The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America

Darsey, James

Published by NYU Press

Darsey, James.
The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7855.
The Word in Darkness

We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long. —Psalms 74:9

Son of man, prophesy against the prophets in Israel that prophesy, and say thou unto them that prophesy out of their own hearts, Hear ye the word of the Lord; Thus saith the Lord God; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! O Israel, thy prophets are like the foxes in the deserts. —Ezekiel 13:2-4

And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried; but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand.

—Daniel 12:8-10

Among the ways that prophetic rhetoric distinguishes itself from the Graeco-Roman model is its transgression of classical genres. As the law in ancient Hebrew culture was given, the deliberative function of prophecy may be truncated. Still, there is a strong element of future concern, characteristic of deliberation, of the consequences of adhering or not adhering to the law, and the "rib" pattern at the center of prophecy provides a clear judicial element. But even more essential than this judicial function, it might be argued, is the epideictic function of prophecy, not only in the celebration and encouragement of common values, but in the sense that epideictic both depends upon and recreates community. Indeed, it is only in the presence of a viable community that the declaratory impulse in prophecy has adequate credibility to insist on engagement. In the absence of such a community, it is easily dismissed as lunatic rant. Prophecy is, in James Boyd White's terms, a language, and it is by languages, “shared
conceptions of the world, shared manners and values, shared resources and expectations and procedures for speech and thought,” he insists, “that communities are in fact defined and constituted.”

It is not necessary to become embroiled in the debates over the nature and precise temporal location of postmodernity to borrow from that body of literature certain insights about the decay of community in contemporary America. Barry Smart notes that, over and above the fractiousness collected under postmodern scholarship, “there appears to be a shared sense that significant cultural transformations have been taking place in Western societies during the period since the end of the Second World War and further that the term ‘postmodernism’ may be appropriate, for the time being at least, to describe some of the implied shifts in ‘sensibility, practices and discourse formations.’” There is also considerable agreement that these “cultural transformations” involve dislocation, alienation, uncertainty, and atomization. Smart describes postmodern forms of sociology as forms “which place emphasis upon the tenuous, negotiable, meaningful, interpretive, and sociolinguistically constituted character of social life, upon the fragile ‘tacit understandings’ which constitute the insecure foundation of social life.”

David Harvey is more bluntly critical of these same tendencies, seeing not a reconstitution of social life, but the destruction of its possibility:

Postmodernist philosophers tell us not only to accept but even to revel in the fragmentations and the cacophony of voices through which the dilemmas of the modern world are understood. Obsessed with deconstructing and delegitimizing every form of argument they encounter, they can end only in condemning their own validity claims to the point where nothing remains of any basis for reasoned action.

“There is, in postmodernism,” he notes elsewhere, “little overt attempt to sustain continuity of values, beliefs, or even disbeliefs.”

Postmodernism is a reaction to the disintegration of the Enlightenment project of the grand narrative, the regularity of prediction and control, and the stability of common sense. The American Revolutionaries, Wendell Phillips, and Eugene Debs were able to capitalize on a common belief structure, the roots of society in their respective times. Their radicalism, like that of the Old Testament prophets, was essentially reactionary. Challenging not root beliefs but contemporary understandings, they demanded a realization of orthodoxy through the excision of corrupt practice. But the career of Eugene Debs, I have claimed, marked the end of an era. Already in Debs’s time there were the unmistakable signs of a dissolution of
consensus in American society, a trend catalyzed by the First and Second World Wars. Postmodernism is a term that suggests the unraveling of that faith that sustained radical thought for the Revolutionaries, Phillips, and Debs, an abrogation of the "vital center," the decline of the common language necessary not only to consensus, but to apostasy as well. Postmodernism is the recognition of the fragmentation of the national community against which the radical seeks definition; it is impossible to stand in opposition to fog. As Hal Foster expresses it, "Pluralism is a condition that tends to remove, art, culture and society in general from the claims of criticism and change." Nor is what President Jimmy Carter termed our "national malaise" merely the fashionable fetish of sociologists, literary critics, and philosophers, indulged in recondite treatises in obscure journals. Postmodernism is not, as David Harvey puts it, "an autonomous artistic current. . . . Its rootedness in daily life is one of its most patently transparent features." It reveals itself, however inarticulately, even in our most ostensibly "mindless," low culture entertainments.

In such an environment, the prophet is not possible. Prophecy is an ineluctably social phenomenon. It is inconceivable that one should serve as God's spokesperson in a world where God, the common bond, the religio, is dead. But the impulses that give rise to prophecy, the need for authority, judgment, and meaning, are tenacious. The appetites of the ersatz polis do not disappear in a postmodern, postreligious world. The competition for and the need to apportion scarce resources, the substance of politics, continues, as does the need for forms of discourse through which these decisions can be negotiated. Even more important than the persistence of political necessities, the desire for cohesion, for unity, for community does not die either.

A theory of prophetic discourse in American radical reform, if it is to have genuine utility, should provide critical touchstones by which prophets can be judged against their professions and nonprophets can be judged against the prophetic standard. It should be illuminating not only of those discourses that conform to its outlines, but should also provide a perspective against which to read discourses that fall under the traditional shadow of prophecy but that lack the social-rhetorical resources to sustain the convergence of speaker, audience, and sacred truth that prophecy demands. In other words, a theory of prophetic discourse should illuminate, and provide some means for evaluating, the dynamic when prophecy fails. This is the purpose of the three case studies here in part II. Three broad rhetorical responses to the need for judgment in a world without God are illustrated:
apocalyptic, the attempt to carry forward the prophetic authority in a world where God is no longer hegemonic; poetic, the attempt to carry forward the appearance of prophetic authority by an imitation of its outward form; and thoroughly secular rhetoric, the capitulation to the postmodern world and the abandonment of the prophetic.

Apocalypticism

Stephen O’Leary is certainly correct to argue that anomie is inadequate as an explanation of apocalyptic, even the presence of apocalyptic, much less its particular shape and logic, and it is certainly the case that there have been important displays of apocalyptic discourse in America prior to the conclusion of the Second World War, though many scholars, including, at times, O’Leary himself, consistent with their purposes, have not bothered to distinguish apocalyptic from prophetic, collapsing both under the rubric “millennialism.” Yet it is equally true, I will argue, that the exhaustive anomie characteristic of the postmodern era vitiates the possibility of prophecy and makes tenable the move of apocalyptic to the political main stage in a way unprecedented in American history. Never, before the 1950s, was an apocalyptic rhetoric able to define the national agenda, not so long as a viable civil religion could maintain the ultimate triumph of the national will. My reading of American history is entirely consistent with those who find the philosophical roots of the postmodern disintegration of the social fabric in the late nineteenth century, as the conclusion of the previous chapter suggests and as subsequent discussion will elaborate, but that reading also indicates an obstinate belief in the national covenant that gave definition to a people and provided a platform for radical dissent. The abolitionists and Eugene Debs deeply influenced the national conversation, leaving their imprint on their respective rhetorical epochs and on subsequent history, in ways that O’Leary’s Millerites could never aspire to. As an instrument of definition, the national covenant marginalized those who did not operate within its fundamental assumptions.

Paramount among those assumptions is the positive outcome of history. The putative view of the jeremiad as a speech of woe notwithstanding, prophetic religion is profoundly optimistic. It was, after all, a vehicle of reform among the Jews of the Old Testament, and in American radicalism it has been consistently associated with perfectionist thinking and hopes for the millennium. In the Old Testament, the optimism of prophecy was
sustained by faith in the omnipotence of Yahweh as the sole creator of heaven and earth and the controller of history. The belief in a single omnipotent God as the author of history ensured a unity of motive in the world and allowed the coherence of vision evident in prophecy; the essential monotheism of the Old Testament did not allow that Yahweh should coexist with deities of sufficient power to exercise effective influence in opposition to His justice. In the cosmology of the Old Testament, there were only two powers, God's will and human will, the latter a gift of God, malleable, and finally nugatory. Human will influenced but could not control the course of history. In such a world, human beings made their fate in accordance with the terms of the covenant.

To emphasize the optimism of prophecy is not to deny the gravity of the threat in the prophetic message. But as the product of a loving God, the threat was intended to instruct, to discipline, and was always conditional. It was posed in the hope that retribution might be averted. The “demonic” side of Yahweh might punish His people or test them, but only in accordance with the revealed truths of the covenant, the knowledge of God revealed to all but the willfully blind. For Yahweh, unique among ancient gods, was a moral god; He acted not on caprice but in accordance with established principle. As evidenced in earlier chapters, the rules of the covenant bound Yahweh as much as they did the peoples of Israel and Judah. Implicit in the threat was a restatement of boundaries and order. However unwelcome the prophetic word may have been in other respects, as the continuing testimony to the undeviating covenant it did provide assurance of Yahweh’s presence in history, the integrity of His rule(s), and the inevitability of His justice. The prophetic word, as illustrated in the previous cases, offers escape from chaos.

Prophecy, however, does not suggest the end of history. The escape it provides is not a stable state. The natural entropy of the world constantly assails the fragile mythos. Because it contains what von Rad has called a “tension of history,” the prophetic faith is a strenuous one; each new event must be evaluated and the people held to account. The greater the calamities that arise, the greater the effort required to avert them, and the greater the guilt when reform fails. In the religion of the Old Testament prophets, responsibility was always a matter between the people and Yahweh. When the events of history reach inhuman and incomprehensible proportions, theories of human culpability are no longer adequate. New causes commensurate with the terror of the perceived effects must be sought. In the history of the ancient Jews, this time was the end of the sixth
century B.C.E., the time of the Babylonian Exile. The Exile was a crisis of unmatched intensity, involving as it did the burning of Jerusalem, the surrender of self-government for the Jewish people, and the end of the Davidic succession. Constrained to work within the here and now of events, prophetic theology demanded that Yahweh reveal Himself in this world through a correspondence between causes and effects. At the time of the Exile, the guilt required to account for events was unbearable, opening Yahweh's control of history to question.21

It has been suggested that prophecy at this juncture was no longer able to sustain the burden of history.22 The crisis of meaning was of such enormity that the organization necessary to hierarchy was impossible. In such an environment, “the absence of persons who are acknowledged by members of their society as performing the role of the prophet”23 is merely a symptom of the larger social chaos and a harbinger of democracy in the worst sense of the word. Instead of the univocal response that would have been required to give the illusion of order, prophecy during the Babylonian and early Persian periods was given over to bitter divisions that seemed only to reflect earthly chaos. The false prophets who were so savagely denounced by Ezekiel and Zepenaiah retreated from the hard terms of the covenant. Their message was one of acquiescence. False prophets provided absolution rather than judgment.24

Scholars have traditionally held that Persian doctrines of dualism were influential in corrupting the prophetic word.25 Rather than rationalize evil as an aspect of God's will, as did the ancient peoples of Israel and Judah, or suggest that, while God did not cause evil, He allowed it to happen as a condition of the freedom of human beings, the basic position maintained by Christianity, ancient Persians held evil to be independent of and opposed to forces of good. Dualism does not limit evil to the exercise of venal human will, the mistreatment of widows and orphans, displays of covetousness, anger, lust, gluttony, vanity, sloth, and pride; evil is a cosmic force rivaling God. According to Georges Bataille, violence in a dualistic world loses its constructive potential, its ability to restore intimacy, and becomes purely destructive, a threat to the established order.26 Only an evil of such magnitude is capable of serving as the responsible agent for otherwise unaccountable grief.

Frightening as the thought of a puissant evil may be, it enjoys the advantage of deflecting responsibility from the self. The agon of history in a dualistic cosmology is not principally between God and His people, but between God and evil, a contest in which the people are but the hapless
The fullest expression of these tendencies can be seen in apocalyptic, a response to chaos which, in opposition to prophecy, tended to remove the battle from the human realm of history to a superordinate realm of cosmic forces. Faced with hardships of a magnitude that the drama of God and people could not contain, the apocalyptist restores balance by reaching outside history for both causes and consequences. As Paul Hanson has noted, while prophecy affirms the historical realm as a suitable context for divine activity from the cosmic level to the level of the politico-historical realm of everyday life, . . . the visionaries, disillusioned with the historical realm, disclosed their vision in a manner of growing indifference to and independence from the contingencies of the politico-historical realm, thereby leaving the language increasingly in the idiom of the cosmic realm of the divine warrior and his council.

In contrast to prophecy, apocalyptic is profoundly deterministic and pessimistic. Although the apocalyptist assures the ultimate triumph of God's will, the world as it exists is incorrigible; justice will require not an enforcement of the terms of the covenant, to which evil is not subject, but a destruction of evil itself. Evil cannot be reformed. The day of judgment requires the end of the drama of good and evil, the end of history. The rhetorical consequences of this position are difficult to calculate. The violent and excessive language in apocalyptic might inspire readers to enlist in God's holy war, but the emphasis on human helplessness in the face of the supernatural would seem to call for passivism. In either case, the language of instruction becomes superfluous because the world is understood to be beyond redemption; all one can do is to align oneself with God and wait or participate in the holocaust. The issue is an important one, because it suggests a judgment of the humanistic and moral status of apocalyptic based on the audience it implies.

Unfortunately, apocalyptic texts offer little clarification in resolving this question. The determinism in apocalyptic lies at the end of history. There lies the locus of judgment. Current history is surrendered to chaos. Apocalyptists announce the imminence of judgment, but they do not judge; they pledge the restoration of order, but they are not its vehicle. Premillennial apocalyptic in particular makes bearable the iniquitousness of history by pointing to signs of the end and promising restitution in the next world for what is unjustly suffered in this one, but it is not responsible for either suffering or salvation.

Extension of the discursive realm beyond history provides a nebulous
point of focus for new expectations. The end of history may be determined, but when is it? As might be expected of a theology that could be so easily discredited by lack of fulfillment, apocalyptic shrouds its forecasts in mystery and ambiguity. The language of apocalyptic is highly metaphorical and symbolic, as is appropriate for the description of a supernatural world. John Collins, extending the work of Paul Ricoeur, has argued that “mystery and indeterminacy” constitute much of “the ‘atmosphere’ of apocalyptic literature,” and suggests “that the text may on occasion achieve its effect precisely through the element of uncertainty.”

If the text of apocalyptic is too amorphous to judge, perhaps we can look to its author. In the case of prophecy, I have argued that the prophet lives the text, that he strives to realize the demands of his message in the flesh. But apocalyptic, as it fractures history, also shatters the identity of its author. The characteristic use of the pseudonym in apocalyptic presents us with three personae behind the message: God as the author of the vision; the purported transcriber of the vision, usually an eminent historic figure; and the actual author of the book. The use of the pseudonym is consistent with the apocalyptic view of history: it reinforces the idea that history was determined from the beginning by allowing the people to find in their current circumstance the fulfillment of predictions ostensibly from an earlier time, and it diminishes chronology as a source of order by locating the author simultaneously in the past, the present, and the future, that is, in eternity.

Apocalyptic, then, responds to crisis by retreating into another world. It does not seek to make the current world morally legible. Apocalyptic is an admission that the old rules no longer hold if, indeed, they ever did; it abolishes the identity of persons and makes a farrago of history; it leaves no stable points of reference. Apocalyptic does not order by division. It dissolves all divisions in the present, relieving human tension not in righteousness but in helplessness. Apocalyptic surrenders this world in the hope of a better one hereafter.

In the modern world, the Second World War stands out as a crisis that threatened not just a particular orthodoxy, but the foundations of value. It is this event that provides our American analog to the sixth century B.C.E. Exile of the Jews. Richard Weaver, in his postwar polemic Ideas Have Consequences, wrote, “Our feeling of not understanding the world and our sense of moral helplessness are to be laid directly to an extremely subversive campaign to weaken faith in all predication.” Weaver’s description, if not entirely idiosyncratic, is an apt description of the conditions of apocalyptic.
If Weaver is correct in his assessment of the ominous doubts that besieged Americans following the Second World War, the argument would lead us to expect a failure of the liberal rhetoric of prophecy among radicals and the ascendancy of something resembling apocalyptic, a discourse that can hold in the balance both terror and passivism. As perhaps the most prominent extremist of the postwar era in America, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy provides an obvious subject for study. Producing a rhetoric that some mistook for radical, McCarthy could not impose order or provide a bright outcome because there was no fixed and received basis for judgment. There were no longer any unchallenged first premises that could sustain a prophetic discourse. The line between light and darkness, God's first division in the ordering of creation, is amorphous and fluid in McCarthy's rhetoric. McCarthy's discourse reflects the irresolution and confusion that ties the modern, apparently secular, genre of the fantastic to the ancient genre of apocalyptic.

Poetry

A second response of moral discourse in a world where God has died is the reification of the form of sacred discourse in the hope that the counterfeit will be accepted as genuine and have the desired effect, perhaps even offered under the delusion that the form is the genuine article. Such a process codifies the extraordinary and converts it to ritual, an aestheticized, rationalized representation of the divine where the tendency is always for technique to usurp inspiration. Historically, poetry has been the formulaic vehicle for prophecy, and it is the rules of poetry that enable the creation of a simulacrum of the prophetic sans the divine motive.

At least since publication of Bishop Lowth's Praelectiones Academicae de Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum in 1741, the literature of the Old Testament and of the prophets in particular has been recognized as a great poetic achievement. This recognition is based on both the outward form of prophecy—its rhythm, its musicality, its artful structures, its highly stylized vocabulary—and on the claim of the prophetic to inspiration, literally an inbreathing of the divine word. About the function of poetry for the ancient peoples of Israel and Judah, Bruce Vawter has written,

In modern society poetry is largely a literary exercise removed from the rough-and-tumble of everyday life, but this was not so in antiquity when national sagas, the utterances of the sages, and the epics of the past were
invariably treasured up in poetry. Poetry, by its rhythm and distinctive vocabulary, was better suited for arresting oral communication than was prose.\(^{39}\)

The function of the poem as a song, the primary vehicle for the preservation and dissemination of a culture in preliterate societies, seems almost universal.\(^{40}\) But poetry, like most preservatives, is also astringent or tonic.

The poem is an appropriate vehicle for prophecy because it allows radical perspectives to emerge through renaming. From at least the time of Isocrates on, it has been recognized in Western culture that poetic is granted certain license with language beyond that granted to rhetoric or prose.\(^{41}\) The poet is a “maker” from the Greek poiein, to make; in producing poetry, the poet reproduces the act of creation\(^{42}\)—the poem is an act of re-creation; it creates a new language—and in so doing, realizes the potential for social criticism. In renaming, re-creating the elements of his society, the poet may challenge the established and accepted relationships of the status quo. Theophil Spoerri recognizes the power of poetry in its conservative side: “It is poetry which watches over all changes in language. Not only was poetry the mother tongue of mankind in the beginnings of history, but it remains so through the ages. It is the protectress of life and the guardian of equilibrium.”\(^{43}\) Walter Brueggemann, on the other hand, recognizes in this power a subversive function:

Poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality. The dominant reality is necessarily in prose, but to create such poetry and lyrical thought requires more than skill in making rhymes. I am concerned not with the formal aspects of poetry but with the substantive issues of alternative prospects that the managed prose around us cannot invent and does not want to permit.\(^{44}\)

Both Spoerri and Brueggemann recognize in poetry the power to name and thus to structure or define significant realities. Prophetic poetry defines the comfortable and convenient as a violation of sacred law. As Melvin Lasky has noted of the highly metaphorical language of radical reform: “The imaginative extension of political ideas and their embellishment by myth and metaphor induce an ideological atmosphere in which men, beginning with more ordinary and even humdrum social concerns, come to think of their activities in terms of the life-and-death purposes of mission and destiny.”\(^{45}\) Thus, American radicals have consistently sought to define their audiences as sinners and slaves.

In setting themselves against what Brueggemann has called the “dominant reality,” poets run the risk of being dismissed as mad, thus mitigating
their threat to the status quo. Only by some claim on the divine does the poet-prophet achieve any credibility in his critique of the officially sanctioned version of reality. Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, admitted the madness of both poets and prophets, but found the madness of the latter to be a “heaven-sent madness” superior to “man-made sanity.” In most cultures, there is no division between the types of madness Plato presents, his distinction being based on a division of labor among the Greek gods, and the madness of poets is not distinguished from the madness that inflames the prophet.

The conflation of poetic and prophetic inspiration is illuminating with regard to the function of language in prophecy. Language not only serves as the vehicle for a radical renaming, but also as evidence of the divine source of that renaming. Nora Chadwick emphasizes the prophetic requirement that divine knowledge be expressed in extraordinary language: “Great prominence is usually given to poetic diction and skill in the pedantic use of phrase and artificial language (rhetoric). Always skill in language is stressed.” In the tradition of Old Testament prophecy, the link between poetic diction and divine afflatus is quite direct. David Freedman contends that for the ancient Hebrews, the poem itself, as a transcendent medium, served as evidence of divine inspiration, and R. B. Y. Scott writes, “The gift of such language is to the prophets a gift indeed, the gift by Yahweh of a vessel to contain his word.” In its most extreme form, the inspired demonstrates transcendence by speaking in a tongue, sometimes a foreign language, which in normal life he is supposed to be incapable of speaking. Poetic diction, then, serves a very special function for the prophet; it is not an accessory, but a necessary sign of charism.

Throughout the preceding chapters, the interaction of this claim of the prophet to inspired knowledge and the prophet’s message has been the focus of attention. The link between prophecy and poetry provides a means of articulating characteristics of the message that serve to communicate the character of the speaker. Many of the characteristics of the prophetic message are commonly thought of as characteristics of poetry. In particular, the fact that poetry, because it is often conceived as having a divine source or at least to emanate from genius, is thought to be concerned with universal and transcendent truths, the mimetic, truths that cannot easily be accommodated to the needs or desires of a particular audience, and the suggestion that poetic emphasizes pathos over ethos or logos. In suggesting that prophecy is poetic, I am not denying the obvious rhetorical qualities that I have claimed both for Old Testament prophecy in the Bible or as it
has influenced American radicals. Rather I recognize, with the majority of contemporary writers on rhetoric and poetic, the practical inseparability of these two modes of discourse. Prophecy, I would claim, is to be located in what Donald Bryant has described as “that area of discourse where the intellect and the emotions bestir each other in the exploration of opinion, judgment, of social action . . . the characteristic common ground of literature and politics.”

Form, though, is in itself inadequate to the task of reconstituting the religious community. It is ironic that invariance is both key to the power of form (witness the Roman Catholic mass prior to Vatican II) and also betrays it as a lifeless anachronism lacking continuing inspiration. It is this invariance that allows the form to be imitated and endlessly replicated, a process akin to what Weber would view as the routinization of charismatic authority, and this replication occurs at the moment that authority shifts from prophet to priest, the latter laying claim to authority “by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition,” rather than by “personal revelation and charisma.” The danger lies not in the derivative nature of the presentation, but in the potential for such derivations, being divorced from essences and stemming only from surfaces, to become caricatures. Hal Foster recognizes this failing in postmodern art when it attempts to quote tradition: “Today, artists and architects only seem to prize open history . . . to redeem specific moments; in fact, they only give us hallucinations of the historical, masks of these moments. In short, they return to us our historically most cherished form—as kitsch.”

Robert Welch, I will argue in chapter 8, falls prey to just such criticism. Attempting to revive a radical tradition in the absence of common root principles, Welch reached for the techniques of poetry. Welch believed that he heard the voice of God in the echo of Emerson, but his absolutism was absorbed into an ecumenical world that reduced all absolutes to the partial truths of a pluralistic universe.

Economic Rationalization

A third possible response of rhetoric to the death of God is conformity to the pressures of secularization. Beginning with the American Revolutionary leaders, this analysis of the rhetoric of American radicalism has focused on the voice of God (nature, the absolutely and objectively true) delivering His prohibitions through His spokesmen considered as American prophets. The men whose discourse has been examined spoke on behalf of the
dispossessed, claiming for them certain inherent and inalienable rights based on ideas of the right. The rhetorical posture of the radicals follows Aristotle's dictum that wrongs committed in the name of the state are properly appealed to the court of higher law for redress. I have tried to demonstrate in radical rhetoric a consistent denigration of the idea that political and economic power is necessarily connected to righteousness.58

It is possible to take a cynical view of Aristotle's advice and to see in it no more than the exercise of those resources which best serve the case. But it is equally plausible to see, as I have argued is the case with prophecy, an inviolable and uncompromising moral claim in the higher law, especially as Aristotle solemnly asserts in another place: "For there really is, as every one to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other."59 Within a philosophy of natural or divine law, all the arrangements of humankind are subject to evaluation by criteria that cannot be abrogated by considerations of political expedience or majority will. "Because it functions as an absolute standard for testing positive law," writes Kathleen Jamieson, "natural law [God's law] is the obvious rhetorical appeal to be employed when confronting tyranny or injustice."60 At the same time, as Jamieson goes on to recognize, the potency of the appeal is "tied to the audience's ability to believe that a knowable moral norm correctly articulated by the rhetor inhere in all men."61 Natural law most effectively warrants the argument "when the audience is willing, because of utility or commonality of belief structure, to grant that the posited law or right may function as an unchallenged first premise."62

It is the acceptance of the partiality of the world that marks the residue of nineteenth-century liberalism in twentieth-century thought, a profound and unfettered individualism.63 The consequences for argument are far-reaching. In contrast to the moral stance described by Jamieson and manifested in prophecy, Irving Horowitz describes the rhetorical possibilities in pluralism: "The more one emphasizes the fragmentation of the world, the more one must insist on the pragmatic values of men, the less can an argument be made for action as good in itself."64 What Horowitz describes is the antithesis of prophecy and has substantial implications for the rhetorical options of those movements of social reform that acknowledge the partiality of the world, that recognize the death of God, the decay of natural law.

Max Weber described modern societies as tending toward differentiation, specialization, and increasing bureaucratization. S. N. Eisenstadt claims
that Weber found in modern societies "a growing differentiation and autonomy of various centers, growing demands for access to them, and for participation in them, culminating in tendencies toward the obliteration of the symbolic difference between center and periphery." 65 John Dewey's analysis of American society in the wake of the industrial revolution corroborates this general view. Dewey wrote,

The ramification of the issues before the public is so wide and intricate, the technical matters involved are so specialized, the details are so many and so shifting, that the public cannot for any length of time identify and hold itself. It is not that there is no public, no large body of persons having a common interest in the consequences of social transactions. There is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. 66

Both Dewey and Weber make their observations in the context of discussions of social change, and Weber's conclusion that society, in this process of diffusion and participation, becomes "demystified" is particularly revealing. In Eisenstadt's reading of Weber, the sum of these centrifugal tendencies is "to dissociate one's predisposition to the charismatic from the societal centers and from the traditions of the larger culture and to associate it more and more only with the sphere of private, face-to-face relations and activities—and even here to emphasize tendencies toward secularization, negation of purity, and dissociation of seriousness and any normative commitment." 67 A world where there is no center, where there is no division between the center and the periphery, is a world without the mystery and separation necessary to the sacred. And where there is no externalization of truth, there is no principle that commands assent except self-interest, and there is thus no community. 68

Jürgen Habermas, following both Weber and Dewey, extends the analysis of the demystification or rationalization of society to the "scientization of politics," finding that "rationalizing tendencies" come both from above and from below. From below, there is a demand for some compensatory value to replace that meaning and order that are lost in modern society. Typically, the succedaneum is economic, as this is the value that characterizes capitalist societies. From above, there is a recognition that the mythologies—"the public religion, the customary rituals, the justifying metaphysics, the unquestionable tradition"—must be converted to a more negotiable form; they must become secularized. 69

Peter Berger finds the origins of secularization in the industrial revolution. Like Weber and Habermas, Berger sees secular tendencies moving
outward from some centrally located sector in society, creating a homoge-
neous familiarity. The scientific logic that made the industrial revolution
possible asserts itself as “an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on
the world,” making what was formerly sacred and mysterious continuous
with the mundane world of everyday existence.70 “A sky empty of angels
becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the
astronaut,” writes Berger.71 Religion is relegated to the marketplace, where
it presents itself as a balm in the lives of private individuals.72 Again, the
focus turns from the transcendent to the immanent and the atomic, the self.
It is from this position that the antireligious nature of pluralism, defined by
Berger as “a social-structural correlate of the secularization of conscious-
ness,”73 can be most clearly seen.

In _The Brothers Karamozov_, Dostoevsky presents the potentialities of a
world where God is absent. “When there is no God, everything is permit-
ted,” is Ivan’s refrain. If there is no God, no absolute truth, there is no law,
no ordonnance, no basis for prohibition.74 The consequences are at once
liberating and terrifying. On the one hand, it appears that those whom the
old morality has oppressed are given license, since the moral and legal
justifications for oppression are sundered. On the other hand, the oppressed
lose all moral claims on the oppressor. At first glance, it may seem that the
absence of moral claims on either side is no more static than are moral
claims in competition. The critical difference, though, lies in the fact that
the absence of moral claims forecloses the possibility of moral debate
completely. Moral claims at a point of stasis presume a tension that may be
broken or resolved. Secular argument is flaccid and inert.

Negotiation, as opposed to the proclamation of prophecy, is the form of
secular debate. Secular debate reflects the economic values of its time by
assuming the form of the so-called “rational exchange model” or “game
theory.”75 Unlike the absolutisms of moral argument, all positions in ratio-
nal economic argument are bargainable; the old ethic of exclusion and
prohibition is replaced by tolerance. As Robert Paul Wolff has written,

Tolerance in a society of competing interest groups is precisely the ungrudg-
ing acknowledgment of the right of opposed interests to exist and be pur-
sued. The economic conception of tolerance goes quite naturally with the
view of human action as motivated by interests rather than principles or
norms. It is much easier to accept a compromise between competing inter-
ests—particularly when they are expressible in terms of a numerical scale like
money—than between opposed principles which purport to be objectively
valid.76
In the transition from what was in a profound sense a religious society, a society that had a sense of transcendental authorship and purpose, to a society based on pluralistic tolerance, we have changed from a society based on authority to a society based on economics. In Robert Bellah’s phrase, we have broken the sacred covenant. Ivan Karamozov’s grand inquisitor makes the following solemn diagnosis of the human condition: “There are three forces, the only three forces that are able to conquer and hold captive for ever the conscience of these weak rebels for their own happiness—these forces are: miracle, mystery, and authority.” For this we have sought to substitute a utilitarian calculus. Reason is no longer the faculty by which the truth is apprehended, as it was for Thomas Paine. Reason is today understood to be the rules for computing the advantages and disadvantages of particular strategies. “The voices of reason” in the contemporary world, writes Robert Paul Wolff, are arrayed “against the passion of intolerant faith.” Reason, in the modern view, makes no moral demands, for such demands are in themselves discredited. Reason offers some evidence of resources convertible to economic terms in exchange for privilege; it does not demand rights. In this world, there are no prophets; only madmen talk to God.

In an earlier analysis, I illustrated this retreat from the religious to the economic by contrasting one of the best known speeches of our time, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, widely regarded as religious, to Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Apposed to Malcolm X’s much reviled insistence on the inherent nature of human rights, King’s discourse is revealing of something fundamental about the preferred modes of appeal in our society. His emphasis on the contractual nature of the Constitution is precisely the converse of the denigration of charter rights by the American Revolutionaries, and his development of the metaphor of the check in the exordium suggests as the basis for rights the very economic rationality identified by Weber, Berger, Habermas, and others as a hallmark of postreligious society. King’s rhetoric is entirely consonant with the career of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for which it implicitly campaigned. It is worth recalling that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 originated in the Senate Commerce Committee and that the act was upheld by the Supreme Court under the power of Congress to regulate interstate commerce, not on the power of Congress, under the Fourteenth Amendment, to promote equality in the private sector. The genetic heritage of the speech manifests itself in the fact that the group protesting at the 1996 Democratic National
Convention in Chicago was not the "I Have a Dream Coalition," but the "Cash the Check Coalition."

The final case study presented here examines a movement for social reform that has carried the logic of negotiable rights to its most complete expression to date, the contemporary movement roughly comprehended under the rubric "gay liberation."