

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



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M. CATHLEEN KAVENY is the Darald and Juliet Libby Professor at Boston College, with appointments in the Law School and the Department of Theology. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before her presentation on prophetic rhetoric in the public square.

OWENS: We're here today to talk about your new book project, *Prophecy without Contempt: An Ethics of Religious Rhetoric in the Public Square*. One of the core themes is the use of prophetic rhetoric throughout American history. Can you give us a short version of that trajectory and its origins in the Puritan jeremiad?

KAVENY: The Puritans saw themselves as the new Israel; not simply as modeling Israel, but, with the help of Christ, as being God's new chosen people, and therefore as setting forth in a new land to organize their community in a way that fully reflected their commitment to God's will. This was done on the basis of a series of interlocking covenants. You had not just a church covenant—not just the covenant of grace of the individual believer, who was saved with God—but also a social covenant, which was meant to reflect in some form or other the special status of New England in the eyes of God. They saw themselves as being called to a higher status in terms of moral rectitude. They saw God as fully involved with them, as meting out reward or punishment depending upon the level of their commitment to the covenant. There would regularly be sermons calling the people to account in terms of the covenant, indicting them for their violations of the covenant. These would be calls of repentance in the hope that God would

see their repentance and then give them the chance to win a battle against the Native Americans or overcome famine or something of that sort, so that they could thrive both spiritually and materially.



What I found very interesting about the jeremiads—and Perry Miller points this out—is that they were actually instruments of comfort for the Puritans. They liked them, and they weren't controversial, really. I started thinking, "how can this be?" How could all of these people go and listen to themselves being condemned without revolting? The answer, I think, is that the jeremiad is structured

as a legal indictment. You're legally indicting the population for things that everybody agrees are wrong. There was a tight connection between the indictment of the jeremiad and the underlying social and political covenants that they saw themselves accountable to.

What happened in American history, I think, is that this tight connection between jeremiad and covenant became a lot looser, even by the time of the Revolutionary War. People started indicting other people for things that they thought should be against the covenant. Most of us don't respond very well to indictments for things that other people think should be violations of the law. As the country became more pluralistic you had a greater social fissiparousness, and therefore the kind of clashing indictments that you can see most prominently in the jeremiad and the counter-jeremiad on slavery at the time of the Civil War.

OWENS: As we stretch the narrative forward, one of the questions becomes whether or not the United States still has that shared commitment. You've already described a little separation there. Do you feel we have enough of a shared base to make prophetic witness or the jeremiad a functional method today?

KAVENY: Whether or not it's actually functional, people love to use it, and it's

been used by people on both sides of the current political spectrum. In the 1960s, you could see people like Martin Luther King, the Berrigans, and antiwar activists indicting people for violating the basic commitments of the society. In more recent years, it's been used by political and social conservatives, as you can see in the indictment around abortion, particularly—gay marriage as well, but the most fierce use of the jeremiad has been on the issue of abortion. What I'm trying to do in the book is open a new front for exploration of these issues.

OWENS: So what sort of guidelines, or normative framework, should we have for the use of prophetic language in public life?

KAVENY: I try to come up with several ways of thinking through guidelines. I devise some substantive criteria that are modeled on just war theory, because in some ways, prophetic discourse can be the equivalent of verbal war. It can be justified under certain circumstances, but you must not use it indiscriminately or without due proportion, any more than you would use nonverbal weapons in that way. This is what I call a theory of just prophecy.

Another model I use is that of moral chemotherapy. Functionally, prophetic rhetoric should target cancers in the body politic. It's not meant to target a cold, any more than chemotherapy is meant to target something like that. Like chemotherapy, too, it sometimes wreaks as much destruction as it does good, so you need to take into account the cost-benefit analysis of the treatment itself.

The third model is the rhetorical model. What criteria can we bring out of the Hebrew prophets themselves? One thing I say is that prophetic rhetoric should be modeled on the oracles against Israel—not on the oracles against the foreign nations, where you're really calling down destruction on someone else.

The other criterion is to connect prophecy and lamentation. Martin Luther King is the gold standard for this quality in our contemporary era. One clear mark of good prophecy is a sense of sorrow for the whole community. King's discourse laments not just the sins of his side, but of the entire community. At the same time, he also proffers a vision of a reconciled community.

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OWENS: Does the effectiveness of prophetic rhetoric depend upon a shared agreement that the target is itself worthy of such prophecy? Some of these issues today seem to be fractured on that question.

KAVENY: Yes, I think that's right, and that was true about slavery as well. If you look at historical anthologies about slavery, you usually only find the abolitionist jeremiad; you don't get the other side. I'm not trying to limit speech, though, but rather to get people to think more. It's a self-critical moment: how should I think about deploying the jeremiad? You may say certain aspects of an issue deserve a jeremiad, but other aspects of it do not.

The tendency is usually to inflate the jeremiad. For example, somebody could reasonably argue that abortion is a fundamental issue of who counts as a member

of the community. Torture is another issue where I think you can see the use of a jeremiad. I think it'd be harder to make that argument about contraception, where you're not talking about fundamental issues of membership.

In the middle section of the book, I explore this prophetic rhetoric side by side with the use of deliberative rhetoric to consider issues of abortion and torture, using the 2004 election as a snapshot to hold it constant. I chose not to study philosophers, but rather real primary sources, like blog posts and newspaper editorials. There's really an ethnographic component to this: looking at how more conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants used prophetic language on abortion and not on torture, while more liberal and mainstream Catholics and Protestants used prophetic language on torture but not abortion.

How do we think about that choice, and how does the language of these modes intersect? I tried to look at these questions not in an abstract, philosophical way, but by getting my hands dirty with the actual sources, to see how the debate was conducted at a particular point in time.

OWENS: Two other examples in the contemporary discourse come to mind for me, and I wonder if they represent some of the problematic of a non-shared critique. The first example is the Occupy movement, which was concerned about wealth and income inequality, and the second is the climate change conversation. There are statistics to be deployed in either case, but there's also a question of concern and responsibility. Do you see these two examples as new fields of prophetic rhetoric?

KAVENY: I think so. James Darsey has talked about how prophetic rhetoric has been used by both liberals and conservatives throughout history; it's been used by communists and communist hunters. You end up in a situation where it's just an American way of calling attention to an issue.

OWENS: What role would humility play in a conversation like this, where science is mixed in with social analysis?

KAVENY: There are two basic types of humility. One is epistemological humility: we don't know enough about what the factual situation is, and therefore we should back off. That's always a good reason to move toward deliberative rhetoric, where you've got much more room for qualifications than you do.

There's another kind of humility that I talk about in the last chapter of the book, though. This is a kind of moral humility about one's own responsibility for causing problems, and about God's stance on a particular issue. I see this kind of humility in Lincoln's Second Inaugural and in the Book of Jonah, which ironizes prophecy. This second type of humility is always good in a pluralistic society when you are justified in using prophetic rhetoric. The first type of humility, though, should lead you toward deliberative rhetoric—not so much prophetic.

OWENS: One of the historically grounded aspects of the jeremiad is a sort of religious and political American exceptionalism. Do you worry about the continuing linkage between exceptionalism and prophetic witness? Obviously the idea has positive and negative implications—you're called to a higher moral responsibility, but the claims are also based on the belief that you yourself are higher than others. How does that resonate with you today?

KAVENY: It worries me, actually, and I think it's important to grapple with that problem. This tradition certainly is rooted in an American exceptionalism. It was a characteristically Puritan Protestant form of discourse, in the sense that they saw themselves as a sect set apart, particularly chosen by God. Eventually, that expanded to include the country.

I don't think we are going to get rid of American exceptionalism. It's too deeply



ingrained in the country's mythology, by which I mean its fundamental understanding of itself. I think we must instead call it to account—to say that we are exceptional in terms of our moral responsibilities, not necessarily in the love that God has for us. For me that idea is seen at the end of the Book of Jonah, where God says, "well, don't you know there are 100,000 Ninevites who don't know their right hand from their left, and many cattle too?" That one line, at least to me, opens up the possibility that God has a relationship with the Ninevites that doesn't just instrumentalize them to His relationship with Israel and Judah. Similarly, I think that we can have a type of American exceptionalism that focuses on our duties before God, but that doesn't exclude other people having their own relationship and duties to God.

OWENS: Is it possible to use prophetic rhetoric in this country without religious references—perhaps calling us back instead to our civic scriptures like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution?

KAVENY: I think that as time went on, the Constitution substituted for the covenant. It became the covenant that we were indicting against, so it does have a sort of semi-secular function. After all, if Catholics, who were seen by the



Puritans as the Whore of Babylon, can find a way to use the jeremiad, certainly the seculars can find ways to move into that mode. Still, I think it's always going to have religious resonances—maybe not, for secularists, doctrinally correct references, but echoes of a Tillichian matter of ultimate concern. I don't think you can get rid of that sort of echo in the language, and that's partly what it's useful for.

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The Boisi Center for Religion & American Public Life

24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

www.bc.edu/boisi
617-552-1860
publife@bc.edu

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