

THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS AND GLOBAL SPIRITUALITY

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Towards a contemporary global spirituality

HISTORICALLY CHRISTIAN spirituality has tended to foster an individual relationship with God which has led most often to an inward and personal prayer life or to a contemplative mindset. Rarely have forms of spirituality led to active engagement with God's creation through a sense of responsibility to work towards the establishment of God's justice and peace. Rather, older spiritualities have had as their aim an other-worldliness. When we look to the biblical prophets, on the other hand, we find a different kind of spirituality; one which calls for an active engagement with rather than an escape from the concerns of the world, together with the constant reminder that we are answerable to God for our response or lack of it.

The prophetic tradition, moreover, does not permit us simply to be content with our own personal growth. It challenges us to seek justice, freedom from oppression, and peace not only for ourselves and our small circle, but for the whole world.

Yet personal and individualistic understandings of spirituality persist. Thus *An encyclopedic history of the religious quest* has maintained that spirituality focuses on

. . . that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions 'the spirit'. This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality . . .

and promotes the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development and its journey to the ultimate goal.¹

Those of us living in the last decade of the twentieth century, however, have become acutely aware of certain global issues which must be addressed within the context of a global spirituality—a

spirituality which takes seriously the need to identify our experience of ultimate reality with the concerns of the global village.

This realization lies behind those who are now calling for what they variously designate a 'spirituality of collaboration'² or a 'spiritual democracy'³ or an 'ecumenical spirituality'.⁴ Underlying all of these is the recognition that we can no longer afford to develop individual spiritualities at the expense of global concerns.

In the prophetic denunciation of sin the personal and the societal are brought together. Sinful societal structures and institutions are seen as the result of the unfaithful actions of the individual and both are condemned. And so as we begin a self-examination of our own motives and actions in response to the prophetic call for repentance, so too must we broaden the base of our critique to see in what ways our actions support and bolster societal systems of oppression which result in certain groups being marginalized.

Amos may be chastizing certain individual fine ladies of Samaria who seem oblivious, or at least indifferent, to the plight of the needy and poor, but in fact he is also commenting on an economic system which has grown to be so corrupt in its distribution of wealth that people now think it their particular privilege to drink wine at the expense of those who grow hungry (Amos 4,1). It is not simply that those who have been appointed as judges at the 'gate' take bribes from those who are guilty, but that as a consequence, the authority of the Law (divinely ordained) is put in jeopardy. An individual action of bribery results in the system of justice itself being corrupted (Amos 5,10-12). Thus our actions have ramifications in the larger scheme of things. They can and do contribute to systemic sin.

It has become quite fashionable in modern theology to appeal to the prophetic tradition in calling for justice and peace. To use this biblical material as an aid to spiritual renewal is not without its own hazards, however. Not least the very barrage of prophetic denunciation can be too much to bear. Hence we move all too quickly from the oracles of judgement to those of salvation. A. J. Heschel has stated:

The situation of a person immersed in the prophets' words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows.⁵

Nonetheless, I think it is far more often the case that we construct walls of stone precisely in order to safeguard the fragility of our skulls.

To allow our spirituality to be influenced by the prophetic literature we need to be open both to its call to repentance and change and to its assurance of God's final salvation.

The interiorizing of God's call

The prophet is portrayed as one who has interiorized God's call, and this is often spoken of in terms of physical trauma. The prophet does not only intellectualize the experience of God's call; it is always a deeply felt transformation, which reorientates the prophet's religious sensibilities towards an active engagement with those who would block and/or deny justice to any part of God's creation. So Amos reports that 'the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel"' (Amos 7,14). Isaiah records his terror at standing before the Lord. His acknowledgement of his own uncleanness results in his being physically purified:

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven'. (Isai 6,6-7)

Only now can the prophet be sent. Jeremiah speaks of the irresistible nature of God's call: 'O Lord thou hast seduced me, and I am seduced; thou hast raped me and I am overcome' (Jer 20,6). The ecstasy of seduction is at the same time a recognition of total capitulation to a power too great to withstand.⁶ Ezekiel, overcome by the majesty of God's presence, falls on his face. He is commanded to stand, and then to eat a scroll with writings of 'lamentation and mourning and woe' (Ezek 2,10), and then to proclaim the message of the scroll to Israel. And then we are told, 'The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me' (Ezek 3,14).

However one wishes to interpret these extraordinary confrontations which result in a conversion of the prophet's heart, one thing is clear: an encounter with ultimate reality does not leave the individual indifferent to the demands made by the initial call. The prophet is forced both spiritually and physically to take up the 'word of the Lord'.⁷

From interior call to public proclamation

The interior call of the prophet always results in that prophet being co-opted as one of God's emissaries. He is the earthly counterpart to

those whom the bible depicts as sitting in the council of God's heavenly court (Jer 15,19; Amos 3,7). This earthly messenger/counsellor is now so much in tune with the voice of ultimate reality, that far from retreating from the horrors of worldly injustice, he plunges himself into the mêlée, his only protection being his inner conviction that God is speaking through him. There is no institutional authority which protects him, only the hand of God, and the realization that his life is now consecrated to declaring God's justice and *shalom*, (Jer 1,18; 15,20). Which is, of course, not to suggest that the prophets were not challenged and/or threatened by those whose actions they condemned. So Amos is threatened by Amaziah who throws the whole weight of royal authority behind his words (Amos 7,10-15). Micah is chastised for preaching against the people (Mic 2,6). No amount of persuading could convince Ahaz to trust in the Lord (Isai 7,1-12). Isaiah is ignored and an alliance is made with Assyria (2 Kg 16,7). What does a prophet know of political matters? A king must be shrewd, and guard against the naiveté of a prophet! Argue as he may Isaiah is not heeded (Isai 28,15-18). In despair Jeremiah utters, 'For twenty-three years . . . the word of the Lord has come to me . . . but you have not listened' (Jer 25,3-7). Not that the prophet should expect to be listened to. Indeed Ezekiel is warned that the people will probably not listen. Even so he is to speak the word of the Lord so that 'they will know that there has been a prophet among them' (Ezek 2,5).

One finds little consolation here except that the prophet manages to reach deep down into the inner depths of his soul and find that ultimate reality which will sustain him throughout the barrage of abuse and indifference which he will encounter.

At this point it is as well to ask how the prophets' journey can be our own? Would we be strong enough constantly to seek after that ultimate reality and continue irrespective of the accusations of others? Perhaps we can take consolation in the fact that the prophets themselves had the self-same doubts. Thus Jeremiah laments:

O Lord, thou knowest; remember me and visit me,
 . . . know that for thy sake I bear reproach . . .
 I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
 nor did I rejoice;
 I sat alone because thy hand was upon me . . .
 Why is my pain increasing, my wound incurable,
 refusing to be healed? (Jer 15,15-18)

And again:

Be not a terror to me;
 thou art my refuge in the day of evil.
 Let those be put to shame who persecute me,
 but let me not be put to shame;
 Let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed. (Jer 17,17-18)
 'Denounce him! Let us denounce him!'
 say all my familiar friends,
 watching for my fall.
 'Perhaps he will be deceived,
 then we can overcome him.' (Jer 20,10)

Whereas there will be occasions when we are alone in denouncing the injustices of our age, alone in decrying societal abuses, we must not succumb to personal arrogance in thinking that we will not find others who will support and actively engage in promoting God's justice and peace. As we search for the inner strength to continue, so too must we seek out a community which will sustain us spiritually and motivate us to question institutions which promote systemic injustice.

As John J. Walsh has put it:

. . . reaching out to others in justice action begets love within the support community, which, in turn, begets love and action for justice.⁸

Of course the harsher the accusation the greater the need for support. Ironically, the greater the need of support the less likely the individual will find it, precisely because of the harshness of the accusations. Nevertheless, in one of Jeremiah's darkest moments, when the priests and prophets of Jerusalem argue that he deserves the death sentence, Jeremiah is saved first by the assembly of princes and people and then by Ahikam (Jer 26,16. 34). Even a prophet such as Jeremiah was in need of a community of supporters. As the final edition of the story recounts, without them the priests and the prophets of Jerusalem would surely have taken his life.⁹ When Jeremiah is finally imprisoned (37,14-16), what is striking is that it is King Zedekiah who is responsible for Jeremiah's release from the dungeon into the less restrictive confines of the court of the guard. There, ironically enough, Jeremiah is able to survive the siege of Jerusalem.

From announcement of destruction to oracle of salvation

The violence and total destruction of the nation announced by the prophets, which subsequent generations committed to writing and

incorporated into Israel's inherited tradition, becomes unbearable for the reader. This is not hyperbolic language, for the reader of a later generation is very much aware that the judgements announced by the prophets did in fact come to pass. The 'altars of Bethel' were smashed to the ground, 'the houses of ivory' did perish, 'the great houses' did come to an end (Amos 3,14. 15), and the Northern Kingdom did disappear, never again to be reestablished. Neither will Judah escape. Jerusalem will be ransacked, the temple destroyed, the people deported into exile. The misery and violence which the people will be subjected to the prophets announce with relentless ardour, and a vividness of imagery that strikes terror in the mind and heart of the reader. Because of Israel's sin Hosea proclaims God's judgement:

So I will be to them like a lion,
 like a leopard I will lurk beside the way.
 I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs,
 I will tear open their breast,
 and there I will devour them like a lion,
 as a wild beast would rend them. (Hos 13,7-8)

Because of Judah's unrighteousness, because her people commit all kinds of evil against one another and oppress the widow and the needy and 'make the fatherless their prey' (Isai 10,1-2), Isaiah proclaims:

Woe to you, destroyer . . . you treacherous one,
 . . . When you have ceased to destroy, you will be destroyed;
 and when you have made an end of
 dealing treacherously, you will be dealt with treacherously.
 (Isai 33,1)

Because the people have forsaken God, Jeremiah proclaims:

The people . . . shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, victims
 of famine and sword, with none to bury them. (Jer 14,16)

Because the people have forsaken justice and pervert the Law Micah proclaims that Jerusalem will be utterly destroyed (3,12).

In our day and age we rarely speak of God's anger as the direct cause of such devastations. Unlike the prophets, we do not usually interpret natural or political disasters as God's punishment for our

sinfulness. Not least it is difficult to imagine God as one who would indiscriminately annihilate both the culpable and the innocent. Quite properly we see ourselves as agents of our own destruction. If disasters occur it is because of our own wrong doing, not the visitation of God's judgement. We are responsible for the poverty and the violence which constitutes daily reality for the majority of the world's population. We are responsible for the homeless, and the unemployed. They are not God's punishment inflicted upon us.

Here the prophets would agree with us. Their proclamation was that at the heart of God's creation lies a morality which we flout at our own peril. Hence to read the words of Israel's prophets is to be forced to examine our actions and to take responsibility for their outcome, not only within human history, but at God's final consummation when we will all be called to account.

So far it would seem that the prophets have little to offer our spirituality except the prospect of judgement. Yet this is not the case. The breadth and depth of God's compassion towards his creation is proclaimed not only in the oracles of salvation but in those of judgement as well. Even in the midst of Israel's self-wrought destruction God cannot forsake her. The prophetic books have been edited in the light of this ultimate experience of forgiveness and salvation, and so even the unrelenting barrage of oracles of destruction found in Amos conclude with

‘In that day, I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches . . . I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel . . . I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them,’ says the Lord your God. (Amos 9,11a. 14a. 15)

Jeremiah speaks tenderly of God's unfailing bond which refuses to abandon Israel completely:

‘. . . as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,’ says the Lord. (Jer 31,28)

A. Heschel suggests that one of the insights left to us from the prophets (in particular Micah) is

how to accept and to bear the anger of God. The strength of acceptance comes from the awareness that we have sinned against

Him and from the certainty that anger does not mean God's abandonment . . . forever. His anger passes, His faithfulness goes on forever. There is compassion in His anger; when we fall, we rise. Darkness is not dismal. When we sit in the darkness, God is our light.¹⁰

It is this faithfulness which was no doubt the most difficult to proclaim in the midst of destruction and ruin. What does it mean to proclaim hope and salvation to a people either in the midst of destruction or in a foreign land in exile? Jeremiah brings a message of hope, a word to console, and declares that the people of Israel and Judah will once again come together to seek the Lord:

'Let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten.' (Jer 50,5)

So convinced was Deutero-Isaiah of God's deliverance and forgiveness that he understands Israel's suffering and endurance to have been God's also:

For a long time I have kept silence,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
Now I will cry out like a woman in travail,
I will gasp and pant. (Isai 42,14)

To those in exile God declares, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people' (40,1). God's faithfulness is everlasting. Israel has endured a punishment far greater than her guilt: 'She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins' (Isai 40,2), but at the end God will not, cannot forsake her:

All flesh is grass,
And all its beauty is like the flower
of the field
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand
for ever. (Isai 40,6-8)

To live one's life with the experience of God's compassion is to be open and compassionate towards others. To have experienced the need for God's compassion is to understand the depth of our sinfulness, accept our need to repent in order that we might once again walk humbly with God, and to 'do justice, and love kindness' (Mic 6,8).

How global is our vision?

We glean an understanding of God's universal salvation to all those who 'keep justice, and do righteousness' (Isai 56,1) when we read:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am. (Isai 58,6-9)

Israel will be freed from bondage, but her salvation will be for all others. It is not simply that God will restore the remnant of Israel to her former glory, but that God declares that Israel will be given 'as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Isai 49,6). God's word, God's saving love and compassion, is meant for all people. God's justice and peace are meant for the benefit of the entire creation. God's compassion and glory know no national boundaries. We are to work for the reconciliation of the whole world.

From individual sin and repentance to global responsibility is the move the prophets challenge us to make. They lived and preached in a particular time in a particular place to a particular people. Nevertheless, in their words can be found not only a personal spirituality, but a larger, global vision—one which seeks to bring justice and peace to the whole of the created order. Of course this global vision must first take root in the heart of the individual, where repentance begins, as a response to God's compassion, perceived not only as self-directed but as the motivation for nothing less than a global concern.

All spiritualities are grounded in the individual's willingness to seek and to understand an ultimate reality which undergirds his/her being. What the prophets remind us is that, having found this ultimate reality, we are now forced to move beyond the boundaries of our own spirituality and to recognize that the well-being of the entire created order is our responsibility. Our mandate is for a justice and peace which is global.

NOTES

- ¹ L. Dupré and D. E. Saliers, *Christian spirituality: post-Reformation and modern*, vol. VXIII of *World spirituality: an encyclopedic history of the religious quest* (Crossroads, NY, 1989), p. xii.
- ² D. E. Jenkins, *God, Jesus and life in the Spirit* (SCM, London, 1988), p. 139.
- ³ Dalai Lama, oral presentation taped as part of a documentary by Bill Moyers entitled *Spirit and nature: a documentary on last fall's conference at Middlebury College*, televised on Vermont Educational TV, June 5, 1990.
- ⁴ G. Cashmore and J. Puls, *Clearing the way: en route to an ecumenical spirituality* (WCC Publications, Geneva, 1990), p. 1.
- ⁵ A. J. Heschel, *The prophets* (NY, Harper & Rowe, 1962), p. xvi.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114. Translation given by A. J. Heschel.
- ⁷ R. J. Sklba, *Pre-exilic prophecy: words of warning, dreams of hopes: spirituality of pre-exilic prophets* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1990), pp. 53–57.
- ⁸ J. J. Walsh, *Integral justice: changing people, changing structures* (Orbis books, Mary Knoll, NY, 1990), p. 22.
- ⁹ For a discussion of how this chapter reflects a complex editorial process and for arguments substantiating the claim that the motif of the persecuted and murdered prophet is later than that of the time of Jeremiah see R. P. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (OTL, SCM, London, 1986), pp. 513–522.
- ¹⁰ A. J. Heschel, *op. cit.*, p. 101.