

The Contribution of the Reformation's Concept of Vocation to Business Ethics

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Ethics has become central to management theory and practice. Nevertheless, various authors notice its incapacity, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective, to impact business decisively as long as there is no fundamental challenging of the mainstream business paradigm.² These assumptions include, among others, the economics-based conception of human nature (including self-centeredness and profit-maximization) as well as the logic of specialization that justify the business world's emancipation from the broader society's moral principles.

In order for ethics to legitimately and substantially shape the mindset and the actions within business, a re-embedding of business into both a more integrative conception of society and a more holistic understanding of human nature seems therefore needed.³ In this paper, I argue that the Reformation's concept of vocation, that points at the *sacred* dimension of *secular* activity, offers such a framework – as does also the Catholic tradition at least since *Rerum Novarum*. In these perspectives, work is no longer merely an economic activity, but also and foremost a social one (work is a service done out of neighborly love) as well as a spiritual one (work is part of one's journey with, and relation to, God).

By making of work a social and spiritual activity as well as an economic one, the Christian tradition makes two important contributions to business ethics. First, it provides business activity with a purpose that transcends its economic logic. As a result, criteria to define a 'good work' go beyond the traditional economic theory calculation and must be derived from a broader understanding of life in society. Second, in the multi-dimensional understanding of work, business actors are not merely endorsing an economic role scripted by economic theory and limited to mere economic reasoning.⁴ Rather, their business role is derived from a broader conception of life, society, and spirituality.

In the following, I first present the concept of vocation as developed in the Reformation tradition. I then discuss its two main contributions to business ethics, namely the embedding of business into a broader perspective that defines its purpose and the integration of business roles into a holistic conception of human person that provides the legitimacy and tools for individuals to integrate ethical thinking into their activities.

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² AA. VV. *Contesting the Value of "Creating Shared Value"*, "California Management Review" 56 (2014), pp. 130-153; Michaël GONIN - Guido PALAZZO - Ulrich HOFFRAGE, *Neither bad apple nor bad barrel: How the societal context impacts unethical behavior in organizations*, "Business Ethics: A European Review" 21 (2012), pp. 31-46.

³ Wim DUBBINK, *The fragile structure of free-market society. The radical implications of corporate social responsibility*, "Business Ethics Quarterly" 14 (2004), pp. 23-46.

⁴ For proponents of this position, see e.g., Milton FRIEDMAN, *The methodology of positive economics*, in ID., *Essays in Positive Economics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1953, pp. 3-43; Michael JENSEN, *Value Maximization, Stakeholder Theory, and the Corporate Objective Function*, "Business Ethics Quarterly" 12 (2002), pp. 235-256.

Reformation and Work as Vocation

The Reformation's reinterpretation of several theological concepts profoundly impacted the conception and the practice of daily life. Even though Luther was probably more conservative about societal reforms than other Reformers, he nevertheless explicitly wrote about daily activities and business in relation to a proper understanding of salvation and of God's participating in the world. Other Reformers more explicitly discussed socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues – and participated in the reshaping of society.⁵ While this has been a strong characteristic of the Reformation, Modern Catholic Social Thought has also given more weight to business activities from a Christian perspective.⁶

In the Reformers' view, God calls *each person* and *all of the person*. Consequently, all aspects of life gain in importance, relevance, and attention. While worship services still play an important role in one's spiritual life, the rest of the week is not to be despised. All our activities, given they are done for God's glory and as expression of neighborly love, are spiritually important. One does not need to be in the Church or in a monastery to please and serve God. On the contrary, the Reformers vigorously condemn a vision that would consider some activities as more sacred than others.⁷ All activities done in obedience to God are sacred. One does no longer have to look up to monks – each and everyone can be proud of his/her estate and responsibilities toward others through work. Work in the world becomes relevant because it is part of God's intention and story for the world and for humans as persons. It allows humans to reflect, even if imperfectly, God's character and God's love for the world and in the world.

This view of work is often related to the notion of calling which implies that work does not primarily result from a material need that would force us to earn a living. It finds its legitimacy, purpose, and rules of functioning not in itself neither within economic theory, but in an external source of authority – namely the one addressing this fundamental call. To understand the purpose of work, we must therefore first understand the content of God's call on human life in general. Bockmühl's concept of triple calling is relevant at this stage.⁸ For him, the first calling is a general calling addressed to all human beings – even to non-believers: In the creation narrative, God calls humanity to look that earth and humanity flourish. The second call is addressed to all believers in Jesus Christ and is a call to growth in discipleship, service, and holiness. While the second calling is

⁵ See Calvin's and Zwingli's involvement in their local sociopolitical life, as well as the more radical social movements of the Reformation, among others the Anabaptist movements.

⁶ We can mention here a series of encyclicals, from *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*. See also UNITED STATES CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 1986.

⁷ "The Devil has so blinded men that he persuaded them and let them believe that, in small things, we should not think that God is honored or served – asserting that such things are worldly. So when a man works and labors to earn his living, when a woman does house chores, when a servant also fulfills his duty, we think that God does not care for these things, and we think these are secular matters." John CALVIN, *Sermon on 1 Co 10.31-11.1 Joannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, C.A. Schwetschke, Brunswique, 1863, vol. 49, p. 696, own translation. While the current understanding of the "sacred-secular" divide, which builds on the Modern idea of specialization and secularization, did not exist in the past, the Medieval Church tended to despise 'secular' activities as they were, in her view, irrelevant to spiritual life.

⁸ Klaus BOCKMUEHL, *Recovering vocation today*, "Crux" 24 (1988), pp. 25-35.

the same for all Christians, the third call is a personal call addressed through the Holy Spirit – a call that puts each person to a unique place with unique gifts.⁹ As noted by Luther – in a perhaps too conservative and foremost too static interpretation – becoming Christian and joining the universal priesthood does not imply leaving our condition in society to join some physical community of believers. Rather, it implies, for most people, continuing their previous activity but considering it important for God since it is part of His plan for humanity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses this position in a quite extreme manner by noting that “Luther’s return from the monastery into the world, into a ‘vocation,’ is [...] the fiercest attack that has been launched and the hardest blow that has been struck against the world since the time of early Christianity.”¹⁰

Work can thus only be understood rightly if one first understands God’s purpose for humanity. Even though there are multiple interpretations on the exact meaning of the Kingdom of God, for most Christians the return of Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God are the ultimate purpose of Christian life. This implies, minimally, to live in a way that reflects and testifies of our hope in the character and mindset of the Kingdom already here and yet to come.¹¹

This conception of life, vocation, and work challenges three common misunderstandings of work as vocation that tend to prevent a full deployment of business ethics in a market economy. First, it highlights that vocation is not something we chose, but something we receive. It is not primarily a tool for *our own* flourishing (in contrast to some recent Evangelical literature on the topic),¹² but an intentional use of our specific gifts and capabilities for the flourishing *of society*.¹³ Works is therefore intimately related to the commandment of loving one’s neighbor: “If you find a work through which you do good to God or His saints or yourself, but just not to your neighbors, you must know that this work is not good.”¹⁴

Second, related to the first point and in contrast to some Puritan drifts, work is not good in itself, and has no purpose in itself.¹⁵ There must be no idolization of work, but a critical appreciation of its goodness and of its contribution to our personal and communal flourishing within God’s purpose for the world. It must remain an expression of our living faith and relation to

⁹ On the Holy Spirit and work, see Miroslav VOLF, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991.

¹⁰ *Ethics*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 291.

¹¹ See Amy L SHERMAN, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2011; Ben WITHERINGTON, *Work: a Kingdom Perspective on Labor*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011.

¹² see e.g., Arthur MILLER, *The Power of Uniqueness: How to Become Who You Really Are*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2002.

¹³ John CALVIN, *Comm. Moïse, Ex 20.15, Opera Omnia*, vol. 24, p. 669.

¹⁴ *Gospel for the 1st Advent Sunday, Adventspostile, Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, H. Böhlhaus Nachfolger, Weimar, 1883 (hereafter WA), vol. 10.I.2, p.41. See also: “Holiness is not limited to the sanctuary or to moments of private prayer; it is a call to direct our whole heart and life toward God and according to God’s plan for this world. For the laity holiness is achieved in the midst of the world, in family, in community, in friendships, in work, in leisure, in citizenship.” UNITED STATES CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Economic Justice for All*, §§ 23, 332.

¹⁵ On the Puritan drift, see e.g., Mario MIEGGE, *Vocation et travail: essai sur l’éthique puritaine*, Histoire et société 16, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1989.

God – an act of obedience that should not turn us away from obeying to God’s other commands – including those related to Sabbath and family.¹⁶

Finally, the Reformation’s understanding of vocation does not prevent specialization. On the contrary, the very fact that each individual receives specific talents and a specific calling implies that there is specialization: not everyone will be doing and thinking in the same way – yet all work is integrated in a holistic perspective. Our answer to God’s unique calling to each one of us always takes place within a community and should contribute to its flourishing by seeking a “mutual communion between men.”¹⁷ In other words, the contribution of business to the broader society cannot be an indirect effect as hoped for through the famous invisible hand of the market,¹⁸ but is at the heart of its *raison d’être*. At personal level, this implies that work can never be reduced to an economic role that would be emancipated from a broader personal identity and from external normative values – with the excuse that the link with the broader social and spiritual reality will be created implicitly through the market.

The vocation-based conception of work has two implications for business ethics. The first one relates to the legitimacy and institutional roots of business ethics: Business ethics is not to be explained, legitimized, and applied only within the business institution¹⁹ and its specific ways of legitimizing, thinking, and evaluating the good. It can – and must – relate to a broader perspective. Second, individuals gain new tools and motivational sources to handle ethical issues within the business sphere. These two implications will be discussed in turn.

The Transcendence of Work Legitimizes Business Ethics

Within society, the legitimacy of the business world, like that of any other sphere of activity, rests on its contribution to a broader purpose and on its respect of a set of general principles and constraints.²⁰ From the Reformation’s perspective, this broader purpose and this set of principles derive from God’s purpose and calling for the whole earth and for individuals on it. This does not imply that there is nothing specific to the business world. As mentioned above, vocation does not prevent specialization, but rather requires it. And specialization implies that the specific characteristics of the business world and work within it shape the way general life principles and values are to be applied in their specific context. At the same time, vocation sets boundaries to the

¹⁶ “That’s why the young men should seek, from his youth, only piety, justice, fidelity, faith, truth, and steadfastness – and work at them. Then, with such virtues, he will bear fruit and be useful to the Christian community, the common good, the fatherland, and to each and every one in particular.” Own translation from *Wie man die Jugend in guten Sitten und christlicher Zucht erziehen und lehren soll, Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, Kraus, München, 1905, vol. 5, Text #101, p. 442.

¹⁷ Jean CALVIN, *Commentaires de Jehan Calvin sur le Nouveau Testament*, Ch. Meyrueis, Paris, 1854, <http://www.unige.ch/theologie/cite/calvin.html> (28.04.2017), vol. 1, p. 524, *Mt. 25,20*.

¹⁸ See critically Michaël GONIN, *Adam Smith’s Contribution to Business Ethics, Then and Now*, “Journal of Business Ethics” 129 (2014), pp. 221-236.

¹⁹ In the sense of institutional theory, see Lynne ZUCKER, *Institutional theories of organization*, “Annual Review of Sociology” 13 (1987), pp. 443-464.

²⁰ See e.g., Guido PALAZZO - Andreas Georg SCHERER, *Corporate legitimacy as deliberation: A communicative framework*, “Journal of Business Ethics” 66 (2006), pp. 71-88.

freedom of a sphere of activity by orienting its purpose toward a greater purpose and by requiring accountability – each calling requires indeed an answer. Nineteenth century pastor, statesman, and writer Abraham Kuyper clarified this double reality by highlighting both the autonomy of each sphere *from each other* and their accountability *toward God* for their specific contribution to the common good. Specialization in this view means that the various spheres of society (e.g., Church, business, politics, education, etc.) should not interfere with each other – but they all remain submitted to God’s purpose and values. While in this view the Church loses influence on the other spheres of society, it remains that “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry ‘Mine!’”²¹

In this constellation, business activity is freed from the interference of any other institution within society – including that of the Church. At the same time, business logic must be derived from God’s purpose for business and – God being coherent – cannot be in contradiction with God’s greater purpose for earth and humanity. Two factors condition thus the autonomy of the business sphere.

First, business’ specific purpose must be defined in the perspective of the broader meaning of life and society and must be regularly reviewed in the light of God’s eternal higher purpose and principles.²² Consequently, it cannot be derived merely from economic theory and cannot be reduced to an indirect contribution as implied by arguments like *the rising tide lifts all the boats*. On the contrary, in a Reformed perspective, one must permanently ask whether the prevailing institutional setting guarantees that business activity contributes *at best* to overall Kingdom values such as peace, human flourishing, and the support of the weakest within society.²³

While the requirement of direct contribution has been contested in past decades by mainstream economic theory,²⁴ it must be remembered that this conception of business was central to many founding fathers of Modern economics. For instance, Adam Smith wrote about economics from the perspective of a moral philosopher who is tackling the issue of ensuring economic security for all.²⁵ Similarly, many current SME holders consider their business as an important part of the local community and submit their economic objectives to socially accepted principles.²⁶ More recently, social entrepreneurship also challenged the prevailing view of a solely indirect contribution of business to society. Social entrepreneurship is usually defined as the application of

²¹ For a short introduction on Kuyper, see Richard J MOUW, *Abraham Kuyper: a short and personal introduction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011, the quote is from p. 4. In Bonhoeffer’s terms: “the rule of Christ commandment over all created being is not synonymous with the rule of the Church.” (*Ethics*, p. 403).

²² While eternal (and so never to be abolished neither deformed), these principles are nevertheless to be applied and adapted to ever-changing socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts.

²³ While it would go beyond the scope of this paper, the question of the ‘width’ of this society is central in a globalized world. Does society end at my doorstep, my nation, or is my ‘neighbor’ any stakeholder that has some influence on, and is influenced by, my actions and lifestyle?

²⁴ See, prototypically, Milton FRIEDMAN, *The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits*, “New York Times Magazine” (1970), pp. 122-126.

²⁵ GONIN, *Adam Smith’s Contribution to Business Ethics*.

²⁶ Yves FASSIN, *SMEs and the fallacy of formalising CSR*, “Business Ethics: A European Review” 17 (2008), pp. 364-378.

an entrepreneurial mindset that does not primarily seek profit, but the solving of a social issue.²⁷ It does not necessarily exclude profit, but submits it to the higher objective of contributing to the flourishing of society. As such, it provides a new purpose for work and, consequently, new legitimacy criteria as well as new evaluation criteria. While financial evaluation remains important (a bankrupt social enterprise can no longer fulfill its mission), it does not represent the best way to measure the *success* of the organization – and financial success in no way implies legitimacy. Other criteria, derived from the business' social purpose, are developed by these actors to measure their performance as regards their impact not primarily on their own needs, but on society in general.²⁸

Second, the specificity of the business sphere cannot prevent the application of the more fundamental principles and values that guide any human action within society. Since business derives its purpose and legitimacy from God's fundamental call to humanity, its ethical principles are also to be derived from this call – and not from economic theory. Consequently, business ethics in a vocational perspective (Reformed or Catholic) is freed from the question of whether ethics is good business or not – and goes far beyond the reduction of ethics to some generally nice attitude and respect towards colleagues and stakeholders. Ethics in a vocational perspective permanently asks the challenging question of whether business's institutional setting represents the *best* framework for work to be an activity that respects the fundamental dignity of the worker, follows basic ethical principles, and makes a substantial contribution to the flourishing of humanity and creation in general – with special attention for the weakest within society.

In sum, the Reformed notion of vocation, which implies that work is derived from a holistic calling coming from outside the business world, offers fresh perspectives on a fundamental question of business ethics. By breaking out of the business sphere itself when discussing business ethics, it points to the possibility of seeking ethical principles that transcend the business world. As such, it challenges mainstream business ethics within management literature which usually avoids the discussion of this 'transcendental' anchorage of business ethics (transcendental here not necessarily in the meta-physical sense, but in the sense of reaching far beyond the boundaries of a given system within society).²⁹ Even though business ethics certainly contributed to much progress in the social and environmental responsibility of corporations, the lack of external anchorage often leads to a lack of fundamental legitimacy and authority, as well as of fundamental criteria, to evaluate and if necessary condemn specific business practices – and to require more fundamental changes within the institutional framework of business. As result, business ethicists remain dependent of the goodwill of business leaders. Paradoxically, business leaders, caught in roles usually reduced to their economic dimension, are not sufficiently equipped for identifying, analyzing, and solving ethical issues.³⁰ In the following section, I argue that here too, the notion of vocation provides

²⁷ J Gregory DEES, *The meaning of « social entrepreneurship »*, Stanford Graduate School of Business, Stanford, 2001, http://www.caseatduke.org/documents/dees_sedef.pdf, (14.06.2010).

²⁸ Depending on the area of activity, these criteria can include mortality rate, literacy rate, unemployment rate, pollution rate, or more qualitative measures.

²⁹ See critically DUBBINK, *The fragile structure of free-market society*.

³⁰ Peter PRUZAN, *The question of organizational consciousness: Can organizations have values, virtues and visions?*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 29 (2001), pp. 271-284.

fundamental tools and means for individuals within the business sphere to better tackle ethical issues.

The Transcendence of Work Provides Individual Tools for Ethics at Work

The Reformation's view of vocation not only challenges the institutional setting of business. It also challenges the idea that individuals should separate their business role from the values and worldviews they hold outside of the business sphere in order to become *homines economici* – agents who limit their mindset to narrowly egocentric and merely rational cost-benefit calculation.³¹ While egocentric actors always existed,³² they were never considered as the norm to be followed for society to flourish – on the contrary, they were perceived as a threat that needed to be strongly criticized. Luther's lack of empathy for merchants being robbed on business travels might be shocking from a perspective of love and mercy, but highlights the disdain that egocentric yet not necessarily illegal behavior encountered at that time. It reminds us that, while specialization might require a specific application of virtues, it does not allow for specific roles to emancipate from an overarching virtuous personal identity.

Consequently, the so-called professional calling (like, by the way, 'church-related activities')³³ is to be derived from a broader calling that includes first and foremost a spiritual answer to Christ's work at the Cross and then impacts all of one's personality traits and public or private activities. Two of these fundamental character traits are relevant in our context: love of one's neighbor and contribution to God's purpose for and on earth. For Calvin, we are put on earth by God on the condition that "each one of us seeks how he could help those in need of him."³⁴ For Luther, the Christian life "sends you to people, to those who need your work."³⁵ There is thus a strong link between serving one's neighbor through daily activity and one's worship to God. In Luther's words: "We serve God when we do what He ordained and leave what He forbade. And so the world could be filled with worship services [*Gottesdienste*]³⁶: not only in the Church, but also in the house, in the kitchen, in the cellar, in the workshop, in the fields, by townspeople and peasant, if we let ourselves be sent there."³⁷

³¹ See above.

³² Luther caricatures egocentric merchants in terms reminiscent of many current caricatures: "I don't care about my neighbor? As long as I get my profit and satisfy my greed." *Du commerce et de l'usure*, in *Oeuvres*, vol. 4, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1960, pp. 119-144, here p. 125, own translation.

³³ This is actually a strange formulation, suggesting that the 'Church' is either a building, an organization, a set of liturgies, or at best, the physical coming together of Christians at a certain point of time in the week. Yet the Church is first and foremost the *body of Christ*. Therefore, 'Church-related activity' should refer to any activity done by a Church member, regardless of when and where it is done. Christ's body does not disappear at the end of a worship service. Scattered throughout their daily activities, Church members remain the body of Christ during the week, and continue to reflect (more or less faithfully) this reality wherever they are. See R. Paul STEVENS, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999.

³⁴ CALVIN, *Sermon on Ga 6,9-11*, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 51, col. 100.

³⁵ Martin LUTHER, *Sermon of June 30, 1529*, WA, vol. 29, p. 403. See also above.

³⁶ Literally *service to God*. Luther plays thus on the double meaning of the word *service* in this expression.

³⁷ *Sermon of the 15th Sunday after Trinity*, WA, vol. 52, pp. 470-471, own translation.

Like any other daily activity, work in this perspective gains a spiritual dimension and becomes part of our spiritual journey on earth. This is true even for our smallest tasks: The servant who cooks and makes the bed of her master might rejoice, because she does not only serve her master, but also God – and God rejoices in this action.³⁸

This connection of work roles to one's broader calling represents an essential resource for ethics in the business sphere. The connection of personal work activity with a broader worldview is indeed essential for finding meaning at work. Such meaning is a condition for individuals to engage their entire person into work and bring their personal values and critical thinking into it – and thus be pro-active as regards ethical issues.³⁹ Further, the connection is important as one's character and one's personal conception of work provides precious resources to take position on ethical issues.⁴⁰ In the same way, several authors have pointed to personal virtues as an essential contributor to ethics in the business context – explicitly or implicitly suggesting that individuals must be able to, and allowed to, bring their broader personality into the workplace, especially when one must stand up against colleagues, hierarchy, or organizational routines.⁴¹ Finally, vocation implies that one's responsibility never ends at the boarder of a specific role, but is always connected to one's holistic vocation – both extending one's responsibility and offering additional legitimacy ground for a possible breaking of professional codes of conduct if required.⁴²

In sum, the vocational theology of Reformation calls individuals at work to endorse fully their life purpose and mindset as foreseen in a broader purpose for earth and humanity. This includes among others that work is to be seen as a service done in love – and not an egocentric bargaining of labor vs. wage neither as a mere material or intellectual task disconnected from one's personal emotions and deepest aspirations. Business actors (whether individuals or corporations) should further explicitly integrate notions such as the common good into their mindset⁴³ in order to be faithful representations of God's character and purpose for humanity. While being fundamentally the investment of one's personal energy and capabilities, work remains a profoundly communal task both in its purpose and in its interacting with others as part of an economic-system-within-society – also for individuals who have no leadership position, such as day laborers or factory workers.⁴⁴ Of course, work can be difficult and, in a fallen world, might sometimes have no other meaning than providing a living for one's family; nevertheless, its fundamental relational nature remains – and its

³⁸ LUTHER, *Sermon of the 15th Sunday after Trinity*, WA, vol. 52, p. 471. See also Jean CALVIN, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1955, III.vii.5.

³⁹ Michaël GONIN - Sophie SWATON, *Work meaningfulness as a key enhancer of ethical values in business*, in AA. VV., *Tradition and New Horizons: Towards the Virtue of Responsibility. Proceedings of the Fifth International Society of Business, Economics, and Ethics World Congress*, vol. 1, ISBEE, Warsaw, 2012, pp. 515-528. On the contrary, the absence of such meaning, which is called anomie, leads to a disengagement at work which in turn leads to an amoral attitude. The latter is characterized not by an explicitly immoral reasoning, but rather by an ethical apathy, a disinvestment or passive attitude towards ethical issues.

⁴⁰ Mary GENTILE, *Giving Voice to Values*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010.

⁴¹ See among others the special issue of *Business Ethics Quarterly*, vol. 22(2), 2012.

⁴² BONHOEFFER, *Ethics*, p. 293.

⁴³ See Cécile ROZUEL, *The moral threat of compartmentalization: Self, roles and responsibility*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 102 (2011), pp. 685-697.

⁴⁴ BONHOEFFER, *Ethics*, pp. 285-287.

absence of meaning for some workers is to be considered as a problem to correct if possible, and not a fatality. On this last point, Reformed theology has much to learn from Catholic Social Thought.⁴⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Reformer's view of vocation connects the business world as an institution as well as its individual actors to a broader framework that sets explicit conditions for their legitimacy and autonomy. It further provides a purpose that also serves as evaluation criterion as well as principles that define the mindset, attitude, and behavior of the individual actors. While the reference to a specific religious framework might represent an obstacle to its application to the whole of the business world in a pluralistic society, it nevertheless points to the necessity, for ethics to gain in influence in the business world, for an external source of authority and of legitimacy. Ethics cannot be limited to a self-referential assertion of economic theory, but must be related to a broader conception of society and human nature. In post-Christendom, the challenge will be to find a basis for an external reference wide enough to create a large consensus, strong enough to resist and challenge the business institution, and stable enough to avoid either normative chaos or distortion through some new absolute power. Paradoxically, the selfless engagement typical of Christian faith might be necessary to foster, within business, a strong and stable alternative to the Christian framework.

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⁴⁵ See e.g., UNITED STATES CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Economic Justice for All*. On the Reformed side, Jacques ELLUL, *Pour qui, pour quoi travaillons-nous?*, la Table ronde, Paris, 2013; Gray POEHNELL, *Hope-Filled Engagement: Creating New Possibilities in Life/Career Counselling*, Ergon Communications, Richmond, 2011.