

On prophets, kings, priests and counsellors

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Abstract

The church is putting much effort into developing a theology of the environment. This is in response to concerns about challenges such as deforestation and global warming, and the realisation that the church needs to add its voice with that of others to express their concern and to contribute to addressing these problems.

I argue that there are at least four roles that the church can play in taking up this responsibility and that we cannot focus on just one. These roles are: prophets, priests, kings and counsellors. I briefly describe each role and exhort Christians to understand the role they play and to exercise it with care and responsibility.

You don't have to go far in perusing blogs and opinion pieces to come across a wide range of strongly expressed opinions held by Christians on deforestation and global warming. Such opinions cover what we should be doing about it and how we must get involved. Christian theologies on the environment in general, and deforestation and global warming in particular are popping up all over the place.

A common feature of these positions is that they are categorical, leaving very little room for doubt regarding the holders' feelings about what they consider to be the Christian's responsibility. It is a pity that they are so varied and, in some cases, contradictory.

The feeling is that the 'the truth is out there' and that somehow we can derive from Scripture a single unifying principle that will align these positions and lead us (with the appropriate sense of guilt, confession and breast beating) into a course of action that will resolve all the problems. Such a conclusion will also give us the basis with which to announce that sceptics, multi-nationals and others of similar ilk are in need of repentance unless they see things our way.

I guess I see things slightly differently.

Let me start with a quote from Charles Handy the British management guru in his book *The Empty Raincoat*:

'There are kings and prophets, I was always told,' said Tony Benn, the British Socialist politician. 'The Kings have the power and the prophets have the principles.' I [Charles Handy] am on the side of the kings, the people who make things happen, but every king needs his prophet, to help him, and increasingly her, keep a clear head amidst the confusions. No one, however, would want the prophet to run the show.'

Handy 1994, p19.¹

Christians are used to the concept of prophets and have developed the idea that they are the 'goodies' while the kings are the 'baddies'. Tony Benn would agree with that. However, Charles Handy puts things into a different (and, to my mind, useful) perspective.

Prophets are George Bernard Shaw's 'unreasonable men', dissatisfied with the status quo, dreaming of what could or should be and striving to bring this about. Because of their 'unreasonableness', they bring about progress. They continually ask 'Why not?' and cajole us to see things differently, often warning us about what things will be like if we do not (i.e. predicting the future).

The tools of their trade are: a simple message, hyperbole, dramatisation, and a lot of self righteous indignation. 'Thus saith the Lord!' spoken with conviction and emphasis (and accompanied by attention-grabbing stunts) nearly always gets a good hearing and uncritical press coverage. It was that way in Biblical times too.

The Bible however warns us that false prophets also exist (e.g. Deut 13:1-3, 1 Kings 18:25, 1 John 4:1). Thus Christians would be sceptical of Tony Benn's idealised portrayal of prophets keeping their principles. For any of a number of reasons the prophetic voice can be corrupted and we need to heed the Scriptural warning about testing for false prophecies.

That said, according to Charles Handy, it is the kings and not the prophets who 'make things happen'. Prophets can say what they like (indeed, it is their responsibility to do so) but it is with the 'kings' where the responsibility for action lies. I am fascinated by the career of the Australian politician Peter Garret. He was the leader of a rock band Midnight Oil renowned for their protest songs, he was the CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation but chose to join the Australian Labor Party and not the more 'prophetic' Greens party. His preference was to take on Handy's kingly role and not a prophetic one.

A feature of the options presented to kings for decision is that they are rarely black or white, right or wrong. Usually they are grey or darker grey, ordinary or not so ordinary. This is often despite the efforts of the prophets to paint them in simpler hues. In fact, it is the wide range of

¹ Handy CB, 2002, *The empty raincoat: making sense of the future*, Arrow Books, London

prophetic voices that the decision makers have to deal with that makes the job so complex. In this way kings and their decision making are held vertical by equal pressure on all sides.

The quality of a king's decisions is assessed not by the desirability of the outcome but by:

- whether the decision can be made in the first place;
- whether the decision can be implemented and;
- how long that decision lasts.

It is no good intending to make decisions (no matter how worthy the cause) if they can't get through the decision-making process, be implemented or if they are dismantled by those who subsequently come into power.

Two contrasting Australian examples of this are the government's adoption of the Goods and Services Tax which was introduced despite much opposition and subsequent threats to dismantle it when the Opposition came into power. The second is the failure of the current (2010) government to introduce an Emissions Trading Scheme despite widespread support and active representations that this was needed to address global warming.

Christians would recognise a third player in the game; that of priests. According to Wikipedia² 'A priest...is one authorized to perform...as a mediatory agent between humans and deities'. In the New Testament, Christians are seen as a collective priesthood and as having a priestly role serving the rest of the world. This strikes me as an incredibly rich concept worth developing much further than it is at present.

The two priestly functions that stand out for me in this context are intercession and pastoral care. With intercession we are called on to pray for the world, its leaders and those in need. In terms of confronting challenges that are facing the world, in terms of making decisions that need to be made to address these challenges, in terms of upholding men and women in their daily work as they work through the situations that arise, our priestly role is vital and yet not well recognised. Nor do I believe it is developed as well as it could be in our thinking and in our strategies to address these challenges.

Regarding pastoral care, it seems to me that the church is extremely active in this area. This doesn't fit into the definition of 'priests' provided by Wikipedia but it is one that I see exercised daily by the church. It is also a role that often runs counter to the actions advocated by prophets. The tension between prophets and pastoral carers is a natural consequence whenever change is advocated and the challenge for the church is to make this tension constructive. This is not easy when the prophetic calls are cast in terms of moral absolutes.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priest> viewed 24th November 2010.

Both of the priestly functions recognise the eternal perspective of our life here on earth and raise our eyes above the immediate concerns that we are facing. We are working for an economy that extends beyond the here and now and, through our intercessions and our concern for those who will be affected, we need to remind those in the other roles not to lose that perspective.

Finally, there is a fourth role; that of counsellors; those who contribute to decisions out of their expertise, experience and thoughtful intelligence. Understanding the decision-making process and contributing to the issues involved, they share of their wisdom

In some cases these counsellors are selected by governments and set up to provide advice on specific areas. A number of ISCAST Fellows have been asked to join such groups and assist in providing advice.

In other cases these counsellors operate independently of government and may operate from within universities or non-government organisations publishing of their expertise. Occasionally newspaper columnists may emerge as more than just reporters and become recognised for their expertise and wisdom and so become influential in decision-making.

In a democracy, Christians are involved in each of these roles—prophets, priests, kings and counsellors. Considering climate change, for example, let me paint a simplified picture of the history of this issue.

Scientists became aware of the issue in about the 1980s and began to express their concerns. There was little traction at first with confusion over issues such as global cooling having to be worked through. The community at large started to respond, aided in particular by conservationists who were far more adept at the prophetic role, reducing the message down to simple tenets and presenting it publicly in a way that scientists could not hope to emulate. It took decades but the issue forged its way into the public consciousness picking up interesting bedfellows along the way (e.g. the nuclear lobby who saw in global warming an issue which their technology could address).

'Counter prophets' also emerged. These are not necessarily the false prophets of scripture but are the ones who speak up for those who would be affected by the proposed changes. Some of these oppose the climate change arguments, quite rightly scrutinising them for weaknesses (after all, the track record of environmental prophecies is not great). The counter prophets also used the language of prophets—hyperbole, self righteousness and simplistic scenarios to get their message across. Eventually the tide of opinion decided that the issue had to be addressed and governments were elected with addressing climate change a major platform.

The governments ('kings') are now trying to make decisions that will address the problem. But this is no easy process. Not only are there people who will be severely affected by proposed solutions but the challenge of developing solutions that will actually work is also proving

difficult (we are, after all seeking to restructure the economy essentially based as it is on cheap electricity generated from the combustion of coal). The prophetic role has been effective in persuading governments to act. Developing the solutions to the problem is now the challenge we, as a community, through our governments, are working on.

So, what should the Christian's position be in this? I cannot see any one role here that is more Christian than any other. There are Christians playing key parts in each of those I have outlined above: prophets (and 'counter-prophets'), kings, priests and counsellors. My only comment would be to paraphrase John the Baptist's answer when he was asked 'What should we do then?' (Luke 3: 1-18).

'Prophets, speak your message forthrightly and with passion but watch your hyperbole and speak the truth. Be careful not to mislead. Watch that the righteousness of your cause does not unfairly impinge on the righteousness of other causes.

Kings, make your decisions with the good of the people of this country and of those who will be affected in other countries in mind; be aware of the planet, its resources and values, and the impact your decisions will have. Strive to make your decisions capable of being implemented and durable. Remember in particular the poor and the vulnerable in making these decisions.

Priests, uphold all those involved in the decisions in your prayers, and pray for the outcomes that will emerge. Remind all continually that the economy they are working for is larger than that of the country and even of this planet. Remind them that we will all be held accountable one day to the creator of this planet and all that it contains and sustains.

Counsellors, use your scholarship, expertise and experience with care. Offer it carefully and judiciously to those involved, with an intelligent understanding of the decision making process, as unto God. Do not misuse your status and the regard with which society holds you but remember humbly that all that you have is from God in the first place and that you are in a position of trust and privilege.'