

Are There Still Prophets?

February 1, 2015

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Readings: Deuteronomy 18.15-20;
1 Corinthians 7.32-35;
Mark 1.21-28

By David Mills

In his “Reflections on Gandhi,” George Orwell said that “saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent,” and given what he meant by “saints,” it was a perfectly reasonable requirement. He never defined the word, but he meant, I think, those publically anointed with a kind of special purity that raises them above criticism and makes them kinds of gurus or sages whose ideas get a good head start in any debate – no matter how far the subject at hand from the matters they actually understand.

Secular Saints and Prophets

Politicians, businessmen, writers, and celebrities do not get anointed, because they do what they do to gain something for themselves, unless they are “mavericks” or for other reasons considered free of the usual human failings. Clerics aren’t anointed because they are considered compromised by their religion, again unless they are “mavericks” or, as with Martin Luther King, Jr., their religion is just ignored. Gandhi was and is certainly one of the world’s saints, as was Albert Einstein and in our own day Nelson Mandela, Elie Wiesel, and Stephen Hawking. Orwell is one also, though he’s been invoked so long as the conscience of his time, and was so consistently critical of the left of his day, he’s now subject to a debunking reaction.

Readers will notice that these public saints all take mainstream liberal positions. A few can challenge liberal beliefs, though only from farther to the left. Andrea Dworkin would be an example. Holding views to the right of mainstream liberalism necessarily prevents one from being canonized by the secular world.

Secular canonization is given only to those who prove their sanctity by holding so-called enlightened views, and it can be easily lost. Remember how quickly Solzhenitsyn’s status dropped after his famous commencement address at Harvard, when by challenging the sins of the West he went, as the joke goes, from preaching to meddling. The world’s saints say what the secular elites want to hear, and say it with the added force of their sanctity. (Which is not to say that they’re necessarily wrong, I should add. The world does sometimes recognize truths, sometimes even truths Christians as a whole don’t see.)

It’s easier to be a world’s prophet than a world’s saint, though the categories overlap a lot. The saint has to do something, like drive an imperial power from his country or resist a racist tyranny and spend decades in jail for it. The prophet only has to speak well. It does help to have done something to justify people’s attention, but his authority usually comes entirely from his message. That message is what the world’s opinion makers want to hear, but more earnestly, intensely, and creatively said than usual – pronounced rather than argued and given in the declarative, not the explanatory, mode.

Secular prophets tend to denounce more than proclaim. Often the ideal for which they’re speaking is left abstract or unstated. Think of the spokesmen for the Occupy movement, who simply refused to say what they wanted and were praised for their passion and their criticism of Wall Street. Sometimes the goal is made clear. Think of those pro-abortion spokesmen who insist that America needs legal and subsidized abortion to achieve equality for women, though even then the force of their speech is directed against allegedly uncaring, ideological, misogynistic people who oppose “abortion rights” and “choice.”

A Particular Calling

Are there still prophets? More culturally and religiously conservative people tend to question, doubt, or ignore the so-called prophets of our time. The word is certainly not one Catholics tend to use. But the scriptures include prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and St. John the Baptist. They did something God wanted done, and their words are still authoritative and binding for us millennia later. Presumably they set for us one model of how God wants us to speak to the world.

So are there still prophets? Not ones who speak with the authority of revelation, obviously, but people who speak the truth now in the way that Isaiah and St. John the Baptist did then? If we take the commonsense answer that there are voices speaking today that the likely reader of this essay would recognize as prophetic, even if he didn't use the word, then yes. I'm thinking of people like Benedict, Chesterton, Richard John Neuhaus, Dorothy Day, Wendell Berry, and Solzhenitsyn among Christians, and – noting that their prophetic insights are mixed with often great error – people like Orwell, Camus, Christopher Hitchens, and Nat Hentoff among nonbelievers.

We are blessed with many wise people, but they are not all prophets. The prophet has a particular calling. A working definition would have two parts. First, the prophet is not someone who sees the future but someone who sees deeply into the present, in a way that if listened to can change the future. He articulates transcendent principles with unusual clarity and applies them to practical affairs in ways they are not usually applied. Prophets are people who say what needs to be said because it is not being said very often. Their penetration can make their message seem eccentric, overwrought, and alien even to those who generally agree with them. They tend to stand out, at least a little, even from their ideological comrades. But they are people who can make you say “Aha” or “Now I see.”

Second, the prophet is not just someone who speaks with insight. He is someone who is recognized as a special voice, even by those who think his ideas are foolish or depraved (for example, “sectarian,” “homophobic,” “insensitive,” “simplistic,” “oppressive,” and the like). He is recognized for his message but also for the way he speaks. The modern prophet speaks with a certain pungency, on analogy with the Old Testament prophets and St. John the Baptist. He doesn't, as Camus put it in his address to the Dominicans in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, give his message “the obscure form of the encyclical.”

This point I would qualify slightly. Prophets may usually speak in a version of the classic prophetic style, pointedly, urgently, loudly, as a voice crying in the wilderness, but they may also speak in the usual way, sounding prophetic only because they say something so contrary to what most people believe. They may be prophets for the bookish, as was Benedict. Though he spoke in the most gentle and measured way, with academic precision and with his pastoral concern usually evident, the press and his critics within the Church used to call him names like “God's Rottweiler” and “Vatican hardliner,” and that suggests how prophetic he was.

Chesterton gave a good description of what I mean in his (much too generous) description of his friend George Bernard Shaw. “[A] man engaged against a brilliant duellist may fancy that the sword of his foe has turned to ten swords in his hand. But this is not really because the man is playing with ten swords, it is because he is aiming very straight with one,” he explains in his early book *Heretics*.

Moreover, a man with a definite belief always appears bizarre, because he does not change with the world; he has climbed into a fixed star, and the earth whizzes below him like a zoetrope. Millions of mild black-coated men call themselves sane and sensible merely because they always catch the fashionable insanity, because they are hurried into madness after madness by the maelstrom of the world.

Chesterton talks about the limits of our language, using the examples of white wine which is actually yellow and white grapes which are really pale green, as well as the “white man” who is in fact “a sort of pink drab.” You couldn't order a bottle of yellow wine or describe Europeans in another country as “pinkish men” without being thought mad or foolish, though both statements would be “the strict truth.” The prophet (Chesterton is speaking of Shaw) “appears eccentric and grotesque because he will not accept the general belief that white is yellow. He has based all his brilliancy and solidity upon the hackneyed, but yet forgotten, fact that truth is stranger than fiction. Truth, of course, must of necessity be stranger than fiction, for we have made fiction to suit ourselves.”

Recognizing the Modern Prophet

This leaves the question of how can we recognize the modern prophet and distinguish him from people who simply have strong opinions and forceful ways of speaking. What distinguishes the prophet from the insightful man? How do we discern real prophets who speak a truth we don't see from those who say well what we want to hear? How, for that matter, do we distinguish the prophet from the jerk, the bombastic, the ideologue the over-confident, the self-appointed seer of deeper truths, and the other false prophets?

Here is a working description, summarizing some of the features of those people who speak prophetically. The modern prophet:

- Speaks with the authority of the Church, or rather (since he's not always officially accredited) with the authority of her teaching, or in the case of the nonbelievers, speaks with the authority of principles we recognize.
- Has the verbal gifts to say what he has been given to say strikingly and memorably, usually because he speaks wittily, sharply, amusingly, or passionately, but in every case he speaks in some way with the quality of the voice crying in the wilderness.
- Draws the implications of eternal truths in ways they are rarely drawn because doing so makes life more difficult than most people will accept or requires beliefs they find simply implausible.
- Knows deeply the tradition from which he speaks and lives a life disciplined by his tradition, which frees him from the assumptions and ideological commitments nearly everyone else holds.
- Does not care much for his status in the world, being someone who says what he believes he has to say without calculating its effect upon his career and income, and is therefore usually not nearly as popular as his gifts would otherwise make him.
- Speaks for the poor and the marginalized, which includes people who are in fact marginalized but not generally thought to be so, like middle Americans, homeschoolers, conservative Evangelicals, and the people who run crisis pregnancy centers.
- Speaks against the advantaged and privileged, which includes not only the usual targets of modern prophecy like corporations and large conservative religious bodies, but also the elite media, mainstream academia, the do-gooder industry (Planned Parenthood being the supreme example), and secular saints.
- At some point goes too far for polite opinion and often embarrasses those who agree with him.
- Almost certainly does not think of himself as a prophet.

Being a prophet is a particular vocation and a fairly rare one, but also one we all have in some small way, within the limits of our gifts. Every Catholic speaks prophetically when he speaks Catholic teaching at the points it most challenges the world.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Jean Marie Calès, "Prophecy, Prophet, and Prophetess," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12477a.htm>

Rev. Felix Just, S.J., "What is Biblical Prophecy?" available at:
<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Prophecy.htm>

Rev. William Most, "Old Testament Prophets," available at: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/SCRIPTUR/ISAIAH.TXT>

"Prophetical Literature in the Bible," available at: <http://www.cathtruth.com/catholicbible/prophet.htm>

Rev. George W. Rutler, "Benedict XVI: Pope as Prophet," *Crisis Magazine* (August 25, 2014), available at:
<http://www.crisismagazine.com/2014/pope-as-prophet>

Rev. John Singarayar, SVD, "Priest as a Prophet," *Our Sunday Visitor* (September 28, 2012), available at:
<https://www.osv.com/MyFaith/Bible/Prophets/Article/TabId/1209/ArtMID/14841/ArticleID>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The scriptures include prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and St. John the Baptist, who did something God wanted done and set for us a model of how God wants us to speak to the world.***
- ***A prophet is not someone who sees the future but someone who sees deeply into the present, in a way that if listened to can change the future.***
- ***Prophets say what needs to be said because it is not being said very often.***
- ***Prophets may speak urgently, loudly, as a voice crying in the wilderness, but they may also sound prophetic only because they say something so contrary to what most people believe.***
- ***Being a prophet is a particular vocation and a fairly rare one, but also one we all have in some way, within the limits of our gifts.***
- ***Every Catholic speaks prophetically when promoting Catholic teaching at the points it most challenges the world.***