Prophecy and Democracy?

Some Arguments in Favor of Prophetic Discourse in Civilizing Democratic Societies

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On the continent of Africa religion, both as religiosity in the sense of reverence for transcendence, and as adherence to institutional faith, is growing. Christianity enjoys its fastest growth on this continent. The question is whether Christianity, and other religions for that matter, would be healthy religion. The criteria for good or healthy religion can be phrased in the form of the following questions. Does religion enhance an honoring of God that is manifested in the commitment to acknowledging, affirming, advancing and actualizing dignity, freedom and justice for all? Does religion support intellectual practices that advance love of God with your mind, and does it oppose oversimplified, naïve and inadequate intellectual responses to complex public challenges in today’s highly sophisticated societies? Does religion advance an ethos of tolerance and embrace in modern-postmodern societies where a plurality of often incommensurable moral, religious and secular comprehensive meaning-giving frameworks and life views co-exist and where consensus is hard to achieve, and does religion therefore free us from the violence of both absolutism and demonization of the other, on the one hand, and apathetic relativism and nihilism, on the other hand?

Building upon and extending earlier research this essay offers a discussion of the appeal for the healthy prophetic presence of religion in society. The argument is offered that the prophetic presence of Christian faith in democracies is crucial for the quest of democratic societies to build a life of civility and worth, dignity, freedom and justice for all. The notion of civil, civilizing and civilization in this essay is used to refer to the aim of a democracy to bring into being a society where everyone experiences a life of worth and dignity, freedom and justice. A civilized society is a society of dignity, justice and freedom for all. In this essay the view is rejected that the notion of civil, civilizing and civilization implies that some nations, ethnic groups or socio-economic groups are by nature uncivilized or less civil, or religiously, ethically and even aesthetically less developed than others. These notions rather refer to the quest of all societies of the world and of all ethnic and other groups for a life of dignity for all.
The calling of churches can be described in terms of a threefold calling, namely the prophetic calling, the priestly calling and the royal-servant calling. In the years of the struggle against apartheid the prophetic calling of churches was emphasized. The two other callings, namely the priestly and royal-servant callings, were also fulfilled, but the prophetic calling enjoyed prominence. In contemporary South Africa, where we celebrate twenty years of inclusive democracy, the pleas are heard from within and outside churches that the prophetic voice of churches be heard more clearly, that it be heard as clearly as was the case in apartheid South Africa. This plea comes from people in various other spheres of public life, including the media and political world, as well as from various church members.

During a visit to Stellenbosch University in 2014 minister Trevor Manuel, senior cabinet minister in the presidency and chairperson of the National Planning Commission, which drafted the National Development Plan, challenged various faculties of the university to contribute to the implementation of this plan. He specifically challenged the Faculty of Theology to view it as its first task to keep the vision alive of a civilized society where everyone enjoys a life of dignity, freedom and justice. Various political leaders in the governing African National Congress consistently challenge churches to offer courageous criticism to the government. Western Cape premier, Helen Zille, appeals to churches to bring the so-called unintended consequences of policies to the attention of government, especially the impact of policies upon vulnerable groups. The media in South Africa consistently view churches as too quiet about public affairs. They are convinced that the prophetic voices of churches and other religious bodies can make an indispensable contribution to the building of a new and civilized society.

Within the churches too various pastors and congregants hunger for a vibrant prophetic voice from their churches. They are frustrated by what they view as a lack of courage to speak out, and an anxiety to be politically correct and in good relationships with former comrades in the liberation struggle who now constitute the government, and who may view prophetic discourse as prophetic criticism.

There is also strong resistance to the idea of prophetic speaking in a democracy. The Dutch theologian Gerrit de Kruijf argued that there is no need for prophetic speaking in the context of a democracy.1 The democratic ethos, democratic institutions and democratic practices make room for engagements other than the prophetic. Only where a democracy becomes oppressive does

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