

Call for papers  
International Conference

**Answering the Call: Aesthetic Expressions of Vocation and Responsibility in Nordic Cultures since 1750**

Date: 21st to 23rd March 2024  
Place: Strasbourg

“Jeg må! Jeg må; så byder mig en stemme i sjælens dyb, — og jeg vil følge den”? Ibsen, *Catilina*

In Ibsen’s first published play *Catilina* (1850), the eponymous protagonist is torn between love and duty. Though set in ancient Rome, the play speaks to a seemingly ever-present issue in Northern Europe: calls of duty ring throughout its modern history. Such a tendency has been seen as linked to a Protestant heritage, most famously by Max Weber.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber noted that the German noun *Beruf* and the English equivalent 'calling' had no exact correspondences in the European languages of Catholic-majority countries. From the Reformation onward, these terms had started evoking a “high estimation of secular everyday labour”. Giving work a religious significance, they implied that one's religious duty could be fulfilled within this world. In fact, such notions demanded it, asking all Protestants to take their responsibility.

Stemming from Latin *respons*, being *responsible* initially comes from the ability to respond, thus to be held accountable for one’s deeds. It is a central notion for Luther, who believed that Christians, as both free Lords and serviceable servants of all things, are responsible for the world. The inner calling leads to a responsibility for the make-up of the outer world.

But the meaning of such a calling has always been ambiguous. Different actors have at various times made sense of the responsibility it entails differently. As Inger Hammar has shown, the calling, and its concomitant definition of work, has even been a point where larger historical changes are intellectually concentrated. It could thus be construed as a site of semantic struggle.

It has often been artists and authors who contribute to this debate. Literature, film and other fields of aesthetic expression have been sites in which the framework for understanding of what the duty to work consists is defined and redefined; they have been the medium where the tension between the individual and the voice(s) that call on them has been brought out.

As with the example of Ibsen above, the sense that one is responsible for one's fate and in extension for the world seems to be present even when the religious referent is missing. While fulfilling a calling is for most people today no longer linked to a sense of religious salvation, merely a brief look in contemporary Nordic literature would suggest that a sense of duty and reward remains. What appears to persist is the foundational stress on individual responsibility.

How, we wonder, does the sensed need to fulfill one's calling motivate decisions even when the call lacks a transcendental source or a specific message?

The conference organizers invite proposals that explore the themes of calling and responsibility within the context of (the often implicit) Protestant legacy in Nordic culture in literature, film and other fields of art.

Such an exploration may follow multiple paths, such as:

- ~ Art as vocation. The historical annals abound with artists of all kinds describing their relation to their work with a vocabulary verging on the religious, especially when it comes to justifying their need to stay true to their duty: Fredrika Bremer, Henrik Ibsen, Lars von Trier, to name just a few. What kind of responsibility to the world does such a stance suggest? Does the fact of staying true to one's path, especially when it is met with strong resistance from the public and/or cultural institutions, inform the artistic value? Are there specific ways of using the language of religious experience for Nordic artists?
- ~ Fictional representations of vocation. We may think here of canonical works, such as Ibsen's *Brand*, or of lesser known ones, as *Brannen* (1961) by Tarjei Vesaas, where the main character receives an enigmatic phone call throwing him into a world of nightmarish visions that he must explore in order to understand what it means to be part of the human community. Such representations ask us whether a calling always chime with a sense of responsibility, or indeed whether answering a call may also be a way of avoiding a sense of responsibility.
- ~ Art as calling on its audience. In his studies of Swedish-language novels from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anders Tyrberg identifies an "aesthetics of calling out" ("anropsetetik"), which demands a response from the reader. Using an explicitly religious perspective based on a Lutheran distinction between *imitatio* and *vocatio*, he implies that the reader's active relation to the text is the place where the calling is actualized. During the past century, it has not been rare for artworks to place the onus of finding their meaning on the audience. One such case is Paal-Helge Haugen's "punktroman" *Anne* (1968). A collage of poetic prose and found material, it tasks the reader to construct a coherent and meaningful whole. In doing so, how does it, and other similar cases, appeal to the audience's responsibility?

This conference is organized by members of the research group "Aesthetics of Protestantism in Scandinavia from the 19th to the 21st Century" (Université de Strasbourg/Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg).

<https://www.skandinavistik.uni-freiburg.de/forschung/forschungsprojekte/aestheticsofprotestantism/>

All papers will be given in English and the conference will result in a volume published in the series "Aesthetics of Protestantism in Northern Europe", edited by Joachim Grage (Freiburg), Thomas Mohnike (Strasbourg) and Lena Rohrbach (Basel).

Please send your proposals for papers, of max. 500 words, accompanied by a short bio by **16 October 2023** to:

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## References

Inger Hammar, "From Fredrika Bremer to Ellen Key. Calling, Gender and the Emancipation Debate in Sweden, c. 1830-1900", in Pirjo Markkola (ed.), *Gender and Vocation. Women, Religion and Social*

*Change in the Nordic Countries, 1830-1940* (Helsinki, SKS, 2000).

Anders Tyrberg, *Anrop och ansvar. Berättarkonst och etik hos Lars Ahlin, Göran Tunström, Birgitta Trotzig, Torgny Lindgren* (Stockholm, Carlsson Bokförlag, 2002).

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, edited and translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London, Penguin Books, 2002).