

RESISTING YOUR BLISS: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO
THEOLOGY, VOCATION, AND WORK – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Resisting Your Bliss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Theology, Vocation, and Work
- Convener: Anita Houck, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, IN)
- Moderator: Maureen L. Walsh, Rockhurst University
- Presenters: Anita Houck, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, IN)
Reid B. Locklin, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto
- Respondent: Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos, University of Detroit Mercy

Anita Houck's paper, "The Play of Work: Virtue in Discourses of Work and Vocation," asked, "If vocation is a promising way to think about work; and if we see vocation not merely as following one's bliss but as holistic, evolving, and communal; and if we think of vocation that way through the concept of virtue; and if virtues include *eutrapelia*, which they do; then can *eutrapelia* combat the idolization of work and save us from the dehumanizing threats of neoliberalism?" *Laudato Si'* and *Economic Justice for All* are among documents that link work and vocation. However, the language of vocation can be used to anoint, rather than challenge, neoliberal accounts of work. Houck drew on the work of Edward P. Hahnenberg and the concept of *lo cotidiano* to define vocation as evolving and present throughout life, holistic rather than centered on paid labor, and directed toward community. Contemporary work on vocation productively draws on virtues, and Houck proposed including the Aristotelian and Thomistic virtue of *eutrapelia*, the virtue of play and good humor, further developed by Hugo Rahner. While it cannot vanquish neoliberalism, *eutrapelia* can encourage social bonds, foster other virtues, apply ethical standards to humor, renew religious imaginations through the image of divine play, and call for a world in which all have access to leisure and laughter as aspects of the good life.

Reid B. Locklin's paper, "Effort, Election and Disgust: Vocational Discernment in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* and *Spiritual Exercises*," opened with an influential verse of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.2.12) that expresses a significant aspect of Advaita. There, a seeker recognizes that no effortful action (*karma*) can lead to liberation—"What's made can't make what's unmade!"—and rightly responds with disgust (*nirveda*), understood by Śaṅkara as "dispassion" or "detachment." Disgust at effortful action—including ritual action—is crucial in awakening desire for liberation and turning the disciple to the renunciation that liberation requires. From this perspective, "the faithful performance of Vedic rituals has more in common with digging ditches and trading stocks than with the pursuit of *brahman*," "the ultimate ground of all reality." This emphasis on disgust or detachment remains in later interpretations, including Anantanand Rambachan's view that, given an appropriate sense of detachment, one can accomplish renunciation within a worldly vocation. Locklin contrasted this approach with later European views of vocation that, driven as much by economics as theology, conferred sacred value on secular activity; the *upaniṣad* sees ritual activity as, in effect, secular, incapable of reaching the divine. In Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, the "indifference" required for discernment is similar to detachment in the *upaniṣad*. Moreover, since election is appropriate to all choices in life, Ignatius also

“secularizes” vocation. In Matthew Ashley’s reading of Pope Francis, the reflection on sin and mercy in the first two weeks of the *Exercises* leads to a gratitude for God’s mercy that functions like disgust or detachment. In both texts, a powerful recognition of the limits of human action is essential before the disciple can turn fully toward the transcendent.

Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos’s response connected Houck’s discussion of the universal and particular vocations to Pope Francis’s reference to “the call to holiness that the Lord addresses to each of us, . . . each in his or her own way,” and to joy and humor as signs of holiness (*Gaudete et Exsultate*); and to Gemma Tulud Cruz’s plenary address at this convention, which demonstrates that rest and leisure are essential for both individuals and the common good and cannot be reduced to mere self-care. With Locklin, she noted the five hundredth anniversary of Ignatius’s “cannonball experience,” observing that Ignatius’s conversion required two steps: first “resisting the bliss” of courtly life, then at Manresa recognizing the limits of his own efforts, seeking detachment and indifference, and surrendering his will to God’s will to act through him. Noting that both papers pointed to interreligious insights, and considering the religious and cultural diversity of Catholic colleges and universities, she asked how Catholic educational institutions might draw on the rich heritages of their founders to guide graduates toward lives of discernment in which “work has the possibility of being part of, and not all of, how they imagine the good life.” She noted challenges such as “the din and demands of neoliberalism,” the monetization and devaluation of the humanities, and pressure from the accreditation of professional programs. She recommended the Examen as a way to develop virtues and move past fleeting invitations to bliss in favor of “consolations that linger.” She suggested that *eutrapelia*, beyond requiring rest from work, could offer the ability “to experience work as play” and “save us from the temptation to surrender our understanding of work to neoliberalism.”

Maureen L. Walsh moderated a discussion whose topics included methodology in comparative theology; the paradoxical possibility of receiving oneself only through renouncing ego; theological anthropology and the move from interiority to community; and the possibilities of incorporating *eutrapelia* within work.

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