

DEMOCRACY AND PROPHECY



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A distinction between what can be called “prophecy” and “casuistical reasoning” runs deep in Western history. Exemplars of prophecy include not only the Hebrew prophets but religious and political reformers ever since, those who see what they regard as a central unseen moral truth about their culture and articulate it with insistence. Exemplars of casuistical or practical reason include most philosophers (from Aristotle on), most lawyers, most politicians, and most of us most of the time.

As M. Cathleen Kaveny observes in this essay, our own era has lots of speech of both kinds, on the right and on the left; in addition, much confusion, in religion and politics alike, arises from our common failure to understand the differences between these two genres of expression and the criteria appropriate to judging them. Sometimes, prophecy is indeed called for, or prophecy of a certain kind; sometimes, the occasion does not justify prophecy, or even if it does, a particular exercise of the prophetic voice is not justified by the criteria that should shape the genre. Kaveny explores these issues both as a theoretical matter and by comparing two prophetic works of our own era, Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech and Father Frank Pavone’s “Open Letter to Michael Schiavo.”

In *Political Liberalism* (1993), John Rawls argued that when citizens are engaged in public discourse about fundamental political questions, they must conform to the ideal of public reason. In particular, they must refrain from offering arguments that depend ultimately on exclusively religious premises or insights or other controversial commitments not shared by the vast majority of citizens.¹ Rawls’s book sparked a rich interdisciplinary discussion about the role of religion in American public life. While appreciating his concern for civil discourse in a pluralistic society, many religious believers and those sympathetic to their claims worried that Rawls’s conception was too restrictive of religiously based arguments. In response

to these concerns, Rawls modified his position to allow for more flexibility for religious believers and others to offer arguments in explicitly religious terms.²

Still, not everyone was satisfied. For example, philosopher of religion Jeffrey Stout has suggested that even the new and improved Rawls operates with an unacceptably narrow notion of what counts as being a reasonable person in the public square. More specifically, Stout highlights both the rigor and flexibility of what he calls “immanent criticism,” which is essentially the process of giving reasons for one’s own views and requesting reasons for the views of other participants in critical, dialogical fashion. Stout contends that immanent criticism is “both one of the most widely used forms of reasoning” in political discourse and “one of the most effective ways of showing respect for fellow citizens who hold differing points of view.” Religious people, Stout notes, can give reasons for their views and request reasons from other participants in the discussion in ways that do not differ essentially from secular participants. We are a community of reason requesters and reason givers, believers and nonbelievers alike.³

While Stout’s criticism of Rawls is entirely accurate, it is not, in my view, sufficiently radical. A distinct and additional flaw in the Rawlsian framework is that it fails to grapple with a common form of American religious discourse that is not straightforward discursive argument, although it does possess its own inner logic and structure. More specifically, the Rawlsian concept of “public reason” does not give us a way to deal with the place of prophetic discourse in the public square. Rawls’s framework tacitly assumes that everyone discussing matters of public concern in the public square will be employing discursive practical reason; religious believers will differ from others only in that their conclusions will depend to some degree on distinctively religious premises. Stout’s critique, as powerful as it is, does not challenge this assumption, although his account of the practice of immanent criticism provides a richer and more capacious account of what type of reason giving ought to count as reasonable in the public square.

Discursive practical reasoning is certainly a key part of the tradition of public rhetoric in the United States and in Western culture more generally. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold (1822–88) called it the language of “sweetness and light,” finding the roots of its dispassionate progression of argument and analysis in ancient Greek philosophy’s pursuit of truth. But Arnold also points to another type of rhetoric equally important in the

American political tradition. It is not cool reflection on carefully defined premises and delimited conclusions; it is, rather, the heated and unwavering commitment to absolute moral truth. Arnold describes this passionate rhetoric of moral witness as the “fire and strength” of the Hebraic tradition; it is found most vividly in the great prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, which is also the Christian Old Testament.⁴

To deal adequately with the role of religious discourse in the public square, it is not enough to come to terms with “sweetness and light”; we must also come to terms with “fire and strength.” We need to reflect on the appropriate use of prophetic discourse in the discussion of controversial moral and social issues. Why? In my judgment, some of the key reasons why Rawls is worried about the introduction of religious claims in the public square—the potential for such claims to cause social divisiveness can result in the marginalization of the individuals who disagree with the people asserting those claims—are particularly applicable to religious rhetoric of “fire and strength.” Reasons calmly stated, no matter what their premises, do not usually provoke conversation partners to retaliation, verbal or otherwise. Prophetic indictments, however, do tend to attract harsh invective in return, at least from those members of the audience who do not consider the prophetic indictment fair. Furthermore, by their very nature, prophetic indictments rhetorically marginalize those who do not comply with their demands for reform.

In my view, some forms of prophetic rhetoric are necessary, on some occasions, to the moral health of the American polity. Think, for example, of Martin Luther King Jr. and the nineteenth-century abolitionists; they traded in prophetic rhetoric. Their uncompromising moral demands reshaped American society on the race question. At the same time, however, this kind of rhetoric is also dangerous to the bonds of civility that allow diverse groups to live peaceably together as one people. All prophetic rhetoric can be divisive—even the rhetoric of Martin Luther King and the abolitionists. Furthermore, not every would-be prophet is Martin Luther King; not every cause is abolitionism.

Those of us interested in the role of religion in the public square need to grapple with both the usefulness of prophetic rhetoric and its dangerousness. Doing so requires us first to understand how prophetic indictments of “fire and strength” operate rhetorically. On the basis of this understanding, we need to develop criteria for the appropriate use of prophetic discourse, criteria that would endorse the use of its “fire and