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BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM: ON PEDAGOGY, PROPHECY, AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: THE RECENT WORKS OF CATHLEEN KAVENY

ON COVENANT, IRONY, PROVIDENCE, AND THE STANCE OF THE PROPHET: THOUGHTS IN LIGHT OF CATHLEEN KAVENY'S *PROPHECY WITHOUT CONTEMPT*

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Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square. By Cathleen Kaveny. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 464. $51.50 (paper). ISBN: 9780674495036.

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When Cathleen Kaveny was writing *Prophecy without Contempt*, she must have known she was taking up topics of great importance. In it she considers the reasons public discourse breaks down, the nature and role of civility, the place of prophetic indictment in a pluralistic society, and the need to retain some sense of a shared national covenant that does not slip into blood-and-soil nationalism. Topics like these had been smoldering in the United States for many years before Kaveny's book emerged. But in 2016—the year the book was published, the year that Donald Trump won a majority of the US Electoral College—they burst into flame. Kaveny did not predict the election, like some kind of futurologist. But she did read the signs of the times, like a prophet. Kaveny's book would have become a landmark in the field even if it were not so timely. But after 2016, it is not just excellent. It is urgent.

Kaveny begins with a recognition of the significance of rhetorical form in public discourse. Too often, considerations of public discourse focus exclusively on the content of the speech, as if the form were a husk that could be discarded to get to what really matters. Form has tended to disappear from recent analyses in part because of a presumption that the proper form for public discourse in a democracy is *deliberative*. Deliberative discourse, in the broadest sense, involves the giving and receiving of reasons in ways that appeal to shared values and aspire to equanimity, reciprocity, and mutual respect. That norm is so taken for granted that it often goes unarticulated and unjustified. Deviations from the deliberative norm can be ruled out on the basis of their form alone. But, as Kaveny argues, "[t]he American public square is not a seminar room. The conversations it hosts are not well-ordered; indeed, they are often cacophonous" (219). The rough and tumble of the public square is loud. And it is full of prophetic indictment, rhetoric that is more forensic than deliberative. Kaveny is making an empirical claim here: public discourse in the United States has always included a variety of rhetorical forms. It has never been simply deliberative. She is also making an important normative claim:

some of the best and most important discourses in American history have taken forms that cannot be reduced to deliberation. Speakers like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. engaged not only in deliberation but also prophetic indictment. Kaveny does not argue that indictment should displace deliberation as the only mode of public discourse. But she does make a compelling case for a plurality of rhetorical forms that includes both deliberation and indictment.[1]

Seeing the importance of rhetorical form lets Kaveny offer a richer analysis of public discourse than those of three influential authors she engages in the first section. Alasdair MacIntyre, John Rawls, and Stephen Carter offer different accounts of why public discourse fails and what needs to be done to strengthen it. They would erect different kinds of boundaries to define and protect it. But they share a deep wariness of prophetic indictment. They analyze it as both a symptom and a cause of the breakdown of the deliberative discourse necessary for life together.

Kaveny acknowledges the risks of prophetic indictment, but her deeper sense of American history lets her argue that it can be necessary for restoring the health of the body politic. Prophetic indictment is, she writes, like chemotherapy. It can be dangerous, destructive, and necessary for life, all at once (315–16). Therefore, we should not seek to banish it from public discourse. We rather need an account of prophetic indictment that can guide us in using it in ways that do not show contempt for those with whom we disagree. Kaveny wants to guard against the kind of contempt that treats "one's political interlocutors as vile or worthless" and so risks "undermining their equal status as participants in our political community" (x). But she also wants to define a kind of prophetic indictment that can perform the condemnation that is sometimes necessary. Holding these values together, she seeks to define modes of condemnation that do not cast the people addressed beyond the bounds of the community of mutual obligation. She describes and makes a case for prophecy without contempt.

Kaveny's arguments about prophetic indictment open into wider claims about religion and public life. The subtitle of the book, "Religious Discourse in the Public Square," suggests these broader horizons. Kaveny moves toward them by positioning prophetic indictment as a kind of synecdoche for all religious discourse. If something of the variety of religious speech is lost in this move—she could do more to acknowledge the differences between lamentation and indictment, for instance, and praise and thanksgiving make almost no appearance at all—there is still a persuasive logic to the move. Prophetic indictment has been the most problematic form of religious speech. It is the mode that is most denounced. Those who would drastically restrict religious speech in public deliberation often use their arguments against prophetic indictment to justify limits that extend to many other genres. Thus, securing a place for prophetic indictment holds out the promise of opening up significant space for many modes of religious discourse in the public square.

In making this case, Kaveny makes an argument that deserves to help define the next generation of scholarship in ways that MacIntyre, Rawls, and Carter defined the conversations Kaveny inherited. Joining extraordinary interdisciplinary research with a singular clarity of vision, Kaveny has written a book that takes its place among these classics. As a classic, it is a generative conversation

1 Kaveny's argument could be even stronger, I think, if she extended her consideration of rhetoric to include the embodied *performance* of these indictments. Things like the dress of the speakers, the spaces in which they spoke, the timbre of their voices, and the ways they moved their bodies all matter for the questions Kaveny considers. Jeanne Halgren Kilde makes these connections in *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). I make my own attempt in Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

partner for a rich variety of positions. I take up that kind of work below, with special attention to four topics: the significance of covenant for prophetic indictment; the location of the prophet in relation to the community being addressed; the costs of using ethical criteria to set the bounds of prophecy; and the mode of irony that is appropriate to prophecy.

COVENANT AND JEREMIAD

Kaveny argues that the best forms of prophetic indictment have been grounded in a shared sense of covenant that includes both the speakers and the hearers of prophetic words. This kind of consciousness marks the speech of the prophets whose words are gathered in Jewish and Christian canons. It has also shaped the tradition of the American jeremiad. Building on the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, Kaveny looks to Puritan examples to define the tradition and then frames the jeremiad as a ritual of consensus.[2] In its classic form, the Puritan jeremiad recalled a covenant between the people and God. It denounced the people for failing to fulfill their obligations to that covenant. It then explained whatever the people were suffering in the present time—whether plague, hunger, drought, the waywardness of their children, attack by indigenous neighbors, or something else—as the chastening rod of God. There was a theodicy at work in the rhetorical form, for in chastening the people God gave them nothing more than what they deserved. The chastening was not a sign that God had abandoned the people, but that God would *not* abandon the people. It was the logic of Hebrews 12:6, a favorite verse of Puritan preachers of jeremiads: "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (King James Version). Prototypical Puritan jeremiads then concluded by calling people back to faithful fulfillment of their duties in this covenant with the God who chastened them in love. The covenant therefore defined both the starting point and the destination of the indictment. The whole of the jeremiad unfolded within a frame defined by a shared covenant.

Kaveny argues that the practice of indictment gradually slipped free from this covenantal frame. The separation of jeremiad from covenant worked a deep change in the nature of prophetic indictment:

> As that connection [between jeremiad and covenant] faded, the jeremiad did not lose its importance; it did, however, lose the sociopolitical context in which it originally played a constructive and formative role. It no longer functioned as an instrument that contributed to social unity by reinforcing widely agreed upon social norms; instead, it became a rhetorical tool deployed on behalf of moral progress, in service of the adoption of new political and/or moral norms. As a consequence of this shift, the jeremiad evolved into an instrument of social division rather than remaining a vehicle that promoted social harmony. (184–85)

Untethered from a sense of covenant, prophetic indictment did not call people back to a shared consensus. It rather called people on to a future that was discontinuous with their past. I would extend Kaveny's argument to say that it therefore incarnated a different theology of history, one that did not depend on a God who in the past made promises that continued to have power in the present, but instead on a God who called people to work toward a better state in the future. There are multiple shifts in this move from faith in covenant to faith in progress, including changes in understandings of the relation of God to history and the role of human agency in the work of redemption. It is a comprehensive shift in worldview.

2 See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

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For her part, Kaveny stresses especially the ways that the dissolution of connections to covenant allowed prophetic indictment to slip into contempt. Calling people to work toward a future that was discontinuous with their past meant calling them to set aside their existing commitments and take up new ones. It also positioned the prophet as one outside, over, and against the community—not as a fellow member of the covenant. Division between prophet and people was built into the rhetorical form. Disconnected from covenant, prophetic indictment ceased to be a ritual of consensus. It became instead a source of conflict.

This etiology of our present crisis has great explanatory power. In describing the detachment of indictment from covenant, Kaveny not only gives an account of the breakdown of public discourse but also opens the way for connections to broad themes in social theory. Talk about "secularization," for instance, often says too much and too little. But Kaveny's analysis lets us describe important dynamics more concretely and precisely. It also suggests a way forward. Kaveny's analysis calls us to renew the connections between prophetic indictment and covenant-consciousness.

Working for such renewal can become problematic when it is taken to imply that prophets can only call people back to commitments that they already share. If the prophet can only call people back to commitments they in fact already hold, then the deepest kinds of social change become much more difficult. The form of prophetic indictment imposes a kind of conservativism—or at least gradualism—upon the utterance. And if divisions run so deep that there are no clear, substantial shared commitments, then prophetic indictment becomes impossible.

Kaveny's proposal runs into problems like these when she writes as if she sees actual, conscious, prior consensus as setting the limits of indictment. In considering the Puritan norm, she alludes to "a homogeneous community, where there is near-universal agreement on what constitutes just moral and political action." In such a community, Kaveny writes, "[e]veryone knew the requirements of the covenant. Everyone acknowledged what constituted betrayal of God's law and what constituted fidelity" (231). The prophet simply had to call people back to what they already believed. The impact of the indictment depended on "*the audience's agreement* (express or implied) to perform or not to perform certain particular actions or classes of action" (208–09). Puritan jeremiads, she writes, "generally reinforced existing communal commitments" (210). If this is what it means for the jeremiad to be tethered to covenant, then the power of prophetic indictment to call for social change operates within severe limits.

The historical record suggests a more complex history and so more radical possibilities. The prophetic indictments Kaveny lifts up as exemplary did not simply call people back to views they already held. And they did not depend simply on prior consensus. Puritan communities were not homogeneous, even in the first generation. And by the time of the controversies over the Halfway Covenant, divisions ran even deeper. Jeremiads could not just appeal to consensus that already existed. They had to *create* consensus and project it back in time as something the people had always shared. More than a hundred years after these Puritan preachers, Abraham Lincoln used rhetoric like this in the Gettysburg Address. As Gary Wills has argued, Lincoln appealed to a vision of the nation's founding covenant to move new values to the center of the nation's life.[3] So, too, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s great jeremiad delivered during the March for Jobs and

3 Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). In considering Wills's argument, Kaveny notes that the Declaration of Independence did not have the same kind of binding, covenantal force as the Constitution—and that Lincoln surely understood this. Both of these points are certainly true. But I take Wills's point to be less about the status of law and more about the shared American imaginary. If anything, the weaker status of the Declaration makes Lincoln's attempt to move it to the center of a shared sense of national covenant even more of a creative act.

Freedom in 1963 did not depend on prior consensus. If anything, it challenged the nation to enter a future it had never embodied in the past. If the call to that future was framed in terms of values present in the founding of the country, it also depended on interpreting those values in ways that had never been realized in the life of the community, that were expressly rejected by authoritative sources in the community's history, and that would be actively resisted by many people in the community.

The examples of Lincoln and King underscore the importance of framing prophetic indictment in terms of a shared covenant, just as Kaveny suggests. They also make clear that the prophet does not just recapitulate an existing covenant, but names a covenant—perhaps in ways it has never been named before—projects it into the past, and narrates the people's history in relation to it.[4] When that kind of appeal to a prior covenant is in place, calls for very dramatic social change can still be framed within rituals of consensus, even as the values to which the prophet calls the people might in fact be transformative. What matters is that they are *presented as* part of the old covenant. This is the power of the jeremiad form: it can contain energies for massive change within a rhetorical form that promises the restoration of community.

Seeing the dynamic, creative nature of the jeremiad clarifies the challenge before us. It is not just to take up the jeremiad form. After all, there is nothing automatically ennobling about the form in itself. The Puritans' rituals of consensus formed and reformed communities in ways that legitimated the slaughter of hundreds of members of the Pequot tribe, the expulsion of dissenters like Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, the executions of more than twenty people accused of involvement with witchcraft in Salem, and visions of the world in which God destined people of African descent for slavery. Even the slogan "Make America Great Again" is a kind of jeremiad that can fit on a hat. Rhetorical form matters, but the task is not just to get the form right. So, too, the task is not simply to call Americans—even with an expanded sense of who counts as "Americans"—back to some actually existing, probably Puritan, Golden Age. This would not be Kaveny's own program, I think, and her understanding of prophecy should not be used to underwrite it.[5] The task, rather, is more like the one that Lin-Manuel Miranda took up in *Hamilton: An American Musical*. It is to tell anew the story of the covenant that defines the nation, how we fell away from that covenant even in the ratifying of it, and how we are called to live up to its promises as a way of living into our own true selves.

THE STANCE OF THE PROPHET

Kaveny rightly names the risk of prophetic speech slipping into contempt for those the prophet is addressing. Such contempt tears at the fabric of the nation and grates against Jesus's call to love our

4 Here I think an analogy from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre can be instructive. MacIntyre famously argues that rationality must be rooted in a tradition. When he presents his argument most subtly, he is clear that tradition is not simply found, but is rather constructed in a creative act of narration. Tradition is not made from nothing. The narrator cannot invent just any way of connecting the dots. But some kind of creative action cannot be avoided in the positing of tradition. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), chapter 15. I suggest that a similar sort of bounded creativity is at work in defining the covenant to which the speaker of a jeremiad might appeal.

5 Calls for restoration of some kind of imagined Puritan ideal abound. See, for instance, Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). See also Ted A. Smith, review of *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, by Philip Gorski, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 4 (2017): 1160–63.

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enemies. These problems are present even when the prophet does in fact hold the moral high ground. As with so many of Kaveny's topics, the dangers she names have become even more acute in the short time since she wrote her book.

Kaveny's attention to rhetoric lets her see that contempt arises not only because of the content of any particular speech, but, more deeply, because of the *rhetorical stance* of the prophet. It matters how the prophet is positioned in relation to the community being addressed. The rhetorical form of the prophet's speech performs that positioning. Kaveny warns against the stance adopted by prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah in their oracles against the nations. These speeches address nations other than Israel. Their rhetorical form positions the prophet as part of a different people than the ones the prophet addresses. The prophet stands entirely apart from the addressees, unconnected to them. And, Kaveny writes, the form of the oracles against the nations implies that "the nations hostile to Israel 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" (353). The oracles are harsh, condemning the nations to "thorough destruction" (353). The oracles against the nations display contempt.

Kaveny calls contemporary prophets to avoid the rhetorical stance of the oracles against the nations and take up instead the stance of the oracles against Israel. Like the oracles against the nations, oracles against Israel can offer sharp critique, even condemnation. But the prophet stands in a different relation to the people being addressed. The oracles against Israel position the prophet as one who shares deep bonds with the community being addressed. These oracles are marked by lament, as the sins of one's own people are an occasion not only of outrage, but also of grief. They are also marked by a sense of sharing in the sin and standing with the hearers in this time of trial. And they are always set in relation to what Kaveny calls "a horizon of hope," for the people being addressed are not simply means to other ends (356). They matter in their own right, and so they cannot be cast aside. They must be redeemed. The prophet who takes the stance of the oracles against Israel will address people as valuable fellow citizens who are called to share in a process of repentance and redemption (355–56).

Kaveny is surely right that far too many Americans today take up the stance of a prophet against the nations. Her attention to rhetoric adds depth and subtlety to more common complaints about incivility or the coarseness of public life. Her better analysis leads to a better proposal for how we should proceed. We do not need prophets to blunt their critiques or dress them up in nicer words. We need prophets to stand with those they denounce.[6]

These proposals make sense for many prophets. But they do not do enough to acknowledge the complexity of every prophet's relation to the community she addresses, especially when she is divided from that community by race and/or ethnicity and a history of profound injustice. The destruction of Native people, the enslavement of people of African heritage, the dispossession of Spanish-speaking people, and the exclusion and internment of people with Asian roots all depended on moves by white Americans to frame members of these groups as beyond the bounds of ordinary moral obligation. The injustice involved defining people as members of other nations. To ask prophets from groups like these (and the list here is only a beginning) to address the nation that perpetuated the injustices simply as their own people is to deny this history of being forcibly defined as different. And to ask them to indict themselves with those they address is to erase the

6 For thoughtful guidance to preachers that resonates with Kaveny's suggestions, see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

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asymmetry of the injustice. Prophets from long-oppressed groups cannot simply speak oracles of Israel to the nation at the hands of which they have suffered so deeply.

At the same time, some of the most important prophets from these groups have refused to adopt a stance that placed them entirely over and against the nation that wounded them. They have argued that it would cause further harm if they were forced to shear off generations of lives and exile themselves to a stance that positioned them as wholly other to the nation. Consider, just to begin the conversation, the prophetic stances of three prominent African American men: W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King, Jr. If the list needs to be expanded in many dimensions, these three at least begin to make the case for rhetorical stances that are more complex than the possibilities suggested by a simple dichotomy between oracles against Israel and oracles against the nations.

W. E. B. Du Bois famously described living with a feeling of "twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[7] From that complex space of twoness, Du Bois spoke to a diverse readership. He wrote the twoness on the page and displayed both the cost of living with it and the depth of insight it made possible. As a prophet, Du Bois stood both inside and outside, with and against, the complex nation he addressed.

Similarly, James Baldwin described a double alienation from both Africans and white Americans that produced what he called a "hybrid" identity. "The Negro," Baldwin wrote, is not just a "physical hybrid," for

> in every aspect of his living he betrays the memory of the auction block and the impact of the happy ending. In white Americans he finds reflected—repeated, as it were, in a higher key—his tensions, his terrors, his tenderness. Dimly and for the first time, there begins to fall into perspective the nature of the roles they have played in the lives and history of each other. Now he is bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced.[8]

Baldwin described a deep bond with white Americans, one forged in the shared history of slavery and its still-burning aftermath. But to be bound to one another is not the same as to be identical to one another. The prophet Baldwin spoke from a place that is at once linked to and alienated from white Americans.

The stance of Martin Luther King, Jr. is especially important for Kaveny. King serves as one of the most important examples from which she develops her vision for prophecy without contempt. And King can, indeed, sound like he stayed within the rhetorical form of oracles against Israel. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," for instance, King often used a first-person plural in which he identified with all Americans, including white Americans. He called on documents, traditions, values, and figures sacred in white American memories. Even as he mounted a scathing critique of white moderates, he refused to denounce all whites, making sure to say that "some of our white brothers grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it."[9] As part of the same

7 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

8 James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 89.

9 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *Christian Century* (June 12, 1963), 771–73. An early draft of the letter and an audio recording of Dr. King reading the letter are available through the The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail.

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Birmingham campaign, though, King used harsher language when speaking to mostly African American audiences. In these speeches and sermons he sounded many of the phrases and themes that appeared in the published "Letter." But he presented them in more sharply critical and alienated keys. The doubling of this speech suggests the complexity of King's rhetorical stance.[10] Alienation from white-dominated America made its way even into the printed form of the letter. Reflecting on his journeys through the South, he described looking at white churches and wondering, "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?"[11] As Jonathan Rieder has argued, these questions "signal estrangement. It is as if King had fixed his anthropological sights on an alien tribe."[12] King, too, wrote as one both inside and outside of the nation he addressed.

King intensified the complexities of this stance as he became more and more critical of an America that blended racism, militarism, and materialism. In "Beyond Vietnam," the landmark 1967 address in which he came out most forcefully against the war, he still spoke of "my beloved nation" and reminded listeners that the motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was "to save the soul of America."[13] At the same time, he called for a "worldwide fellowship" that transcended merely national allegiance. He spoke as if he were already a citizen of that fellowship and addressed America as a nation that stood apart from it. King distilled this combination of alienation, allegiance, and hope in quoting the penultimate stanza of Langston Hughes's "Let America Be America Again":

> O, yes, I say it plain,
> America never was America to me,
> And yet I swear this oath—
> America will be![14]

Such talk was more than immanent criticism from a prophet who identified entirely with the nation. "America never was America to me" told of a deeper estrangement. The hardness of "never" undercut any story of a paradise before the fall. At the same time, the speaker swearing that America will be America suggested not just prediction of some future event but a personal commitment—the commitment of one already invested in the nation—to make it happen. Such prophetic utterances cannot be reduced to either "oracles against Israel" or "oracles against the nations." They involve instead a more complex stance, one that acknowledges the ways history creates connections and divisions that run not only between the prophet and the nation but also within the prophet's own self.

DELIBERATIVE DISCOURSE AND PROPHETIC INDICTMENT

One of the greatest strengths of Kaveny's book is that it shows a way in which prophetic speech might play a constructive role in a liberal political order. As Kaveny sees, attempts to rule out prophetic indictment, and to limit the speech proper to a liberal political order to deliberative

10 For a description of the recordings, see Jonathan Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), xvi.

11 King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 772.

12 Rieder, 89.

13 King, "Beyond Vietnam" (speech, Riverside Church, New York, NY, April 4, 1967), https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam.

14 King, "Beyond Vietnam," 13:02.

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discourse, tend to run aground in two ways. First, they fail descriptively. Liberal political orders did not emerge solely through deliberative discourse, and they rely on more modes of speech even now. The insistence on deliberative discourse as the only mode of speech proper to a liberal political order also fails prescriptively. Other modes of speech—like prophetic indictment—can provide necessary sustenance and correction. The American public square has never been a seminar room, and it is a good thing, too.

Kaveny makes room for both deliberative discourse and prophetic indictment. But the two do not relate to one another as peers. As I read Kaveny, deliberative discourse not only does its own work but also defines the rules by which prophetic speech can enter the public square. This is clearest, I think, in Kaveny's analogy to just war theory in her development of guidelines for when and how prophetic speech should be used. This analogy acknowledges that prophetic speech, like war, may sometimes be necessary. It should have a place in any liberal political order. But that place is defined by the deliberative discourse that is the default native language of the liberal political order. For Kaveny, deliberative discourse defines the conditions under which we might resort to prophetic speech. And deliberative discourse defines the ways in which prophetic speech might be used. Prophetic speech gets a place in Kaveny's liberal political order, but it is a place demarcated and regulated by deliberative discourse.

I have three different concerns about this basic picture of the relationship between deliberative discourse and prophetic speech. First, I worry that our deliberative discourse is not always able to recognize when it stands in need of correction or supplement by some other form. I think of the clergymen addressed by King in the letter from a Birmingham jail. They were not themselves rabid segregationists. Indeed, in an earlier statement they had opposed Governor George Wallace. They had written that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions." They then stressed the continuity between this position and their argument that the demonstrations in Birmingham were "unwise and untimely." They encouraged demonstrators to be patient, to work through accepted legislative and judicial processes. They called the demonstrators to deliberative discourse. And, in their deliberative wisdom, they said that the time was not right for prophetic indictment. They were wrong.[15]

A single failure of deliberative discourse to recognize the need for prophetic indictment does not suggest that such failure is intrinsic to the whole mode of speech. But I think it does impose a certain burden of proof. Are there moments when deliberative discourse recognized that it had broken down so badly that it needed another mode of discourse to correct it? Examples of such recognition after the fact abound. Kaveny's book is one of the best examples. But how many times has deliberative discourse welcomed prophetic indictment in the moment? What reason do we have to believe that deliberative discourse—especially in these United States, as the nation actually exists—will reliably display the capacity to recognize its own limits?

A second worry: Kaveny does powerful work in clearing a space for prophetic speech within a liberal political order. In some of the commentary on the book, and even at times within the book, prophetic speech stands in for religious speech in the fullest sense. My concern arises because the standards that Kaveny proposes for evaluating when prophetic speech is permissible take the form of ethical guidelines. They ask when prophetic speech might be *good*—not when it might be beautiful, faithful, fitting, inspired, commissioned, or even true. But the fullness of religious speech sings in all of these registers, and more. And I worry that if the filter through which

15 For the letter of the Alabama clergymen, see C. C. J. Carpenter, et al., "A Call for Unity," reprinted by the American Friends Service Committee, 1963. Archives of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf.

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prophetic speech must pass in order to enter public discourse is defined by an ethical frame, then ethical concerns will determine, shape, and ultimately provide the substance of whatever religious speech makes it into public discourse. The filter does not just determine but also redefines what passes through. When that happens, religious speech enters public discourse only in the key of ethics—or at least in ways that are compatible with ethical norms. Modes of religious speech that come alive when they transcend ethics, such as praise, get flattened into conformity with ethical standards, like a hymn of adoration that has been transformed into an exhortation to right living.

A third concern about the proposed relationship between deliberative discourse and prophetic speech is more culturally specific. I worry that Kaveny's vision misses the complexity of the actual social dynamics of contempt in American life today. She is rightly concerned about the contempt of the prophet for the wider social order. The ethical checks she proposes are designed to limit that contempt. But contempt flows in the other direction, too: it flows from the respectable masters of deliberative discourse toward those who try to speak in prophetic languages. I see that kind of contempt in a once-established center's attitude toward would-be prophets with many different agendas, from activists with Black Lives Matter to those President Obama once defined as clinging to their guns and their religion. I do not mean to suggest any kind of moral equivalency between these voices. I only mean to argue that they both claim the role of prophets and are sometimes denounced by a discursive center for their rhetoric of prophetic indictment. Here it is not just the prophets who show contempt for a "center" committed to deliberative discourse. The discursive center also shows contempt for prophets. I think that contempt in either direction can be corrosive of our political order. And I worry that Kaveny ignores this second kind of contempt, the contempt of deliberative discourse for prophecy. I worry that she misses the contempt of an established, increasingly secular center for the would-be prophets on its margins. That contempt should not be ignored. It matters morally. And we are beginning to see how much it matters politically.

PROVIDENCE AND IRONY

One of the most creative and important contributions of Kaveny's book is her call to "ironize the American jeremiad" (409). She develops these ideas in a glorious final chapter, "Prophecy, Irony, and Humility." The chapter draws on political philosophy, American history, biblical studies, and literary theory to develop a powerful line of thought. In the wit, clarity, depth, and range of this chapter Kaveny is working at full stretch—and in ways very few can match. Kaveny rightly stresses the importance of her project, arguing that "the American tradition of prophetic indictment cannot survive into our future, which will be more pluralistic and globalized and less conventionally religious, without practitioners who possess both humility and a lively sense of irony" (375).

For Kaveny, irony is tightly linked to humility about the status of one's moral judgments. She describes the relationship she sees between irony and this kind of humility in a passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

> By creating a rhetorical space between a prophet's view of the situation and God's view, humility can help the prophets make room for the perspective of others—including those whose positions or actions are the targets of their indictments. A capacity for irony, in my view, facilitates prophetic humility by enabling prophets to view their own words and actions from other vantage points. It also captures something of the postmodern sense that one's commitments and viewpoints are ineluctably contingent—that matters look different from different vantage points. (375)

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In Kaveny's view, irony helps create the capacity to imagine one's thoughts and actions from other perspectives. Being able to take on these other perspectives makes clear the particularity and contingency of one's own perspective. When prophets understand their own perspectives as contingent, they acknowledge the possibility of a gap between their views and God's views. The recognition of this gap makes for the kind of humility Kaveny calls prophets to embody.

Kaveny is concerned to distinguish proper prophetic humility from what she calls "moral agnosticism" and "corrosive cynicism" (376–77). To say that our views are not identical to God's is not to say that we know nothing. Prophetic humility, Kaveny says, can "acknowledge the gap between God's perspective and our understanding of that perspective without creating a totally unbridgeable chasm between them" (376).

Kaveny's leading example of ironized prophecy that produces appropriate humility is Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. In the speech, she writes, Lincoln "reconfigures . . . the American jeremiad to incorporate a significant strain of modesty about the will of God" (376). Kaveny underscores Lincoln's clarity in naming slavery as the cause of the war. At the same time, she argues, Lincoln displayed real modesty when he said that both North and South "read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other." In Lincoln's view, the purposes of prophets—even prophets from the North—were not identical to the purposes of God. Rather, the "Almighty has His own purposes." Out of the depth of this realization, Lincoln could call for action with "malice toward none, with charity for all," action that sought to "bind up the nation's wounds" and to "achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."[16]

Kaveny brilliantly parses the tight intricacies of Lincoln's speech. She makes clear that Lincoln was "no moral relativist," but was "utterly clear in his conviction that slavery is an offense in the sight of God" (391). Lincoln was also clear, she writes, that the deaths of six hundred thousand people could only be seen as a terrible, grievous loss. Irony involves a willingness to take up other perspectives. But irony has its limits. Even this limited irony gave Lincoln a humility that kept him from identifying God's purposes with the purposes of his own side. And this humility, he said, "ought not to lead to moral indifference but rather to love of neighbor, and possibly even love of enemy" (391). In Kaveny's reading, Lincoln's sense of irony produced humility that led to calls for compassion, charity, and peace. This Lincoln becomes her model for ironized prophecy.

"The next question that arises," Kaveny writes, is "whether this implication puts Lincoln outside the genre of prophetic indictment indebted to the Bible" (392). Kaveny seems eager to argue that biblical traditions of prophecy do not need to be saved from themselves by some alien, modernist medicine. She wants to establish a deeper continuity between biblical traditions and the ironized prophecy she thinks we need now. She grounds that continuity in the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah describes a prophet whose understandings of his mission and message are very different from those of the God who calls him. The book describes how God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. But the prophet disagrees with God at every turn, first running away and then, finally, reluctantly, pronouncing an oracle that produces repentance and reconciliation the prophet did not intend. The effect is comic in the fullest sense. In spite of this bumbling, bitter prophet, the redeeming purposes of God are realized.

16 Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address" (speech, Washington, DC, March 4, 1865), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp.

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After a thorough consideration of some of the best contemporary scholarship on the Book of Jonah, Kaveny concludes that the book "encourages the audience to take with a grain of salt any prophet's claim that he has privileged access to the mind of God. It does so, in my view, by inviting us to read prophetic indictments ironically" (406). Irony about prophetic indictments extends both to moral judgments and to the sense of being a people whose identity is grounded in a covenant. Kaveny argues that attempts to root out "the covenantal imagination" (396) from American rhetoric will fail. The tradition runs too deep, and the promises of being a citizen of the world are too thin. But, she writes, "what cannot be removed can be reformed. The Book of Jonah limns a way to nourish and maintain a covenantal framework between God and a particular group of people while ensuring that the terms of the covenant are duly respectful of God's broader concerns as the maker and sustainer of all creation" (396–97). This expansive vision of a covenant that transcends both racist, ethnocentric forms of nationalism and thin forms of cosmopolitanism is one of the most important contributions of the book.

I am deeply sympathetic not only with this reframing of covenant, but also with Kaveny's desire for modes of prophecy that combine irony with a realism that believes there is some meaningful sense in which our moral judgments can be right or wrong. I am also sympathetic with Kaveny's desire to insist that we can be sufficiently confident that the suffering and death of human beings are, in themselves, moral wrongs. But I think Kaveny's examples suggest a different mode of irony than the one she ends up describing. Kaveny often writes as if the question of irony arises primarily within the discourse of moral epistemology: we think something is good or bad, but we know we might be incorrect in our judgment. As Kaveny sees, this kind of irony can slip through salutary skepticism into "corrosive cynicism" (377). Kaveny argues that skepticism must stop at the limits of human suffering and death, but I do not think she offers an argument that defines and secures this boundary. If we should always acknowledge that our moral judgments can be wrong, why should our judgments about suffering and death be exempt? Even if Kaveny could defend a confident realism about the badness of human death in the abstract, the questions become more complicated in practice. When has a life begun in such a way that taking it is wrong? Should we never judge it right to take a life? Not even to save a life? The questions are familiar. And it is hard to see how, once an epistemological irony starts to frame our answers to them, skepticism could be kept within the limits Kaveny recommends.

The better course, I think, would be to follow Lincoln and the author of the Book of Jonah in shifting irony from the discourse of moral epistemology to the discourse of the theology of history. Then we would be ironic not about the status of our knowledge, but about the *meaning* of our actions. We could work with various sets of convictions to offer the kind of justifications that are appropriate for moral views—justifications that need not be absolute in order to keep us from relativism and undue uncertainty.[17] This ordinary, everyday sort of confidence could sustain Lincoln's conviction that slavery is evil and the Book of Jonah's confidence that God cares about Ninevites. These commitments (and many more) could be held with an appropriate confidence that kept them from dissolving into what Kaveny calls "moral agnosticism" (376). But this appropriate confidence about moral judgments is also compatible with an acknowledgment that history sometimes unfolds such that our actions end up meaning something very different than what we intended. This kind of irony is almost inescapable if we hope that God is working for the redemption of a history whose true end is more than we can ask or imagine.

17 For the sense of certainty I am trying to suggest, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

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This is the kind of irony, an irony of history, that I think marks both Lincoln's Second Inaugural and the Book of Jonah. The irony of history is comically plain in the Book of Jonah. When the prophet finally pronounces the oracle of God to Nineveh, that great city, he intends to announce the destruction of the city. But by the grace of God the city repents and God spares the city. This new ending gives Jonah's prophecy a meaning he did not intend and did not even desire. And so he sulks. The irony of history—especially a history of a redemption that outruns all our intentions—can be difficult to take.

A similar irony infuses Lincoln's Second Inaugural. Lincoln said that "the Almighty has his own purposes." But this was not first of all a statement about the epistemological status of our moral convictions. Just as Kaveny says, Lincoln did not wonder if slavery might in fact be just. Nor did he wonder if the deaths of so many hundreds of thousands were good or bad, in a moral sense. But, contra Kaveny, Lincoln *did* leave room for regarding the bodies with a kind of irony. The irony is that they went—they were *sent*, from both North and South—to their deaths for the sake of a cause taken to be of the highest order. The sending would inscribe their deaths into a story whose meaning was defined by that cause. But, Lincoln insisted, the people's ways were not God's ways. Their cause was not God's cause. Instead, he wrote, if slavery was an offense that God now willed to remove, then this "terrible war" was "the woe due to those by whom the offense came." The real meaning of these deaths, in Lincoln's view, was not defined by their relation to an earthly cause. It was defined by their relationship to God's redeeming work in history. Thus, the meaning of these deaths was not that they shared in the triumph of a just cause nor that they partook of the nobility of a Lost Cause. It was rather that they revealed the chastening hand of a God who would not let an almost-chosen people betray the covenant of freedom and equality for all.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural took the form of a jeremiad. And this jeremiad did not require any additions from later readers to become ironic. Its core logic already depended on the irony at work in a history of a redemption that was not all up to us. The key to that kind of history is a sense that our moral evaluations of actions and events do not necessarily define the ultimate meanings of those actions and events. That is not because our moral evaluations might be wrong, as in moral skepticism. It is rather because the full significance of these actions and events depends not on how we evaluate them but on what role they play in God's great work of redemption. This kind of irony depends on a vision of history in which the ethical is located *within* a wider, higher frame of reference that is defined by the redeeming work of God. I think the spatial dynamics and power relations of this vision are an inversion of those in the vision Kaveny describes. Kaveny calls for the boundaries and behaviors of prophetic speech to be set by ethics. But Lincoln's vision, and the vision of the Book of Jonah, locate ethical deliberation within a narrative space discerned by prophetic vision. Thus, the irony proper to a jeremiad—the irony of history—requires turning Kaveny's relationship between ethics and prophecy inside out.

In keeping with her commitments, Kaveny has written a book that functions primarily in the mode of deliberative discourse. *Prophecy without Contempt* sets up a new landmark in deliberations about religion and public life. It sharpens conversations that have tended to be vague and sprawling by focusing them on concrete historical practices. It calls participants in these conversations to new reflexivity about our own modes of speech. It shows the power (and the demands) of richly interdisciplinary work. In its prescient reading of the deep currents of our times, it opens into prophecy, almost in spite of itself. But Kaveny's first aim is not to leave deliberative discourse behind to take up prophecy. It is to reason from within deliberative discourse to argue for a place for prophecy in public life. And, at this moment in history, that case is at least as important as the prophecy it helps us recognize.

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