

The Church as a Prophet in the Contemporary Market

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ABSTRACT: Recently there have been cases of challenging encounters of enthusiastic Christians with government authorities which severed evangelistic and open discourse about Christian values in Western Europe and North America. After failing with her function as priest and king, the church has the opportunity as well as the responsibility to be the voice of God in a tumultuous contemporary market. Following the profile of a biblical prophet, the church is called to be a prophet as God still wants to talk to his world; also as the community and the sign of the kingdom of God, the church is a herald and a prophet in the contemporary market. Although for various reasons the church has not been very active in fulfilling this role, it can be prophetic by proclaiming the word from God and being a transformed community.

KEYWORDS: Church, prophet, postmodernity, proclamation, world, ministry

There have been at least a dozen times when I had the opportunity to watch for a short while street preachers in the towns and cities of Great Britain; one common feature I easily figured out was that it seemed that nobody was paying any attention to the preacher. People in a hurry were not even trying to avoid the determined preacher who is sometimes using a speaker to make sure everybody around notices his presence – everybody passes by as if he is not there. The parallel with the Old Testament prophets is striking. However, sometimes some people seem to listen: on 1st of July 2013, Tony Miano, a retired American officer was arrested in Wimbledon, London for preaching

out on the streets against sexual sins, including homosexuality. The police officers, alerted by a call made by a woman who witnessed the preaching and who claimed the sermon was homophobic, took Mr. Miano into custody for several hours, interrogated him about his Christian beliefs and then released him soon after midnight (Barnhart 2013).

What I have just mentioned above is exemplary for what the church has faced more and more in most places in the world in recent times. But this is something that the church has not experienced for many centuries, perhaps sixteen of those: since the times when Constantine accepted and promoted, even enforced Christianity within the Roman Empire until the World Wars of the twentieth century. Between these two significant ends, the church was very much the priest and the king, or his closest adviser; the church took upon itself the crucial business of solving the most important issue of the medieval and early modern man: his eternal destiny. It was the priest the one mediating for the sinful man, securing for the latter deals from the divine courts – the most convenient was offered towards the end of the Middle Ages as a climax of the work of the church-mediator: the indulgences. The reformers challenged the claim of the medieval church to be the priest of the world – because this was rejected, the reformers formed new churches which were founded on the understanding that each individual should and could get right with God through the merits of Saviour Jesus Christ, the High Priest who gave himself for the sinful. Council of Trent tried to preserve the office of priest of the world for the church, as has been the case with Eastern Orthodox churches in the East, which have not yet been seriously challenged in this matter.

Perceived by Constantine and many other emperors who followed, as the cohesive factor for a fragmented empire, the church was seduced to a promising camaraderie with the state. This new development for the church meant access to earthly power – sometimes at the great price of being subjugated to the princely authority (caesaropapism (Rotaru 2014, 45-46) has proved to be most part of the period just that) or other times fighting hard to control the king in virtue of the superiority of spiritual realm over the temporal one; with Innocent III (1198-1216) and Boniface VIII (1294-1303) this view reached its climax: the first one claiming that the royal power is the ‘moon’ which takes its light from the ‘pontifical authority’ which is the sun, so although the king might be elected by the princes who have the right to do so, the final word belongs to the pope (Innocent III 1963, 112-113); the latter went even further and asserted that the

‘temporal authority’ is to be exercised only ‘at the will and by the permission of the priest’ (Boniface VIII, Pope, 115). Either controlled or controlling, the church was exercising a kingly authority, a phenomenon which departed it from the lives of the individual and separated it from the concerns of the community. It was the Enlightenment and symbolically the French Revolution which challenged this claim of the church to temporal power; the partnership between the church and the king was charged to cease and make room for the will of the people.

Loosing these two ‘offices’ the church so boldly but wrongly claimed and performed, it started to face a crisis of identity and to experience the calamity of being told it is of no use any more. Denying this cruel reality, the church has proved autistic to the messages and wishes of the society of recent times. However, I want to suggest that the church does have an important role to play in the world today, one which was actually hers from the beginning; it might be that the church has not played it enthusiastically because of the price it always requires, or because it considered it inappropriate when dealing with the new friend, the state; it had embraced it before Constantine with the thousands of Christians who chose to be martyrs, with the apologists and church leaders who lead the flock of Christ in troubled times. This was role of the church as prophet to the world.

In this paper, I want to argue that this is the role which the church should seek to play in the contemporary arena which is so different to the world which knew the church as priest and as the king’s companion. In the multitude of voices in the market today, God could use a herald to share his message with words and deeds.

God’s voice in the market

The contemporary stage has changed significantly since the church was priest and king’s partner; then the church dominated the scene, was part of all dealings, or at least of the important ones; its voice was heard and asked to set the tone for all matters. Starting with the Enlightenment, more actors were invited on the scene, more voices spoke, and now none seems to have the leading role, perhaps apart from the one which shouts that there is no such thing as a leading voice. Psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen (2000, 7) asserted

that in postmodernity, there is ‘a plurality of voices vying to be part of the good and the right.’ To make things even more complicated, the multiplicity of voices is complemented by a multiplicity of selves: “...postmoderns are populated with a plethora of selves. In place of an enduring core of deep and indelible character, there is a chorus of invitations. Each invitation ‘to be’ also casts doubt on the wisdom and authenticity of the others” (Gergen 2000, 178). This deconstruction affects all aspects of individual existence as well as of the community: no more ‘imposed’ morals, no more absolutes, no more metanarrative, no more (ultimate) authority, but many stories, many voices. Because the church is perceived as being one of the protagonists of the failure of modernity, it is silenced and pushed to the margins. This should not disturb the church, as it was when the church was on the fringe of the society – before Constantine, that its strength and impact were great. Tertullian’s observation encapsulates the experience of the church over the centuries: ‘... the more you mow us down, the thicker we rise; the Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again and fructifies the more.’ (*The Apology of Tertullian* 1889, 143)

So the ‘market’ is has changed dramatically for the last two centuries, especially in the last one; the contemporary society looks similar to the syncretistic world of pre-Constantine era which the church experienced. Francis A. Schaeffer (1970, 35), with his insight as early as 1970, asserted a disturbing truth for what once was the stronghold of Christian faith and culture: ‘We who hold to Christianity are now an absolute minority’ and then he discerned the implications of this reality. One of the failures of the contemporary church is that it has not read the ‘signs of times’ and has acted as if it is still the central and the most respected voice in the market.

In the contemporary market, in an anti-Christian atmosphere, the voice of the church needs to be heard in order that the words of God to be passed to the many actors on the scene. Being God’s voice in the market means nothing less than being God’s prophet in the market. We turn now to this complex concept.

The prophet – the voice of God

In the Old Testament, the prophet, *nabi* was a person called by God to see the things of God (an idea indicated by the term *ro’eh*, seer, from which *nabi*

developed) in order to pass them on to the people who fail to walk in the ways of the Creator. The prophet is the ‘mouth of God’ (Exodus 7: 1, 2) because he or she is chosen for this ministry and also offered the great privilege to know God, his ways and his will within a close relationship – that is reason for the title *‘ishha ‘elohim* ascribed only to the prophets among the other offices of those guiding spiritually the people of God (Iacob 1958, 239). Probably this aspect can be seen most clearly in the experience of Moses, the first of the great Old Testament prophets, who had access in the presence of the Almighty and then took the message to the people of Israel (Exodus 33: 11).

The prophets had an influential role to play in the development of the whole nation through their proximity to the royal court, something which gained for them an institutional dimension: ‘the prophets were able to the nation’s conscience throughout the centuries’ (Iacob 1958, 240). The king would listen to their message as a divine guidance for the matters of the state. Being so closely connected to the royal court, practically part of it (including being financed by it), there were also situations when the prophets lost their strength in talking against the state and the people to fulfill God’s revealed will (1 Kings 22: 5-25) (Dyrness 2010, 241).

The prophet was passing on to the people the message from God regarding their respective situation as well eschatological events, not only by words but also by embodying the message – Jeremiah’s life totally overlaps with the ‘word of God’ he must communicate to the people of Israel. The prophets are consumed by the calling of being God’s voice in the middle of the people who were departing from God’s word and will. Therefore the essence of their ministry was not to tell the future, but to speak the word from the Lord in a particular situation; that word often was about what the implications of their actions were, what was about to come upon them, but all that was implicit.

Is the church a prophet?

There has been much talk about the gift of prophecy in the church beyond the New Testament times; the debate has been focused on prophecy as a gift of the Holy Spirit to be used within the church. Although soon after the New Testament times this gift was not as popular in the teachings nor the praxis of the church, things have reversed dramatically with the expansion of the Pentecostal and

charismatic movements. More recently, as well as in the early centuries, there has been little concern for the concept of the church as a prophet to the world.

George D. Younger (1960), in asking whether the concept of ‘prophetic’ can be ascribed to the church, argues that because in the early centuries of the existence of the church, the office of the ‘prophet’ gradually faded away, one of the implications is that the Old Testament prophets with their awareness of the work of the Lord beyond the chosen nation are a potential model for the church, and not the New Testament times ‘prophets’ who were focused exclusively on the church.

Because prophecy is not merely foretelling but speaking in the name of the Lord, this can be understood as the core of the ministry entrusted by the risen Christ to his weary disciples who were sent share the good news God has for the fallen world (Matt. 28: 19, 20; Acts 1: 8). The good news presupposes a bad news: man fails to live up to the divine standards, so judgment and punishment are the gloomy perspective for humanity. God sends his people to share with the world the good news of the redemption through the sacrifice of his Son – it is part of the ministry of reconciliation to which the church was invited to partner with God with (Avery Cardinal Dulles 2002, 68-80). It is also in light of the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God that we see the role of the former in announcing the coming of the kingdom as well as the invitation to enter it. As the herald of the kingdom, the church speaks against all plans to build any other human kingdom which eventually will be doomed (1 Cor. 15: 24, 25; Rev. 12: 10) – the faithful are to proclaim in their daily prayers that the kingdom, the power and the glory belong to God forever (Matt. 6: 13). As the community of the kingdom, the church calls the world to seek and practice the values of the kingdom; the church itself is to embody the new reality brought by the submission to the great King.

So we can agree with Younger who, after showing that the church meets all requirements which define a prophet, he concludes: ‘the prophetic function informs all of the church’s life, giving to all of her activities that faithfulness to God and to her Lord Jesus Christ that will keep her aware of what God is presently doing both in his church and in his world. The prophetic function, then, is of the very essence of the church’s life, not an extra activity tacked on to those more customarily considered to be basic.’ (Younger 1960, 324) What are then the main ways in which the church can perform her prophetic function?

The ministry of the prophetic church

Before looking at some of the ways the church can be prophetic, we need to assert the shortages on its part in this matter: for various reasons, the church has – too often - not been the much needed prophet in the public market. Sometimes this was because the church sided with the powers - the Constantinian *symphony* was played at great cost for the cause of the Gospel; in the West Thomas Aquinas was instrumental in the understanding that the church and the world are in a close relationship under the rule God; on the other hand, in the East, drawing on the all-compassing concept of *theosis*, the church becomes ‘the soul of the world’ transforming it (Visser’t 1937, 126-33). Surprisingly, in recent centuries, the evangelicals have taken the protestant model of an antithetical relation between the world totally affected by sin and the church to an extreme: probably in the context of the two world wars, the evangelicals have deserted this world focusing nearly exclusively on evangelizing the utter sinners and on eschatology. The Lausanne Movement balanced that overreaction of the evangelicals but there is still a lot to be done to take more responsibility for this world, which is God’s. Another reason the church has not been a prophet in the last half a century is the opposite to what we mentioned about the evangelicals, that is the understanding of the happily secularised Christianity that church and the world are coterminous.

Yet another reason is not theological but utterly profane – in the words of Walter Brueggemann (1978, 11): ‘The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act.’ The theologian continues by saying that, in order for the church to recapture a deep understanding of its being and purpose, it needs to rediscover the very basis of the prophetic ministry: ‘the church will have no power to act or to believe until it rediscovers its tradition of faith.’ (Brueggemann 1978, 12) The actual prophetic ministry of the church follows the pattern of the prophetic office in the history of the people of God: a message to share and a life to live in a particular way.

In addressing the issue of the pastors being called to a prophetic ministry, John E. Johnson (2000, 74-6) points to some aspects which are essential for this enterprise, and these aspects are also relevant for the church. The theologian suggests that the pastors are to enact their prophetic role by proclaiming the

message they receive from God; it is a message of prediction, judgment, comfort; being the 'social conscience' of the wider community, the prophets had also a message of protest: on the one hand, the protest was against the *status quo*, challenging the culture with its false gods and the powers which were not fulfilling their *raison d'être* but pursuing their agenda; on the other hand, the protest was against the injustices from within the society taking the side of the oppressed.

The very preaching of the Gospel and of the coming of the kingdom of God in the midst of our world in order to redeem it, is fundamentally the ultimate prophetic message; it indeed challenges the foundational premises of the social and cultural construct. Brueggemann (1978, 13) asserts that 'the task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.' Therefore, the proclamation of the church is not simply a message to listen to but it aims at exposing the hidden forces behind the powers of the world. This is corroborated with the message of the expansion of the kingdom of God as the ultimate goal of man, society and the whole created order.

The arguments which call for a withdrawal of the church from 'world's matters' implying that there are two separated spheres which should look each after itself, fail to keep the balance between the fact that the two do indeed correspond to different yet not wholly separated spheres on the one hand and the fact that the two are still under God, on the other hand. If the church listens more faithfully to the message from God, it has the possibility as well as the responsibility to speak truth into the dealings of the world.

A particular case is when the state claims authority and the allegiance which belongs to God; then the church must speak against it as did the *Confessing Church* in the Germany of the Second World War. This will imply a price to pay but there is no alternative for the church: in such cases fervent prayer is to be accompanied by steady actions. At least as important as a verbal proclamation of the message from the Lord to the world is its embodiment; as the prophets of old times, the church is *to enact* the message. The credibility of its *verbal* proclamation depends upon the measure in which the church lives out the message itself.

Drawing on the thinking of Gerhard and Norbert Lohfink, John Fuellenbach suggests that the church is to a ‘contrast society’, a demonstration of what kind of community God intended and still wills for people. The concept of contrast society is implied by the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God: ‘... Church as contrast society emerges only when people let themselves be caught by God’s Kingdom present now, including their weaknesses and guilt’ (Lohfink 1988, 147-160). The church is not only the community *for* the kingdom, as Fuellenbach points out, but firstly the community *of* the kingdom: all those who have accepted the rule of God over their lives enter the kingdom; therefore, the church is the community *of* the kingdom until its full disclosure. Submitting to the will of the great king, those entering the kingdom and becoming part of the church, must live according to the values and the principles of the kingdom.

A community, which seeks to live by values such as care, seeking firstly the well-being of the neighbour, forgiveness, justice, compassion, love, deeply challenges the world and acts as a threat to the *status quo* of the society. A genuine Christian community is one in which anybody has a place and finds significance; also the voice of the powerless would be supported by the choir made of the rest of the church. A church which truly lives out the kingdom values is a prophet whose message has an great impact, leading to changes in the surrounding world.

It cannot yet be fully grasped what lies ahead for the societies, and by extension, to the whole humankind; the contemporary public market with its chaotic overlapping of voices points to a turbulent future. However, because this world is still God’s, the church should take on more seriously role of being a voice sharing God’s message for the broken creation. This prophetic function is essential for the church in fulfilling its mandate of heralding and being a sign of the kingdom of God, as well as for the well-being of broken world.

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