

“Working Through ‘Vocation’: Theological and Religious Perspectives”

Proposal for Course Development Grant

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Overview

This proposal imagines a course focused on the question: “What difference might ‘vocation’ make for those committed to the deep significance of religious and theological questions?” It would foster intellectual exploration of the idea of vocation and invite students to locate themselves in conversations about vocation, and attend to implications for their own lives, through consulting texts and in conversation with faculty from the Religious Studies Department.

The Course as Proposed

Topical Foci

The course, tentatively titled, “Working Through ‘Vocation’: Theological and Religious Perspectives,” would be concerned with three interrelated foci: [1] the question of “vocation” itself as a problem for theological and religious inquiry, [2] what such inquiry has to do with how people in religious and theological studies think of their “vocation,” and [3] how students can appropriate their learning in the course for their own life and work, particularly in regard to life after Santa Clara.

A single question guides the course: “What difference might ‘vocation’ make for those committed to the deep significance of religious and theological questions?” At the same time, these three foci make more clear how the question is to be explored and for what purposes.

Focus [1] is important because “vocation” has had variable meanings, applications, and functions in the Western intellectual tradition. Moreover, its current place in much of the literature and practice in religious universities and their patron endowments draws on the Christian tradition for the specification of its tasks, problems, questions, and outcomes. This essential and complex link to Christianity (and its attendant nexus of concepts, such as “discernment,” “work-life balance,” “passion,” “mentoring,” etc., not to mention influential structuring stories from contemporary religiously-inspired vocational literature such as that, for example, of Frederick Buechner, Parker Palmer or Michael Himes), reformulated variously in both granting institutions and universities that make use of grants to foster vocational exploration,

invites investigation by scholars who make the study of theological and religious problems their specialty. We have a substantial core of such scholars residing in the Religious Studies Department at Santa Clara. Our local scholars represent a rich potential jury on the question of the history, meaning, and use of the concept of vocation, allowing a potentially nuanced understanding of how this notion has arrived as an object for study as well as training in a Catholic university. Due to the centrality of the Christian theological tradition for the constitution of “vocation” as it comes to us in this project, it is appropriate for theology to “host” the conversation, inviting other disciplines present in our department to join in scholarly appreciation, critique, and reconstruction of “vocation”, in dialogue with Santa Clara students, and for the sake of helping students “work through vocation” now and after Santa Clara.

Focus [2] presents itself as an opportunity for Department faculty to think publicly through their own sense of their “vocation” in dialogue with the students. Ideally, faculty would be paid for preparing and delivering lectures in the course constituting their response to the course’s guiding question. These lectures would double as essays, and my intention would be to eventually gather these lectures/essays into a volume that I would edit, presenting the Santa Clara Religious Studies faculty’s shared work on a common question. This contribution would be a welcome one in the world of American Jesuit universities, in the sense that it provides space for reflection on both the potential distinctiveness and potential complexity in the way that theologies and religions are studied and taught in Jesuit universities today, thus bearing on the pressing question of the Jesuit identity of Jesuit universities today—an identity sometimes thought to be informed by, if not housed in, the sites of religious study on campus. In this way, the course would contribute not only to student development—in the opportunities to discuss professors’ work on a question of interest to them—but would provide for faculty development as well, as the course brings together diverse departmental faculty and would issue in a document that would give some sense of how and why we do what we do. Thus would the course help to open up the question of vocation on many levels: student, faculty, department, university.

Focus [3] is the *raison d’être* for the course. The primary goal of the course is for students to formulate their own way of thinking about the topic, in two dimensions:

- First, retrospectively: as a capstone experience of their religious studies at Santa Clara (synthesizing the “point” of their work in pursuit of religious and theological questions in their courses—what has been the purpose of it all, and where might it be headed for the student?); this dimension would be analyzed by students through discussion and short essay in dialogue with faculty presentations and course readings.
- Second, prospectively: Where are they headed after graduation, and what sort of consolidation of faith and work might assist in making good choices about the next stage of their lives? In other words, what can reflection on the course topic teach them about what their emerging “vocation” might be *already* as seen in retrospect, and what are possible *next* steps in their own formation in faith and work that might lead them to the next step in mature consolidation of (a now newly problematized and enriched understanding of) “vocation”? This dimension, too, would be analyzed by students through discussion with faculty and texts, and rendered in short essay.

Overall, then, students would be required to develop their own responses to the guiding question of the course in dialogue with the faculty from week to week, culminating in short “retrospective” and “prospective” essays, concluding with a final essay, presentation or project that requires them to address the basic question of the course in dialogue with the texts, the lectures, and the discussion. There might be many ways for this culminating work to be presented to the Ignatian Center/Bannan Institute. At the least, it could be archived for purposes of reflection on the complexities of “vocation” in the lives of students today, no small service to Jesuit higher education.

The course would be intended primarily for juniors and especially seniors, particularly though not exclusively for religious studies majors and minors. This course would be offered as a third-level course under the TESP (Theology, Ethics, and Spirituality) designation in the department (allowing for changes in the organization of departmental curriculum currently being contemplated in line with the University's revision of the Core). The foremost reason for this curricular designation is that its point of departure is situated in a theological problematic (for reasons described above) that comprehends the description of "third level" courses, that is, that focuses on special topics on the study of religion that encourage reflection on the continued significance of religious questions beyond the college years.

The "texts" of the course would consist of contemporary theories that bear on the course's basic question, as well as the lectures given by faculty and the ensuing discussions. The course would meet once a week, divided roughly into thirds, with 1/3 the lecture by guest faculty, 1/3 a discussion between students and the faculty lecturer, and 1/3 a debriefing of conversation in the light of the reading for the day. In order to foster conversation, enrollment would ideally be limited to 20 students. The course would perhaps work most fruitfully if offered once every other year, to offer time for re-tooling, recruitment of faculty to deliver lectures, refreshment of potential student population, and development of potential book project.

The Work to Be Done: Justification for Course Release

There are several tasks to be done that would justify a course release:

- Writing a grant (most likely from Bannan) for money to fund the faculty preparation of lectures;
- Gaining an understanding of some of the contemporary literature in religious and theological studies that addresses the course question;
- Making arrangements with interested faculty who would participate in the course;
- Developing a basic comprehension of some of the fundamental dynamics of the discourses concerning vocation as understood in the institutions that sponsor its study today, as well as in the history of Christian theology.

Relation to Research and Teaching

Research

I study a domain of theological research called "practical theology." My research focuses in general on the relation of theology to culture. More specifically, it focuses on how Christian theology can make reflexive and critical sense of practice in faith and culture. That is to say, it examines both how theology interprets and aids in various cultural practices, as well as investigating how theology itself is constituted by the practices of its host cultures. My most recent writing examines how theologies of practice function as spiritual exercises, and how spiritual exercises might position theologies of practice.

This proposed course is located in that research space, and not only insofar as "vocation" is a topic in literature that can justly be included in the domain of practical theology (the works of Buechner, Brian Mahan, Parker Palmer and many others on "vocation" are indeed often denominated as such), but also insofar as it examines theologically the concept and experience of vocation today as a practice, and insofar as it examines the cultural practices that establish the concept and experience of vocation today. It puts to myself, my colleagues, and my students, and implicitly to the larger university, the question of how an intellectual engagement of the concept

of vocation, hosted by theology and aimed at a public of our students who take theological and religious questions as central to making sense of life, can itself become an exercise that leads to a decision about “what to do with life.” “Vocation” becomes bound up with what one does with what must be deconstructed and reconstructed about the discourse of vocation.

The “faculty development” aspect of this course also relates to my research, insofar as I am trying to think through the theological and philosophical literature on “spiritual exercises”: the relation of people’s intellectual work to their lives and “faith” in the study of religion and theology, and not only among theologians. Being able to host various faculty speaking to this topic and being in explicit and implicit conversation with them would advance my own research by deepening my sense for the specific ways that scholars of religion and theology think about their personal “investment” in their research, that is, how they practice their “vocation” in the academy. This allows us to see how the professorial life works as a practice of teaching and research that is (possibly) related to the scholar’s own “spiritual autobiography.”

Teaching

The pedagogical space in which this course would exist can be comprehended within my own philosophy and practice of teaching. I conceive of my teaching at Santa Clara as joining departmental and university goals, insofar as my primary task is to teach for a depth of existential engagement in my students, that will be both freeing for them in some small way now, and useful for later appropriation of our studies in their lives. This means that I see the deepest sort of “curriculum,” essentially, as consisting in their passions as worked through in their cultural practices. From this pedagogical perspective, I must join the theological content of my courses to *that* deepest curriculum in such a way that theology becomes employable as a metal detector of sorts, that students can “sweep” across their lives, questions, and cultural engagements so as to help unriddle their placement in the world with the assistance of a theological sounding. Of course, I must also teach them how to take apart and repair the equipment, not to mention showing how different equipment will “register” or “locate” different treasures, dangers, and underground phenomena. This course inhabits the teaching space I have been trying to compose through my courses, by making the critical thinking of “vocation” from those committed to religious and theological questions the material for students’ existential engagement.

My teaching here has attempted to open the theological tradition to the specific and diverse questions posed by our students, and vice versa. I want to conduct this dialogue between student passions and emplacement in the world, on the one hand, and the theological tradition on the other, in a way that encourages mastery and imagination, ethical clarification, and respect for the complexity of actual practices of faith and those who undertake them. In other words, in the language of Santa Clara’s mission: “competence,” “conscience,” and “compassion”—theologically inflected. The proposed course would find itself in that rhythm, as students would continually be challenged to question their assumptions as they hear from various faculty, and faculty as they hear from students, and all would constantly be entreated to formulate their own understanding of “vocation”—as both a “discourse” and a “practice” in their lives. In short, both the content and the style of my teaching dovetail well with the proposed form and content of this course.

Placement in the Life of the Religious Studies Department

This proposal comes at a unique time in the life of the Religious Studies Department. We have been engaged in a “Theology Initiative” instituted by the University administration, which is essentially a process of shoring up Catholic theology in our Department for the good of the Department and the University with respect to the Jesuit mission of our school. This “Initiative”

has been the occasion for many conversations about how theology relates to many other disciplines of the study of religion found in our Department. Because my own theological work converses so frequently with various religious and philosophical disciplines, and also because I am committed to and curious about the role of a Religious Studies Department in relation to the Jesuit and Catholic character of Jesuit Catholic universities, I have been keen to find ways to bring our Department faculty together on various projects that ask questions which we share. This course could be an important venue for just such a project of cross-disciplinary conversation, on the shared question of vocation.

Toward this end, I was able to make a presentation about this course proposal at a recent departmental faculty meeting, as a way of gauging interest (especially since I would be relying on colleagues to help fill out the lectures from various religious-disciplinary perspectives). Without exception, the response was supportive. Some helpful questions were raised and expressions of interest offered. Immediately afterward, six faculty members confirmed that they were interested in participating in such a course. Presuming that those faculty alone remain interested and are available in the future, there are more or less already enough for a “first try” at the course.

Relation to the Ignatian Center and Bannan Institute

This course would bring diverse Religious Studies faculty into the ambit of the work of the Ignatian Center and the Bannan Institute. The lectures during the course would provide critique and reconstruction of the vocational mission that has played such a formative role in the life of the Center/Institute for the last many years. Student presentations/projects at the end could somehow be included in the life of the Center/Institute, such as having representatives of the Center/Institute present, or having student work published by the Center/Institute, or having the Center/Institute help fund the production of the book to come out of the course.

The course would aid in presenting faculty who have made “vocational” decisions and do “vocational” thinking as “whole persons,” that is, as teaching scholars whose work relates to the wider horizons of their lives. They would model how the pursuit of theological and religious questions can be part of a way of life and work. In this way, the course by its very nature encourages students to think of themselves as complex and rich beings, capable of being driven by religious and theological questions, and suited for complex and rich ways of living and working after Santa Clara.

Placement in the Life of Jesuit and Catholic Universities

The potential book to come out of the course (most likely after it had been offered a few times), would help position Santa Clara’s approach to the question of vocation in a Jesuit Catholic university as distinct from the approach being taken in other Jesuit and Catholic universities. While several Catholic universities have, with the help of Lilly, brought the issue of vocation to the foreground through theological, ministerial, and other campus venues, I know of none who have allowed religion faculty a sustained critique and reconstruction of the notion of vocation, nor done so in dialogue with the students toward whom the vocation discourse of the university is aimed. One interesting thing to be discovered along the way is what such a project as this would contribute to clarifying the identity of Jesuit and Catholic universities, and the encouragement of vocation therein. One of my colleagues has even suggested that the very best student responses to the faculty papers also be included in a potential volume. This suggestion would further contribute to the uniqueness of the Santa Clara approach to vocation.