

☞ INTRODUCTION ☞

RECENTLY, I WAS BROWSING IN MY LOCAL BOOKSTORE when two clerks who knew I taught courses in religion confronted me with an urgent question: “What good does religion do in politics?” They were clearly exasperated by some issue of the so-called culture wars featured in the news that morning. As I paused, they added, “In twenty-five words or less.” “I don’t need twenty-five,” I replied. “My answer is Martin Luther King Jr. and”—remembering the key role of local women in the civil rights movement—“Fannie Lou Hamer.” They were surprised and then nodded, “OK, but they were exceptions,” as if I’d cheated. They were, of course, right. King and Hamer were exceptional, but they also are exemplary of the values of citizenship that we ought to try to emulate. And both were inspired and motivated by the religious institutions and values of African American social Christianity. In both historical paradigms of the role of religion in politics, the mid-nineteenth-century antislavery movement and mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement, whites were enabled to empathize vicariously with the suffering of African Americans through the written or oral witness of escaped slaves, or the visual spectacle of modern demonstrations captured in photographs and on television (and for some in both eras, to literally share it). This kind of empathetic understanding is crucial to “releasing” the efficacy of the redemptive suffering that King and others preached. It makes people aware (“I never knew it was so bad”), troubles or shames their consciences with the dissonance between principle and practice (“How can this

happen in the United States?”), and ideally leads them to some level of action (“What can I do about this?”).

Had the two clerks allowed me more than twenty-five words, I might have told them about the course I taught for several years to Princeton undergraduates, Religious Radicals, a seminar on twentieth-century Americans who participated in movements of social and political change for religious reasons. That course is the source of this book. The title of the book is based on a definition of the prophet by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his classic study *The Prophets*: “An analysis of prophetic utterances shows that the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, sympathy with the divine pathos, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet’s reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos. . . . The prophet hears God’s voice and feels His heart. He tries to impart the pathos of the message. . . . As an imparter his soul overflows, speaking as he does out of the fullness of his sympathy.” He adds that the prophet is one who is impelled to speak because he feels the divine pathos like a “fire in the bones.” Different as they were, each of the figures we will consider—Heschel, A. J. Muste, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, Howard Thurman, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King Jr., and Fannie Lou Hamer—was moved to action by a deep compassion for those suffering injustice or oppression, and each succeeded in conveying this compassion to the larger American public through writing, speaking, demonstrating, and/or organizing. By analyzing their theological and ethical positions, and the rhetorical and strategic methods they employed, this book seeks to illuminate how these exemplars of twentieth-century prophecy in the United States persuasively mobilized some of their fellow citizens to commit themselves to movements for social change.

As I write, the news is awash with commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march focused on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, site of the brutal beating of civil rights activists on what has come to be called “Bloody Sunday.” Speeches by the first African American president and many others praise the courage of those who endured the beatings, and preach how far the nation has yet to go to achieve its goal of civil equality despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Memory and mourning combine in prophetic insistence on inner change and outer action to reform systemic structures of racism. Once again, crowds symbolically retrace the steps of the marchers, some actually present, across the bridge. Several years ago I had the privilege of visiting Selma with a group of Princeton alumni along with graduate and undergraduate students. After visiting the museum, close to the base of the bridge, the group decided to walk across it. I couldn’t. I stood alone as the rest of the group crossed because I had a strong feeling that I didn’t need to. Why? Because during our visit to the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, Joanne Bland, who had been beaten on the bridge as a child, was our guide, offering personal memories. She pointed to a wall covered with cards from previous visitors, sharing their impressions and feelings, and singled out one—a card written by one of the state patrol officers who had beaten the marchers on Bloody Sunday. He expressed remorse at his behavior and asked forgiveness. During the tour, she struck up a conversation with an elderly alumnus in our group. He was a retired Presbyterian minister, hampered now by arthritis, but eager to visit all the sites, as decades ago he had heeded King’s nationwide call for clergy to join the demonstrations in Selma. When she heard this, Bland hugged him and told us how important it had been for the black community of Selma to know that they

were not alone—that they had support from people like him, from around the country. They both began to weep, moved by the memory of the solidarity in compassion that bridged the gaps of race then and now. Watching this encounter, the rest of the group, including me, was moved to tears as well. It was a moment of shared pathos that transcended time. For me it was the high point of the trip. I no longer needed to cross the bridge.

I hope that the following pages will help readers grasp the divine pathos that moved each of the prophets whose lives and words I discuss. Let us listen to their voices, which echo those of the exemplary figures they turn to for inspiration and validation: the ancient prophets of Israel, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; the Gospel sayings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and chapter 25 of Matthew; the American antislavery protest of William Lloyd Garrison and Henry David Thoreau; and fellow pacifists Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi, to cite the most prominent. Moreover, their voices invoke the biblical narratives of Exodus, the Promised Land, the Good Samaritan, Lazarus and the rich man, and the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Recalling these paradigmatic stories fires their imagination and potentially that of their audiences to envision a god who cares about and intervenes in human history on behalf of the “poor, the widow, and the orphan,”—the oppressed. As theologian and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann convincingly argues, it is the deployment of this prophetic imagination that makes it possible to create a counterscript to that imagined by the currently hegemonic culture. And it is the heuristic power of these accumulated stories that feeds the moral authority of the prophet, especially when reenacted in the dramatic action of demonstrations and public protest.

I am all too aware that reading about prophets does not automatically lead to action. As the old dictum says, “Those who can’t do, teach.” But teaching and reading may lead to doing, as I discovered to my great surprise at the close of one of my Religious Radicals seminars. I asked the students to write a short essay on which readings had most challenged them and why. One student, who had been quiet for much of the semester, picked two readings that had especially moved him. The first was a passage from John Perkins’s autobiography, *Let Justice Roll Down*, about organizing the black poor in rural Mississippi. A tenant farmer revealed that he was so impressed by Reverend Perkins’s words and example that he “put down the bottle.” The second passage was Merton’s description of his experience on a street corner in Louisville, when he saw within the people passing by a “virginal” still point and realized that “at the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our mind or the brutalities of our own will.” The student said that he had adamantly refused to acknowledge that he was an alcoholic, despite passing out drunk on the street and being arrested. Reading these two passages, he wrote, “turned my life completely around.” He entered a twelve-step program and had been asked to speak to several eating clubs at Princeton about the dangers of binge drinking. Unexpectedly, I learned that teaching and reading could inspire “doing.”