

That Embarrassing Voice of Prophecy

By Alexander Carpenter

This recent Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, I attended a conference in Washington D.C. titled “Politics and Spirituality: Toward a Public Integrity.” The Center for Action and Contemplation and *Sojourners* magazine organized the event, and about eighteen hundred people came to listen to the prophetic voices of pastor Jim Wallis; Richard Rohr, a priest; journalist E. J. Dionne; and writer Anne Lamott. That’s right, prophetic voices. And frankly, that embarrassed me.

It was not the speakers; they inspired just fine. Both the speeches and the people with whom I spoke recalled the old evangelical and mainstream Protestant and Catholic traditions of treating religion as both a personal and public virtue. Not the current far-right obsession with enforcing private morality on the nation, but the old-time progressive Christian mission to preach deliverance to the captives and feed the hungry.

Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners* and a graduate of Trinity Evangelical Seminary, suggested that he is an evangelical born in the wrong century. He pointed out that it was Charles Finney, the great nineteenth-century evangelist, who invented the altar call, and right after the saved came forward they were encouraged to sign up for the abolitionist cause. In addition, Finney founded Oberlin, the first college to give women more choices for their future. (Where are those pro-choice evangelicals now?)

I wasn’t embarrassed either when people

invoked the names of great prophets such as Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Franz Jaegerstaetter, Simone Weil, Black Elk, Oscar Romero, and Mother Jones. Nor was I embarrassed when, on Monday, we marched through the streets of the district and gathered on the lawn in front of Congress.

And I wasn’t embarrassed when Jim Wallis prophesied that if Martin Luther King Jr. were still alive, “he would be speaking in this place about the invisible misery of poverty, . . . about the agony and the arrogance of our war in Iraq. He would be speaking of a nation seduced by materialism, blinded by its militarism, finding security in all the wrong places and becoming more and more insecure every day.”

In fact, I had to agree that the religious right has dominated the moral discourse of America far too long and that budgets are moral documents, too. “Yeah,” I thought, “budgets *do* reveal

a country's priorities and its earmarks show us who really has our leader's ears."

So what embarrassed me? Well, when was the last time you heard someone with a solid liberal arts education speak glowingly about the gift of prophecy? That is, someone who isn't paid to do so. Well, this group—very reverend Episcopalians, Princeton Seminary students, bearded Middlebury College students, Fuller evangelicals, and young Jesuit workers—believed in the gift of prophecy; and it was I who struggled to share the word.

"Prophet!" It still sticks in my barely ecumenical craw. Isn't that our doctrine? In fact, number eighteen uses Ellen White (the only prophet named) to justify our remnant security, and, in return, anyone who still doesn't care about plagiarism or history gets "comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction."

So, why did *they* use the term *prophetic*, and as a synonym for progressive, no less? As has been pointed out by many scholars, including Abraham Heschel, the tradition of biblical prophecy grew out of Israel's class inequalities. From about 850 B.C.E., the kings fought foreign wars or tried to keep from being invaded, while the rich got richer and the poor got poorer and the priests just burned lambs and colluded with those in power.

In this context, prophets like Habakkuk stood up and spoke strong, even political words:

Because you plundered many nations
All surviving peoples shall plunder you—
For crimes against men and wrongs against lands,
Against cities and all their inhabitants.
Ah, you who have acquired gains
To the detriment of your own houses,
Who have destroyed many peoples
In order to set your nest on high
To escape disaster!
You have plotted shame for your own house,
And guilt for yourself...
Ah, you who have built a town with crime,
And established a city with infamy,
So that peoples have had to toil without profit,
And nations weary themselves for naught!

(2:8–13)¹

Not long afterward, Babylon invaded.

Now, I don't have enough faith to believe that God controlled human freedom, causing some people to kill other people to prove some point about being good. But I

do believe that some prophets, as seers, like Martin Luther King Jr., can see beyond our myopic, bourgeois eyes, and envision a better future. As Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo both point out, there are two thousand verses about poor people in the Bible and not a single one about permanent tax cuts for the extremely wealthy. In fact, if I recall, Jesus encouraged even Peter to pay his fair share, too.

Continuing the prophetic tradition, Ellen White preached against slavery, encouraged the great Adventist health tradition, sent her son on the *Morning Star* to work with minorities, joined the women's movement of her day, and encouraged the internationalization of Adventism and uplifting the poor.

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