

Breaking the Circle of Humanity: On Political and Prophetic Authority

Let me begin this brief article by noting what I take to be an obvious fact—namely, that whenever human beings gather together to form communities, however large or small, a system for exercising authority inevitably emerges to secure the community's well-being. For ideals must be articulated, laws emplaced, problems appraised, decisions made. The subject which will concern us is precisely this authority exercised in human communities. And my remarks will be premised on the idea that there is a distinction between what I will call "political" authority and, drawing from my work as a theologian, "prophetic" authority. Let me begin as follows, then, with a few descriptive comments regarding this distinction.

Companionship with Others: On Power and Persuasion

Political authority is one that legislates; prophetic authority is one that persuades. In the first case authority is a laying down of laws; in the second case it is an appeal to a way of life. Political authority is premised on a *quid pro quo* relationship between two contracting parties (those who govern, those who are governed) in which abiding by the law issues in reward while breaking the law issues in punishment. Prophetic authority is premised on an appreciation of singlemindedness, the "purity of heart" of which Jesus spoke, in which the good is done for no other reason than that it is good. Prophetic authority does not raise the question of rewards and punishments—or at least it does so only secondarily to its main concern that the good be done for its own sake. Political authority has its source within the closed circle of humanity; it is parental, civil, ecclesiastical, and so on. Only as it becomes prophetic does it break this circle and become theological as well, God-directed in character. The only will, we are saying, which can be understood as good *in itself* is the will of God. And the task of prophetic authority is to per-

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suade others first that this is so, and then that God's will is known. The prophet in any age exists as a living reminder that we have not been orphaned in a hostile world where human whim reigns as the final arbiter of what becomes of us. He coaxes from our minds a continual recollection of the presence of God in the story of human development.

Like political authority, however, prophetic authority can go awry in its intentions. When it does it becomes especially demonic in its expressions because it backs itself up with the authority of God himself, and the claim that its rights and power are therefore unquestionable. This is the stance of the religious maniac who does not perceive that his reception of a revelation of God's will does not bring in its train an identification between his own will and God's, or that his interpretations of God's will do not possess the sanctity of the will itself. He has obliterated the chasm that separates the words of God from his own words, and thus has lifted the barrier between the object of his faith and his specific attempts to articulate it. The religious maniac does not understand that he can legitimately mediate the authority possessed by God's word, but this cannot generate any claim to an authority apart from this word. The religious maniac is behaviourally deviant because his imagination has gone wild on the thought that his ways are identical to God's ways in the world. He demands an unquestioning and complete submission to the instruction contained in what he says and does. And when he doesn't get it, when he sees in the response of others even potential disagreement or contradiction, he tends to get belligerent and threatening. Sometimes he can back up his threats personally; he has the authority (of whatever sort) to punish those who disagree with him. But in all cases he threatens the punishment of God, the divine retribution that will inevitably recompense eye for eye and tooth for tooth any rebellion against what he proclaims is the word of God. Prophetic humility, the awareness that one can preach only what has been received from God—that one cannot go beyond this when voicing promises of reward and punishment—is completely foreign to him.

The demon in Milton's great poem, *Paradise Lost*, thus becomes a classic illustration of the religious maniac. His screaming confession, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven," is the manifesto *in extremis* of any individual who refuses or has forgotten the distinction (what Kierkegaard calls "the infinite qualitative difference") between his will and God's will. He commits the elemental fault which the Greeks called *hubris*, the assertion that he, finally, is the arbiter of values, the judge of life and death, the mind that will determine the course of creation—because he, finally, is the one to whom the will of God is accessible. We are in the world here of the psychopathic prophet who determined the destiny of Germany for a dozen years, and the one in Jonestown who manipulated the communal suicide of a small population.

The madhouse scenarios of prophets gone awry in their authority are familiar enough to us all. They are written in grotesque detail on countless pages of human history. And they remind us that human savagery is never quite so exquisite as when it is attached to a religious conviction gone haywire. The greatest villains who have ever brought ruin onto human communities have been those convinced that their activity has the blessing of God; that they are serving a providential scheme, the "order of things," against which any rebellion deserves a hellish reply. The villainy is born from an untempered conceit leading them to think that because they have received a revelation of God's will, they may begin to act like God, enjoying divine prerogatives in determining the values and goals, life and death of other human beings.

Whenever a society is caught with a dearth of leaders, whenever its members are looking for someone who will exercise an authority that will guide meaning into their lives, the society is open to the influence of a prophet. But the true prophet, unlike the false or insane one, will exercise his authority only as a parenthesis, a hiatus in the development of the society. By this I mean that whereas the false or insane prophet has invested his own worth in the authority he exercises, and hence will maneuver events to maintain and strengthen this authority, the tack of the true prophet is just the opposite. His authority is exercised only as long as it is needed—that is, until the time when the people to whom he preaches have themselves become prophets, exercising their own authority over their lives. The true prophet, in other words, seeks to bring people to an experience of God similar to his own, so that from this experience a vocation will be shaped that will give their lives the leadership for which they yearn. Once this task is complete, his authority, no longer needed or productive, is gladly abdicated. The false or insane prophet, on the other hand, would die before he did likewise. What engages the true prophet, we are saying, is fundamentally the task of catechesis. His purpose is to instruct people that the will of God is known, that it must be taken seriously, but that it cannot be taken seriously until they assign it authority over their lives. Unlike the false prophet, however, he views himself in this task only as a mediator, not an initiator, of what God wills—and so is able to withdraw from it with a satisfied heart when it is complete. Or differently: The true prophet knows that what he preaches does not have value in and of itself simply because it is *he* who is preaching it; rather, it has value because (and only when) it mirrors the received word of God. The true prophet, in short, readily acknowledges the distinction between what the Greeks called *doxa* (personal opinion) and *episteme* (true knowledge); the former comes from the workings of his own mind, the latter from the revealed word of God. But the false prophet not only blurs this distinction, he does away with it entirely, now equating his personal opinion with true knowledge.

It is a commonplace fact that at a certain stage in his development every healthy child achieves a maturity of consciousness that allows him increasingly to guide his life apart from parental leadership. This can be an extraordinarily disconcerting experience for the parents. To benefit from it they must come to the realization that their child is becoming more and more like them—that is, a thinking, valuing creature who is providing a meaning for his life whose source is a “calling” or vocation he believes he must pursue. If the parents do not come to this realization, if they attempt to deafen the child to the calling or vocation he experiences, they are in effect assaulting the very beginnings of his sense of integrity. Their behaviour now becomes analogous to that of the false or insane prophet. It amounts to a refusal to abdicate an authority over the child’s life that no longer belongs to them but has moved to the child himself. And if the child is not strong, if his vocation dies under their refusal to relinquish authority over him, then he becomes much more accurately described not as their partner in life, someone with whom they share an equal communion, but as their slave. The textbooks of psychoanalysis are filled with case histories describing just this type of situation. The adult who cannot make critical decisions without the consultation and approval of a parent or parent-surrogate will find himself psychologically stymied when this parental authority is no longer available. His initial impulse then will be to transfer as quickly as possible onto someone else, a new “parent,” the authority of the one now absent. The classic example of the man who marries a woman not to be his wife but to replace his mother is a tragic demonstration of this process. The marriage will endure only when the woman is as maladjusted as the man and willingly gives up the role of his wife in favor of that of his mother. Otherwise the marriage will dissolve when the woman concludes that the man is irredeemably locked into a neurotic dependency relationship with her that requires a responsibility on her part that is neither fair nor healthy. In her husband’s case the child has not become father to the man; the man has remained a child.

It can be a heady experience to exercise authority over the lives of others. The taste of authority can be very sweet, and it can be addictive. It can also be a sedative against the pain of a life that, left on its own, without the authority over others that fills its days, would be without direction. Authority is sometimes a surrogate for self-worth, that is, it fills in the gap that exists when an individual cannot find purpose in relating to himself and so seeks this purpose in an over-involved and over-influential relationship with others. Power is the chief characteristic (and expression) of an authority that is described in this addictive and sedative fashion; and it is this type of authority that must always merit our close, specific, and attentive scrutiny. For it is here that we find the breeding ground of tyranny and the opposite of all prophetic authority,

which exercises itself, as we said, not in power but persuasion. Power is built on the assumption that not all are equal in guiding their lives in a community; persuasion is built on just the opposite assumption. The prophetic life, in other words, is one which recognizes the independent worth of human beings, the fact that no one has a right to *intrude* his convictions into the lives of others when they themselves possess other convictions, or no convictions at all. This, I think, is the fundamental insight, the guiding thought that undergirds Ezekial's great teaching on the autonomous responsibility of each individual to shape and follow his own conscience. What the prophet may do is assist in this shaping; he may attempt to form the consciences of others in a way consistent with his perception of God's will. But he may not try to force this perception on others, to bludgeon them into an acceptance of it so that their consciences, no longer the result of their own free decisions, are not their own. For every individual, the prophet knows, has independent worth before the eyes of God, and his convictions must be the result of a conscious and liberated choice. Otherwise the possibility is ever alert that their integrity is unjudged, their value unappraised, and their passion to drive his life borrowed and always tentative.

Finally, let me note that when you have a wound you cannot heal, you know what it means to be powerless. The wound is a continual reminder that you are not in complete control of your life; that factors can intrude upon it which exercise a subsequent authority that you cannot ignore. In fact, we sometimes find a prophet describing the experience of his call, his vocation, in just this fashion. But when all are prophets, when all are wounded by God in a way they cannot ignore, then all are equal. And the authority they exercise over each other can no longer be one of power—for that now belongs only to God—but one of persuasion. For what they seek from each other, what they need, is a convincing assessment of what their wound means, what its effects are at any given point in their lives. This assessment, however, cannot be legislated; it must be debated. It cannot be handed down; it must be brought up. It cannot be the responsibility of one or some; it is the responsibility of all. Prophetic authority, in short, can never be the breeding ground of human tyrannies. Before that could happen it would either kill itself or metamorphose into the mere exercise of power. No—what it helps bring to birth is not human tyranny but human community.