



## 2008 SANTA CLARA LECTURE



SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

### **PROPHETIC DISCOURSE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

M. CATHLEEN KAVENY

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2008

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# Prophetic Discourse in the Public Square

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2008

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In a recent sermon, Father Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., the preacher to the papal household, reflected upon various ways in which Christians might contribute to the political common good. He reminded his listeners that Christians not only have an obligation to pay their taxes and to advocate for just social policies that promote "the family, the defense of life, solidarity with the poor, peace." They also have a responsibility to act as leaven in the political conversation itself. According to Father Cantalamessa:

Christians must help to remove the poison from the climate of contentiousness in politics, bring back greater respect, composure and dignity to relationships between parties. Respect for one's neighbor, clemency, capacity for self-criticism: These are the traits that a disciple of Christ must have in all things, even in politics.

It is undignified for a Christian to give himself over to insults, sarcasm, brawling with his adversaries. If, as Jesus says, those who call their brother "stupid" are in danger of Gehenna, what then must we say about a lot of politicians?<sup>1</sup>

With all due respect to Father Cantalamessa, my suspicion is that his advice will be received far better in the city-state of the Vatican, which is a non-hereditary elected monarchy ruled by the Bishop of Rome—the Pope—than it will be even among Catholic Christians in the United States. Why is that?

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<sup>1</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., "Profile of a Catholic Politician," *Zenit* (October 17, 2008), <http://www.zenit.org/article-23960?|=english> (accessed November 2, 2008).

First, the population in the United States is significantly more pluralistic than that of Vatican City. The lack of a common culture, common background, and common sensibilities creates the possibilities for misunderstanding and conflict. The man formerly known as “Joseph Ratzinger” does not have to contend with the political sensibilities of “Joe Sixpack,” “Joe the Plumber” or even Joe Biden in setting temporal policy for the Vatican.

Second, while Americans do, I think, agree in general terms about the importance of “the family, the defense of life, solidarity with the poor, [and] peace,” there is significant disagreement about what commitment to these values mean in concrete cases, as our arguments about gay marriage, abortion, progressive taxation, and the war in Iraq demonstrate.

Third, the root Christian heritage of the United States is not Roman Catholic, but a particular strand of English Protestantism known as Puritanism. In 1630, a band of Puritans set out for the New World, in order to free themselves from the corruption of the English Church (which they saw as retaining too many “Romish” inventions) and establish a “City on a Hill,” the “New Jerusalem,” a polity whose total structure, through its coordinated political and religious governance, accorded with God’s holy law. Human nature being what it is, the initial religious fervor of those making the trip to America wore thin at times; moreover, that fervor was sometimes insufficiently kindled in the children and grandchildren of the initial settlers. To ignite religious ardor, Puritan clergymen availed themselves of a particular form of preaching known as the “jeremiad.” As its name suggests, the jeremiad recalls the urgent call to moral repentance found most strikingly in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, but also prevalent in the other prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament.

Even a cursory glance at the prophetic books reveals that they do not comply with Father Cantalamessa’s call to “bring back greater respect, composure and dignity to relationships between parties.” The Hebrew prophets are not respectful, composed, and dignified; they dedicate themselves, body and soul, to decrying the sins that not only erode the social order, but corrode the relationship between God and the community. Not surprisingly, therefore, the American political jeremiads inspired by the prophetic books are not the model of calm, polite discourse that the preacher to the papal household recommends to Christians in the public square.

Most contemporary prophets in the public square would respond to Father Cantalamessa that in some circumstances, the “Christian cooperation in building a just and peaceful society” he desires does not require the soft, rounded tones of courtesy, but instead demands sharp and impolite determination to speaking the truth to power. American Jeremiahs, like their Judean prototype, call the country to abandon its corruptions and falsehoods and to recommit itself to its fundamental values, which they present as simultaneously the basis of our commitment to one another and the commitment of God to us.

At the same time, however, there are costs entailed by our nation’s heritage of prophetic rhetoric. One obvious cost is that it is available not only to the politically virtuous, but also to the politically corrupt. Southern confederates used prophetic rhetoric as well as northern abolitionists; it was a tool of McCarthyites in the 1950s as well as anti-war activists in the 1960s. As Scripture itself testifies, there are false prophets as well as true prophets. The second cost, however, is more difficult to reckon. All prophetic rhetoric, even prophetic rhetoric rooted in moral truth, has the potential to rip the fabric of the community to which it is addressed. It can set brother against brother, sister against sister, neighbor against neighbor.

Moreover, it can actually be counterproductive with respect to the particular issue or question which is of deepest concern to the prophet. The invective of a jeremiad can just as easily harden the heart of an audience as open it to divine grace. This danger, in my view, is exacerbated in contemporary America by our relative religious, political, and historical ignorance. While politicians and pundits regularly draw upon prophetic language, many of them, and even more of their audience, do not understand how it operates as a form of rhetoric. There is a tendency of both prophetic speakers and their audience to view prophetic indictments as a weapon in political, moral and cultural battles, a weapon whose core is a type of pugnacious incivility. In the matter of prophetic rhetoric as in many other things, we draw upon our Puritan heritage without fully understanding its nature and implications.

As we Americans collectively catch our breaths at the end of a long national campaign and election, it is an opportune time to ponder the use of prophetic rhetoric in general, and in the context of that election. In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to do just that. First, I will attempt to say something about the history of prophetic rhetoric in the United States. Second, drawing upon biblical scholars as well as scholars of rhetoric, I will offer some reflections on the use and abuse of prophetic rhetoric. Third, I will attempt to apply those insights to two practitioners of this rhetoric who were both prominent and controversial in the 2008 elections: Jeremiah Wright, President-elect Obama’s Baptist former pastor, and Charles Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Denver. Both committed Christians, the two religious leaders are very different in politics and religious sensibilities, in part reflecting the different traditions within Christianity that they inhabit. Nonetheless, each has grafted the rhetoric of the Puritan jeremiad into their public discourse on the relationship of faith, politics, and culture.

## **THE PURITAN JEREMIAD AND ITS PROGENY**

According to the late Perry Miller, the eminent scholar of American religious history, the Seventeenth Century Puritans developed a tradition of holding a fast-day sermon, held on annual days of election in the spring, before the newly constituted General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (i.e., the legislature). This sermon quickly became ritualized in terms both of structure and

content. Based on a verse from the Old Testament, frequently Isaiah or Jeremiah, the preacher would teach the doctrine that the settlers are being “pertinaciously pursued for their sins” by an angry God.<sup>2</sup> Next would come a series of “reasons,” in which the preacher would invoke the Puritans’ understanding of the terms and conditions of their national covenant, a sacred contract with God and with one another that the settlers had breached. The third, and most riveting, section of the sermon was called the “applications” or “uses.” Miller writes that in this section, the preacher “enumerated, in as much detail as he had courage for, the provocations to vengeance, proposed a scheme of reformation, and let his imagination glow over the still more exquisite judgments yet in store unless his listeners acted upon his recommendations.”<sup>3</sup>

This particular type of sermon, which Miller refers to as a “jeremiad,” became a dominant literary and religious type among New Englanders for several generations. According to Miller, New Englanders found the “jeremiad was the one appropriate convention because it made sense out of their unique experience.”<sup>4</sup> In particular, it made sense out of the adversity that they experienced; the hunger, the Indian attacks, the uncertainty, the privation, by interpreting it in light of the New Englanders’ relationship with God, which was modeled on God’s relationship with Israel and Judah. Indeed, they saw themselves truly as God’s new chosen people, who had the added gift of God’s grace through Jesus Christ in confirming their election and supporting their endeavors. In this context, the jeremiad allowed pious New Englanders to channel their anxieties and tribulations toward hope for a better future.

The New Englanders had sinned badly, provoking divine wrath. The mercy of the Lord toward His chosen people is, however, tender and generous; if they turn from their evil and walk in His ways, He will avert His wrathful gaze. And by the grace of God, hopefully nurtured by powerful (and colorful) preaching, His chosen people would turn from their wicked ways.

What were those wicked ways? As time went on, the catalogue of sins became standardized. Over and over again, the Puritans were told that they hardened their hearts; they had become sermon-proof. They were too prideful, taking too much delight in wearing fancy clothes. There was heresy (in the form of Quakers and Anabaptists) in their midst. There was swearing, sleeping during sermons, and Sabbath-breaking. Family discipline had broken down. Sexual sins abounded, fueled by great dependence upon alcohol, both among the Puritans and among the Indians whom they were “debauching...with rum.” There was too much lying,

and in increasingly capitalistic New England, “there was inordinate affection unto the world.”<sup>5</sup>

As time went on, there was less physical and material danger, and more spiritual danger. The moral decay itself became an affliction, rather than merely a cause of other, more standard afflictions. It was the second, third, and fourth generations of Puritans, according to Miller, that took the most comfort from the jeremiads.<sup>6</sup> Their Calvinist work ethic provoked them to work hard; it made their business practices sharp—perhaps too sharp. Their efforts were successful temporally, but much more ambiguous when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. The ritual of the jeremiad helped them cope with their temporal success, and the harsh compromises with Gospel values that success in an emerging capitalist society entailed.<sup>7</sup> Miller writes: “The sins paraded in the sermons were not so much those of the notoriously scandalous but such as were bound to increase among good men. They thus had to be all the more vigorously condemned because they were incurable: after proper obeisance to the past, the society was better prepared to march into its future.”<sup>8</sup>

The jeremiad persisted as a dominant American rhetorical form long after the Puritans left the scene, although some of its purposes and characteristics changed through the years. Why would Americans hold on so tightly to such a seemingly dour, if not destructive, form of public speech? In *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch highlights three aspects of this rhetorical form noted, but not emphasized, by Miller.

First, despite initial appearances, it is fundamentally an optimistic form of political and religious rhetoric. First the Puritans, and then by extension, New England, and by extension again, the entire American experiment, were the New Israel, chosen by God among all other nations. Just as God will not forsake His original people, the Jews (and Bercovitch discusses the interest among millennialist Puritans in the return of the Jews to Israel and their conversion), He will not forsake His new people, to whom He has bound himself by irrevocable election. As Bercovitch writes,

Why was it that “no place under heaven . . . will so highly provoke and incense the displeasure of God as . . . New-England”? Why were there “no persons in all the world unto whom God speaketh as he doth unto us [by His] . . . most awful Providences”? The reason was

<sup>2</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press 1981), 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-36. Miller takes this list from the Synod convened in 1679 in response to the General Court’s request for an answer to the questions, “What are the provoking evils of New England?” and “What is to be done, that so those evils may be reformed?” The request came as a result of the repeated setbacks suffered in the 1670s, some in connection with the English battles with Native American tribes in New England.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3: “The Protestant Ethic,” 40-52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

obvious. Because New England was God's country, its inhabitants must expect His lash. "God is terrible out of his holy places."<sup>9</sup>

God's chastisements, in the case of other nations, were meant to destroy on account of sin and disobedience. In the case of the Puritans, and New England, and later the United States, they were meant to be "corrective afflictions."<sup>10</sup>

Second, the optimism inculcated by the jeremiad was not merely a hope for a sacred future, a beautiful life after this world, but a hope that fused the sacred and the profane. The American jeremiads embedded New England's destiny, and later, American destiny, within the framework of God's eternal will. "Of all communities on earth, only the new Protestant Israel had 'the Blessings both of the *upper and nether Springs*, the Blessings of Time and Eternity.'"<sup>11</sup> Bercovitch argues that Calvinist values of hard work and frugality merged with the growth of capitalism to produce a "middle class" mind-set of economic striving deemed to be both demanded and blessed by God himself. Prosperity and success were available in this life, as well as the next, due to God's unique will for the new land.

Third, the jeremiad is not only oriented toward a hope-filled future, it is designed to evoke in the audience a carefully calibrated state of anxiety and anticipation that spurs them on to build that future. The jeremiad was the rhetoric of progress, and the ceaseless striving that enabled progress. "The very concept of errand, after all, implied a state of *unfulfillment*. The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England's Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome."<sup>12</sup> The jeremiad produced the precise mixture of anxiety and commitment that enabled the early settlers to tame the wilderness, to move from colony to province, and from province to nation.

Bercovitch argues that the jeremiad, despite its harshness, is actually a force for social stability. Its ritual "bespeaks an ideological consensus - in moral, religious, economic, social, and intellectual matters - unmatched in any other modern culture. And the power of consensus is nowhere more evident than in the symbolic meaning that the jeremiads infused into the term America. Only in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred."<sup>13</sup>

Critique, even harsh critique, is tolerated, even encouraged, if it falls within the rubric of the jeremiad—calling the New Jerusalem to repent, so that it can continue its progress toward eternal and temporal flourishing. Furthermore, there is room

<sup>9</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 57. He is citing John Bale, *The Image of Both Churches* (1548), in *Select Works*, ed. Henry Christmas (Cambridge, 1849), 295; Increase Mather, *The Times of Man* (Boston: 1675), 16, 19-20, John Sherman and Thomas Shepard, Jr., Preface to Oakes, *New-England Pleaded With*, sig. A2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. He is citing John Davenport, *A Sermon Preached at the Election* (Cambridge, Mass., 1669), 16; Richard Mather and William Tompson, *An Heart-Melting Exhortation* (London, 1650), 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. Bercovitch's notion of "errand" is taken from Miller's classic work, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

for others, even vanquished enemies, to become citizens of the New Israel, provided that they accept the terms of the national covenant. After observing how the Union leaders in the Civil War saw their struggle against the South in terms of the cosmic terms of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bercovitch noted how Lincoln reintegrated the enemy in his 1863 National Fast Day speech. "[T]he war was 'a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins to the end that the whole people might be redeemed.' . . . Now that the South had been made to correspond to the ideal, it too could join the revolution toward the American City of God."<sup>14</sup>

How much room is there in the American jeremiad for expansion beyond its Puritan roots? According to James Darsey, a professor of rhetoric at Georgia State University, a great deal of room. In his book *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*,<sup>15</sup> he argues that the jeremiad does not in fact, even require a belief in God—simply a belief in the special nature of the United States that is captured metaphorically by the idea that it is the "New Jerusalem." What is required, according to Darsey, is a belief that there are bedrock values and commitments that are essential to this nation's identity. We can continue to speak meaningfully of a covenant even if we no longer literally believe in a covenant with the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But we must continue to believe in bedrock moral values, which serve as the basis for prophecy's radical social critique.

If Bercovitch is correct, the jeremiad is an enduring feature of American political and moral life. It is in our rhetorical reflexes, so to speak. It is not, however, always in our conscious reflection. We are familiar with its general form, particularly its language of indictment. But neither would-be Jeremiahs nor their audiences are familiar with the other features of the genre, either how it operates within the prophetic books themselves, or how peculiarly American expectations have shaped the genre—even if those expectations are only tacit, only half-realized and only half-understood by those who hold them.

I now turn to the question of how the rhetoric of prophetic indictment actually operates in practice.

## THE LOGIC OF PROPHETIC INDICTMENTS

What are the characteristics of prophetic indictments as a rhetorical form? The Protestant ethicist James Gustafson has noted three characteristics. First, "they usually, though not always, address what the prophet perceives to be the root of religious, moral, or social waywardness, not specific instances in which certain policies are judged to be inadequate or wrong."<sup>16</sup> Second, prophetic indictments

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 174. His quotation of Lincoln is taken from Edward M. Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 14.

<sup>15</sup> James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy*, The Stob Lectures, 1987-88 (Grand Rapids: Calvin College and Seminary, 1988), 8.

employ “language, metaphors, and symbols that are directed to the ‘heart’ as well as to the ‘head.’ The prophet usually does not make an argument; rather he demonstrates, he shows, he tells.”<sup>17</sup> Third, prophetic indictments are usually utopian in nature. Gustafson does not use this term technically, but merely to indicate that “prophets sometimes proclaim and depict an ideal state of affairs which is radically in contrast with the actual state of affairs in which we live together in society.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, prophetic indictments frequently decry a social evil without providing a clear plan for its amelioration.

The overarching goal of the prophet is to call the community back to its fundamental moral commitments, and to renew its dedication to the bedrock principles upon which the society is based. Prophetic discourse is, in an important sense, about the foundations of moral discourse, not about its upper floors. If the foundations are not steady and strong, any moral reasoning grounded upon them is likely to be unstable and dangerous.

The definitive example from the Old Testament is the sin of idolatry, excoriated again and again by the Hebrew prophets. Nowhere is the grievousness of the sin of idolatry more vividly portrayed than in the book of Hosea. Instructed by God to take a temple prostitute for a wife, Hosea passionately conveyed God’s sense of outrage and betrayal at Israel’s dalliances.

Protest against your mother, protest!  
for she is not my wife,  
and I am not her husband.  
Let her remove her harlotry from before her,  
her adultery from between her breasts,  
Or I will strip her naked,  
leaving her as on the day of her birth;  
I will make her like the desert,  
reduce her to an arid land,  
and slay her with thirst.<sup>19</sup>

The prohibition against idolatry stands at the foundation of the Israelite religion. Those who do not realize why idolatry is a grievous offense against Yahweh clearly do not perceive who Yahweh is—the one true God, who led the Israelites out of captivity and provided for them through their wanderings in the desert. They do not grasp the exclusive nature of the covenant Yahweh made with people on Mount Sinai.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>19</sup> Hosea: 2:4-5. All scriptural passages quoted or cited in this essay are taken from *The Catholic Study Bible*, Donald Senior, gen. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

In addition to calling people back to the fundamental commitments of their moral and political world, prophetic indictments also serve a second fundamental purpose. They are frequently used as a form of moral shock treatment. In their very harshness, they force people to recognize the truth about thoroughly corrupt patterns or practices of behavior, a truth to which they have become blind or callous. This function of prophetic indictments is illustrated by the second overarching theme in the Hebrew prophets: the scandalous exploitation of the poor by the privileged upper class. Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah, which are designed to make the comfortably wealthy of Judah, who no doubt think of themselves as right with God, rethink their status:

The Lord rises to accuse,  
standing to try his people.  
The Lord enters into judgment  
with his people’s elders and princes:  
It is you who have devoured the vineyard;  
the loot wrested from the poor is in your houses.  
What do you mean by crushing my people,  
and grinding down the poor when they look to you?  
says the Lord, the God of hosts.  
The Lord said:  
Because the daughters of Zion are haughty,  
and walk with necks outstretched,  
Ogling and mincing as they go,  
their anklets tinkling with every step,  
The Lord shall cover the scalps of Zion’s daughters with scabs,  
and the Lord shall bare their heads.<sup>20</sup>

It appears, therefore, that the basic functions of prophetic indictments are two: 1) To demand that wayward citizens make a renewed commitment to the moral basis of their community—in the case of the Israelites, a renewed commitment to the covenant with the one true God; and 2) To shock wayward members of the community out of their indifference to their own flagrant pattern of sins, and to the harm those sins cause to other members of the community. If a society is threatening to abandon key elements of its entire moral framework, or if its members manifest a pattern of sustained indifference to human injustice, prophetic indictments may be the only medicine strong enough to overcome the danger to its moral fabric.

Strong medicine, however, is also dangerous medicine. When a human body is ravaged by cancer, chemotherapy can be the only hope of restoring life and health. At the same time, chemotherapy can have destructive consequences. Unless the physician is extremely judicious in its use, it can do more harm than good—in some

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 3:13-17.

circumstances, it can even kill the patient. So too with prophetic indictments, which I believe function as a type of *moral* chemotherapy. They can be absolutely necessary to preserve the fundamental moral fabric of the community. At the same time, they can rip a community apart, setting mother against son, sister against brother. This destructive potential is intimately connected with the inner logic of prophetic indictments; it arises from the way in which prophetic interventions affect the ongoing conversation.

First, by their very form and content, prophetic indictments radically constrain the possibilities for acceptable response on the part of the listeners. Remember that the true prophet is claiming to be a messenger of God; the prophet also claims that the message he or she is delivering is divinely mandated. From the prophet's perspective, therefore, the only acceptable response is obedience and repentance on the part of the audience.

Second, it is important to note that prophetic indictments often forestall the possibility of dialogue or compromise. This is the case, for example, with respect to the substance of the message. The prophet believes that he or she is uttering God's own message; it cannot, therefore, be quibbled with or debated.

Third, and consequently, prophetic indictments leave scant room for careful, casuistical distinctions common in both law and ordinary analysis of moral problems. Consider, for example, the prohibition against idolatry, which I identified earlier as the fundamental moral prohibition of the ancient Israelites. Does it count as "idolatry" to eat meat sacrificed to idols if the eater doesn't actually believe in other gods? This is a casuistical question, probing the precise boundaries of the definition of "idolatry." It was a live question for St. Paul.<sup>21</sup> It is not one, however, with which the writers of the biblical books of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Hosea would have had much patience.

Fourth, and most importantly, the use of prophetic indictment generally marks the end of civil discussion. Those who, for whatever reason, do not acknowledge the speaker's identity as a true prophet are likely to react with indignation to the prophet's stinging words. The prophet, filled with righteous anger, calls for obedience and repentance. One or two members of the audience might comply. But the rest are incredulous and skeptical; they believe themselves to have been calumniated and respond accordingly. The quality of the conversation disintegrates apace.

Prophetic indictments, then, are a powerful tool. But they are also a dangerous tool. Targeting a fundamental moral cancer growing in the body politic for destruction, they may end up working great harm to the body politic itself. Yet, as even a cursory review of contemporary news radio, television political shows, and the political blogosphere demonstrates, the temptation to engage in prophetic indictment can

be deeply attractive to a wide variety of people all across the political spectrum, and of all religious faiths and of none. Precisely because the jeremiad is an American form of political discourse, it retains the vehemence of religious conviction without necessarily requiring or reflecting religious inspiration.

There are true prophets. There are also, it seems, many false prophets—or at least overly eager prophets. Is it possible to come up with criteria that help guide the use of prophetic discourse in the public square? I have argued elsewhere that it is possible to develop constraints that govern the appropriate subject matter of prophetic indictments, which is based upon reflections on the prophetic books in Scripture themselves, as well as the most accomplished practitioners of this rhetoric, such as Martin Luther King.<sup>22</sup> Prophetic indictments are meant, for example, to apply to questions that go to the heart of the moral and political structure of society—to the heart of the covenant, so to speak, not to more peripheral matters. It can be tempting to turn to prophetic indictments as a rhetorical device to cover up a weak argument—the equivalent of the preacher's marginal note, "point weak—bang on pulpit." This temptation must be resisted.

Proper subject matter, however, is not enough. Reflections on the prophetic books, together with the best practices of contemporary prophetic rhetoric, also yields insight into the most helpful *rhetorical stance* for a would-be prophet to take toward the community that he or she is addressing. In my view, two factors are crucial. First, would-be prophets ought to avoid framing their remarks to their fellow citizens in terms of what biblical scholars frequently refer to as the "oracles against the nations," and orient them according to the framework modeled in the so-called "oracles against Israel and Judah."<sup>23</sup>

The "oracles against the nations" are found in several prophetic books, including Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. In general terms, the prophet condemns each of the enemies of Israel and Judah, usually its neighbors, by name, for their perfidy and cruelty to God's chosen people. The oracles promise not only divine retribution to the enemies of their people, but often utter and complete destruction as they are made to drink from the cup of divine wrath. God uses the enemies of Israel and Judah to chastize them, but they invariably exceed their mandate in egregious ways. Consequently, their enemies will not only be punished severely, but in some cases will even be wiped off the face of the earth for their treachery and butchery.

The language is shockingly, unremittingly harsh. Consider, for example, this oracle against Babylon (which, not surprisingly, comes in for the worst of the criticism) from the Book of Isaiah:

<sup>22</sup> M. Cathleen Kaveny, "Prophecy and Casuistry: Abortion, Torture and Moral Discourse," *Villanova Law Review* 51:3 (2006): 499-580. This article develops in more detail some of the arguments made in this section of the paper.

<sup>23</sup> For a very helpful orientation, see David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> 1 Cor. 10:14-32.

I am stirring up against them the Medes,  
 who think nothing of silver  
 and take no delight in gold.  
 The fruit of the womb they shall not spare,  
 nor shall they have eyes of pity for children.  
 And Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,  
 the glory and pride of the Chaldeans,  
 Shall be overthrown by God  
 like Sodom and like Gomorrah.  
 She shall never be inhabited,  
 nor dwelt in, from age to age;  
 The Arab shall not pitch his tent there,  
 nor shepherds couch their flocks.  
 But wildcats shall rest there  
 and owls shall fill the houses;  
 There ostriches shall dwell,  
 and satyrs shall dance.  
 Desert beasts shall howl in her castles,  
 and jackals in her luxurious palaces.  
 Her time is near at hand  
 and her days shall not be prolonged.<sup>24</sup>

In general, in the oracles against the nations, the prophets express God's implacable, destructive wrath toward the enemies of Israel. These nations are not valuable in and of themselves; they are only instrumentally useful for the supporting role that they play in the divine drama between God and His chosen people. Overstepping their moral boundaries, they are condemned to thoroughgoing destruction. The prophet speaks over against them, because God Himself is over against him.

It is precisely for this reason that the oracles against the nations can be contrasted with the oracles against Israel and Judah, in which God chastises His people, frequently in language every bit as harsh as He chastises the nations. The crucial but important difference, however, is that He repeatedly forgives His people. Deutero-Isaiah describes how God relents after afflicting Judah with the Babylonian Captivity, promising them a Messiah (Cyrus of Persia) who will allow them to return to their homeland. In the case of Judah, unlike the case of Babylon, the divine edict of destruction is undone. Consider this passage from Isaiah, in stark contrast to the previous one:

Remember this, O Jacob,  
 you, O Israel, who are my servant!

I formed you to be a servant to me;  
 O Israel, by me you shall never be forgotten:  
 I have brushed away your offenses like a cloud,  
 your sins like a mist;  
 return to me, for I have redeemed you.

...

It is I who confirm the words of my servants,  
 I carry out the plan announced by my messengers;  
 I say to Jerusalem: Be inhabited;  
 to the cities of Judah: Be rebuilt;  
 I will raise up their ruins.  
 It is I who said to the deep: Be dry;  
 I will dry up your wellsprings.  
 I say of Cyrus: My shepherd,  
 who fulfills my every wish;  
 He shall say of Jerusalem, "Let her be rebuilt,"  
 and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."<sup>25</sup>

In my view, those who invoke prophetic rhetoric with the goal of calling attention to a fundamental flaw in their community need to construe their audience as fellow citizens of Israel and Judah, not as citizens of Babylon, or Assyria, or even Egypt. Prophets need to make it clear, in other words, that they do not see their audience as implacable enemies, and that their prophetic indictments are not designed to demand or portend the necessity for the utter destruction of those who hear those indictments. Instead, they are designed to prepare the way for repentance, reform, and divine mercy. Prophetic language that is modeled, explicitly or tacitly, upon the oracles against the nations, cannot heal a political community. It cannot be interpreted in a constructive way. It carries with it only the threat of annihilation, not the (conditional) promise of a world made new. For that reason, it cannot possibly produce repentance and renewed commitment to the community.

Second, precisely because they are addressing their own people, would-be prophets would do well to stand with their audience in their trials and tribulations, despite their sins. They ought not, rhetorically speaking, to set themselves over and against the people whom they castigate in God's name. The prophet Jeremiah, after whom the jeremiad was named, stood in sympathy and solidarity with the people, even as he stood in sympathy and solidarity with God's sense of anger and betrayal at their faithlessness.

As the great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Those whom he loved he was called upon to condemn. When the catastrophe came, and the enemy mercilessly killed men, women, and children, the prophet must have discovered that the agony

<sup>24</sup> Isaiah 13:17-22.

<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 44:21-22, 26-28.



was greater than the heart could feel, that his grief was more than his soul could weep for.<sup>26</sup> Heschel observes that Jeremiah “prayed and pleaded for His [God’s] people,” he did not stand coldly against them, even as he stood on the side of divine right.<sup>27</sup> Decrying the sins of Judah, and predicting her doom on account of them, Jeremiah took no pleasure in being right—in being in accordance with the abstract moral law of the universe. At the heart of the universe for Jeremiah was not an abstract moral law, but a relationship, a covenant written in the heart as well as in stone, between God and His people. To be an instrument of divine wrath toward God’s beloved people, toward Jeremiah’s own people, was too much for the prophet to endure.<sup>28</sup>

Cursed be the day  
on which I was born!  
May the day my mother gave me birth  
never be blessed!  
Cursed be the man who brought the news  
to my father, saying,  
“A child, a son, has been born to you!”  
filling him with great joy.  
Let that man be like the cities  
which the LORD relentlessly overthrew;  
Let him hear war cries in the morning,  
battle alarms at noonday,  
because he did not dispatch me in the womb!  
Then my mother would have been my grave,  
her womb confining me forever.  
Why did I come forth from the womb,  
to see sorrow and pain,  
to end my days in shame?<sup>29</sup>

Third, and finally, if a prophet’s condemnations of sin and call to repentance are to be heard as constructive chastisements, he or she has to situate them within a horizon of hope. It must, somehow, be possible to turn from sinful paths, to avert disaster, and to reestablish oneself and one’s community within divine favor. Prophecies of wrath and doom are situated within the context of divine faithfulness to His people. The prophet weeps for his people suffering under a just lash, and offers them comfort and consolation. As Heschel writes of the book of Jeremiah, “The rule of Babylon shall pass, but God’s covenant with Israel shall last forever.”<sup>30</sup>

To summarize the three guidelines for a helpful prophetic stance that I have drawn from the prophetic books themselves: First, in offering prophetic critique to one’s own people, do not adopt the stance of the oracles against the nations, but instead, take as your model the oracles against Judah and Israel. Second, identify yourself with the people who are sinning and about to receive divine chastisement, do not stand over and against them. Third, offer hope. These guidelines, I believe, help insure that prophetic indictments are heard and understood by their audience as beneficial, although painful, chemotherapy, rather than as a poison ultimately destructive of the body politic.

In my view, these guidelines are particularly important for prophetic rhetoric to be effective in the American context, given the prominent role of the jeremiad in our own history. This is not to say that we can not question the presuppositions of the American jeremiad—indeed, we must question them. To the extent, for example, that our religious and political heritage hardens into the literal message that God really only cares about the United States, and not about other nations on the earth, it must be strongly, even prophetically resisted. But even in prophetically denouncing that message, American prophets ought not communicate that God hates America (the opposite message), or that they themselves stand separate and apart from the America whose shortcomings they decry, or that there is no hope of a renewed future for our nation. Even in prophetically rejecting prophetic abuses, one can learn from the Hebrew prophets.

## CASE STUDIES FROM THE ELECTION: JEREMIAH WRIGHT AND CHARLES CHAPUT

As I argued in the first section of this essay, America has a long history with prophetic rhetoric. It continues to exert a significant force upon our political imaginations, even if many of us, perhaps most of us, are not as familiar with its scriptural roots and rhetorical structure as we ought to be. Furthermore, it is a form of political and religious rhetoric that has expanded to encompass the moral perspectives of those who were once invisible to it, or even its explicit enemies.

In *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, David Howard-Pitney describes how African-Americans from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X made the jeremiad their own in order to protest against the radical sins of slavery and racism, which violated God’s covenant with America.<sup>31</sup> Building upon Bercovitch’s analysis, Howard-Pitney demonstrates how the jeremiad allowed African-Americans to mount a sharp critique of unjust practices while at the same time affirming their love and loyalty to the country. In my own terms, Howard-Pitney’s work shows how the prophet can claim the role of a loyal dissenter,

<sup>26</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins - Perennial Classics, 2001), 153-54.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-60.

<sup>29</sup> Jeremiah 20:14-18; also quoted in Heschel, 159-60, but from a different translation.

<sup>30</sup> Heschel, 165.

<sup>31</sup> David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, rev. and exp. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

provided his or her critique is structured in the form of an oracle against Israel, rather than an oracle against the nations.

The fact that African-American prophets have been able to draw upon the tradition of the American jeremiad is of paramount moral importance for this country, given our history of slavery. From a purely rhetorical perspective, however, the fact that Roman Catholics have also assumed this role is far more striking. To the early Puritan settlers, Rome—the Roman Catholic Church—was *Babylon*, not Israel. Rome was the implacable enemy of the New Jerusalem. Purifying the Church of England meant purifying it of its residual “popish” tendencies. Despite this antagonistic history, Catholics in the United States eventually began to make the American jeremiad their own. They too employed prophetic rhetoric, loving their country and calling it to account for its transgressions.

In the mid-twentieth century, the prophetic voices among American Catholics were largely progressive in nature, calling the country to account primarily for its failures with respect to peace and justice. Daniel and Philip Berrigan furnish a good example of this prophetic strand in their protests against the Vietnam War. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, however, the dominant Catholic prophetic voices tend to be conservative, both theologically and politically. Taking their cue from Pope John Paul II’s prophetic contrast between the “culture of life” and the “culture of death” in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*,<sup>32</sup> they denounced practices such as abortion and stem cell research as an idolatrous exaltation of human free choice over divine law.

The 2008 presidential election demonstrates, I think, the continuing power of the American jeremiad, along with its expansion to encompass the concerns of previously excluded groups such as African-Americans and Roman Catholics. More specifically, the controversy surrounding the jeremiads of Barack Obama’s longtime pastor, the aptly named Jeremiah Wright, generated national news coverage in the spring of 2008, and threatened to upset his campaign against Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries. At least in Catholic circles, the national election was colored by the prophetic denunciations of some American bishops against Barack Obama for his pro-choice stance on abortion; one of the most indefatigable of the group was Charles Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., the archbishop of Denver.

Although my own rhetorical style tends toward analytical argumentation, what Matthew Arnold called the “rhetoric of sweetness and light,” rather than toward the “fire and strength” of the Hebrew prophets,<sup>33</sup> I do not wish to deny the legitimacy of prophetic discourse in general. I do think it can at times be a necessary form of “moral chemotherapy.” I also believe that systemic racism and abortion, the topics

addressed by Reverend Wright and Archbishop Chaput, respectively, are appropriate topics for prophetic rhetoric, because they both go to foundational issues about who counts as a full member of the American polity. I want to suggest, however, that my criteria for the appropriate use of prophetic discourse in the American context can help explain why the remarks of each clergyman have been received with such hostility in some quarters.

### *Jeremiah Wright*

Jeremiah Wright is senior pastor emeritus at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois, the church which Barack Obama attended with his family for many years. In March 2008, ABC News broadcast a story that included excerpts from some of his more fiery sermons. One, entitled, “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” was delivered on September 16, 2001 (the first Sunday after the terrorist attacks); the other, entitled “Confusing God and Government,” was delivered on April 13, 2003. The story generated intense interest and controversy from other media outlets and political commentators. Questions were raised about Wright’s patriotism, his relationship with the Obama family, and whether Barack Obama endorsed the ideas expressed by Wright. Obama repeatedly distanced himself from the pastor; finally, on May 31, 2008, the Obamas withdrew their membership in Trinity United Church of Christ, expressing their deep disagreement with the “divisive” statements of Reverend Wright.<sup>34</sup>

The initial story, and many of the responses that it provoked, demonstrate that even highly educated people are unfamiliar with the rhetorical conventions of American religion. The lead of the original ABC News story suggests that Wright is literally calling upon God to consign the United States to perdition: “Sen. Barack Obama’s pastor says blacks should not sing ‘God Bless America’ but God damn America.”<sup>35</sup> The body of the story reveals that the reporters did a great deal of research: “An ABC News review of dozens of Rev. Wright’s sermons, offered for sale by the church, found repeated denunciations of the U.S. based on what he described as his reading of the Gospels and the treatment of Black Americans.”

But no amount of research can make up for the lack of real insight. The story presents Wright as drawing upon his own idiosyncratic religious vision and deep feelings of racial resentment in order to deliver incendiary messages to his largely black congregation. Without any background or context, the ABC News story quotes passages from Wright’s sermons, including this passage from his April 13, 2003 sermon:

<sup>34</sup> The best summary of the incident I have found is “Jeremiah Wright Controversy,” *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremiah\\_Wright\\_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremiah_Wright_controversy) (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Brian Ross and Rehab el-Buri, “Obama’s Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11,” *ABC News*, March 13, 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4443788> (accessed November 30, 2008 via the previously cited Wikipedia site).

<sup>32</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Vatican: the See website: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html) (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Samuel Lipman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

“The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no, God damn America, that’s in the Bible for killing innocent people,” he said in a 2003 sermon. “God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme.”

Many commentators interpreted Wright as straightforwardly calling upon God to punish the United States. For example, National Review columnist Mark Steyn interprets Wright as an America-bashing racist:

God has blessed America, and blessed the Obamas in America, and even blessed the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose bashing of his own country would be far less lucrative anywhere else on the planet. The “racist” here is not Geraldine Ferraro but the Reverend Wright, whose appeals to racial bitterness are supposed to be everything President Obama will transcend. Right now, it sounds more like the same-old same-old.<sup>36</sup>

Scholars of religious studies attempted to quell the firestorm, by setting Wright’s preaching in a broader context. Georgetown’s Michael Eric Dyson,<sup>37</sup> Princeton’s Eddie Glaude,<sup>38</sup> and Santa Clara’s own James Bennett<sup>39</sup> described the rhetorical genre of black preaching, and highlighted its roots in the prophetic books of scripture, as well as in the story of oppression and liberation in the Book of Exodus.

Doubtless the controversy surrounding Wright’s fiery words stems in part from a broad cultural unfamiliarity with important forms of African-American preaching. Most people, after all, do not know that Martin Luther King wrote an important paper on the Book of Jeremiah while a student at Crozier Theological Seminary.<sup>40</sup> I would add that the controversy, and even the ABC News story itself, also demonstrates the relative unfamiliarity of Americans with the importance of the jeremiad more generally in the nation’s political and religious history.

But the problem was exacerbated, I think, by the precise way in which Wright’s words were taken out of context in the original news story. For example, the phrase “God damn America” as used by Wright is undeniably shocking. It is meant to be. But it is also meant to call America to repentance and humility before God, not to call for her utter destruction. It is an oracle against Israel, in other words, not an oracle against the nations. In the vast majority of news accounts, however, it appeared to be closer in sentiment to an oracle against the nations, a fact which understandably would provoke a more intense reaction in those who heard it. There were, however, exceptions. In his interview with Rev. Wright, who served six years in the Navy, Bill Moyers attempts to bring out the larger, constructive purpose of Wright’s critique.<sup>41</sup>

BILL MOYERS: Yeah. But talk a little bit about that. The prophets loved Israel. But they hated the waywardness of Israel. And they were calling Israel out of love back to justice, not damning--

REVEREND WRIGHT: Exactly.

BILL MOYERS: Not damning Israel. Right?

REVEREND WRIGHT: Right. They were saying that God was - in fact, if you look at the damning, condemning, if you look at Deuteronomy, it talks about blessings and curses, how God doesn’t bless everything. God does not bless gang-bangers. God does not bless dope dealers. God does not bless young thugs that hit old women upside the head and snatch their purse. God does not bless that. God does not bless the killing of babies. God does not bless the killing of enemies. And when you look at blessings and curses out of that Hebrew tradition from the book of Deuteronomy, that’s what the prophets were saying, that God is not blessing this. God does not bless it - bless us. And when we’re calling them, the prophets call them to repentance and to come back to God. If my people who are called by my name, God says to Solomon, will humble themselves and pray, seek my faith and turn from their wicked ways. God says that wicked ways, not Jeremiah Wright, then will I hear from heaven.<sup>42</sup>

I do not mean to deny, of course, that some of the controversy was not attributable to Wright himself. His performance in subsequent appearances at the National Press Club, for example, certainly added fuel to the flames.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, I do think the twin roots of the problem were the unfamiliarity of many Americans with the rhetorical form of the jeremiad, and the fact that the excerpts presented him as

<sup>36</sup> Mark Steyn, “Uncle Jeremiah,” NRO, March 15, 2008, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=ZjE3NDc3YTU0ZGM5NGEzZTdkNjcyZjBiNDVjMjU5MGQ=&w=MQ==> (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> “Professor, Author Michael Eric Dyson Compares MLK to Jeremiah Wright,” *Newsvine.com*, April 4, 2008, [http://newsguru.newsvine.com/\\_news/2008/04/04/1410426-professor-author-michael-eric-dyson-compares-mlk-to-jeremiah-wright](http://newsguru.newsvine.com/_news/2008/04/04/1410426-professor-author-michael-eric-dyson-compares-mlk-to-jeremiah-wright) (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> “Eddie Glaude on the Wright Issue,” *The Chicago Blog*, March 31, 2008, [http://pressblog.uchicago.edu/2008/03/31/eddie\\_glaude\\_on.html](http://pressblog.uchicago.edu/2008/03/31/eddie_glaude_on.html) (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> James B. Bennett, “Obama’s Pastor’s Words Ring Uncomfortably True,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 20 March 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Luther King, “The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought” (1948), in Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker and Penny A. Russell, eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 1, *Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) available online at The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/.kingpapers/article/volume\\_i\\_14\\_september\\_to\\_24\\_november\\_1948b/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/.kingpapers/article/volume_i_14_september_to_24_november_1948b/) (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> “Jeremiah Wright,” *Bill Moyers Journal*, April 25, 2008, an interview with Jeremiah Wright, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/profile.html> (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. For a full transcript of the interview, access <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/transcript1.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Amy Sullivan, “Jeremiah Wright Goes to War,” *Time*, 28 April 28, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1735662,00.html> (accessed November 30, 2008).

engaged in a critique more akin to the oracles against the nations, calling for utter destruction, rather than an oracle against Israel or Judah, threatening destruction with a view to provoking reform. The outcry against him vividly exemplified the fact that audiences do not respond well to prophets whom they perceive to be calling for the utter destruction of their country.

### *Archbishop Chaput*

While Jeremiah Wright and Charles Chaput hail from very different branches of Christianity, they have one important thing in common. Each labors tirelessly for the recognition and protection of a segment of the population whom he believes to be unjustly denigrated; people of color in the case of Reverend Wright, and in the case of Archbishop Chaput, the unborn.

Chaput, as many of you will remember, was extremely active in the 2004 presidential election, sharply protesting not only the suitability of John Kerry, a pro-choice Catholic, for presidency of the United States, but also at one point suggesting that Catholics who voted for him would be committing a serious sin.<sup>44</sup> He frequently frames his interventions in the public square in a clearly prophetic way. Drawing upon Pope John Paul II's imagery in *Evangelium Vitae*, he tells us that we face a choice between a "culture of life," which values all human beings, including the unborn, and a "culture of death," which treats vulnerable members of the human family as disposable. In a speech delivered less than a month before the election and provocatively entitled "Little Murders," Chaput quotes Cardinal Francis George in a sentence that would not be out of place in Jeremiah. "[T]oo many Americans have 'no recognition of the fact that children continue to be killed [by abortion], and we live therefore, in a country drenched in blood.'"<sup>45</sup>

Needless to say, Archbishop Chaput is a controversial figure in the Catholic Church in the United States. Many Catholics, of course, welcome his prophetic stance on abortion. But others find it alienating, to say the least. Some Catholics object to his stance on abortion itself. Others suspect that his remarks seem to be consistently biased in favor of the Republican Party. A third group of Catholics, however, agree with him about the morality of abortion, but object to his rigorous stand<sup>46</sup> on the

political question of whether one can ever vote for pro-choice politicians.<sup>47</sup> Not only does he himself believe that there is no "proportionate reason" which justifies voting for a pro-choice candidate,<sup>48</sup> he has at times expressed skepticism about the faith and morals of those who do believe that there is proportionate reason. In fact, he has recently expressed the view that prominent pro-Obama Catholics such as Douglas Kmiec use arguments that "seek to contextualize, demote and then counterbalance the evil of abortion with other important but less foundational social issues."<sup>49</sup>

It strikes me, however, that Chaput's interventions in the public square meet resistance not only because of substantive disagreements, or opposition to his prophetic stance, but also because of the particular manner in which he deploys his prophetic rhetoric. Whereas Wright's problem is that he appeared to be preaching in the manner of an oracle against the nations, rather than an oracle against Israel, Chaput's problem is that he appears to stand *in disdain against*, rather than *in solidarity with*, those whom he prophetically condemns. Why is that?

First, Chaput's favored language of the "culture of life" versus the "culture of death" can easily generate an "us versus them" mentality. Those who deploy this language, particularly in the American context,<sup>50</sup> set themselves over and against those whom they criticize. Life versus death. Good versus evil. "Us" versus "them." There can be no common cause with a person whom one configures as a denizen of the culture of death; by definition, there is nothing good about them. Chaput writes, "To suggest—as some Catholics do—that Senator Obama is this year's 'real' prolife candidate requires a peculiar kind of self-hypnosis, or moral confusion, or worse."<sup>51</sup> What would be worse? Deliberately furthering deeply immoral practices, practices that verge on the demonic. In another talk last year, Chaput pointedly noted that

<sup>44</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Laurie Goodstein, "Group of Bishops Using Influence to Oppose Kerry," *New York Times*, October 12, 2004, Religion section, at A1.

<sup>45</sup> Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., "Little Murders," *The Witherspoon Institute: Public Discourse*, October 18, 2008, an address to an ENDOW (Educating on the Nature and Dignity of Women) dinner on October 17th, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/viewarticle.php?selectedarticle=2008.10.18.001.pdart> (accessed November 30, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., "Archbishop's Column: 10 Points for Catholic Citizens to Remember," *Denver Catholic Register*, January 16, 2008, <http://www.archden.org/dcr/news.php?e=454&s=2&a=9553> (accessed December 2, 2008). See also his Archdiocese of Denver Web Column, "Thoughts on 'Roman Catholics for Obama,'" May 19, 2008, [http://www.archden.org/images/ArchbishopCorner/NewspaperColumns/ab\\_chaput\\_webcolumn.pdf](http://www.archden.org/images/ArchbishopCorner/NewspaperColumns/ab_chaput_webcolumn.pdf) (accessed December 2, 2008). In this column, he took a more irenic attitude toward Catholics who voted for a pro-choice politician than he did either in 2004 or in the fall of 2008.

<sup>47</sup> The term "proportionate reason" is a technical term of Catholic moral theology. Catholics are not permitted to vote for a pro-choice politician intending to further pro-choice policies. In 2004, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, issued a confidential letter to Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Bishop Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C., entitled "Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion – General Principles." The note at the bottom of the communication stated: "N.B. A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons." The communication is reproduced at Catholic Culture, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=6041&CFID=20139382&CFTOKEN=64927414> (accessed December 2, 2008). For a fuller account of moral obligations associated with voting, see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," available at <http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org/> (accessed December 2, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> "Prof. Kmiec argues that there are defensible motives to support Senator Obama. Speaking for myself, I do not know any proportionate reason that could outweigh more than 40 million unborn children killed by abortion and the many millions of women deeply wounded by the loss and regret abortion creates." Chaput, "Little Murders."

<sup>49</sup> Eric Gorski, "Archbishop Criticizes Obama, Catholic Allies," *USA Today*, October 19, 2008, an article, by an AP News reporter, is reporting on the speech "Little Murders," [http://www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2008-10-18-1132206159\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2008-10-18-1132206159_x.htm) (accessed December 2, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> I do not believe that *Evangelium Vitae* supports the dualistic reading of the "culture of life" and "culture of death" that has become dominant in the context of the American culture wars.

<sup>51</sup> Chaput, "Little Murders."

“when you read early Christian literature, practices like adultery and abortion are often described as part of ‘the way of death’ or the ‘way of the [devil]’.”<sup>52</sup>

Second, when positioning himself rhetorically, Chaput tacitly but undeniably sets identity as a Catholic over and against identity as an American. He is speaking to other American Catholics primarily as Catholics, and only secondarily as Americans. The title of his book, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life*,<sup>53</sup> is instructive. Catholic identity sets the framework and the terms of the discussion. From that distinct framework, which Chaput claims should be more “foundational” to the identity of Catholics than anything else,<sup>54</sup> Archbishop Chaput addresses American Catholics. He presents Catholic identity as standing in conflict with American identity: “As Catholics, we need to take a much tougher and more self-critical look at ourselves as believers; at the issues underlying today’s erosion of Catholic identity; and at the wholesale assimilation—absorption might be a better word—of Catholics by American culture.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, while he asserts that Catholics can best serve the nation by faithful commitment to the tenets of that faith; he understands that service nearly exclusively in terms of challenge and critique.

Rhetorically, then, Chaput presents himself as a citizen of the Roman Catholic Church, who is at best a resident alien of the United States. He has another home, a true home. From rhetorical perspective, his critique of American Catholics involves complicated and conflicting currents of loyalty and betrayal. Ultimately, he is asking them to be more loyal to Catholicism than to America; his prophetic rhetoric stems from his commitment to the Catholic tradition, which he sees as threatened by American identity. His prophetic critique splits religious identity and national identity apart, and pits them against one another. But the constraints of the American jeremiad do not allow for such a split. In my view, Chaput is hampered in his effective deployment of American prophetic rhetoric because he does not stand fully with and in America when he deploys it.

Let me emphasize that this stance is not his fault. I suspect that Chaput’s ability to make use of the American prophetic tradition are inevitably constrained, even frustrated, by his commitment to the Roman Catholic tradition. There are real tensions between a Catholic theological vision and the vision presupposed by the prophetic rhetoric of the sort that shaped the early American imagination. One problem of course, is that Puritanism in fact saw itself as a thorough indictment and

rejection, not only of the Catholic Church, but of any residual Catholic sensibility within English Protestantism.

The difficulties, however, are not simply a matter of two-hundred-year old political and religious differences. They are more basic and structural. Catholicism conceives itself as representing an entire world—not as a particular nation in a privileged relationship to God. To say that one nation, the United States, is set apart and more special to God than other nations conflicts with Catholic imagination. The very idea, therefore, that God could prefer any country, including ours, in the fashion presupposed by the jeremiads stands in deep tension with the more universalistic commitments of the Catholic tradition, which is reflected in everything from its understanding of the sacraments to its commitment to the natural law tradition.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Archbishop Chaput cannot situate himself fully within the American horizon, criticizing our particular nation for its failure to live up to its unique responsibilities before God. He cannot situate himself solely within any one political community; he cannot be an Israelite preaching to other Israelites, or a Judean preaching to other Judeans. In the end, the universal and global understanding of Catholicism will not allow it.

Moreover, forcing Catholicism into the framework of the jeremiad is unfortunate from both a theological and a rhetorical perspective. Theologically, it inevitably distorts Catholic identity, by presenting it as a competing claim on the audience’s loyalty, a distinctive commitment, which stands critically “over against” American identity. Properly speaking, a Catholic or “universal” identity should transcend and encompass any national identity. Rhetorically, precisely because a Catholic perspective is configured as a competing identity, “another country,” when it is forced into the framework of the jeremiad, it creates the sense that the prophet is not standing with those he or she is criticizing.

Does this problem mean that Catholics cannot engage in prophetic discourse? Absolutely not. It does mean, however, that Catholics cannot simply blindly insert themselves into the tradition of the American jeremiad. In my view, an urgent task for Catholics who feel called to prophetic witness is to fashion for themselves an appropriate form of prophetic rhetoric, which is suitable not only for the American context, but also consonant with the presuppositions of the Catholic tradition in Christianity.

## CONCLUSION

My third criterion for the fruitful use of prophetic rhetoric is that the prophet must leave his audience with some ground for hope of a renewed, reconciled community. Prophetic indictment that solely castigates sin may precipitate despair or provoke resentment and resistance; they cannot be the catalyst for constructive change. People must be able to envision a better future before they can be moved

<sup>52</sup> Meg Jalsevac, “Archbishop Chaput Says Follow Example of Early Christians in Fight Against Culture of Death,” *LifeSiteNews.com*, November 7, 2007. <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2007/nov/07110702.html> (accessed December 12, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Julia Duin, “Denver Archbishop Not Among Democrats’ Invited Clerics,” *The Washington Times*, August 19, 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/aug/19/denver-archbishop-not-among-democrats-invited-cler/> (accessed December 2, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Chaput, *Render Unto Caesar*, 184.

to dedicate themselves to it. That future need not be described in every detail. As I noted earlier, prophets do not generally provide detailed blueprints for societal renovation. Nonetheless, they must communicate a confidence that the sacrifice of self-interest and self-indulgence which they demand will ultimately issue in new possibilities.

The gold standard for American prophetic discourse in the last century is, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech,<sup>56</sup> delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, to more than 250,000 people at a March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>57</sup> Needless to say, the speech repays careful study from a rhetorical perspective. Here, however, I want to highlight only one aspect. The dream of Dr. King was a litany of hope, a vision of reconciliation, not a dream of retribution:

*I have a dream today.*

*I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*

*I have a dream today.*

Dr. King told of his dream in the second half of the speech; it gave his audience the strength to bear the prophetic indictments that constituted the first half. It ensured, as he intended, that they did not "wallow in the valley of despair." He knew that prophetic indictments are of little use if they do not inspire a positive plan of action. Leavened by hope, however, prophetic rhetoric can be a powerful and constructive force. Forty-five years after Dr. King delivered his speech, our nation elected the first African-American President of the United States. Needless to say, our nation has many injustices left to remedy—contemporary prophets such as Jeremiah Wright and Charles Chaput tell us so. But let us take renewed energy from this one moment of realized hope.

*When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

<sup>56</sup> The speech is available both in video and in transcript form. For video, see Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEMXaTktUfA> (accessed December 4, 2008). For a transcript, see Martin Luther King, Jr., "The I Have a Dream Speech," August 28, 1963, *U.S. Constitution Online*, <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html> (accessed December 4, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> For a fascinating account of the composition of the speech, see Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

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