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Conversations about Calling

"How does it make you feel?" "Does it have a positive impact on others?" "Does it turn up the volume and increase the vibration of your life?"[1] Media mogul Oprah Winfrey posed those questions to help her readers gain insights about their "callings." Contributing authors to the "Find Your True Calling"[2] issue of *O Magazine* echoed the core themes embedded in her questions—personal alignment, intense emotions, prosocial intent, and something transcendent (e.g., vibration). Interestingly, these same themes dominate contemporary management scholarship—not surprising given that management scholars' renewed interest in calling coincided with Winfrey's ascent as an "arbiter of truth"[3] during the 1990s.

Modern management scholars generally agree that a calling entails engaging in work that is intrinsically rewarding because it is aligned with one's passion, core interests, abilities, and perceived destiny. Consequently, work in a calling is energizing, elicits commitment, and sometimes benefits society. Similar themes are evident in definitions of calling that guide management scholarship.[4] More specifically, the *Encyclopedia of Career Development* states:

> The idea of viewing one's work as a calling came into common usage with Max Weber's concept of the Protestant work ethic. While a calling originally had religious connotations and meant doing work that God had "called" one to do, a calling in the modern sense has lost this religious connotation and is defined here as consisting of enjoyable work that is seen as making the world a better place in some way. Thus, the concept of a calling has taken on a new form in the modern era and is one of several kinds of meanings that people attach to their work.[5]

This definition suggests that modern management has made considerable progress beyond historic theological notions of calling—but not all management scholars agree.[6] Although encyclopedic definitions have the cache of authority and dominate the discourse, some management

scholars contend that calling is still a transcendent or religious concept, but they are in the minority. The source of discord among management scholars can be traced to fault lines that frame conversations about calling. In this chapter, I explain the contours of those fault lines, resulting conversations about calling, and overall implications for calling scholarship and practice.

Fault Lines That Define Conversations about Calling

Calling is an old idea that found new life in management scholarship at the end of the 20th century. *The* conversation about calling is centuries old and has spawned multiple conversations as religious adherents, philosophers, social scientists, and cultural trends have influenced its meaning. New actors and epochs have spawned revolutionary changes in the meaning of calling and evolutionary changes[7] that reflect incremental shifts in our understanding and its application.

Three historical epochs carved fault lines that now define calling scholarship: (1) the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, which defined calling as a sacred approach to ordinary work; (2) the simultaneous birth of management studies and the introduction of calling into it in the early 1900s; and (3) renewed interest in calling in the 1980s. These epochs are illustrated in Figure 1.1. Revolutionary changes in the meaning of calling are illustrated by large, dramatic flashes, while more incremental evolutionary changes are represented by minor flashes along a continuum from before the Christian era (B.C.E.) to the present.

Revolutionary conversations about calling originated with being *called* to the Christian faith after the ministry of Jesus Christ. Shortly thereafter, an evolutionary shift in meaning denoted calling as a summons to religious occupations and service.[8] Sacred meanings of calling as religious service persisted for more than 1,500 years.

In the mid-1500s, a revolutionary shift occurred when Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin appropriated the term *calling* and declared that all ordinary work was sacred, not just work in a monastery. For the remainder of the millennium to the present, theologians have continued to theorize, sermonize, and write about the sacred calling in secular life.[9] (Theological perspectives of calling will be examined in Chapter 9.) As Figure 1.1 shows, there has been no widely accepted revolutionary shift in the meaning of calling since the 1500s; truly revolutionary changes are both rare and disruptive.

The next notable evolutionary shift in meaning occurred nearly 500 years later, when calling was catapulted into management studies at the dawn of the 20th century. The issue that interests us here is whether modern management's perspective of calling in the 21st century is best described as revolutionary, evolutionary, or something else.
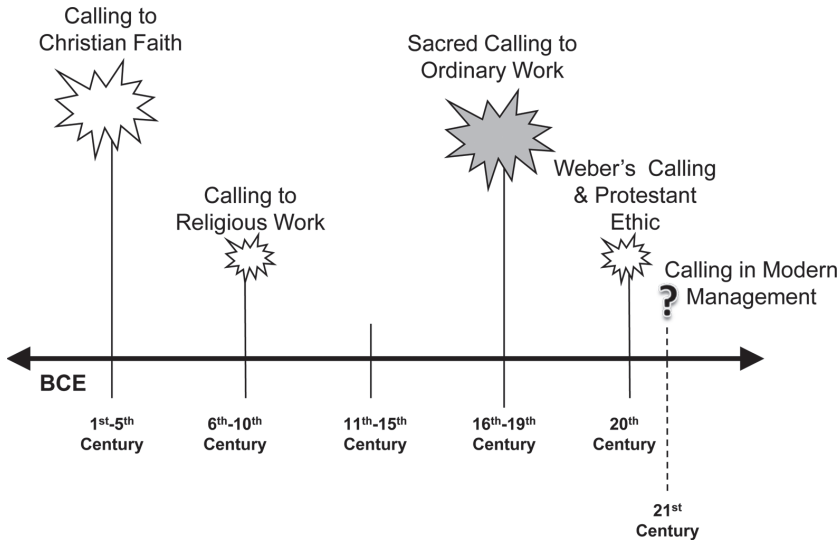
Figure 1.1 Twenty centuries of revolutionary and evolutionary shifts in the meaning of calling.

Origins of Calling in Management Studies

Renowned sociologist Max Weber introduced the idea of calling to the nascent discipline of organization studies in the early 1900s with his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*[10] (hereafter *Weber*). His ideas about calling were evolutionary in the larger context, but injecting calling into the new field of management studies was indeed revolutionary for management. *Weber* referred to the theological writings of Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin to describe calling as a "peculiar ethic" that infused ordinary work with religious or sacred meaning. He hypothesized that a sacred calling resulted in highly motivated employees who approached work in ways that "enormously increase performance," thereby contributing to remarkable economic growth. Intrigued by these ideas, industrialists and clergy experimented with integrating spirituality and work during this era, which I examine in Chapter 9. Yet, Weber was concerned that the robust religious construct might become a ghost of its former self in the new economic system—with good cause.

Weber considered religion an important dimension of modern life in the industrial age, as did his contemporaries, psychologist William James and sociologist Emile Durkheim. Yet Weber's perspective was eclipsed by two academic trends—Scientific Management and positivism. Frederick Taylor's book *The Principles of Scientific Management*,[11] was the cornerstone of management studies and was published shortly after

Weber's book. Scientific management sought to enhance employee performance with exhaustive measurement—not meaning and motivation. Taylor used time and motion studies to measure and improve observable work practices, which resonated with industrialists and managers. Moreover, Taylor's techniques were validated by the second academic trend—positivism in scientific research.

Positivists, and logical positivists, measure what is distinctly observable. The goals of positivist approaches to research are to identify and predict cause-and-effect relationships in order to control those causes and outcomes. This research tradition seeks to verify or falsify claims or deem them meaningless. However, since metaphysical, spiritual, and religious constructs are not easily observable, knowable, or verifiable, they were not considered "serious" topics for social science research in that era.[12]

Positivism prevailed from the 1920s to the 1950s, coinciding with management's Human Relations movement of the 1920s−1940s, when psychologists redirected their attention from time studies toward human need; indeed, careerism and fitting a person with his or her environment (i.e., Person-Environment [P-E] fit) followed.[13] As these ideas prevailed, Weber's calling receded in importance and lay dormant for decades.[14] Calling was a dead topic in management during most of the 20th century.

It stands to reason that in 1968, when calling reemerged in management scholarship—having been filtered through Taylorism and positivism—that the definition was quite different from Max Weber's original idea. Richard Hall resurrected calling with a study of professions and bureaucracy during the ascent of careerism. Hall's definition reflected the prevailing academic zeitgeist: "A sense of calling to the field—this reflects the dedication of the professional to his work and the feeling that he would probably want to do the work even if fewer extrinsic rewards were available."[15] Hall's assertion is notable because he decoupled calling from religion, God, and sacred notions of work. Further, he tightly coupled calling and career by associating it with professions (e.g., law, medicine, and accounting).

Nearly 20 years later, in 1987, Phillip Schorr published an article about public service as a calling,[16] in which he defined calling as "joyous service" to a profession. Having traced the origins of calling from ancient Greece to the Bible to Weber, Schorr believed that the utility of calling could be increased by disconnecting it from religion and making it *broadly applicable* to *non-religious endeavors* such as public service and administration. He asked, "Can we promote the contemporary equivalent of the calling by creating commitment and passion for the public service by means of an administrative theology?"[17] Apparently, Schorr was unaware that reformers' revolutionary idea of calling applied to

non-religious endeavors and was *broadly applicable* to all work. For Schorr, an "administrative theology" had more practical utility than an actual theology of work, as Weber suggested. (I discuss the risks of an administrative theology in Chapters 8 and 9.)

The 1980s publication that had the greatest influence on management thought about calling was *Habits of the Heart*,[18] by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (hereafter *Habits*). *Habits* emphasized the importance of institutions in strengthening community and society as a means of moderating the rise of expressive individualism, which is characterized by strong feelings, rich sensual and intellectual experiences, self-expression, and luxuriating in one's interior world.[19] In *Habits*, the authors did not dismiss religious notions of calling as Schorr did; instead, they suggested that it had been weakened and displaced, which is precisely what Weber feared. Thereafter, calling became an intriguing topic in management, and publications proliferated.

Given the trajectory of calling scholarship in management, it is "logical" that the dominant conversation asserts that calling is a secular orientation toward occupational work. If this is true, however, the notion would represent the first revolutionary shift in meaning in 500 years! While some might think it's about time, and it may be, not reflecting on the context, causes, and consequences of such a momentous change is intellectually reckless. So, I consider them here.

The Revival of Calling in Historical Context

Each epochal shift in the definition of calling to date—from the call to religious belief and behaviors, to a call to religious service, to the sacred call to ordinary work—has added layers and texture to its meaning, making calling more robust and relevant for daily life. Through the lens of institutional theory,[20] layered and increasingly complex meaning can be expected over time, as new voices enter a conversation. Notably, as new voices entered the discourse about calling, they did not negate prior meanings; multiple meanings of calling have coexisted for centuries. However, the dominant management perspective about calling is a conversation stopper; nearly 20 years of scholarship has insinuated itself into a 20-centuries-old conversation, disrupting and dismissing sage voices without fully listening to them or understanding the implications of silencing them. Conversationally speaking, that's just rude.

As sociologist Stephen Kalberg noted, "Cognizance of ideas teaches that the present is closely connected to the past: if forces as fragile as ideas can remain viable over centuries, despite their inherent dependence upon social carriers, then the past must be acknowledged in general as powerfully influencing the present."[21] Since management

scholars are neither the authors nor social carriers of the idea of calling, it is imprudent to uncritically accept the dominant secular perspective as definitive—it is not the only management definition of calling.

Competing conversations about calling began during the 1980s and 1990s, similarly reflecting themes of alignment, passion, and prosocial intent that Winfrey espoused. However, these conversations were differentially influenced by economic, social, technological, and ideological trends. The confluence of economic recovery, information technology, creeping individualism, post-positivism, and religious revival formed the zeitgeist that led some scholars to persist in their belief that calling is transcendent or sacred. Such scholars were influenced not only by historic fault lines but also by new ones carved in response to contemporary cultural and academic trends. In the sections that follow, I briefly describe these trends and representative characters[22] of the era (in addition to Winfrey) who depicted personality traits, tastes, and behaviors that were considered good, legitimate, and culturally appropriate going into the 21st century. I discuss these trends, icons, and implications for calling scholarship in management.

Capitalism, Individualism, and Technology

In 1981 Ronald Reagan became president of the United States during an economic recession in which 11% of Americans were unemployed. The national mood became more hopeful as economic recovery ensued, buoyed by a technology revolution, although tinged with increasing individualism. The images of fictional and actual success icons dominated the media, representing the competing cultural ideals of civic-minded and communitarian ethics versus triumphant individualism in modern capitalism.[23] Those icons and images influenced business practices, career aspirations, and consumer tastes.

For more than a decade, fictional television characters from *Dallas* and *Dynasty*[24] gave weekly lessons about how triumphant individuals amass, enjoy, and display the fruits of capitalism on a grand scale. Gordon Gekko, a ruthless stockbroker in the movie *Wall Street* (1987), embodied the period's unrestrained utilitarian individualism with his "greed is good" mantra that heralded a hypercompetitive and amoral spirit of capitalism. These characters influenced national culture and represent some risks of the secular individualistic calling that I describe in Chapter 2. At the same time, real management gurus multiplied, as Tom Peters sent us *In Search of Excellence* and W. Edwards Deming encouraged *Total Quality Management*[25] to gain competitive advantages in global commerce. These fictional and actual icons defined business and individual "success" for a generation—the baby boom generation.

Baby boomers (i.e., those born between 1946 and 1964) came of age in industrialized countries and yuppies—young upwardly mobile professionals—became icons for individualism, conspicuous consumption, and how to scale the corporate ranks. Iconic entrepreneurs Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart catered to and cultivated the tastes of baby boomers and aspiring yuppies with their unique brands of expressive individualism;[26] they offered lessons in introspection, emotional expressiveness, and sensual domestic experiences (albeit, on a more modest scale than fictional television icons).

The parallel yet divergent trajectories of Stewart and Winfrey highlight tensions of that era of capitalism. Stewart used her platform of evangelical domesticity[27] for purely utilitarian purposes—to cultivate consumers' tastes for household products (many her own brand). She promoted her products through corporate partnerships that comprised her vertically integrated empire. Eventually, Stewart went to prison for insider trading and was confronted with the challenge of preserving her tarnished brand. In contrast, Winfrey used her media platform toward communitarian, individual, and economic ends. As a communitarian, Winfrey launched new talent and promoted literacy, social advocacy, health awareness, global education, and activism. She promoted triumphant individualism with self-improvement programming; economically, her legendary product endorsements were an entrepreneur's dream and a retailer's delight. During this era, the cultural call seemed to summon people to *be* their best, *buy* the best, and *build* a bigger, better enterprise—sometimes winning at any cost. *Habits'* authors sought to counter negative aspects of that call by encouraging civic engagement and greater reliance on traditional institutions to prevent the societal trend toward creeping individualism.

One individual stands out as *the* business icon of the era, Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates. Gates, a college dropout whose technology empire made him one of the world's richest people. He embodied the inventive, entrepreneurial, and competitive spirit of modern capitalism. Gates also demonstrated a communitarian conscience through the work of the Gates Foundation.

Developments in information and manufacturing technologies during the 1980s and 1990s made anything seem possible; these advances also influenced new thinking about science more broadly. In an interview with *Business Week*, Laura Nash, then a professor at the Harvard Business School, described how technology broke the positivist frame.

> The New Economy is causing a deep seated curiosity about the nature of knowledge and life, providing a fertile environment for this new swirl of non-materialist ideas. In this kind of analytical

framework, suddenly it's O.K. to think about forces larger than yourself, to tap into that as an intuitive source of creative, analytical power. Furthermore, the Internet's power to blast through old paradigms and create previously impossible connections is inspiring fervent feelings that border on the spiritual. This new sense of spontaneity has caused even the most literal-minded to say, "Wow, there's this other force out there."[28] Suddenly, studying religion, spirituality and the metaphysical were no longer considered taboo in mainstream social science.[29]

In 2001 management scholars Charles Fornaciari and Cathy Lund Dean pondered the possibilities of using post-positivist scientific methods such as quantum physics and chaos theory to advance research about spirituality and management.[30] Later, Deborah Bloch and Lee Richmond applied complexity theory directly to calling and career development.[31] They argued against quantitative studies that measured small differences (positivism) and for the use of narrative methods to explore the dynamic, self-regenerative nature of calling and the nonlinear way that it develops (post-positivism).

Post-positivism, Faith and Professional Practice

Post-positivism was the most important philosophical shift in scientific thought in the 20th century.[32] Instead of the positivist approach that accepts only observable measures as ultimate truth, a post-positivist approach is interested in layers of deep structures that underlie what we observe. Post-positivists understand that observable reality is socially constructed and fluid and is therefore fallible, prone to researcher bias, and reflects *a* truth, but not *the* truth. Consequently, post-positivist scholars seek multiple perspectives to gain insight into truth.[33] During this era, one post-positivist perspective included faith.

A popular religious revival occurred near the end of the 20th century, due in part to the felt need for deeper meaning in life and work that transcended the hypercompetitive, consumption-oriented, rapidly changing world.[34] People were searching for something more. To aid their search, an explosion of Christian book sales ushered in the "purpose-driven"[35] end of one millennium and the beginning of a new one. Religious practices, alternative practices, and philosophies became more mainstream and more pervasive in the social sciences.

Although the scientific study of religion in the social sciences had been underway for decades, research escalated during the 1980s and 1990s with support from entities such as the Fetzer Institute, the Templeton Foundation, and the Lily Endowment. Furthermore, professional associations created religion and spirituality subgroups as

forums for practitioners to share knowledge about how to use faith to achieve secular goals in practice. Professionals' shift to acknowledge and include clients' beliefs was less about professionals' own beliefs, but rather the need to offer more culturally relevant, client-centered, and holistic practices.[36] Medicine, psychology, social work, and public health were among the professions that created faith subgroups in their professional associations; management was one of the last professions to embrace the trend when, in 1999, the Management Spirituality and Religion interest group was formalized as part of the Academy of Management (AOM). This lag by AOM is notable given that the Faith at Work movement started 14 years earlier.[37]

Even though there was a long history of combining faith with work in practice (which I examine in Chapters 7, 8, and 9), social, economic, and political trends of the 1980s inspired business leaders to combine faith and work in new ways. While some sought to address macro issues of social, economic, and environmental justice, others sought more integration of their beliefs and work lives. According to David Miller,[38] former business leader turned theologian, integration occurred in one of several ways, by (1) infusing religious *ethics* into work; (2) engaging in *evangelism* explicitly or implicitly by viewing work as part of one's vocation; (3) *experiencing* work in spiritual terms (e.g., calling) rather than merely instrumental terms; and/or (4) seeking personal *enrichment* and transformation through contemplative practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, and study). The Faith at Work movement spawned new partnerships between clergy and corporations, workplace ministries, and the role of corporate chaplains.[39] Notably, the movement was not led by religious institutions.[40]

Related business publications followed. Best-selling business books of the 1980s such as *The Road Less Traveled* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* were published as antidotes to the amoral and hypercompetitive approach to capitalism. Although the authors of both books had religious backgrounds, they muted religious beliefs in their writings. Instead, they promoted expressive individualism through hope and pursuing one's passions, and, to varying degrees, they espoused the importance of character development. In contrast, best-selling business books of the 1990s boldly combined management and spirituality, but neither Deepak Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*[41] nor Laurie Beth Jones's *Jesus CEO*[42] were scholarly books. Finally, in 2003, two scholarly publications brought legitimacy and rigor to synthesizing faith and management: *The Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance* and *Business, Religion, and Spirituality*.[43] Only this latter work mentioned calling or vocation.

Despite the scientific shift toward post-positivism, increased interest in spirituality across professions, and the well-documented Faith at

Work movement, the majority of management scholars were reluctant to or timid about engaging religion or spirituality.[44] Therefore, it is not surprising that, today, a secular perspective of calling dominates management scholarship, while a faith perspective of calling is relegated to being a faint minority voice.

In sum, epochal shifts from the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, to the ascent and subsequent decline in calling's popularity in management during the early 1900s, to major cultural, scientific, and technological shifts in the 1980s have profoundly shaped ideas about calling. Those shifts, along with other factors, have resulted in three distinct conversations about calling in management.

Three Conversations about Calling in Management

Although *Habits* was first published in 1985, and the pace of academic publications has accelerated during the past decade, scholars have yet to agree on a single definition, robust measure, or theory of calling.[45] Instead, three research enclaves have formed due to scholars' different ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological foci.

Epistemologically, management scholars are united by their references to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and *Habits of the Heart* as the basis of their truth claims about calling. They differ, however, in degree to which they (1) have preserved Weber's and *Habits'* ideas, (2) implicitly extend different vocational guidance theories, and (3) are based on explicit psychological theories. Phenomenologically, scholars differ in their focus on the individual, the work itself, work organizations, and society at large—but those differences are relatively minor. The main point of contention is ontological—that is, whether calling is secular, transcendent, or sacred and how calling relates to work and life.[46] These ontological differences have resulted in three conversations about calling in management: (1) secular individualistic; (2) transcendent, meaning it is a spiritual yet secular concept; and (3) sacred. Management scholars widely acknowledge the fact that these differences have not been reconciled and impede progress.[47] The question is why?

Why, after 28 years, is there still no consensus about the definition, measure, or theory of calling? What are the unexamined assumptions that cause this fragmentation to persist? What are the consequences of this fragmentation in practical terms? What insights and evidence can help us overcome this conceptual quagmire? And, how do we transform the cacophony of voices into a harmonious chorus that promotes progress in research and practice? I offer insights and answers to these questions throughout this book.

Advancing the Discourse

Indeed, conversations about calling have been socially constructed and the meaning has changed over centuries as philosophers from Aristotle to Oprah entered the discourse. Historic and contemporary social, economic, scientific, and cultural shifts shaped the context in which management scholarship about calling began in earnest, as well as the dominant and emerging ways that we think about it. At present, a vocal and dominant group of management scholars contend that calling is secular, negating its essential core. This is both radical and risky.

Radical ideas are important because they have the potential to promote progress. Conversely, radical ideas can be reckless if pursued uncritically. With regard to calling, perhaps after 2,000 years it is time to think about it in secular terms as well. However, this thinking is risky if we unquestioningly accept assertions that calling is *only* secular without fully considering individual and social reasons for dismissing the sacred, the attendant implications for organizations and society, or how the wisdom of other voices could inform our scholarship in nontheological ways. I explore various radical, risky, and rational ideas about calling throughout this book.

Although *the* conversation about calling has been underway for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years, the management conversation is just beginning. After 20 years, there is no consensus about the definition of calling or how it should be measured, nor is there an overarching theory that can guide research and practice. This is a perfect time, therefore, for management scholars and others interested in the topic to consider how to thoughtfully advance the conversation about calling in the 21st century. That is my goal throughout this book. As ensuing chapters will show, each conversation describes elements of a theory, advances our understanding of key features and core dimensions of calling (e.g., personal alignment, intense emotions, prosocial intent, and something transcendent), and illuminates unexamined dimensions.

In Part I of this book, I explore aforementioned conversations about calling in management. In each conversation, I present illustrative research, intellectual contributions, theoretical foundations, and implicit or explicit assumptions. I then highlight the strengths, limitations, and implications of each conversation. (I trust that my reasons for not "vacuum cleaning"[48] the literature by citing every published study will be apparent to readers by the end of each chapter.) I conclude Part I with Chapter 5, "Calling in the Iron Cage," in which I explain why the dominant perspective gained academic legitimacy, implications for privileging it over marginal perspectives, and describe steps to progress toward a coherent theory of calling (which I present in Chapter 10). Although Part I is aimed at researchers, nonacademic readers may find

it interesting to peek behind the curtain to gain insights into the process of knowledge construction.

In Part II, I explore conversations about calling outside of management scholarship; they yield major insights that can make management theorizing more relevant and robust. More specifically, Chapters 6 and 8 examine practitioner perspectives of calling, including psychologists, journalists, consultants, and religious authors. Chapter 7 illustrates how people have navigated the vicissitudes of pursuing a calling. In Chapter 9, I explore and directly quote theologians to reveal elements of theory scattered across the 16th through 20th centuries. Because Part II examines popular books, personal stories, familiar narratives, and history, it is less research oriented and more accessible. It will be of interest to readers who are deeply interested in the topic of calling, either to motivate themselves or others, as well scholars and practitioners (e.g., counselors, consultants, and clergy).

In Part III, I connect all of the conversations in a theory of calling and use a case study to illustrate how it can be applied in practice. Finally, drawing on innovations in post-positivist social science research, I conclude by suggesting ways to cultivate the callings of youth and adults, with hopes of restoring the calling's former vigor in modern life.

Persistent divisions and discordant conversations about calling matter. On one hand, different voices expand notions of what it means to have a calling. On the other, they impede advances within management scholarship and management's ability to work across disciplines. Setting aside ideologies and preferences, the question for us to consider going forward is not "Which conversation is right or wrong?" Instead, we must discern what is gained or lost by amplifying or silencing the many different voices.

NOTES

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17. Schorr, "Public Service as a Calling"; Schorr, "Public Service as a Calling. Part II," 658.

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22. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart.*

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26. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart.*

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38. Miller, *God at Work.*

39. Conlin, "Religion in the Workplace"; Miller, *God at Work.*

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