

Prophecy and Presence

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If prophetic presence is part of the witness of faith communities, then that presence must be recognized and visible. Such visibility comes not merely through the undervalued role of the Spirit in bringing things to light, but also through the prophetic tradition of being properly engaged with society and culture. The prophetic platform takes seriously the fact that this is the Lord's world, and that God is rather well informed about how it is operating. Therefore, prophets must be similarly informed. It also rests on the premise that God takes context, culture, and people seriously; so too, then, must the prophet. The Auburn report speaks directly to this question of the possibility of real prophetic presence for religious leadership and institutions in general, and our theological seminaries in particular. It's hard to be prophetic when nobody's listening.

The Auburn report also comes during a season of heightened interest in the role of religious institutions in public life, expressed in two seemingly separate streams of inquiry. First, the public sector in general, and government and policy people in particular, are asking what role religious institutions (now known as "faith-based institutions" for a variety of reasons) can play in the strengthening of civil society. This line of investigation results from the honest search for real solutions to community and social problems and from a self-interested quest to reduce the role of government (and its revenue sources, i.e., taxes) in the resolution of the same. Second, religious institutions from a variety of faith

traditions are reformulating their own sense of what it means to engage the larger society, whether that means a retreat from political process on the religious right, or the development of programs for mainline denominations suffering from declining and sometimes schismatic memberships.

In the first instance—that of the public sector—much attention has been paid to the capacity of religious organizations to deliver social services. Recent federal legislation concerning Charitable Choice reflects such thinking. Charitable Choice was initially intended to enable religious organizations to compete for social services contracts as part of support for individuals and families moving from welfare to work, and is now being debated as a viable public policy for a variety of other services as well. In the ongoing conversation about the role of volunteerism in social and community development, policy people point to churches as the largest repository of volunteer labor of any institutional configuration in the United States (and presumably in Canada). Politicians and policy analysts wonder aloud whether such a volunteer labor force can be mobilized to pick up some of the slack of social welfare programming. There have even been naive notions that churches can “do it all,” literally taking on the former welfare caseload in the wake of the dismantling of the welfare safety net. One national columnist has gone so far as to suggest that each congregation in the United State should adopt one welfare family. More knowledgeable wags reply that many congregations could start with the pastor’s family.

Simply put, there is an active conversation as well as enacted legislation that assumes religious institutions have a role to play in strengthening community

life in general and delivering social services in particular. *Often absent from this conversation, however, is any notion that churches should adopt or continue a prophet posture or advocacy.* Rather the dialogue assumes that church and state will be able to coexist without the checks and balances of moral authority.

Stopping just short of calling for a return to the idyllic days of pristine partnership between home, school, and church, this model values churches more for what they can do than for what they essentially are. From a theological perspective, few religious insiders would quarrel with the notion that, in the best of all worlds, what religious institutions do is a product of what they are—i.e., that their outreach, their service delivery, their helping ministries flow from their very being as faith-based institutions. Yet, current political conversations do not attend to this faith dimension, and in so doing, manage to avoid many pressing public moral questions as well.

In the second kind of inquiry into the public role of religious institutions—that taking place within the churches themselves—religious institutions move between political disengagement on the one hand and public re-engagement aimed at “meeting the needs” of current congregational, jurisdictional, and denominational constituencies. These modes of public engagement and disengagement alike reflect the rapidly shifting tides of political reality, but the gravitational pull is toward a political center that can provide emotional and ethical respite for persons made dizzy by such changes. Some of the conversation here comes as a response to the public dialogue on the role of churches. But more of it reflects a need for institutional self-preservation. Public

disengagement offers refuge from the failures of a particular political agenda under the slogan of “taking care of our own,” while public engagement promises new ways to “take care of our own,” in light of the fact that they are leaving us.

I find these two “streams of inquiry” on the role of religious institutions a helpful context within which to consider the Auburn report. As a former seminary dean, I am tempted to turn immediately to the second stream of inquiry and defend it as a necessary precursor to any public presence of religious institutions in general and seminaries in particular. But in my current role as a policy analyst, I am much more fascinated by the issues being raised in policy circles concerning the public role of churches and virtually scandalized by the notion that most of this conversation to which I have been privy has occurred without much participation of theological schools. Let me offer two instances of this “missed connection” at the national level. A recent issue of the *Brookings Review*, arguably one of the most widely read public policy journals in the world, carried the title, “What Does God Have to Do With the American Experiment?” Only one theological educator wrote for the issue. The Manhattan Institute has begun extensive inquiry into faith-based solutions to social problems. The list of fellows related to this enterprise includes two pastors, but no theological educators.

The Auburn report also notes that local politics seem unaffected by the presence of seminaries. The comments by local politicians and community leaders cited in the report raise the question of religious presence at precisely the time when policy discussions seem to call for that presence. It seems to me that if seminaries and religious leaders were prepared and positioned to do so, there

would be ample opportunity for discussion of the public role of religious institutions that was actually informed by religious institutions themselves. But several things work against this happening.

First, while those initiating the conversation on religion and public life represent a mixture of the religious (liberal and conservative), areligious, and even antireligious, a critical mass of those involved clearly do not understand religious institutions. They are more comfortable hearing persons like themselves talk about churches than talking to someone from the churches themselves. They don't know the church world in general, nor its leadership in particular. Beyond that, they are even less likely to know the scholars of the church. Simply put, if we want to enter the conversation about religion and public life, we are going to have to invite ourselves to the party.

Second, because the interest in religion and public life owes much to the so-called social service function of religious institutions and much less to the churches as repositories of moral wisdom and insight, religious leaders will have to bring to the table their own brand of moral discourse, appropriately blended with a solid grasp of public issues and policy. Despite the well-known moral lapses of some public religious figures, religious leaders bring rich traditions that make them well-equipped to raise value-laden questions concerning public life. Religious leaders, however, tend to have a poor grasp of policy issues, whether in contemporary debates about welfare reform, the role of race in domestic policy, school choice and school vouchers, or other issues that affect the lives of the people our churches are called to serve.

It would be foolish to expect theological seminaries to develop across-the-board expertise in policy matters, especially at the expense of the already dwindling core of tradition at the heart of seminary curricula. But neither is it acceptable for seminaries to serve as professional and research institutions without in some way accessing such expertise for faculties, students, and the general church. Interestingly, many of our denominations have people who do policy work almost in isolation from the world of congregations. If theological seminaries seek a closer link with congregational life, they will be better positioned to work on the interface of religion and policy than even denominational and jurisdictional officials.

Somewhere between preparing candidates for ministry in isolation from public policy concerns and turning seminaries into a social policy research centers is an understanding of the seminary as a place where theological knowledge can be brought to bear on important questions of public policy and community well-being. Such a perspective both avoids the baptism of ideology in theological fonts and the false notion that seminaries can become schools of public policy. A major way to avoid these problems is to focus on the moral questions involved in public issues while being informed by good policy people and studies.

This leads to a third challenge—the development of partnerships between theological seminaries and professional research and/or learning institutions that concentrate on issues of public policy and community well-being. Some ready partners already exist: religion-friendly institutions whose full-time mission has

been to inform and influence policy on issues that people of faith care about. These institutions include faith-based think tanks such as the Center for Public Justice (which assisted Senator John Ashcroft in the development of Charitable Choice legislation) and university-based research centers such as the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (which advised Jesse Jackson during his presidential bids).

The challenge of developing such partnerships is heightened for theological seminaries. Free-standing seminaries can suffer from isolation, from not belonging to a larger intellectual community where such issues are part of the normal fare of discussion and research. These schools, after looking seriously at available resources, should identify institutions of like persuasion, whether the match is the conservative heritage of Pepperdine University and its newly developed School of Public Policy, or the innovative faith-friendly work of Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, which continues to inform definitions of community organizing, development, and building through its assets-based approach to community analysis. And while Conrad Cherry has rightly shown the tensions inherent in the attempt to maintain prophetic integrity in the university-based divinity school,¹ it still stands to reason that such institutions may be better poised to develop such partnerships with policy-wise thinkers who are part of this larger conversation. That said, free-standing seminaries should think about developing and strengthening conversations with professional and research institutions that can be appropriate partners in thinking through the role of religion and public life.

The final challenge concerns the role of African-American theological schools and seminary leadership. While the Auburn report rightly points to the historic role of public engagement by black theological leaders, the trends of the past twenty years bode a warning for those who believe that such leadership will continue unaffected through the new era of devolution and shifting policy. Black middle class churches increasingly find themselves in situations parallel to the white urban congregations of twenty or thirty years ago who struggled with the decline in their “neighborhood population” and made the choice to follow their members to the suburbs. If such a phenomenon persists in the black community today (and all indications are that it will) then it is a short jump from the current celebration of African American public theological engagement to the same laments of invisibility that plague today’s mainline schools and leadership, and threaten the rest. Cornel West has already demonstrated the bankruptcy of the black exceptionalist tradition which gives African Americans a sort of “get out of jail free” card when it comes to such issues as prophetic witness, community engagement, and social critique. Black seminary leaders will probably always be expected to preach, speak, and be a part of the fabric of public leadership in the black community. But whether these leaders will continue as a prophetic presence may well be determined by the extent to which they can resist tendencies toward cultural assimilation that could render them as invisible as their white counterparts. Indeed, *the whole of this argument hinges on whether one accepts prophetic witness as part and parcel of a seminary’s mission*. If not, the above is moot. But if so, Barbara Wheeler and her colleagues have spoken

directly to the very real danger that theological seminaries could develop into non-prophet organizations.

¹ *Hurrying Toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).