History of the Integration of Religion and Society

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Assignment

### *Developmental Readings*

Review Assignment #3, the course essential elements, assigned readings, and recommended readings to identify selections of books and scholarly articles to identify and select developmental reading sources and entries.

* Refer to the “[Student Guide to Developmental Readings](https://drive.google.com/file/d/161V_FaYR2BnNGCSFUlWPjUSIQzcH04Hq/view?usp=share_link)” for updated information on sample comments, rubrics, and key definitions related to developmental readings.

**Source One:** Hegeman, David. (2007). *Plowing in hope: Toward a Biblical theology of culture* (2nd ed.). Canon Press. <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B08RNJFQVJ&ref_=dbs_t_r_kcr>

**Comment 1:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

Christians cannot “…assume that culture ‘just happens’ (the evolutionary view).”  Would undermine the view of God’s Lordship. (p. 11)

“Culturative history is God’s unfolding purpose for man, in which mankind plays a chief role in the development and transformation of the earth from garden-paradise to the glorious city of God.”  (p. 34)

“Mankind’s mission to transform the earth through culture-making was radically altered—but not abandoned—by the entrance of sin into the world. The Fall made the human race rebel against God’s righteous commands, including the command to rule and work the creation. Nevertheless, fallen mankind was still capable of some culturative good. Man was now the object of God’s holy wrath. A perfect sacrifice was needed so that mankind could be reconciled to the Father. This salvation was secured through the incarnate Son of God—Jesus Christ. Man could now be restored to a state of holiness so that he could return to his calling to rule, fill, work, and keep the creation. The future hope of God’s people is eternal life on the glorious, restored New Earth, where culture will flourish without the detrimental effects of sin, and the best and most noble of human cultural artifacts will furnish the holy Jerusalem.” (p. 69)

**Essential Element:** Social Reforms and Christianity’s Influence on Society

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is variant to my understanding regarding the intersection of Christianity and the secular world. There is much that Hegeman states here that I find congruent with Scripture. His emphasis on the fall of humanity into sin and our complete dependence upon the Christ for reconciliation and salvation with God is spot on. He is also correct that humanity even in its fallen state can produce “some culturative good.” Even my Lutheran tradition which subscribes to the total comprehensive depravity of humanity because of the fall, recognizes that there may be some degree of civic righteousness in the secular world, what Lutherans refer to as the left-hand kingdom. I appreciate Hegeman acknowledging that a culture without sin will come in the “New Earth”. The question is to what degree can this fallen world realistically be transformed into something akin to or even approximating what the new creation will look like. I confess to a bias of not being optimistic about human society and culture. My twenty-year study of Revelation suggests that humanity will not ascend culturally, but because of the corruption resulting from the fall which infects every human institution, will descend. Revelation paints the picture of social de-evolution. At this point, I don’t have a great deal of faith in the “social gospel”.

His point about God’s giving humanity dominion being a call to go forth and create culture, or I would say, civilization, is insightful and useful.

**Contextualization:**

In my tradition, there is a conversation about just how the Christian church should relate to the wider culture. This I will examine further as this DLL progresses. I’m not inclined toward those who say the church should focus only on itself and ignore trying to have a positive impact on the culture. The reason I am engaging in doctoral work at Omega Graduate School is that I believe it is important for the church to engage and converse with our secular culture on one hand so that the church is better at equipping the saints to defend against ungodly influences in the culture that can wreck a faith that is faithful to Scripture, but on the other hand to be of service to our neighbor both for purposes of evangelism (right-hand kingdom) and the improvement of their life (left-hand kingdom). As has often been attributed to Martin Luther, God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does. I believe the entry point for this intersection is that of our God-given vocation. However, my understanding of Scripture suggests that in this world, the best we can do is some damage control. I realize that in the past the Christian faith in the West has had a dominating influence over the culture, but this is not always encouraging. The established church may have been a dominant voice, but it became corrupted with worldly values, and integrated human philosophies that were not congruent with Holy Scripture, creating a systemic doctrine that rejected core Scriptural beliefs and required a reformation movement to put the Gospel back at the center. Amid our work to engage the world and our culture, as Christians we dare not forget the primary purpose of the Christian church is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Many faith traditions chasing the Social Gospel have made shipwreck of their Biblical doctrines. Scripture does suggest that Christians are called to good works for our neighbors, (Ephesians 2) but I don’t find support for the primary purpose of the Christian church to be changing this world, but rather preparing people by faith for the next one.

**Source Two:** Menuge, Angus. (1999). Niebuhr’s Christ and culture reexamined. In *Christ and culture in dialogue* (pp. 31–55). Concordia Publishing House.

**Comment 2:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

This last option is similar to the preceding except that it is more optimistic about the ability of Christians to improve culture. It still affirms the universality of sin but maintains that cultures can be converted. One of the fundamental theological reasons for this optimism is the view that the Fall only perverted things which were created good, that these things remain inherently good and capable of reform, even though they have been misdirected.”  (p. 42)

“Niebuhr offers no evaluation of the basic strengths and weaknesses of the transformationist view, itself a sign that he thinks it is the best. We will see, however, that it is vulnerable to serious objections.”  (p. 43)

“The emphasis on transforming culture has the danger of becoming the whole reason for the church's existence. The "social gospel" may quickly replace the true gospel of grace and promise with a works-righteous religion of Law, a danger which has been clearly realized in the strident, coercive activism of some of the main-line Protestant churches…relied on the Law to force social reform, exchanging the Word for the Sword.”  (p. 45)

**Essential Element:** Social Reforms and Christianity’s Influence on Society

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is additive to my understanding of the integration of Christianity and society. This collection of essays considering Niebuhr’s classic is a seminal work within my faith tradition. These passages are to a degree responding to developments as we moved into a new millennium but are also prophetic. In the Lutheran tradition, God’s Law is used in three ways. First, it is used as a mirror to convict us of our sin and call us to repentance. Secondly, it is used as a guide for the reborn Christian in the production of good works for our neighbor. Thirdly, it is used as a curb by various authorities to restrain evil and promote good in the world. It is this third use that the integration of society and religion seems most concerned with. This is certainly a legitimate use of God’s Law and pertains to God’s lordship in what Lutherans call the left-hand kingdom or the secular world. In the past, it was taught that natural reason keying into the natural laws of creation (Romans 1) would guide authorities in this action of retraining evil and promoting good. In recent times it is more apparent it is simply not that simple, nor was it simple in Romans 1. The point there was that even though God’s natural laws are evident, people ignore them anyway. This is certainly the case in today’s political spheres and is evident within current 21st-century academic disciplines. Thus, the need for the church’s prophetic voice shines forth. But Menuge points out two key points here. First, the danger of the “social gospel” replacing the true gospel with a works-based religion. As stated before, the church must not lose its central purpose of proclaiming the Gospel that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Second, he points out the danger of “coercive activism” that is prevalent in both the right and left activism. It would indeed be beneficial for humanity if our culture and the way we lived our lives was more congruent with the way that God designed our lives to be lived. But it is not simply a matter of information or even reshaping structure, because the sinful corruption of the human heart and mind remains.

**Contextualization:** Building upon the points made in comment 1, I find the idea of neglecting our prophetic voice proclaiming the third use of the Law into the secular world to be contrary to God’s call for His people to be about good works for their neighbor. But we must keep in mind that the Law does not convert the human heart, and coerced behavior is not genuine conversion. There is a place for the Christian to advocate for, instruct, and demonstrate evidence for the importance of taking into account how God designed our lives to be lived as we engage society and culture to deal with real-world problems. We would hope for effectiveness in this endeavor for two reasons in my opinion. One is to weaken the barriers that exist to hearing the Gospel of redemption but second for the sake of the lives of our neighbors. Perhaps in no place is this clearer than in the church’s advocacy for the life of unborn children. As we engage in research with the hope of encouraging change for our real-world problems as Christians, it is important to remember why we are doing it, what we hope to accomplish, and keep this work in proper perspective not as traditional “kingdom work” which is normally about building a community of believers, but rather as enhancing our vocational service to perform good works for our neighbors and encouraging them to consider as we build our societies together, not just our selfish desires but the real needs of others.

**Comment 3:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

Regarding the framework, Christ and culture in paradox: “The paradox view differs from the preceding one by maintaining that while both Christ and culture claim our loyalty, the tension between them cannot be reconciled by any lasting synthesis.”  (p. 40)

“The two realms distinction has far-reaching consequences. Since one is saved by grace, not works, there are no grades of holiness, or any need to separate oneself from culture. This means that any vocation (provided it is a true vocation, a station instituted by God) can be pursued for the glory of God. In that sense, Christians can participate fully in what is best in culture: we are ‘set free to serve.’ Our motivation for service comes from gratitude born of faith in God's love for us, but the specific techniques of service can be derived from the surrounding culture. This freedom of the Christian is balanced by a respect for temporal law and secular government (Rom. 13:1-7) as a means of curbing the consequences of sin.”  (p. 41)

“On the other hand, Niebuhr thinks there is something to be said for two charges against the paradox view). First, it tends toward antinomianism: if we are justified by grace, not works, and sin inevitably persists in the Christian, why should he not sin all the more? Second, it leads to cultural conservatism: if we should accept the temporal authority of existing institutions and rulers, it would seem to be unmotivated, perhaps even wrong, to call for reform. Along with this is the idea that Luther views the role of Law in a purely negative fashion (as curb and mirror, the first two uses of the Law), but does not support its positive role (as guide, the third use of the Law) in improving society.”  (p. 42)

“Understood aright therefore, Christian vocation is anything but a timid accommodation to existing cultural institutions.”  (p. 47)

“Again, it has been claimed that the paradox view leads to social stagnation. Although the Lutheran may witness via his vocation, there seems little incentive to call for significant reforms or indeed new vocations provided the society is genuinely ordered by those instituted by God. To a degree, a defensive reply seems appropriate. We live in an age where irresponsibility, abandonment of vocation, is widespread, particularly in that most important of vocations, parenthood.”  (p. 49)

“Reform and innovation are considered good, so long as they are the fruits of a creative agape. We must however test the fruits, because we face not only the possibility of a divine transformation of the world but a satanic transformation as well.”  (p. 50)

**Essential Element:** Religion and Society Integration Models

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This selection of quotations is additive to my understanding of the intersection of religion and culture. The Christ and culture in paradox model appears best positioned as a general framework for the integration of religion and society. It maintains a faithful Christian worldview informed by Scripture while recognizing the role of “creative agape” as we live our lives together and work to build a better world as far as possible in a fallen one.

**Contextualization:**

As my work is done within the community of faith as a parish pastor and congregational advisor, these passages help me understand how to advocate for positive social engagement with my fellow Lutherans in a way that does not betray our tradition but rather leverages it. There is in some circles of my faith group a resistance toward any attempt to bring about social change or to engage the inaccuracies of our contemporary world as buying into the whole “social gospel” approach. Some use the difference in authority, purpose, and means of how God rules in the left-hand kingdom (the civic world) and the left-hand kingdom (the church) as a reason for Christians to not be overly involved in trying to shape the civic world, and especially so for clergy. Many times, I hear the argument that clergy need to stay out of trying to shape the civic world. This elaboration by Menuge helps provide a framework to engage such limited thinking from within my tradition in a way that will hopefully gain a hearing and a degree of credibility for my work.

**Source Three:** *In Christ all things hold together: The intersection of science & Christian theology*. (2016). LCMS.

**Comment 4:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“By contrast, in the Reformed tradition (“Christ the transformer of culture”), both the severity of the Fall and the scope of redemption are given a more dramatic understanding. The Reformed combines a deep pessimism about fallen man with a profound optimism about the implications of redemption. The Fall does not merely mean that humanity lost its orientation to supernatural ends. It means “total depravity”: we are made enemies of God, and all of our faculties are turned away from God. Not only are individuals turned inward and regard themselves as gods, cultural institutions likewise assert their independence of God and glorify their own works in  idolatrous rebellion. In this context, nothing but a complete transformation of the natural man can help. Grace does not complete nature; it fundamentally restructures and reorients it, yielding new life in Christ. The transformationist thinks that it is not only individuals but cultures, that can be redeemed. So there is an emphasis on reclaiming the culture for Christ, supported by means and strategies such as Christian bookstores, Christian movies, and Christianized approaches to art, history, literature, government, and science.” (p.30)

“The Lutheran perspective (typified by Niebuhr as “Christ and culture in paradox”) agrees with the Reformed position that sin is a condition of total depravity, but disagrees that Christians should aim to redeem culture Lutherans do believe that cultures can be changed for the better as Christians carry out their vocation in the world. But they believe that such change is temporary at best and that we should simply aim to do the best that we can for the people we can help and with the gifts that God has provided. While individual Christians can exert an important influence in the political sphere, it does not make sense to seek to Christianize government because God’s left-hand kingdom is not a place of abiding hope (Ps. 146:3). The unique and primary vocation of the church (which bears the Word) is to proclaim the Gospel in truth and purity and to rightly administer the sacraments. The vocation of government (which bears the Sword) is to restrain evil and uphold temporal order, thus allowing free passage for the Gospel. This means that government is susceptible to two main errors: it may wrongly present itself as an institution of salvation (as may happen in a state church), or it may wrongly use force to attempt the impossible task of coercing faith, failing to recognize that only God can create faith (Matt. 16:17; 1 Cor. 3:7). Earthly governments, therefore, provide a framework and context in which the Christian can serve his neighbor and witness to the Gospel, but our ultimate hope is in the kingdom that is not of this world (John 18:36).” (p. 29-30)

**Essential Element:** Religion and Society Integration Models

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** These quotations are additive to my understanding of the integration of religion and society. This assists in clarifying the purpose of trying to engage the culture with a Christian voice. Rather than holding to what I consider an unrealistic position not supported by Scripture of there being a potential for “reclaiming the culture for Christ” because culture can be redeemed, the Christ and culture in paradox view is more aligned with what is possible in this world and with Holy Scripture. For example, even if we had a Christian government, a theocracy, and we imposed solid Christian morality utilizing the authority of the government following God’s natural and moral laws, this would not transform hearts nor change eternal destinies. Focusing rather upon our work as an expression of our God-given vocation and encouraging others in the faithful performance of their vocation is likely to be more effective through helping people understand the true depth of our interdependence and how much we rely upon one another to do the right thing.

**Contextualization:** Engaging this contemporary culture is a complicated and messy process from a Christian viewpoint. On one hand, it should be simple, to be a voice in the wilderness reminding people we need one another, and the world is a better place if we love one another as ourselves. Here using the doctrine of vocation to help people remember we are called to serve one another would be helpful. But what is love? Different people understand this differently. The LGBTQ community uses a particular narrative about love to affirm lifestyle choices that deviate from the Biblical norm. What is service? Critical race theory would advocate that the cultural systems we have constructed and inhabit are essentially racist against people of color granting privilege to white people and consider service as acting to flip the script. Economically challenged whites might not feel such a model is congruent with their lived experiences. Conversation is difficult when one does not agree on the definition or the landscape of the discourse. The paradox model is helpful here because it does not expect perfection nor hold expectations for significant improvement in the secular realm in the adoption of a Christian godly worldview. But there is plenty of room in which to engage people living within this post-Christian world by putting love into practice in our vocations.

**Source Four:** Myers, Jeff & Noebel, David. (2015). *Understanding the times*. Summit Ministries. <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3057123/34>

**Comment 5:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

Third, Jesus himself never spoke explicitly against government. He never told his followers to eschew society and hide in the desert (like the Essenes), tear down government (like the revolutionary Zealots), or join those in power (like the Herodians). He did not tell the centurion or any official of influence to quit their positions, and he commonly used leaders of various sorts in his parables. Indeed, no New Testament writer told law enforcement, military, or government officials to quit their jobs if they came to Christ. In contrast, they were told to act honestly and justly in their respective vocation (see for example Luke 3:14 and Acts 10). (Myers & Noebel, 2015, Chapter 15 Politics section)

**Essential Element:** Religion and Society Integration Models

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is additive to my understanding of social reforms when considering the integration of religion and society. The authors make the point there is a viable place to stand between hiding from, tearing down, or joining up with the culture. The authors point out that Jesus called people to remain in the midst and to carry out their vocations in a Christian manner.

**Contextualization:** This quote suggests a model of four categories for religion and society integration as illustrated in the table below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Essene | Zealot | Herodian | Vocational |
| Withdraw from society;  Take refuge within the community behind strong non-porous walls of shared tradition | Tear down existing culture.  Take over existing culture.  Remake existing culture according to our preferences | Reaffirm the existing culture.  Join with those who have power for pragmatic reasons. | Be in the world, contribute to the world, but not of the world;  Live and work faithfully showing love for God and neighbor |
| Medieval monastic tradition  Contemporary Benedict Option  Some conservative Lutheran voices | Social gospel  Critical theory  Derrida/deconstruction  Christian nationalism | The institutions of the state  People who don’t like rocking the boat | Rare birds but they do exist. |

Much more could be said about these four approaches. This does suggest more support for a Christ and culture in paradox model. This model can help communicate within the Christian community about how we may best go about engaging our post-Christian culture. There may be one significant aspect though to be pondered upon. While this model reflects a non-Christian culture, it is more specifically reflective of a pre-Christian culture. Our post-Christian culture is more nuanced in that it has an understanding (often in error) of Christianity that it critically rejects in active opposition. So perhaps some reflection on how Jesus engaged active opposition would also be warranted, especially when considering how the church leadership should so engage. Vocation is more about living in the left-hand kingdom. But how does the right-hand kingdom, the clergy, for instance, engage our culture? Is this more informed by how Jesus engaged the scribes and Pharisees of His day?

**Source Five:** Sanchez, Leopoldo. (2022). The commandments and social justice. In Pless, John T. & Vogel, Larry M. (Eds.), *Luther’s large catechism: With annotations and contemporary applications*. Concordia Publishing House.

**Comment 6:**

**Quote/Paraphrase**

“A Lutheran approach to social justice will benefit from Martin Luther’s distinction between the two kinds of righteousness, reflections on right attitudes toward the poor and the needy, exposition on the Ten Commandments, and teaching on vocation.” (p. 321)

“The Lutheran Confessions describe active righteousness as “a righteousness of reason,” “civil works,” or “righteousness of philosophers,” because human reason can, to some extent, know and carry out such righteousness in civil society, as even philosophers such as Aristotle have taught in their “social ethics.” This active righteousness is called “the righteousness of the Law.” (p. 322)

“The practice of justice begins within one’s callings or vocations in life. Preachers must proclaim the Gospel and teach people to live rightly according to God’s commands. Those in civil office are to enact just laws and change laws that perpetuate injustices toward disadvantaged neighbors, seeking the goal of greater temporal justice in a sinful world. Public and church service for the benefit of society must be inculcated at home and school…” (p. 326)

“Through their vocations, Christians can unite with others with similar callings to serve larger numbers of neighbors and advocate for their needs. Luther observes that one can only live rightly with other neighbors when one believes rightly by putting one’s trust in God.” (p. 326)

**Essential Element:** Social reforms

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** These comments are additive to my understanding of working for social reform in society from a Lutheran perspective. Sanchez is a known advocate for social justice issues within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Beyond the description of the importance of vocation, are two key points for further consideration. First is the reality of “active righteousness” that he states human reason can to some extent know and act upon. Secondly, he makes the point that Luther taught one can only live “rightly” with our neighbors if we put our trust in God. This raises some questions discussed below.

**Contextualization:** Sanchez’s first point is a long-time traditional Lutheran understanding of the role of natural reason and God’s law in enabling ethical behavior in the civil world. Hence the word “civil” which we see in civilization, civilian, and civilized. Engaging a critical world that sees civilization, especially Western civilization, and the notion of a civilizing social force as essentially oppressive creates a challenge for following this track in conversation with those who hold to critical and postmodern viewpoints. This traditional viewpoint is contingent on the idea that reality exists, and truth is out there, in this case, an ethical guideline for behavior, to be discovered. Many in our contemporary society believe that all frameworks are socially constructed instruments of power and take a far more self-interested and pragmatic approach to social justice and change. What is social justice exactly? What would it look like? Ask different people and you will probably get different self-interested answers.

His second point also raises some questions. If only one who has faith in God can live “rightly” with our neighbor, where does this leave us for engaging with those in the world who do not believe in God, or whose faith in God is more a construction of their imagination than a reflection of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. This is an interesting paradox, because two claims stand side by side and seem to exclude one another, yet both are true depending on how you look at it. On one hand, all people can do good things for one’s neighbor. On the other hand, all are fallen in sin and no work of ours will ever be perfect or even necessarily “good” in God’s sight. I think this is more of a paradox than a contradiction. Scripture indeed teaches good works flow from conversion, which suggests genuine God-pleasing good works are not possible without a faith relationship with God. (Hebrews 11:6) However, from a worldly perspective there is a degree of difference in what we experience as good or bad in the behavior and attitudes of other people. “Temporal justice” might be a far cry from God’s holiness, but it is yet worthy of pursuit even if it won’t change anyone’s eternal destiny, it may impact our neighbor’s life. And if the Christian church is seen as making a real difference in people’s everyday lives acting in love, perhaps a door is open for changes to occur in eternal destinies as well. If the church is seen helping to improve human-to-human relations in the lefthand kingdom, then perhaps people will be more open to hearing the Gospel that restores the relation of God and human beings in the right-hand kingdom.

**Source Six:** Wasserman-Soler, D. (2023). Lay vocation before the reformation: Faith, reason, and friendship in the middle ages (and today). *Christian Scholar’s Review*, *52*(4), 51–66.

**Comment 7:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

The passage discusses several key points regarding Ramon Llull's perspective on lay vocation, friendship, and the pursuit of truth. Raymond Llull was a Majorcan philosopher, theologian, and mystic who lived during the 13th and 14th centuries.

Llull addresses his book to laypeople, emphasizing his belief that all individuals, not just clergy, have a calling to pursue religious truth and share it with others.

Despite not holding a formal religious position, Llull sees laypeople as capable of exerting themselves to the utmost in guiding others towards religious truth. He underscores the importance of humility in this pursuit. Llull's emphasized the value of friendship as a foundation for productive conversations about religion. (pp. 55-59)

**Essential Element:** Christianity’s Influence on Society

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is additive to my understanding of Christianity’s influence on society regarding the role of laypeople in service to one another. The author seeks to show that the attribution of vocation to non-clergy is not limited to a protestant influence but to demonstrate before the Reformation an awareness of laity having a vocation. It is noticed here that the emphasis on vocation is still in the narrow understanding of being limited to a call from God to engage in work in what Lutherans would call the right-hand kingdom. While the laity are not here functioning as priests presiding over the Mass, the focus is not upon their ordinary work in the world but on a divine calling to share religious truth with others.

**Contextualization:**  There does appear to be something to the claim that before Luther elevated ordinary work as an expression of vocation because it served neighbor, ordinary work wasn’t closely associated with a calling from God nor an expression of faithful toward God’s call to love others. Today this stimulates thinking regarding the ordinary work that all do in our society, including non-Christians. Might we say that all people have a calling or a responsibility for others so that we pursue truth and share it with others? Might we also say that all people have a calling or responsibility for others so that our work must be done in the context of serving not just ourselves but our community, and not just our insular tribal community, but the community of humanity?

**Source Seven:** Santrac, A. S. (2021). The Christian scholar today and Bonhoeffer’s legacy of the transformative gospel. *In Die Skriflig*, *55*(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2678>

**Comment 8:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

“The proclamation of the contextual gospel led Bonhoeffer (1995b:89) to affirm the basic Christ-suffering: ‘Every man must experience the call to abandon the attachments of this world ... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.’” (p. 2)

“Bonhoeffer reminds us that a vocation to responsible Christian scholarship says ‘yes’ to worldly institutions and, at the same time, says ‘no’ in sharp protest against their abuses (Bonhoeffer 1995a:251). This vocation is determined exclusively by the calling of Jesus Christ and the immediate will of God.” (p.2)

**Essential Element:** Christianity’s Influence on Society

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** These comments are additive to my understanding of Christianity’s influence on society, both past and current. Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Hitler and the Nazi movement resonates with those who seek to resist autocracy and tyranny in this world for the sake of others. His death highlights the power of sacrifice for others. In Lutheran circles, his theology and ethics stimulate much conversation regarding the intersection of religion and culture. This stimulates a question regarding “vocation”. Is vocation, including work in the civic world for the good of others limited to Christians? It is true that for a Christian we are called to not be mastered by attachments to this world and that in a sense we are called to die to self and to live for the good of all. It is also true that our sinful nature by default moves us to be self-oriented. But if Christian scholarship is going to seek to transform the world, either there must be a recognition of some capability for some form of civic righteousness or the church would have to focus on converting all people, something the Bible says will not happen, to help bring any improvement to our shared lives.

**Contextualization:**  For the Christian scholar there should be confidence in the directions in which Scripture guides us, but we must be cautious of arrogance and hubris. Christian revelation may indeed lead us to say no to what is not true, certainly no to abuses orchestrated by corrupting worldly institutions, and yes to truth. It is also true that Christians recognize certain truths about self, world, and God that the fallen secular world will not. We should approach this awareness with a strong degree of humility and gratitude, as but for the grace of God we should not recognize the truths of God either. As we engage worldly institutions and cultural norms and people not operating with a Christian worldview, we must be innocent as doves but wise as serpents knowing where common ground exists for productive discourse and where unbelief will create an unsurmountable barrier to engagement.

**Source Eight:** Stein, S., & Storr, V. H. (2020). Reconsidering Weber’s the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. *The Independent Review*, *24*(4), 521–532.

**Comment 9:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

“Weber contends that because Luther’s conception of “the everyday” remained primarily traditionalistic, Luther did not personally associate the idea of the “calling” with an explicitly capitalistic orientation. In keeping with what Weber understands as the increasing importance of divine providence in Luther’s overall theological outlook, the significance of attending to one’s “calling” is recognition that conduct in one’s assigned station and circumstance, being providentially ordered, must therefore be an ethically sufficient condition for salvation.” (p. 525)

“God willed the social achievement of the Christian, because it was his will that the social structure of life should accord with his commands and be organized in such a way as to achieve this purpose. . . . Labor in a calling, in the service of the secular life of the community, also shared this character” (p. 526)

**Essential Element:** Christianity’s Influence on Society

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is variant to my understanding of how Luther’s doctrine of vocation influenced society. Weber’s book has become canon in the West regarding the establishment of capitalism and how it is supported by the “protestant work ethic”. Weber certainly examines Luther’s influence in this regard, but believes Calvin has the more developed understanding seeing ordinary work as a “divinely appointed task”. (p. 525) Likely, Weber does not completely understand Luther for Luther and Lutheranism would never consider work (nor good works) to be even potentially an ”…ethically sufficient condition for salvation.” (p. 525) Rather good works are a response for neighbors that flow from and testify to one’s salvation. Weber does better in recognizing the protestant message of labor as a calling that serves the “secular life of the community…” (p. 526) This accords with Hegeman that from the beginning God has placed us into interdependent relationships with one another that we build a civilization. This was an essential purpose of creation that existed before the fall and continues because it is woven into the very fabric of creation.

**Contextualization:**  Luther’s understanding is framed by his understanding of two different kingdoms, and two different purposes. The secular, left-hand kingdom, is about ordinary life, ordinary work, and the building and sustainment of a viable civilization that accords with the designed order of creation as manifest in God’s moral law and natural law. The right-hand kingdom deals with salvation and the proclamation of the Gospel. We are not redeemed of our sin by anything we do in the lefthand kingdom, for Luther recognized even our good works are never perfect. We are redeemed by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The language of redeeming the secular world, the secular culture, is remiss. It isn’t possible. The corruption runs too deep. But we may seek to improve the life of our neighbor by living out our calling in that realm to build just and loving lives together. We are not going to save the world or culture or civilization. But we may be able to express love and service and help others to have a better life that is at least closer to what it should have been before the fall. But if we seek the redemption of people, it will not come through the redemption of culture, but through the proclamation of the Gospel.

**Source Nine:** Bouma-Prediger, S. (2023). Ecology of vocation: Recasting calling in a new planetary era. *Christian Scholar’s Review*, *52*(4), 131–133.

**Comment 10:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

The article points out that as the modern era progressed, vocation came to be understood as a calling “without a Caller”. Protestant churches are criticized for neglecting to consider our responsibility for creation when considering vocation and encourages the concept of neighbor to be expanded to more than just humanity. The author finds potential in the discourse of vocation language that reinforces our “creatureliness” but finds the traditional concept of vocation as Luther and Calvin used it as “too individualistic”. (p. 132)

**Essential Element:** Christianity’s Influence on Society

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This article is additive to my understanding of vocation. While it is critical of the traditional protestant understanding of vocation as “too individualistic” it makes a valid point that humanity was created not only in an interdependent relationship with one another but also with the world around us. We were given dominion over the earth and as Hegeman points out, to build a civilization, even a godly one, a task frustrated by the fall. But that does not mean that our stewardship of the world can be dispensed with for the building of this creation.

**Contextualization:**  I agree with the author that the discourse of vocation can serve not only to help us focus on how people in carrying out their daily lives and work may help serve and improve our neighbor's lives through impact on our culture but such improvement can be facilitated by a greater awareness of our interdependence with our physical world. While I would not elevate the physical world to a status alongside humanity as perhaps someone would do would ascribe rights to elements of that world akin to human rights, it is certainly true that our ordinary lives are negligent in incorporating an understanding of how dependent we are upon our planet for our daily lives, and how caring for the planet is also a form of caring for others. Gen Z folks are very interested in general in how the future health of the planet will unfold, which provides a fertile ground for the Christian message of the beauty, the importance, and our interdependence with the physical world to be recovered and used to help bring some healing to our planet that would also improve the lives of others.

**Source Ten:** Verovšek, P. J. (2022). The reluctant postmodernism of Jürgen Habermas: Reevaluating Habermas’s debates with Foucault and Derrida. *The Review of Politics*, *84*(3), 397–421. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670522000316>

**Comment 11:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

“My core conclusion is that the philosophical and political relationship between Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida should not be reduced to pitting modernity against postmodernity, the Enlightenment against Romanticism, mainstream liberalism (or even crypto-conservatism) against the radical Left. Instead, following Johnson, these thinkers should be interpreted as part of a common attempt to find a way to think through the “ambivalent Enlightenment legacies [that] make room for the significance of unreconciled Romantic longings” in postwar Europe. While important differences remain, they should be seen as the result of the differing philosophical and political contexts of France and West Germany, respectively, which has shaped what Bourdieu has referred to as a “common problematic . . . [focused on] the relationship between authority and communication” in the aftermath of Europe’s experience of total war in the first half of the twentieth century. Philosophers and politicians who blame postmodernism for identity politics and growing illiberalism would do well to remember that this approach does not necessarily lead to relativism, nor does adopting its insights require abandoning the social and intellectual project of the Enlightenment that grounds support for democracy, at least in the West.” (p. 421)

**Essential Element:** Social Reforms

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is variant to my understanding of the influence of postmodernism on contemporary approaches to social reform. The reminder of the historical situatedness of the postmodern movement in Germany and France as being heavily influenced by the Zeitgeist of post-war Europe is well taken. In this context, it can be understood why a skeptical turn toward authority and the use of language occurred. Nonetheless, the rejection of metanarratives, of any possible positive authority because of the corruption of authority and the misuse of human-created narratives to fuel the Nazi movement, when logically extended does indeed arrive at relativism and illiberalism.

**Contextualization:**  I remain skeptical of the value of postmodern and critical approaches for providing valuable tools for social reform without bringing with them baggage that ultimately fuels the downfall of civilization. That said, several scholars I respect find encouragement in postmodernism thinking that as it cracks open the limitations of modernity room may be made for Christian discourse to enter in an influential way into the marketplace of ideas and conversation. This is something I need to be more open to and consider and may be a topic I use for my forum paper that comes up later in the term.

**Source Eleven:** Zhao, X. (2024). Heidegger’s world: Re-Enchanting through thingness. *Religions*, *15*(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010003>

**Comment 12:**

**Quote/Paraphrase:**

“Weber’s declaration of the “disenchantment of the world”, his observation of the meaning crisis in both religion and science, and his acute discovery of the retreat of the mystical from the public sphere are monumental. These ideas are exemplified by his poignant reflection towards the end of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904–05)” (p. 2)

The article notes that as far back as 1919 Max Weber discussed how the modern world was becoming “disenchanted” resulting in a sense of a loss of meaning or discourse about meaning with a shift toward rational analytical tools due to the rise of science and technology. (pp. 2-3)

**Essential Element:** Social Reforms

**Additive/Variant Analysis:** This comment is additive to my understanding of how various disciplines have arrived at the point of how they approach social reform. Certainly, within contemporary critical approaches, there is even “disenchantment” with science as an objective vehicle to convey truth and reality. Postmodern critical approaches see all human reality as a product of socially created evaluations flowing from experience resulting in socially created frameworks, including the frameworks that support the traditional scientific method. They tag to this the idea that all such frameworks are about power and influence, that all have at the core a pragmatic core as those with power to shape those frameworks do so to serve themselves at the expense of others. Thus, much of today’s methods of securing social change are about identity and power.

**Contextualization:**  This may relate to or at least provide some insight into the consideration of vocation as a vehicle for social change. As noted before, as humanity moved into modernity the discourse on vocation focused on a person having a calling but with the absence of a caller. Vocation itself was disenchanted or despiritualized. This sense of disenchantment that Weber was picking up on in the early 20th century, and this loss of meaning as humanity turned toward the abstract objectifying of all things by science, grew as the 20th century progressed. We saw science bring transformation leading to amazing technological advances with powerful impacts on the quality of human life, both good and ill. Perhaps postmodernism and critical theory, and if I am correct about a new emerging worldview of transmodernism, we are hearing the lingering crying in the background of a need for meaning, a need for purpose, a desire for something more that makes humanity worth existing than just the biological processes of evolution and our short self-interested lives on this one single world in a vast universe of galaxies, stars, and worlds. The sense of vocation could become inspirational once again when connected to meaning, purpose, and something transcending the individual. Could postmodernism and transmodernism be a cry for meaning? Could the previous author (in comment 11) be right that despite where postmodernism ends with deconstruction and hypercriticism, there was underneath “Romantic longings”? (Verovšek, 2022, p. 421)

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