

RECLAIMING THE CONCEPT OF CALLING

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary offers a triple meaning of *reclaim*:

1 bring back (waste land, etc) to useful condition, a state of cultivation, etc. **2** reform (a person): *reclaim a man from error/vice*. **3** demand that something be given back.

Why could it possibly be worthwhile to reclaim a concept such as *calling* (*Ruf, Beruf*)? Is there any reason, other than historical, for the social and moral interest in such a seemingly outdated concept? The answer to this intriguing question might eventually be positive, but it will take quite some hermeneutics-based analysis before we reach a satisfactory answer. Following the Dictionary's guideline, our task is to bring *the concept of calling* back to a useful condition, to reform it, and to demand that it be given back to people who need it.

In religion-dominated times in the past, most people felt *called* to their task or job, or at least they were told to feel so, especially in Protestant circles. People in leadership positions were supposed to be called, be it as a father, a teacher, a statesman, or a function, *Ambt* (office) in whatever institution one can think of, including, for instance, a housewife in a family. One's identity, was provided with some kind of calling. *Freedom* was limited to the position one was called – or should we say *predestinated*? – to.

But today? On the one hand, *free* people 'feel like' doing things, they are more or less attracted and receptive to nice perspectives in their jobs and lives. The term 'well-understood self-interest' says it all: you have to use your rationality, and there is no metaphysical aim, creational order, or a natural law which 'calls' people to certain positions, apart from their interests and preferences. Neither is there a personal God who might be involved in some process of calling. On the other hand, we do live in a social system which gives directives and even imperatives for choices in behavior and mentality. We all know our receptiveness to personal advantage, be it material or immaterial. In case we would call this a divine realm, then people still *are* called to a certain aspect of their identity. So we should behave in a hermeneutically careful way, searching for possibilities to reclaim 'calling', both religiously and beyond religiosity. In the dialectics of sociology and theology, Max Weber (1864-1920) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) will be our guides.

A Controversial Inheritance

Terms like vocation and calling do function in the relatively small circle of religiously minded people who still speak of personal vocation. Being called from daily life to the realm of the church, the mission, or the monastic order, means a very important personal commitment in holy, non-wordly institutions. Charles Taylor (1989) writes:

Whereas in Catholic cultures, the term 'vocation' usually arises in connection with the priesthood or monastic life, the meanest employment was a calling for the Puritans, provided it was useful to mankind and imputed to use by God. (223).

It is clear that the Protestant contribution to the phenomenon of calling meant a much broader approach. All ordinary people were called to occupy the place which God had prepared for them. This makes people accept their position in the social order. Social order is part of natural order, which mirrors God's creation, and thus the divine will. Investigating the concept's social and economic impact, Max Weber made it clear that Luther and the pietists strongly influenced the meaning of *calling in business*.

Under the heading *Luther's Conception of the Calling*, Weber (1906/1993) writes about the concept of calling:

Now it is unmistakable that even in the German word *Beruf*, and perhaps still more clearly in the English *calling*, a religious conception, that of a task set by God, is at least suggested. (79)

The interpretation, however, of this widely used concept is quite another thing:

For, above all, the consequences of the conception of the calling in the religious sense for worldly conduct were susceptible to quite different interpretations. The effect of the Reformation as such was only that, as compared with the Catholic attitude, the moral emphasis on and the religious

sanction of, organized worldly labour in a calling was mightily increased. [...] Everyone should abide by his living and let the godless run after gain. (83)

Interestingly, the Puritans connected the concept of calling with providence – for them a theological *must*, as Weber analyses it:

For everyone without exception God's Providence has prepared a calling, which he should profess and in which he should labour. And this calling is not, as it was for the Lutherans, a fate to which he must submit and which he must make the best of, but God's commandment to the individual to work for the divine glory. This seemingly subtle difference had far-reaching psychological consequences, and became connected with a further development of the providential interpretation of the economic order which had begun in scholasticism.(160)

Here, economics and the personal calling confluenced. No question of the above 'let the godless run after gain' in Puritan circles: Gain could very well be conceived as a blessing, a sign of God's election...

Does this kind of 'calling in business' still exist? Definitely not in a direct way, but one could claim an indirect, unconscious way in which a kind of calling still functions. For this thesis, however, I need some God-talk, some thinking about the shifting image of God in relation to fate, good luck and well-understood self-interest. Weber also connects *calling* with *redemption*. As object of God's redemption, every individual human being is called to fulfill his/her special task. To answer the call or to refuse to - that is the question. This 'modern' question replaces a 'premodern', mere ontological, determination of human existence.

Bonhoeffer, a Sense for Saintness

Living and working in the extremely difficult time of Nazi-totalitarianism, the Lutheran thinker Dietrich Bonhoeffer tried to socialize the concept of calling by introducing the *mandates* as institutional areas of calling. This term is the outcome of a bitter struggle concerning the social institutions in those days. Showing his critical mind in the field of language, Bonhoeffer condemns the suspicious terms *orders of creation* (*Schöpfungsordnungen*) and *orders of sustenance* (*Erhaltungsordnungen*), thus stressing human responsibility.

Bonhoeffer consequently reminds his partners in the discussion to their calling, asking them on which ideology or moral principle their business activities might be based. As a Lutheran thinker, Bonhoeffer often quotes Luther, who was the first to call people back from a flight from responsibility. Inside the mandates, the individual is set free and licenced to behave in a responsible way to join in the reality of Christ (*Christuswirklichkeit*) in which the world is embedded. He also speaks of participation in Jesus' *being-there-for-others*, which is his transcendence. The idea of *being called* includes the active aspect of faith versus the passivity of orders.

To postmodern ears, this kind of Christ-talk is hard to understand. Being aware of Bonhoeffer's predicament while writing and acting, however, will help us interpret his *cri de coeur* in the correct way. His theological remarks do reveal his very calling to kill the tyrant. For such a great job one needs great words, which help to memorize the old ethical problem of a right and a false calling, a right and a false image of God – of being Saint or Devil.

In the section called *The Place of Responsibility*, Bonhoeffer (1949/1964) writes:

The calling, in the New Testament sense, is never a sanctioning of worldly institutions as such; its 'yes' to them always includes at the same time an extremely empathic 'no', an extremely sharp protest against the world. Luther's return from the monastery to the world, to the 'calling', is [...] the fiercest attack and assault to be launched against the world since primitive Christianity. Now one takes up his position against the world *in* the world; the calling is the place in which the call of Christ is answered, the place at which one lives responsibly. Thus the task which is appointed for me in my calling is a limited one, but at the same time the responsibility to the call of Jesus Christ breaks through all limits. (255v)

The free subject's responsibility is the big item:

Vocation is responsibility and responsibility is a total response of the whole person to the whole of reality; for this very reason there can be no petty and pedantic restricting of one's interests to

one's professional duties in the narrowest sense. Any such restriction would be irresponsibility.
(258)

In this respect, Bonhoeffer's (1951/1971) opinion on the church, one of the mandate fields (the others are culture, labor, family, and state), is interesting: *Ekklesia* means being called away (*ek-klaō*) from your own business and share in the revolutionary movement of the messias (the *messianische Ereignis*). In his case, the consequence was very clear indeed: One had to abandon the false savior (the *Führer* and all this term stands for) and to share the resistance in the name of the true messias (Jesus Christ and all this term stands for). Maybe we could see parallels in being caught in a false consciousness and behavior then and now. Bonhoeffer's voice, especially his voice from prison, is searching indeed. For him, sharing in Jesus' being-there-for-others means an existence based on transcendence. This *Nachfolge* (*deputyship*) includes protest against the violences of human dignity.

Suffering as chiffré

Bonhoeffer uses the biblical image of the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Isa.52/3) as the messianic character who represents and defends these basic values. The Suffering Servant seems to cover the calling's critical, active character, opposed to the uncritical, passive 'take your fate for granted'. Hermeneutically speaking, however, a fundamental ambiguity is at stake, a doctrinal controversy which directly affects ethics: Suffering as a consequence of behavior for others in the social and historical sense of the word, versus suffering as a consequence of God's decision to save humans from sin by means of his Son's sacrifice. This implies a contradiction between an active, historical vision and a passive, eternal one.

Within this scheme, all kinds of calling depend on the interpretation of *Jesus as a subject* – in continuity with *ancient Israel as a subject* (backwards) and with *us today as subjects* (forwards). The active, historical interpretation does not allow a division between mind and matter in a dualistic sense – which implies the acceptance of the tension between mind and matter, on a horizon of eschatological hope. This, however, would mean the overcoming of a classical social dichotomy, which finds its expression in Max Weber's (1919/1971/1973) focus on an ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*) versus an ethics of mentality (*Gesinnungsethik*). According to Weber, one has to be obedient to the ruling directives, expectations, and codes in his or her professional field, including calling (*Beruf*). This is one's responsibility (*Verantwortung*). In the realm of mind and imagination (*Gesinning*), however, one can *only* afford some kind of Sermon-of-the-Mount ethics. A connection seems impossible. Behaving as a real Suffering Servant of the Lord, Bonhoeffer does connect both realms. This, however, implies a radical restatement of doctrinal belief.

Hearing Voices?

Assuming that people do obey some kind of call, as stated above, we should ask: Who's voice do people hear? The theological context of this question is the old scheme of 'God and the Idols' (*Gott und die Götter*). Functioning as *chiffres* or codices of human relations, God and the gods (Idols) form a useful matrix for a critical reception of the concept of calling. The divine does not contain some metaphysical truth in itself (*an sich*), but opens up the kernel of truth of human relations and humanity's attitude toward nature. With this outcome of theological and sociological reflection in mind, we can connect ourselves to earlier cultures.

Just like their ancestors, contemporary people do need legitimation and motivation in their lives and work. Not because every individual is morally concerned about the consequences of his attitude and behavior. In fact, *everyone* is living in a social system to which *everybody* contributes. We all are part of corporative entities, *bodies* that do constitute our relations: personal, political, and business relations. These relations form systems of hierarchy and interdependency.

Now we can define 'calling in business' as a receptiveness for *calls* which transcend the well-understood self-interest in the individual-oriented, narrow sense of the word. As responsible agents, people who feel a calling will first of all try to listen to calls from outside and inside the system and respond accordingly. A responsible receptiveness is embedded in the hierarchy of values he or she does

acknowledge. Here, *knowing* and *believing* go hand in hand. As a *believer* in values-as-mandates (see Dietrich Bonhoeffer), the responsible ('called') subject will have to *know* about the meaning of value in the economic field (see Karl Marx). This relation will turn out to be fruitful indeed.

This moral subject/agent will have to find a way between rigorous objectivism and monadic subjectivism. Instances of objectivism are the rigid schemes of the *premodern* ideology of Catholicism, in which religion backs – in a critical way – both the existing political order, and the underlying system of global capitalism. With subjectivism I have in mind the individual who does not feel like being called to responsibility for a reality which passes his or her narrow limits. In both cases values remain unanalyzed.

Human beings do have moral and spiritual possibilities. In order to touch and to activate them, I have tried – according to the Dictionary's guideline – to bring *the concept of calling* back to a useful condition, to reform it, and to demand that it be given back to people who need it. I trust that the people who are globally connected in business will rediscover the alienated – and, after all, dearly missed – concept of calling. People who open their ears for Calling will feel free to take part in a new enlightenment. Concerning the

attitudinal, moral, and spiritual differences between one who sees business as a career and one who has a sense of calling in business (CALL FOR PAPERS of this conference),

I strongly hope for a decrease of the too long suggested conflict between career and calling. The autonomy of the person who is open for Calling guarantees a broad understanding of life and work, including thought and language.

Our Amsterdam Institute of Deep Economy and Ethics (IDEE) is working on the oneness of the structural and personal aspects of business. This we consider a presupposition for the 'called-to-be-a-subject' issue. This is a powerful subject, which lives in the consciousness of simultaneously being part of the economic as well as the ecological reality, and which tries to live in oneness, thus overcoming the dichotomy which seems imposed to rule over imagination as well as reality. Change the first one, and the latter will follow.

References:

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge 1989)

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1906; London and New York 1993); id. *Politik als Beruf* (1919; Tübingen 1971), and *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919; Tübingen 1973)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (1949; London 1964); id. *Letter and Papers from Prison* (1951; New York 1971)

Hans Dirk van Hoogstraten, *Deep Economy: Caring for Ecology, Humanity and Religion* (Cambridge 2001)

Institute of Deep Economy and Ethics (IDEE), Amsterdam, website: www.deepeconomy.net

CALL FOR PAPERS: Business as a Calling - The Calling of Business, Universidad de Deusto Bilbao, Spain, July 15-18, 2003