Journal of Markets & Morality
Volume 18, Number 2 (Fall 2015): 409–417

Theological Vocation and the Marketplace

Timothy Dalrymple
*Polymath Innovations**

This is a nice change of pace for me. I am at this point more of a recovering academic than a practicing one, so the opportunity to reflect on these things together is truly precious. It is good to see many faces I recognize from the faith and work movement, broadly understood, as well as some faces for which there are Patheos connections. Given that I am now not exactly a practicing academic, I was. I assume I have been invited to give this talk because of my story, my experience, so I will share that story with you, and we will have an opportunity to reflect on it together.

My Story

I was at Stanford University as an undergraduate when it became clear to me that there was only one person of robust Christian faith in their religious studies and philosophy departments. When this individual did not get tenure for what seemed to be pretty clearly political reasons (he was an excellent scholar who went on and has done quite well for himself), some students invited him to go to an Operation Rescue event. He went, and this caused quite a furor with his being accused of dragging students into his own political activism—all of which was untrue but nevertheless created all sorts of issues.

At any rate, he was not granted tenure, and the next year there was nobody in the broader Christian community who was able to speak with a high degree of learning and some degree of winsomeness and persuasiveness on fundamental matters of faith. Thus, students in Christian fellowships wrestled with their faith,

thinking: Maybe I could find somebody in the Religious Studies Department or the Philosophy Department to help me think through these things. Alas, there was nobody there. Because I was in those departments, and it was known that I read much regarding these matters, I became the default person, even though I felt as if I did not really have a whole lot to say. I wanted to understand these things better. I believed that God was calling me to become that hopefully persuasive, hopefully articulate Christian voice within the secular university.

I was also a gymnast—this was a big part of my young life—I came to Stanford to compete on the gymnastics team, and I broke my neck during my sophomore year. That constituted quite a big change in my life's trajectory. I faced the question of whether this was something that would remain tangential to the story that God wanted to tell with my life or was this something that I could somehow welcome into my vocation.

As God seemed to be clarifying that I should go in the direction of studying philosophy of religion or modern Western theology, the doors opened for me to focus on the issue of suffering. I thought: I will pursue a philosophy of suffering, a theology of suffering. That is the course that I took through my MDiv at Princeton Seminary and then a PhD program at Harvard in the School of Arts and Sciences. I ended up writing my dissertation on how Kierkegaard understood suffering and the various ways in which God works providentially through suffering to prepare us for faith and in the living out of faith in the world.

I had a wonderful experience at these places, but I began to get restless toward the end of my PhD program. As I was wrapping up the dissertation, I found myself spending an increasing amount of time—and maybe I was just wasting time—engaging online commentary on matters of religion. As I would go to the library to work on my dissertation, I would spend the first hour or two cruising around to some different blogs that I had started to enjoy, some different websites, reading some articles, commenting some, and eventually developing some of my own presence and voice online as well.

It was around that time in my final year as a doctoral student that an email went out to the doctoral student list saying, "There is a group of people who want to start what we hope will be the world's greatest religion website, the WebMD of religion. Is there anybody who would be interested in being a part of that?" The very first employee of Patheos was another doctoral student—his name was David Charles—and he was the one who sent that email out. I saw it and responded immediately with great enthusiasm for the idea.

For me, it felt as though there was a more robust—and frankly, more influential—conversation taking place online about religion than there was within the academy, and I was dealing with, in many ways, the frustrations, the turf battles,

the political nature of conversation around religion specifically at Harvard. I was frustrated with the boundaries there and seeing there is this conversation taking place online every day. It is not as though I was going to take a couple of years to research something, take a couple of years to write something, a couple of years after that maybe it would be published, and a couple years after that maybe somebody would respond to it.

Rather, there was this daily ongoing dynamic conversation taking place. A lot of it was terribly uninformed and a lot of it was—not to put too fine a point on it—just terrible. It was awful. But there were also things taking place that were valuable. It was clear to me that there were people who were genuinely seeking and finding direction—rightly or wrongly—through online commentary.

I saw an opportunity, I thought, to try to craft a better conversation online around religion. The vision for Patheos was to reproduce online the marketplace of religious ideas, even though it was a multireligious marketplace of ideas—we like to say there is something of Patheos to offend everybody. There is evangelical, Catholic, and progressive Christian, but there is also atheist and Mormon and pagan and all manner of voices represented. Yet, the vision of creating a better conversation on life's most important questions was very appealing to me.

Beyond that, beyond the value of the conversation itself, I wanted to be a part of helping to cultivate a better evangelical public voice. Even the evangelical voices taking place in this conversation were not necessarily doing so with a high degree of intellectual integrity; many of the loudest voices were the least educated on these matters. It seemed as though there was abundant room for improvement when it came to the evangelical voice as well.

We launched online in May of 2009. For me it was quite unforeseen yet a remarkable way of using the calling, the training that God had given me. When I started my PhD program at Harvard, there was no such thing as Patheos. It is not as though I could have said, "Wow, I want to get a PhD in order to go into developing an online religion site." There was no such thing. There was something called Beliefnet in an early form, but it was quite different.

It was not as though I could have foreseen this, yet when it actually came about it was: Wow, God is using the talents and the passions he has given me. He is also using the training that I have gotten in a way that I could not have foreseen at all, but that actually seemed in fact better for me than what I would have found inside the academy.

Since our launch, we have grown steadily. The latest figures are that Patheos reaches over eight million unique visitors a month, about twenty million page views a month. In addition, it publishes twenty thousand new pages of content a month. It is safe to say that the ministry has established itself. Has it made the

world a better place? I am sure that is a matter of debate. Throughout my travels, I always meet people who say, "Oh, Patheos, I see that in my Facebook stream all the time. I read the articles and sometimes they piss me off, but sometimes they don't." So, I hear all kinds of things about Patheos.

We put forward voices that are speaking truth into the marketplace of ideas. I am really proud of the people that we have writing at the evangelical channel, which is where I was first focused. We have Dr. Scott McKnight, Dr. Mark D. Roberts, and Dr. Ben Witherington. They range from somewhat conservative to somewhat liberal, but they tend to be academically grounded, and they are bringing good things forward.

We have a couple of people who are involved in the Faith and Work channel that we have developed at Patheos, and I believe in the value of what they are doing. There are numerous other things at Patheos that I ask myself, "Is that making the world a better place?" I do not know, but the site as a whole is doing something significant.

I will wrap up my own story before I begin to reflect on what the economics of theological study might mean for us. I started on the content side, writing and editing as the managing editor of the evangelical channel, then as the associate director of content, and then the director of content, shaping content strategy as a whole and building new areas of the site. What you find really quickly when you are part of a for-profit venture that is building a website is that your traffic can grow much faster than your revenue, and we were struggling to make ends meet. By switching over to the business development side, I helped develop new revenue streams and brought in some investment and strategic partnerships and that kind of thing, which I found I could enjoy also.

It made me feel in various ways like I was going back to when I was a kid playing with Legos; you are putting something together, crafting something, making something real in the marketplace that has value to people. Even though I was not writing or editing nearly as much, I was nevertheless doing the things that were necessary to create a sustainable conversation and hopefully a more elevated, a more informed, and a more charitable conversation about matters of religion.

To complete the story, about a year and a half ago, I started my own company, taking things we had learned and leveraging them for other organizations. It started with web design and development and moved on to strategy and how to develop an effective web presence. We were working with clients such as International Justice Mission (IJM), the Chuck Colson Center, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, American Enterprise Institute, Ethics and Public Policy Center—organizations that were at the intersection of religion and politics, religion and culture, religion and economics, or just straightforward ministries (for example,

International Justice Mission [IJM]), and in some cases non-Christian non-profits like the Humane Society. I could go on with names of the clients we have been privileged to work with: John Maxwell, Museum of the Bible, BioLogos.

The point is that, when we started reaching out to some of these organizations and working with them—developing their web presence, developing animations and video, consulting—what we found was that there were actually potential clients who were looking for someone who could understand what they were about theologically and help them frame their story theologically.

If we had a screen here, I would show you some of our early animations that were not by any stretch the most sophisticated animations—they have gotten better over time—but even that early they very clearly depicted that this was how the International Justice Mission wanted the church to understand its work theologically. All they told us was, "Well, we want to explain the difference among justice, charity, and development." That was it. I pondered: How do I think about that theologically? How do I help them tell that story and connect with the church?

Much of the work we have done has also been in the education space, developing online learning products. Thus, we are able to say to Redeemer Presbyterian or to the Museum of the Bible or a local generosity ministry in Atlanta that we can help because of our multiperson academic background. We can help you understand your educational objectives, your pedagogical principles, sketch out what is going to be the curriculum and syllabus, and break down each course and the constituent element. We will write the scripts for the videos. We will write the Digging Deeper sections of the PDS and the e-publications. We will develop the animations and the infographics, and we will wrap it up into a learning management system and put it online for you. There are not many people out there who can do all that.

This is one different way of taking a theological education out into the marketplace and finding that there is a great demand for it; we have had no problem finding business. The problem has been dealing with growth and getting the right people in place. I had no business background prior to Patheos. Consequently, with these "small things" like tracking expenses I thought: We will be good at the big things like product development, customer experience, and bringing in business. We found out that developing a good business is just as much a problem as developing a good product.

The theological framing around what we do reaches into the kind of culture we want to have as a company. Most of the people within the company are Christian—not all—but it reaches into the kind of clients that we want to pursue and the kind of products we want to develop, the way in which we want those

products to communicate to the world, and a way of helping people develop their digital voice. This is a language we use sometimes: there are so many excellent ministries and church related organizations with no idea what to do when it comes to new media; we can help them develop their digital voice, help them navigate that labyrinth.

The Economics of Theological Study

Thus, one of my experiences illuminated theological vocation in today's marketplace. But what about the economics of theological study? First, conversation on religion and theology has gone viral. Alongside the professional theological conversation today is an equally and maybe more influential amateur conversation. It is important that we recognize this. Theological conversation that shapes the broader ways in which people understand their relationship between God and the world is no longer encompassed—if it ever was—within the groves of the academy and the teaching rooms of the church.

When I started my path of theological education, I thought: There is kind of only two things you can do with it. You get a PhD in religion, and you are either going to make more PhDs in religion so you are going to stay at a university and train people in the same way that you have been trained, or you are going to go into ministry in some way. If that was true at the beginning of my PhD program, it is certainly not true at the end.

I have come to know people who have taken theology in all kinds of new and interesting directions in the marketplace. Unrefined though it may be, there is theological conversation taking place on Reddit when a Redditor declares that belief in God is toxic, on the CNN Belief Blog when the blogger condemns traditional Christian stances on same-sex marriage, or when a spoken-word artist posts on YouTube why he loves Jesus and hates the church. That is theological conversation. It is taking place outside the boundaries of academia, and whether or not we wish it to be so, it is simply a fact that theological conversation has gone viral, and we need digital public square theologians who can bring a winsome voice, as well as the wealth of church thought, commentary, and tradition on these matters to bear on these conversations. For me this is the reason I was so eager to become a part of Patheos in the first place.

To be sure, the professional conversation on theology is still important and still influential, and although it moves slowly, there are virtues to that. It is quite possible, however, that the amateur conversation on theology is running beyond the boundaries of what professional theologians are able to address from their traditional places of work. For that reason, additional professional theologians

need to be addressing the amateur theological conversation. It was once the case that theologians might have sneered when their colleagues set up a blog, but I no longer think that is the case, and I no longer think it should be the case; that is a very important public voice to have.

The second issue, and this is entailed in the first point, is that the theological vocation is far broader than we might think. The professional theologian is needed not only in the church and in the academy but also in the private sector and in the non-profit sector and in the public square. Today there is a need for trained theologians at media institutions like Christianity Today where they have a theologian in residence on the board; at non-profits like World Vision and IJM to help them frame their work theologically and engage the church in the bigger picture in what they do; at startup companies like Patheos to help cultivate a serious and elevated conversation on religious matters; or at creative agencies like my current company to come alongside businesses and non-profits who work in a faith-inflected space and help them develop messaging and content and educational resources. We need theologians engaging healthcare and mental health care. We need them in the publishing industry; in philanthropic foundations like the Templeton Foundation, for instance; or in non-profits that are engaging in the culture.

I have seen many people—and this is what I have come to know since leaving the academy—who get their degree in religion and theology, and they go work for the State Department to help diplomats understand the religious landscape or military intelligence—some might be for that and some against—but military leaders who are engaged in military enterprises need to understand the religious landscape around them.

The third economic point is that this is in many ways a wonderful day and age for entrepreneurial theologians. It has been said that today's generation will change careers—not jobs but careers—on average every five years. What I have found is that there is an open space in which to carve out your own path. I hear from young people who have a passion for theology or philosophy of religion or apologetics or biblical studies, and yet they have an entrepreneurial bug. They wonder what it would be like to start a company, to make an app, to develop a computer game, to put together a film production crew, or whatever it might be.

The questions I always ask them are these:

1. How can you monetize the things that you love to do and feel called to do?

2. What story or product or service or website or app can you create that people will not even know they cannot live without until they see it in front of them?
3. Who would be willing to pay you to do the things that you want to do?

If you find that, then you are 75 percent of the way there.

Becoming a theological entrepreneur is not for everyone, to be sure. It requires a high tolerance for risk; it requires a great deal of imagination and diligence; but, the way is open to carve out new career paths.

My favorite example of what might have been is somebody like Steve Jobs—at the risk of being cliché. He was not a computer scientist, not a programmer, not even a formally trained designer or product developer, but he had certain business intuitions and design sensibilities, and even in his work he was pretty thoughtful about representing a certain Buddhist ethic and outlook. What if Steve Jobs had represented biblical values and beliefs? What if he had been nurtured by the church and supported by it? What if he had been given theological training that helped him think through his work, his product, his company, and his effect on society?

This leads me to the fourth and final point about economics: It is not only possible to have this, but we really need theologians who are telling stories, writing novels, developing films, starting companies, developing investment funds, and just in general bringing theological richness to their projects.

If anyone has seen the Christopher Nolan film, *Interstellar*, you would have to agree there is a theology in that film, or in *Noah*, or in any other number of examples. It is not preached from a soapbox, but it is communicated in the way the story is told, and in the background assumptions that shape the world it describes, and in the dialogue of the characters. It is a theology; it is just not necessarily a Christian theology. Similarly, go look at popular computer games like Game of War where you are actually tasked with developing pagan temples. There is a theology infusing the product; it is just not necessarily a Christian theology.

I could say the same thing about any other number of areas—not merely storytelling but product development and marketing and communications. There already are theologies out there in the marketplace, which means there already are theologians out there doing this kind of work. They just are not necessarily Christian theologians. There are Christian theologians working in the marketplace, but we need more.

The church will be enriched, the culture will be enriched, and the kingdom of God will be well served if more of these theologians who are already seed-

ing the marketplace were Christian theologians and if more of these Christian theologians were deeply formed by theological training. Then we would have a robust Christian theology saturating the marketplace and pressing through the culture and into the lives of everyday citizens.

Conclusion

In summary, if there ever were clear lines dividing the work of theology from the marketplace, sequestering theology in the academy and the church, those lines are increasingly vanishing. This is not only partly because of changes to the educational marketplace (that is a whole different direction I could have gone with this talk) and partly because of the internet and its effect on religious conversation but also partly because the marketplace is so wide open for people with theological sensibilities to get out there and shape the message, shape the story, shape the product.

There are all sorts of reasons why these developments might worry us. Is the rise of amateur theology a good thing along with the incredible influence that it has? Well, God made me an optimist, and if you are looking to take theological education outside of the classroom and outside of the sanctuary and do something inventive and entrepreneurial in the marketplace, this is a good time to be alive. The rise of so many amateur theologians has made the need for professional theologians so much more acute and has opened the door for entrepreneur theologians to carve out their own path to speak into the culture and to put a dent in the world.

Note

* This is an edited version of a presentation delivered at the "Economics of the Theological Vocation" session, organized by the Theology of Work and Economics consultation, on November 21, 2014, at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held in San Diego, California.