



Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square

Cathleen Kaveny

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American culture warriors have plenty to argue about, but battles over such issues as abortion and torture have as much to do with rhetorical style as moral substance. Cathleen Kaveny reframes the debate about religion in the public square by focusing on a powerful stream of religious discourse in American political speech: the Biblical rhetoric of prophetic indictment.

Throughout American history, reformers of all political persuasions and for all manner of causes—abolitionists, defenders of slavery, prohibitionists, and civil rights leaders—have echoed the thundering condemnations of the Hebrew prophets in decrying what they see as social evils. Rooted in the denunciations of Puritan sermons, prophetic rhetoric has evolved to match the politics of an increasingly pluralistic society. To employ prophetic indictment in political speech is to claim to speak from a position of unassailable authority—whether God, reason, or common sense—in order to accuse opponents of violating a fundamental law.

The fiery rhetoric of prophetic indictment operates very differently from the cooler language of practical deliberation and policy analysis. Kaveny contends that prophetic indictment is a form of “moral chemotherapy”: it can be strong medicine against moral cancers threatening the body politic, but administered injudiciously, it can do more harm than good. Kaveny draws upon a wide array of sources to develop criteria for the constructive use of prophetic indictment. In modern times, Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies the use of prophetic rhetoric to facilitate reform and reconciliation rather than revenge.

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