

Failed Priests and Prophets

There seems to me to be a permanent state of conflict in all religions between religious authority and individual spirituality or mysticism.

Authority values conformity, control, and stability, whereas mystics have invariably been individualists who have challenged the established structures and encouraged different ways of interacting with the world and its mysteries. Invariably the non-conformist individualists have been isolated, excluded, and disparaged by the authorities, sometimes excommunicated, imprisoned, and even burnt at the stake. Occasionally doubtless they have gone overboard. Some have become false messiahs, fake gurus, and corrupt egomaniacs. But religious life without them can often be boring, stifling, and ultimately lead to a state of paralysis from which only mystical revolutions like those of the Essenes, the Kabbalists, or the Chassidim can free it. Then they themselves lose the dynamic, become the establishment and the cycle starts again.

In the Torah and during the first period of Jewish history the hereditary priesthood, the Cohanim (descended from Aaron), oversaw the sanctuaries. Its role was ceremonial. But priests with Levites also functioned as the teachers, healers, and civil servants working in league with the monarchy. They were not given tribal lands, and they relied on tithes, offerings, and sacrifices. Historically in both Commonwealths, the priesthood with a few exceptions lost its sense of mission and spiritual leadership. It became corrupt, politically, and materially and turned into a privileged aristocracy that had more in common with the upper classes of other societies than with the poor of their own. They were the first to assimilate during the Persian, Greek, and Roman eras.

They bring to mind the priests of the Russian Orthodox Church who are supporting and encouraging Putin to behave like an evil maniac in Ukraine in complete disregard of their own stated values. Interestingly, Jewish Law has always insisted that in the event of besieging a city, one must always leave a path open and free to allow inhabitants to escape if they want to. Just think how barbaric the Russians are in refusing this ancient religious principle.

The prophets on the other hand were not hereditary. A prophet was the charismatic mystic, often living amongst and catering to the poor and downtrodden, and on the run from authorities, preaching challenging messages of morality and spirituality.

They were charismatic individuals who attracted followers by their personalities, which is why you find women prophets but there were never women priests. The prophets were the ones who kept the religion alive amongst the people while around them idolatry was encouraged by all the kings of Israel and half the kings of Judea. This is why, when the rabbis of the Mishna talk about the chain of tradition, they say that Moses handed the tradition to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and

the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly which was the meritocratic Sanhedrin of scholars (Mishna Avot.1). But there is no mention of the priests!

Yet the prophets were far from perfect as a group either. There were just as many false, dishonest prophets as there were good ones. A healthy religion (indeed any kind of society) needs priests and prophets. Authority provides continuity, safeguards, and comfort. It maintains the system. But without creativity and challenge, all authorities retreat behind bureaucracy and safety, and they end up driving too many marginal people away. But what of those individualists who do not fit into any sub-set or sect? Shouldn't a healthy society accept individuality not suppress it?

The trouble is that during times of crisis or oppression, the natural tendency is to close up, man the barricades and abandon weak links. Which explains why at such times heresy hunting and conformity become so prevalent. During the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, many Jews converted to Christianity to escape oppression, not to be different. Some tried to have it both ways Christian or Muslim in public but Jewish in private. Many simply assimilated and others turned into fierce opponents of Judaism as if to prove how committed they were to their new religion. Some of the fiercest antagonists of Jews under both Christianity and Islam were Jews who converted out. This cycle and these processes have been going on throughout our history. Which explains why despite having been around for so long, of all the major religions that came from us and after us, we are the smallest.

In our day it is not conversion to another religion that represents the biggest challenge but the drift out of committed or knowledgeable Judaism towards the dominant culture. Some simply have no experience of a Jewish way of life and see no good reason to go on identifying in any practical way. Often, they simply have more in common with secular or left-wing values that have no patience with national identities which is of course their right. We all have our priorities in our loyalties. Others want to assert their individuality by rejecting the burden of their past. And we have all met those, both Israelis and others who are passionately opposed to the very idea of a Jewish state and feel alienated by much of Israeli society. And that is their right. Many of us still believe in freedom of thought and expression even if we are rapidly going out of fashion.

What shall we make of the synagogue in Chicago that proudly declared it is the first anti-Zionist synagogue? We have been there before of course. Most Reform American synagogues at the start of the twentieth century had rejected Jewish law and or were anti-Zionist. Or the Neturei Karta Charedi Jews who ally with Iran and march in New York with those who want Israel to disappear off the map? Notice that the gunmen who mowed down inhabitants of Bnei Brak, a Charedi and non-Zionist city in Israel, did not care or differentiate between anti-Zionists and Zionists!

We are a nation of priests as the Bible says. But I am not sure that that is always a compliment!