

Ideology, prophets and the market place

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From the time of Weber, some sociologists have used the Priest-Prophet dichotomy to describe the roles played by religious actors in society. My understanding is that the Priest category represents those religious persons who uphold and support the status quo no matter what it is. These persons range from those who identify themselves closely with those in power and assist them in defending the status quo, to those who place themselves in a political vacuum and ignore social issues, thus indirectly supporting the status quo. The Prophet category on the other hand, represents those who seek to challenge and change the status quo, particularly when it is oppressive and exploitative of the majority or a significant minority within society.

In his *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Peter Berger explains the priestly function when describing the theodicies that “may serve as legitimations both for the powerful and the powerless, for the privileged and for the deprived. For the latter, of course, they may serve as “opiates” to make their situation less intolerable, and by the same token to prevent them from rebelling against it.” He then goes on to comment, “Put simply, theodicies provide the poor with a meaning for their poverty, but may also provide the rich with a meaning for their wealth. In both cases, the result is one of worldmaintenance and, very concretely, of the maintenance of the particular institutional order.”

I would suggest that in this age of growing secularization, there are secular religions, ideologies and the emerging idol known as the market place or the market economy, which are also seeking to enforce their semi-religious concepts of an institutional order that protects the interests of the rich and the powerful.

The Leung & Wang paper describes the prophetic role played by Cardinal Zen in support of individuals speaking out on behalf of the poor and weak in Hong Kong, and demanding that more attention be paid to the basic rights of persons, including the right to universal suffrage. Towards the end, Leung & Wang liken persons such as Cardinal Zen to a brightly shining star amidst an oppressive and repressive society in which people’s basic rights are not observed, and where an authoritarian government opposes democratic forces striving for their ideals.

The bad news is that oppressive and unequal societies are flourishing in many parts of Asia and there are priestly forces - both religious and secular - helping to maintain this unjust social order. The bad news is that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening in these societies. The good news is that there are individuals and civil society groups emerging to take up the prophetic role of questioning and challenging the oppressive status quo, as seen in Hong Kong and Macau.

An example of the bad news is Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s attempt to dismiss the country’s chief justice in March 2007. The good news is that Pakistan’s legal profession mobilized themselves in massive numbers to protest. Lawyers boycotted courts for days and even formed

human chains around court buildings “to express their resolve to uphold the independence of the judiciary”.

The bad news is that India, a country which dumped shiploads of ‘extra’ grain into the sea several years ago, saw 18 children die of starvation in a village in its northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The good news is that local groups built a monument to those children in January 2007, where flowers are regularly placed by the parents and others to signify that children in their village will never be allowed to starve again.

The bad news is that despite requests to government officials for food aid, a nine-month-old baby girl, Seema Musahar, and two other children in Belwa village, Uttar Pradesh also died of starvation. The good news is that after Basil Fernando, Executive Director of the Hong Kong based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) wrote a letter to the local magistrate, with copies to the United Nations (UN) and other national and international organizations, the magistrate gave the issue of food assistance a high priority and promised that all children in his district would be provided with sufficient food.

The bad news is that at least thousands of children and persons with mental problems worked as slaves in brick kilns in Shansi province, China, while local police and officials did nothing to stop this atrocious practice. The good news is that newspaper reporters dared to write and expose the practice, and lawyers may now seek damages for the victims.

The bad news is that people in many cities in China are forced to sell their land at low prices. The good news is that human rights lawyers are taking up these and other cases of ordinary people.

The bad news is that government officials are harassing the human rights lawyers. Some good news is that a group was recently set up in Hong Kong to offer support for human rights lawyers in China.

The bad news is that more than 800 persons in the Philippines have been victims of extrajudicial killings, including union leaders, peasant organization leaders, journalists, lawyers, judges and even a bishop. The good news is that independent groups have identified that the military - and therefore the state - is responsible for many of the killings, while the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has stated that the Philippines military “remains in a state of almost total denial... of its need to respond effectively and authentically to the significant number of killings which have been convincingly attributed to them”.

The bad news is that corrupt officials are thriving in China. The good news is that Auditor General Li Jinhua insists on transparency and publicity. He stated, “Audit is not only a kind of supervision of government, it is also a tool in pushing ahead democracy and the rule of law.”

The bad news is that the chief justice of Sri Lanka, who is allegedly involved in corruption (Transparency International recommended the establishment of an independent panel to enquire into those allegations), was invited to give a lecture at this university last week. The good news is that after the AHRC informed the university of his background and planned a protest and forum for discussion, the invitation was withdrawn.

The economic gap between the rich and poor and the political gap between the powerful and oppressed will continue to grow until societies live by the rule of law, where the police, prosecutors and courts enforce the law equally for all citizens.

The lines are clear: those who support the Priests and those who support the Prophets.

Peter Berger has written, "The individual is not molded as a passive, inert thing. Rather, he is formed in the course of a protracted conversation (a dialogue, in the literal sense of the word) in which he is a participant." Berger goes on to comment, "Furthermore, once the individual is formed as a person, with an objectively and subjectively recognizable identity, he must continue to participate in the conversation that sustains him as a person in his ongoing biography. That is, the individual continues to be a co-producer of the social world, and thus of himself."

There is a great need to provide support to persons in our societies who are being oppressed and made victims by priests propagating a new idol -'market forces'. There is also a need to provide support to individuals so that each can become a co-producer of our social and political world and receive a just share of the economic profits being generated.

I hope that more academics will adopt the attitude of early 20th century social scientists who envisioned education and research as a means to build a more just social order, and that they will join or support civil society groups that are playing a prophetic role in today's society and encourage their students to do likewise.