

Vocation vs. Narcissus

Uwe Siemon-Netto, Ph.D., D.Litt.

Abstract: *The mounting narcissist mindset is an acute threat to the survival of ordered society in North America and Western Europe, for it focuses man's attention entirely on the "Me." This chapter presents the specifically Lutheran doctrine of vocation as the most effective antidote against this destructive Zeitgeist because it directs the individual to the "You," the other person, and therefore away from the "Me." The doctrine of vocation stresses the priesthood of all believers in the temporal world, where all have a call from God to serve their neighbor in all their everyday endeavors. By doing this in a spirit of love Christians render the highest possible service to God. This concept differs starkly from Roman Catholicism's sacramental view that vocation is limited to the ordained ministry or monastic life. It is also in variance with the pietistic and evangelical position that the Christian is to avoid the sinful world altogether or be "sanctified" by working as a missionary abroad. Luther, by contrast, has a much more down-to-earth message: He teaches that Christians, being assured of their salvation by grace through faith in Christ's redemptive work for them on the cross, are to roll up their sleeves and get involved in the secular realm without succumbing to its ways. In their secular vocations they become God's partners in the maintenance of the world and in the ongoing process of creation.*

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If the acerbic Max Weber were alive today how would he assess the manner in which narcissism as a new form of religion is shaping contemporary man? Over a century ago, Weber exposed the link between internalized religious doctrines and the behavior of individuals, communities, and nations. He famously discovered that the spirit of American capitalism was rooted in the post-Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, notably in Article Three of the Westminster Confession of 1647, which states, "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and other foreordained to everlasting death." Weber rated this as a doctrine of "extreme inhumanity" ... [because] the Father in heaven of the New Testament, so human and understanding, who rejoices over the repentance of a sinner as a woman over the lost piece of silver she has found, is gone."²

Weber reminded his readers of John Milton's famous comment regarding the Westminster Confession, which is still part of the Presbyterian, Baptist, and many independent creeds in America: "Though I may be sent to Hell for it, such a God will never command my respect." Weber found that this statement of faith resulted in the practice of American Protestants of measuring their state of grace by their success in accumulating assets to the glory of God. Thus capitalism emerged, according to this father of sociology of religion, a German agnostic.

Me and my Jesus, Me and my Toyota

Weber died in 1920 and therefore is unable to censure my tongue-in-check assertion that his findings might not only apply to bona fide religious doctrine but to idolatrous belief systems as well. Then again he might even agree with me if he were to ponder today's *Narcissism Epidemic*,³ which surely ranks as a popular faith movement the practitioners of which endeavor to sit on their own altars and worship themselves. Perhaps Weber would argue that this epidemic's roots reach as far back as the Westminster Confession. He wrote,

The question, *Am I of the elect?*, must sooner or later have arisen for every believer and forced all other interest into the background. And how can I be sure of this state of grace?⁴

In other words, personal fate in eternity became the believer's overriding concern; the "Me" mattered first and foremost, not the "You," not the neighbor on whom both the Old and the New Testaments focus the believer (q.v., Lev. 19:18 and Matt. 22:29). It follows from Weber's theory that over the centuries the habit of checking for "signs" to ascertain one's state of grace, signs such as material success, has warped culture. It surely contributed to today's Me syndrome, even though those afflicted by it are generally unaware of its Westminster roots. Suffice it to watch American television for a single day to find ample support for this contention. There is, on the one hand, the relentlessly repeated assertion by commentators, "We are the most generous people on earth." Whether factually true or false, this claim reminds one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poignant observation,

A desire to be good for its own sake, as an end in itself, so to speak, or as a vocation in life, falls victim to the irony of unreality. The genuine striving for good now becomes the self-assertiveness of the prig.⁵

On the other hand, television commercials inexorably reflect the influence of happy-faced American Protestant testimonials. However, instead of "Me and my Jesus," radiant faces now proclaim their quasi-religious exultation over banalities: "Me and my Toyota," "Me and my indigestion pills," "Me and my vacation on the Carnival Cruise Line," and, at one unforgettable moment, "Me and my cure of athlete's foot." Surely, Westminster is one of the Me culture's progenitors.

The empty vessel spirituality

That said, it is time to consider the Narcissism Epidemic's more recent and sinister lineage. Owing to modern mass communications, the Me mindset has had sufficient time to

evolve as a belief system of at least three generations: first the Baby Boomers, then Generation X, and now the Millennials whom Joel Stein describes most eloquently in a *Time Magazine* cover story titled, *The Me Me Me Generation*. Stein calls the present time as an “era of the quantified self.” He goes on to say:⁶

Millennials are a generation mostly of teens and 20-somethings known for constantly holding up cameras, taking pictures of themselves, and posting them online. They are narcissistic, overconfident, entitled, and lazy. Their self-centeredness could bring about the end of civilization as we know it...⁷

Referring to the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking* (TTCT), Stein recounts an unsettling result for the Millennial Generation:

Scores on tests of empathy... fell sharply, likely because of both the lack of face-to-face time and higher degrees of narcissism. Not only do Millennials lack the kind of empathy that allows them to feel concerned for others, but they have trouble even intellectually understanding others’ point of view.⁸

This dearth of empathy among young Americans uncannily brings to mind a troubling historical detail: It was a similar personal deficiency that motivated Heinrich Himmler, the founder and leader of the Nazi SS, to make the destruction of Christianity his ultimate goal. Among the aspects Himmler hated most about Christianity, according to his biographer Peter Longerich,⁹ was its principle of mercy, and mercy is surely a standard presupposing an individual’s sense of empathy.

If Max Weber lived today he might well attribute such warped attitudes and behavioral patterns to the phenomenon that narcissism has taken root as a pseudo religion in Western societies. One case in point is the frightening statistic that 98 percent of the 1.2 million abortions in the United States every year are perpetrated for selfish reasons of “personal choice,” and not even on medical or psychological grounds such as rape, incest, and a diagnosed danger to the mother’s life or health.¹⁰ This means that by the “personal choice” of one or more individuals (mother, father, physicians) other individuals (babies) can be legally liquidated even though their DNA shows that they are complete human beings no different from others except that they are not fully grown. Thus in a free and democratic society, a person can decide that another person’s life is *lebensunwert* (not worth living), to use a term coined by the Nazis; moreover such a personal decision rests on two conditions that in the healthier societies of the past might have fallen under the rubric of malice and aforethought, die criteria of murder in the first degree. They

- are: 1. Is the other person's continued existence convenient or inconvenient to his or her parents?
2. Is he or she young enough to be disposed of?

Other stark results of the narcissism epidemic are the alarming erosion of ethics in politics, finance, jurisprudence, and the media, and the glorification of homosexual behavior, a practice deemed *para physin* (against nature) since Plato's days, culminating in the acceptance of the legalization of same-sex marriage by a majority of Americans and Western Europeans, a trend Kirill I, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, chastised as an "apocalyptic symptom."¹¹

It is the mark of the Me Me Me Generation that it eschews structure and therefore authority. "Millennials aren't trying to take over of the establishment; they are growing up without one," Joel Stein writes. This corresponds to what Thomas Klie, a professor of practical theology at Rostock University, has found in a study of the burgeoning esotericism among young Germans. He reports that while esotericists do affirm the existence of a "creative principle" larger than the individual himself, this doesn't mean much:

While the Christian believes in a Creator God to whom he owes his life, esotericists cannot bear the thought of any aspect of their existence being beyond their control. . . . In esotericism the believer is his own creator.¹²

Thus while in their minds the divine might be greater than the Me, the Me nevertheless trumps the divine. Klie defines this worldview as "container spirituality" in the sense that spirituality merely provides an empty vessel ready to be filled by the believer himself according to his whim. It is hard to think of a more accurate definition of the narcissism epidemic in the West, a plague against which a backlash seems to be emerging on both sides of the Atlantic.

My successor as director of the Center for Lutheran Theology and Public Life in Capistrano Beach, California, Prof. Jeffrey Mallinson of Concordia University Irvine, reports that today's student generation is haunted by "a sense of abandonment." The same applies to their contemporaries in Europe. The hundreds of thousands of young Frenchmen demonstrating in the summer of 2013 against their country's legalization of homosexual "marriages" angrily charged their parents' generation, the European equivalent of the U.S. baby boomers, "You have left us without any values." Matching this, German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk told the editors of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in Switzerland, "We are living in a state of permanent improvisation."¹³ He said this in a video interview appropriately titled, *Zerbricht unsere Gesellschaft?* (Is our society falling apart?). To put my personal spin to this: A Me-centered society devoid of a sense

of empathy living in a state of permanent improvisation, not passing on values and abandoning its young, has only one place to go: *Tohuwabohu*, the chaos that preceded Creation. Hence one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's most evocative observations in his Prison Letters seems as timely today as it was under the Hitler regime in Germany 70 years ago:

One may ask whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet.¹⁴

“Do as Thou Wilt” – Do your own thing

It might seem far-fetched, but the point could be made that today's narcissism epidemic with its lack of empathy is to some extent the fruit of (or influenced by) the New Age religion founded by the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) who took pride in calling himself “the wickedest man in the world.” Crowley was the author of *The Book of the Law*, which he claimed had been revealed to him by Aiwass, a communicator of Horus, the Egyptian God of war, in a hotel room in Cairo in April 1904. The message Crowley received sounds like straight out of Himmler's textbook. According to Crowley, Aiwass told him,

We are not for the poor and sad. Beauty and strength, leaping laughter and delicious languor, force and fire are of us... We have nothing to do with the outcast and the unfit... Let them die in their misery... stamp down the wretched and the weak... Pity not the fallen! ... I console not, I hate the consoled and the consoler ... I want blasphemy, murder, rape, revolution, anything, bad or good, but strong.¹⁵

The book's central proclamation is: “Do as Thou Wilt. This is the whole of the law.”

Timothy Leary, the drug guru of the 1960s, told television interviewers before his death in 1996,

I have been an admirer of Aleister Crowley. I think that I'm carrying on much of the work that he started over a hundred years ago ... He was in favor of finding yourself, and [proclaimed], “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.” ... It was a very powerful statement. I'm sorry he isn't around now to appreciate the glories he started.

These interviews can still be found on the Internet. Leary reminded his audiences that the maxim of the 1960s, “Do your own thing,” was merely a modern rendering of “Do as Thou wilt, this is the whole of the law,” (a slogan R. Ron Hubbard, founder of the Church of Scientology, also adopted). “Do your own thing” has of course remained a rallying cry of the Me and the Me Me Me generations; it is the creed of the narcissists and contrary to Jewish and Christian

doctrines admonishing the believer to focus on the neighbor rather than himself.

Switching from “Me” to “You”

In this eon of extreme self-centeredness where even the most basic civilities such as using one’s blinker before changing lanes on a freeway or returning telephone calls when such a courtesy does not seem to promise personal gain are falling by the wayside, Christ’s commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matt. 22:39, KJV), appears curiously countercultural. Yet this admonition, which ranks second only to Jesus’ words, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37), provides the very foundation for the most forceful antidote against the Me Epidemic I am championing in this chapter: Martin Luther’s doctrine of vocation, which says that in all their earthly endeavors Christians are called to serve their neighbors out of love. In so doing the Christian renders the highest possible service to God and becomes a member of the universal priesthood of all believers. It is one of the most attractive features of Lutheran theology in that the priesthood is thus not limited to the ordained ministry, as in Roman Catholicism, and that it encourages the believer to become active in the world without succumbing to its sinful ways.

In his commentary on Genesis 29:1-3, Luther writes,

[B]ecause we dwell and live in the flesh, for this reason the flesh must be cared for, but without sin. The state and domestic affairs must be administered, since we are not yet in Paradise. Nor are we like the angels; but we live in the flesh, in a natural life which has need of food, drink, clothing, house, offspring, and agriculture. There is also a need of political government and of protection against evil men. Therefore it is necessary to retain those two parts of this life. They are support and protection. The home supports and cherishes children and the household. The state defends and protects all these.¹⁶

“Glorious Works He does through us,” Luther exults, explaining in detail man’s divine assignment, all “completely secular and heathenish works,” such as milking cows, serving in the military, working as a household servant, parenting, but also enjoying himself:

If the person believes and adheres to the Word and does not persecute the Word but gives thanks to it, then you should do nothing else than what Solomon says (Eccles. 9:7-9): “Go eat your bread with enjoyment, drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has approved what you do. Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy the life with the wife whom you love, all the days in your vain life which He has given you under the sun.” What more could be said more pleasantly, more delightfully, and more clearly?¹⁷

Like other down-to-earth verities, Luther's liberating doctrine of vocation is often badly understood. I have even heard leaders of faithful Lutheran congregations in the American Midwest ask me, "Is this actually Christian?" Luther himself was exasperated by this widespread lack of appreciation of the importance of work in everyday life: "Not all men are able to understand this. Not even Erasmus saw it."¹⁸ Strangely, the most incomprehensible aspect of Luther's message seems to be the most comforting: man does not even have to make any special effort to serve God by serving his neighbor. In Lutheran theology, vocation is understood as a state and not as works. This means that the Christian does not serve his neighbor *per vocationem* (through the exercise of his vocation), thus perhaps earning brownie points in heaven or collecting proof of being one of the elect in the sense of the Westminster Confession. To the contrary, it is *in vocatione* – in the ordinary performance of his function as plumber, husband, wife, child, cook, soldier, student, politician, prince, or subject – that the believer serves God by serving his neighbor lovingly.¹⁹

The German word for one's vocation or professional occupation is *Beruf*. Luther coined this term after translating a verse from the book Wisdom of Sirach, or *Ecclesiasticus*, which is accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholics and Orthodox but not the Protestants. This text says,

Stand by your agreement and attend to it, and grow old in your work. Do not wonder at the works of a sinner, but trust in the Lord and keep at your job; for it is easy in the sight of the Lord to make the poor rich suddenly, in an instant.²⁰

Sociologists of religion have long attributed the excellence of products from Lutheran regions to the fact that through the generations their citizens have internalized the *Berufungslehre*, or doctrine of vocation, Luther developed from this text. Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Volkswagen, Porsche, Saab, Volvo, and Peugeot are among the best-known brand names testifying to this Lutheran ethic; in a newspaper interview the 1980s, Roland Peugeot, the former CEO of the automobile manufacturing company bearing his name, explained the high quality of its cars with his family's Lutheran ethic. The Peugeots hail from Montbéliard in Eastern France that used to be part of the German duchy of Württemberg the official religion of which was Lutheran.

The Christian as a dual citizen

All this is perhaps best understood if positioned within the larger framework of the aspect of Lutheran theology that pertains to the interface between the spiritual and secular aspects of human existence. This theology is often referred to as the two kingdoms doctrine, or the law-and-gospel dialectic, or in the words of the late U.S. theologian William Lazareth, God's two-fold rule in the world. This concept is central to Luther's teachings and spelled out in Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession. In World War II and its aftermath, some Reformed theologians and high-church Anglicans misinterpreted the two kingdoms doctrine maliciously as some form of latter-day Gnostic dualism or, worse, the source of Lutheran quietism that conditioned German Protestants to cowardice in the face of Nazi tyranny. These charges were inaccurate, for this doctrine is entirely grounded in Scripture.

Based on Christ's words to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), Luther distinguished between two realms, both belonging to the same God but governed in two different ways. On the one hand, there is the spiritual realm, which Luther named *das Reich zur Rechten* (the kingdom to the right) because it is in this realm where Christ "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). Here God has revealed himself in Christ (*Deus revelatus*). This realm is infinite. It will ultimately be completed in the *eschaton* when there will be no more sin and therefore no need for forgiveness.

The temporal realm is called *Reich zur Linken* (kingdom to the left). It will eventually disappear. Though sinful it is nonetheless a reality God will not allow to slip from his ultimate control. Here He plays, in Luther's words, *Mummenschanz* (a masquerade). God remains hidden (*Deus absconditus*). He reigns indirectly through his "masks" (*larvae Dei*), meaning creation in general, but human beings in particular in this context. The non-Christian is a citizen only of the worldly kingdom, while the Christian holds dual citizenship of both realms, which, though distinct of each other, are not separated by some kind of spiritual Berlin Wall. Both realms interconnect and serve each other: The right-hand kingdom serves the secular world by supporting and protecting it in the Gospel, whereas the temporal world is a bastion enabling the Gospel to be preached.

The two realities mirror each other in fascinating paradoxes, for instance:

- **Man:** In the right-hand kingdom, only the believer is a member of Christ's body. In the left-hand realm, man is God's mask and cooperator, whether he is a believer or not; he is

God's partner in the *creatio continua*, or ongoing process of creation, by procreating, tilling the soil, inventing new tools or medicines, and perhaps ultimately colonizing other planets.

- **The Church:** As the Body of Christ, she is an integral part of His right-hand kingdom, but she is also present as a corporate citizen in the secular world, where she maintains real estate, renders charitable and medical services, pays ministers and other employees, and occasionally must fight lawsuits.
- **Sinners and perpetrators:** In the right-hand realm repentant sinners are forgiven. In the left-hand kingdom, perpetrators are punished, whether they are Christians or not.
- **Governing principle:** Right-hand kingdom: the Gospel. Left-hand kingdom: the Law of Moses and natural law (cf., Rom. 2:15: "What the law requires is written on their hearts").
- **Mode of government:** Right-hand kingdom: grace, love, and faith. Left-hand realm: natural reason, which, though under sin, is nevertheless a gift from God to help man in his task to maintain order in the world. Luther called reason "the heart and the empress of the laws; [it is] the fountain whence all laws come and flow."²¹ "In temporal matters," Luther said, "man . . . needs no other light than reason. This is why God does not teach in Scripture how to build houses, make clothes, get married, conduct war and the like . . . [F]or all this the natural light is sufficient."²²
- **Rulers:** Right-hand kingdom: Christ. Left-hand kingdom: emperors, kings, presidents, prime ministers, governors, mayors, parliaments, and voters. Secular rulers need not be saints. "It is sufficient for the emperor to possess reason,"²³ Luther wrote. In his Genesis Lectures he made one of history's most celebrated theological statements on the topic of God and temporal power. It has been quoted around the world for centuries, except in recent American presidential election campaigns where it would have been most helpful. In the late fifteen thirties, Luther told his students at Wittenberg University: "[D]eus per bonos et malos principes gubernat orbem terrarum" (Through good and bad princes God governs the whole earth).²⁴
- **Social structure:** Right-hand kingdom: all are equal. Left-hand kingdom: all unequal; there are superiors and subordinates.

- **Activity:** Right-hand kingdom: resting and feasting with God and praising Him. Left-hand kingdom: all secular vocations, beginning with the vocation of being a toddler and culminating in the vocation of a helpless person on his or her deathbed to lovingly allow caretakers to exercise their vocation in love.

Vocation: an expression of discipleship

Both Christians and non-Christians have their assignments, according to Luther. In the case of the Christians, however, their vocations in the temporal realm cannot be separated from the Gospel. Citing the example of Peter leaving his nets at the Sea of Galilee in response to Jesus' call, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

For Luther, on the contrary, a Christian's secular vocation is justified only in that one's protest against the world is thereby most sharply expressed. A Christian's secular vocation receives new recognition from the gospel only to the extent that it is carried on while following Jesus.²⁵

These two sentences are an excellent example of the paradoxical relationship between Christ and culture: On the one hand, the Christian lives in this sinful world where he serves his neighbors in love in his vocation. On the other hand, he must never lose sight of the fact that he does so in the full awareness that he is a disciple. Like so the many aspects of Luther's theology of God's two-fold reign, pseudo-Lutherans have a history of distorting in an infuriating manner, as Bonhoeffer's legendary outburst in *Discipleship* about "cheap grace" shows:

[In the minds of these people] Christian life consists of my living in the world and like the world, my not being permitted to be different from it—for the sake of grace—but my going occasionally from the sphere of the world to the sphere of the church, in order to be reassured there of the forgiveness of my sins. I am liberated from following Jesus—by cheap grace, which has to be the bitterest enemy of discipleship, which has to hate and despise true discipleship. Grace as presupposition is grace at its cheapest; grace as a conclusion is costly grace. It is appalling to see what is at stake in the way in which a gospel truth is expressed and used.²⁶

Cheap grace comes of course under the rubric of the Me culture in that it affirms the "Do as Thou Wilt" approach to everyday life, compounding this abomination of doctrine by helping itself freely and selfishly to the grace displayed in the spiritual supermarket. There is no qualitative difference here between this false religiosity and the empty vessel spirituality Thomas Klie has found among German esotericists. If anything, the former is worse because it makes God an accomplice in the act of turning the Christian faith on its head. The blasphemous

decision by the Church of Sweden to conduct same-sex marriages – the bishop of Stockholm is a lesbian “married” to a female priest – comes to mind, as does the permission by most regional churches in Germany to allow active homosexual pastors to practice sodomy in parish-owned parsonages. Cheap grace is the rejection of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation, which is always linked to Luther’s theology of the cross that states that in this world (the left-hand kingdom), the Christian picks up his cross and follows Jesus. As the Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren explained,

To understand what is meant by the cross of vocation we need to remember that vocation is ordained by God to benefit, not him who fulfills the vocation, but the neighbor who, standing alongside, bears his own cross for the sake of others.²⁷

The temporal realm being a stage for God’s masquerade, it is the place where all social classes, professions, and trades must bear the cross of vocation. As Luther said,

If I had the choice, I would select the most sordid and rustic work of a Christian peasant or maid in preference to all the victories of Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar, etc. Why? Because God is here, and the devil is there. This is the essential difference. The material of the works is the same, but the distinguishing characteristics and the difference are infinitely diverse. For God says: “The works and domestic duties of this woman, namely, that she sweeps the house and obeys the housewife, please me.” For “He has regarded the humility of his handmaiden” (Luke 1:28), where there are no great and glorious works except that at home she humbly discharges the duties of a maid, whether in the kitchen or among the cattle.²⁸

To the naïve onlooker, the cross of vocation is often hard to fathom, Luther allows. In his treatise, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, he wrote:

Now slaying and robbing do not seem to be works of love. A simple man therefore does not think it is a Christian thing to do. In truth, however, even this is a work of love. For example, a good doctor sometimes finds so ... terrible a sickness that he must amputate ... a hand, foot, ear, eye, to save the body. Looking at it from the point of view of the organ that he amputates, he appears to be a cruel ... man; but looking at it from the point of view of the body, which the doctor wants to save, he ... does a good and Christian work... In the same way, when I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked... it seems [a]... work completely contrary to Christian love. But when I think of how it protects the good and ... preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace, then I see how precious and godly this work is... If the sword were not on guard to preserve peace, everything in the world would be ruined because of lack of peace.²⁹

Monkey business and tomfoolery

This seems clear enough, yet it fails to convince even some of the most prominent Lutheran theologians whose minds have been polluted by the simplistic *Zeitgeist* of pacifism and political correctness that has been permeating liberal Protestantism on both sides of the Atlantic since the “make love not war” ideology of the nineteen sixties. On New Year’s Day 2010, Rev. Margot Kässmann, then chairman of the state-related Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), ascended into to massive pulpit of the rebuilt baroque *Frauenkirche* in Dresden to rail against the deployment of 4,800 German soldiers to Afghanistan, a topic on which to opine she was certainly not vocationally equipped. As German troops were dying or getting wounded in their struggle against terrorists in the Hindu Kush, she endeavored to turn the congregation’s opinion against their sacrifice saying, “Nothing is good in Afghanistan.” Soon thereafter, Dr. Kässmann resigned for the wrong reason: not false doctrine but driving her luxury staff car under the influence of alcohol. Now she labors as the EKD’s “ambassador for the Reformation’s 500th anniversary in 2017.”

This makes one think of one perplexing aspect of the otherwise perspicuous doctrine of vocation. On the one hand, while insisting that vocation is inseparably tied to discipleship, Luther did state that God creates from among non-Christians outstanding people to help Him run the temporal world. Luther called these personalities, *Wundermänner* or *virī miraculosi*. This term sounds so odd that it is rarely discussed in Anglo-Saxon theology. In fact, in the English-language version of Luther’s commentary on Psalm 101, where this notion is discussed in great detail, no satisfactory translation has been found for *Wundermann*. This word, peculiar even to modern German ears, is circumscribed either as “wondrous man,” or “extraordinary leader,” or “outstanding man.” A *Wundermann* owes his name to the divine miracle (*Wunder*) of his appearance. He is graced with a particular *afflatus*, a whiff of the Spirit; he is to the secular world what the prophet is to the spiritual realm: He is a special gift of God. Luther wrote,

Some have a star before God; these He teaches Himself and raises them up as He would have them. They are also the ones who have smooth sailing on earth and so-called good luck and success. Whatever they undertake prospers; even if all the world were to work against it, it would still be accomplished without hindrance. For God, who puts it into their heart and stimulates their intelligence and courage, also puts it into their hands that it must come to pass and must be carried out; that was the case with Samson, David, Jehoiada, and others. He occasionally provides such men not only among His own people but also among the godless and the heathen; and not only in the ranks of the nobility but also among the middle

classes, farmers, and laborers.³⁰

Luther specifically mentioned King Cyrus of Persia, the Athenian statesman and general Themistocles, Alexander the Great, and the Roman emperors Augustus and Vespasian as examples.

On the other hand, Luther warned that Satan seeks to copy God wherever he can (and here the Dresden homily comes to mind):

But so things happen in the world: If God builds a church, the devil comes and builds a chapel beside it, yes, even countless chapels. And so here: If God raises up an outstanding man (*Wundermann*), either among the spiritual or the secular authorities, the devil brings his monkeys and simpletons to market to imitate everything. And yet it all amounts to monkey business and tomfoolery.³¹

Called to bear the cross of a voter

What seems to make Luther's doctrine on vocation, for all its clarity, so hard to grasp is its universality, for it covers the total spectrum of a Christian's life on earth, including political life in a democracy, an area in which in the United States Lutherans have been notoriously disinclined to participate as fully as others. This reluctance is all the more lamentable as in election campaign after election campaign the theological discourse about faith and society becomes increasingly befuddled and banal, with few churchmen and even fewer media commentators competent enough to speak about these issues with authority. Yet solid guidelines for this have existed ever since the Reformation almost 500 years ago, and no branch of the Christian church is better equipped than the Lutheran to drive home the point that in a democracy, Romans 13:1 ("There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God") applies to the voter as much as to elected officials, perhaps even more so because the voters are the sovereigns of a democratic nation.

As Wingren would have said, the voter bears the cross of a vocation, and it is a heavy cross indeed. The voter has the assignment from God to appoint sheriffs, councilmen, and presidents. In the sense of Romans 13, this makes voters *leitourgoi gar theou* (Rom 13:6), or God's servants in His temporal realm. The Greek word, *leitourgoi*, implies that they are his liturgists in the world, the secular counterparts of the liturgists serving God with prayer and hymns of praise in the right-hand kingdom of Christ. It is staggering that most Christians, many Lutherans included, do not seem to have an inkling of chilling implications of this theological verity for the democratic system: Being called to serve their neighbor, they most focus on the

singular and plural “you,” and not the “me” and “us,” when casting their votes. This precludes any motivation that for selfish ideological reasons would exclude any segment of one’s fellow human beings, notably the most vulnerable: the unborn. Ignoring their right to live amounts, from the perspective of Lutheran doctrine, to vocational malpractice on the part of an electorate considering itself Christian. Seen this way, the case of *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, was, in Luther’s inimitable imagery, “monkey business and tomfoolery.” It is gratifying to know that it was a Lutheran, William Rehnquist, who wrote the dissenting opinion on this deadly ruling.

In a democracy, the Christian electorate does not have the option of saying, “It wasn’t me,” when things go wrong as a result of their choice. Germans who elected Hitler in 1933 didn’t get away with this excuse. Granted, making the right choice presupposes that the voter is comprehensively informed before going to the polls. This has become increasingly difficult in an age where populist rhetoric pollutes airwaves and printed columns and where the Me epidemic has ravaged journalism to the extent that the ever-curious reporter of old who considered it his vocation to ask questions vicariously for his readers or listeners has been replaced by “self-important pundits,” as publisher Rupert Murdoch once called them before succumbing himself to this malady by making his television networks a playground for such pundits.

This does not free the consumers of media products from their own vocation to inform themselves comprehensively before making decisions affecting their communities and nations. Vast amounts of information, good as well as bad, are available on the Internet, in books and scholarly journals. It is time-consuming to find and to digest these materials, but they are there. In its role as a corporate citizen of the temporal realm, the Church has a pivotal role to play in this respect. Not that preachers should ever endorse any political candidate from the pulpit, but there is no theological reason why the Church should not, as a service of love to the world, create well-stocked, non-partisan reading rooms and give high priority to teaching responsible journalism as a Christian vocation at its high schools, colleges, and universities. Moreover, the Church must admonish its members to go to the polls in order to perform their duty as sovereigns of their nation. A Christian failing to do so for fear of voting wrongly resembles the useless servant who kept the pound entrusted to him laid up in a napkin (Luke 19:20). Finally, it is also an important aspect of the doctrine of vocation that where man errs in exercising his divine vocation in the world, God will ultimately put things right.

Vocation as a tool for apologetics

“You can judge the quality of their faith from the way they live,” said Tertullian of Carthage (160-225 A.D.), an early Christian apologist. This is perhaps the most basic argument in favor of the doctrine of vocation as a means of Christian apologetics. There is an intriguing aura about the mother, scientist, farmer, statesman, car mechanic, soldier, or reporter serving their neighbor while exercising their ordinary vocation, not in a narcissistic or greedy manner, but out of love. It triggers curiosity. It makes bystanders wonder: “What motivates you, makes you act that way?” This gives the believer an opportunity to talk about his or her faith.

It is, moreover, perfectly possible to discuss the superiority of a sense of vocation over narcissism in entirely secular settings without being accused of violating the hysterical taboos in contemporary America against “spreading religion.” In the spring of 2011, the superintendent of schools of three adjoining counties in Missouri invited me to address more than 500 students and their teachers in a public school auditorium. I asked a random group of four or five students to join me on the stage and said to them: “Suppose an elderly lady collapses in front of you on the sidewalk. What do you do: Step over her and walk on? Ask her if you can help and then move on if she doesn’t answer?”

“No!” said the kids in unison. Then they debated how to make that woman comfortable and whom to call: The police? A doctor? An ambulance?” I asked, “Why not just move on?” They replied, “That wouldn’t right. She is a human being like the rest of us. She needs help.” I pressed on: “Why do you feel that way?” One by one they responded, “It’s like helping a neighbor extinguish the fire when his house is burning.” What followed was a lengthy discussion between teenagers about the normal person’s innate drive to help a neighbor in need, innate like hunger and thirst. “You know what this is?” I told them, “It’s a vocation.” They understood instantly. Yet we still had not broached the subject of God, the one who is doing the calling.

Then I tried to find out what they wanted to be when they grew up. One wanted to be a journalist, one a doctor, one a farmer, one an electrician. When I probed why they were dreaming of these vocations, they all answered that they wanted to serve their fellow man in these vocations. After that we debated these vocations. It turned out that these very average young people thought that being of service was joyful, as one of them said. Finally I asked them, “Do you know what the word, vocation, means?” They answered: “Calling.” So I said, “If we have a calling somebody must be doing the calling. I as a Lutheran Christian believe that we have this

calling from God. Some of you might have different ideas. A secular school auditorium is not supposed to be the place to discuss this. But you may ask your pastor, your parents, your grandparents, or wait until class is over, and we'll talk about this outside this building." We met after school and talked at great length. Afterwards, the high school principal told me: "Come back anytime you want. This is good stuff."

These were not yet expressions of vocational thinking in the sense of discipleship, for these young people, in general badly or not at all catechized, were not aware what this meant. But the students' remarks showed that in a healthy environment young people seem to have an innate wish to serve their neighbors. I posit that this desire is part of what Luther called the *lex inscripta*, the natural law written upon man's heart, according to the apostle Paul (Rom. 2:15). And this is in keeping with the findings of the St. Louis-based French anthropologist Pascal Boyer who wrote in a Christmas edition of the German weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*: "Religious thinking seems to be an integral part of our standard cognitive equipment."³²

This is the solid theology on which Lutherans must build when championing the doctrine of vocation as the most effective remedy against the narcissism epidemic, provided they ever rise from their slumber. Billy Graham called Lutheranism famously the sleeping giant in the United States, allegedly echoing a similar statement by Theodore Roosevelt, or so I am told. It is high time for Lutherans to rise and help America overcome its Westminster handicap. For in the doctrines of the two kingdoms and of vocation they have by far the healthiest argument against Me, Me, and Me.

Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto is an international journalist from Germany and founder of the Center for Lutheran Theology and Public Life/League of Faithful Masks in Capistrano Beach, CA, which champions the doctrine of vocation. He holds a Ph.D. in theology and sociology of religion from Boston University and an honorary D.Litt. from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

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- ² Weber, Kindle location 1415-16.
- ³ cf., Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (New York: Free Press, 2009).
- ⁴ Weber, Kindle location 1496.
- ⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 189.
- ⁶ Joel Stein, "The Me Me Me Generation," *Time*, May 20, 2013, 28-36.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 265.
- ¹⁰ William R. Johnson, "Reasons given for Having Abortions in the United States," *Johnston's Archive* (October 9, 2008).
- ¹¹ "Zeichen der Endzeit im Westen." *idea.de* (July 25, 2013).
- ¹² cf., Evelyn Finger, "Die Renaissance der Unvernunft: Sehnsucht nach dem Selbst," *Zeit Online*, June 6, 2013.
- ¹³ Peter Sloterdijk, "Zerbricht unsere Gesellschaft?" *Standpunkte*. Neue Zürcher Zeitung (May 5, 2013).
- ¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 3.
- ¹⁵ Aleister Crowley. *Liber Legis: The Book of the Law* (Cape Neddick: Samuel Weiser, 1976), 2:17-21.
- ¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition, vol. 5* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing house, 1955ff), 266ff.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Karl Eger, *Die Anschauung Luthers vom Beruf* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1900), 117.
- ²⁰ Sir 11:20-21.
- ²¹ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther's Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883-199), WA TR VI, no. 6955, hereafter abbreviated as WA.
- ²² WA 10 I 1:531, 6-16.
- ²³ WA 27:417-418.
- ²⁴ Martin Luther, *D. Martini Lutheri Exegetica Latina*, vol. vii, ed. Christoph Stephan Gottlieb Elsperger (Erlangen: Carl Heyer, 1831), 67.
- ²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 49.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 50-41.
- ²⁷ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 29.
- ²⁸ *Luther's Works*, vol. 5, 266ff.
- ²⁹ Ibid., vol. 46, 96.
- ³⁰ Ibid., vol. 13, 154-155.
- ³¹ Ibid., 159.
- ³² Pascal Boyer, "Das Hirn, Dein Gott," *Zeit Online*, December 23, 2008.