

COMMENTARY ON PRIESTS, PROPHETS, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT

by Sanborn C. Brown

From the point of view of a scientist interested in religion in an age of science, I will first comment on Dr. Williams' statement that "Past prophecy has moved at a profound moral level, but it has on the whole been separated from technical knowledge. It is possible that in our time the prophetic function will appear most powerfully where it joins an ultimate moral sensitivity to a technical grasp of the structures and dynamics of human existence."

I am persuaded that the present-day prophets (using the term as Williams has defined it) come from among the ranks of the scientists. Contrary to some of Williams' remarks, I do not believe the scientists are priests and most emphatically doubt that they should be.

I am not so foolish as to contend that all scientists are prophets. But when, as I am about to do, I reproduce Williams' characterization of prophets and ask you to use the word "scientist" for "prophet," I mean an individual appearing as rarely as the prophets of the Old Testament and with an equal commitment to reality and credibility, but in a modern scientific manner.

Let me then remind you of Williams' first characterization of a prophet: "The prophets see life and history under the aspect of the divine purpose of a particular people which is bound up with the divine purpose of the world. . . . There is no separation of sacred and secular for the prophets." He had previously defined the divine as "the ultimate meaning-giving reality. Every culture and every person depends upon or searches for something which gives integrating and final meaning to existence. In functional terms we shall call that, however it is conceived, the divine."

"The prophets see life and history under the aspect of the divine purpose of a *particular people*." In the context of my present remarks, this means to me very specifically, paraphrasing Williams, "The scien-

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tist sees life and history under the aspect of the ultimate meaning-giving reality of a Judeo-Christian people."

Much has been written about the unique character of Christianity as an exploiter of nature. Many learned men, deeply versed in the basic elements of other religions, have been impressed that science and technology have grown out of Judeo-Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature as something to be subjugated and used for his own purposes to a degree that suggests that this may be a unique characteristic of our Western religious tradition. I am impressed by this characterization, and it makes me hasten to point out that there are no universal prophets—prophets only speak to their own priests and peoples. Scientists are probably only prophets for the Jews, the Christians, and such Judeo-Christian "heresies" or reformations as Islam and Marxism.

Returning to Williams' paper: "The prophets come into conflict with the established political order and religion . . . because they put the moral claim ahead of everything else including the religious forms and rituals." Again: "In this penetration to the foundation of the community's life, the prophets do in a sense unhinge all securities in tradition, institution, and national expectation. . . . [Nevertheless,] the prophetic cannot be understood as the rejection of the establishment. Yet it does drive beyond the present establishment to a future order."

And his last point: "Finally it is a distinctive mark of prophecy that the prophets are individuals. They do not all say the same thing, or see history exactly alike."

My purpose in drawing attention to this parallelism between the prophetic and the scientific endeavors arises from a concern more basic than mere semantic games or philological exercises. Science has given man knowledge and techniques for the annihilation of man. Man may now guide his genetic future; he himself may shape man not only in his own present image but modified in his choice from hundreds of different ways: brighter, more stupid, more aggressive, less aggressive. Man can guide his evolution through controlling his environment. The computer age is upon us, and cybernetics is not theory but practice. The use of electronic information-retrieval systems to control the affairs of society is not tomorrow but today.

The prophets all about us cry out to be heard. But who will translate the science in our culture into goals and aspirations for mankind, into "searches for something which gives integrating and final meaning to existence"? According to Williams, "The priestly function is the mediation of this divine reality."

To suggest that scientists should be both priests and prophets disregards the omnipresence of the establishment. To quote again: "The prophets do not give principles for the determination of what is just. . . . They do not work out the assumptions which might underlie the formation of a viable method for the adjudication of disputes. Most of this task is either ignored or left to the tradition. . . . To carry this out in a complex society becomes a problem of social and legal engineering for which the prophetic word alone does not give guidance."

And as he had previously pointed out, "It is the priestly function within the establishment which preserves the prophets' message and reaffirms it through the liturgy of the community . . . without the priestly conservation in the establishment the prophetic word would be lost, or become merely eccentric to the community."

To emphasize Williams' point further, prophets make bad priests and priests make bad prophets for the very reason that to be successful in the practical function of guiding the community of men, priests work from within the establishment and prophets work from without. Yet "the prophets do not reject the religious community. Drastic as their condemnation of it is, they still call the community back to its true foundations."

One theme here seems to me to be very striking: the remarkable theological parallelism between the ancient Hebrew prophets and the modern scientists. Jehovah's laws had to be feared and obeyed with as rigid adherence to every detail as do the laws of physics and biology. The ancient Hebrew felt that he had no more chance of modifying Jehovah's will by prayer than a modern man can modify the acceleration of gravity by prayer as he jumps from the top of the Empire State Building. "The Lord God . . . visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" remarkably resembles the prophecies of Hermann Muller, George Wald, and Theodosius Dobzhansky about the degradation of the human gene pool.

There is a very obvious illustration of the roles of prophet, priest, and establishment which can be introduced by another quotation from Williams: "Priestly authority to declare what is true is always derivative. It comes from the traditions and institutions which are accepted as having a divine foundation or revelation. Priests have authority as long as this mediation actually is believed in, but the priest does not originate the truth which he declares."

Surely one of the great prophets of the nineteenth century was

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Charles Darwin. The biological, genetic, and anthropological insights following his revelation showed that all races of men were essentially equal in significant ways. Yet only now, a hundred years later, are the priests among us sufficiently convinced of the basic religious relevance of his prophecy to challenge the establishment, to insist that this concept must be "acceptable to those who hold decisive power." As priests, ministers, and rabbis lead the civil rights rebellion, we see a modification of the establishment led by those whose function and duty it is to lead, presumably reinforced by the message of the prophet Darwin.

Many people fear, with reason, that having entered an age of ever accelerating prophecy the priests will not listen and react fast enough. It is a hundred years since Darwin. Can we wait that long for the prophecy of Einstein— $E = mc^2$, which translates into the technology of the hydrogen bomb—to be recognized by the establishment as vitally affecting the future of man? Or the prophecy of Hudson Hoagland and others, whose deep freeze of human sperm puts a control of future evolution into the hands of the establishment? How long can the establishment wait for the priests to guide the fulfilment of the prophecy?

We have among us the priests and, occasionally, a prophet. Our urgent mission is to hasten the dialogue between them to improve that "configuration of power and prestige which influences all the important decisions, and which sets the boundaries of what is acceptable to those who hold decisive power." This is the function of the Institute for Religion in an Age of Science: not for the scientists to talk to those who agree or understand them, nor for the religionists to talk to the laity. It exists so that we can clarify the prophetic revelations of modern science so well that priests will rise to lead us in challenging the establishment not only for the betterment but perhaps for the very survival of the human race.