uncertain fate. Moreover, he candidly admits his own limitations as a theologian in regards to the range of disciplines involved in a critical analysis of work, and that, due to page constraints he is forced to limit his theological reflection on work to a succinct eschatological and pneumatological perspective.

5. Ibid., 79. Present in each of Moltmann’s major works is the argument he first developed in his *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1964; English translation 1967), that the Christian faith is thoroughly eschatological and defined by its hope in the coming (future) of God and his transformation of the world through the indwelling of his Spirit. The essence of this theology serves as the broad framework for Volf’s pneumatology of work. Readers familiar with Moltmann may notice further similarities between his theology and that of Volf, such as the Panentheistic approach to the present ecological crisis found in work (*Work in the Spirit*, 144).

6. Ibid., 70, 90. Thomas Aquinas maintains that the *vita activa* is subordinate to the *vita contemplativa*. Barth argues that human work is a *parergon* (a secondary or complementary work) of our true *ergon* (work), which is our faithful obedience to the divine call. See *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed. William C. Placher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), which includes an excerpt from Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* III:4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985) related to vocation.

7. Isaiah 65.17–25; Revelation 21.1–8.

8. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 105–110. Some of the most serious deficiencies of the vocational understanding of work are that it can breed indifference to alienation and dehumanization in work, and that it is obsolete in a world that presupposes a diachronic and synchronic plurality of work.

9. Ibid., 124.

On the contrary, perhaps the most unique and commendable aspect of Volf's theology of work is that he sees the transformation of work as a task to be carried out alongside economists, social scientists and government officials. To translate a theology of work into concrete public policies that will address the multi-faceted crisis and problem of alienation in work is beyond the scope of theology. Yet no positive and lasting transformation is able to occur in the way in which people understand and experience work unless it is grounded in a sound theological vision.

In conclusion, Volf presents a convincing argument, from a Protestant perspective, for a paradigm shift from vocation to *charismata* while simultaneously preserving the strengths of the former and providing innovation within the theology of work so that it is better suited to address the present reality of work. His overall presentation and writing style is crisp and on point, making for a thoroughly enjoyable and informative read.

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