

Prophets, Priests, Mystics and Poets

By
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These are four of the main personas seen in almost all religions. Although they all play different parts, they are not mutually exclusive—meaning a single person might identify as one, two, or all of them. Each has a bright and a shadow side. Each has its own great power. Prophets channel Divine thoughts and feelings, moving others to God's will. Priests lead institutions in the world while preserving the sacred traditions and rituals of their followers. Mystics seek direct, personal experience of the Numinous. Poets give such experience a voice.

The Prophet:

A prophet channels God's thoughts and feelings to the people. God usually wants to be channeled when the people are doing wrong or their leaders are. Because no one likes criticism, the messages of the prophets are usually not welcome. The result is violence against them or they are isolated and given the cold shoulder. Of course, there is the compensation of being God's agent. That is, God is on the prophet's side and vice versa. That often means that God will limit the damage done to the prophet by his audience. Often, this reassurance from God is simply that the prophet will not be killed.

Let's look at some other general characteristics of the prophets. 1) As people to whom God speaks, prophets tend to see everyone else as deaf, unjust, ignorant, and untrustworthy. If they were as close to God as prophets, prophets would not be speaking to them on behalf of God. 2) Prophets are lonely and uncomfortable. They are separate from the people to whom they speak, and they often are hostile to them and vice versa. It is not fun to be a prophet, and prophets sometimes resist the call. 3) Prophets are not only messengers, but they testify and insist that their message is divine. 4) God protects his prophets because they are his associates and partners—though sometimes reluctant ones. 5) The prophet speaks divine truth but is not a fortuneteller. That is, the prophet is more concerned with truth and changing the behavior of others than with predicting the future. 6) Not only do prophets speak to the people, but they sometimes are charged with speaking truth to power—to priests and presidents. 7) Dreams, visions, and symbolic actions are means of communication for the prophet.

The big question with any prophet is whether the prophet is true or false. Few people are more useful than a true prophet and more harmful than a false one. Unfortunately, there is no sure way to tell which is which. You can, of course, look at the truth of their prophecies, but that truth is usually not clear until after the crisis is past. So, the role of prophet is one of great uncertainty.

The Priest:

A priest is a religious leader authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion, especially as a mediator between humans and God. They also have the authority or power to administer religious rites; in particular, rites of sacrifice to, and placation of, a deity or deities. A priest may have the duty to hear confessions periodically, give

marriage counseling, provide spiritual direction, teach, or visit the sick. The priest is responsible for the functioning of a church or denomination, and for developing, preserving, and spreading its beliefs and tenets. She is also responsible for sustaining the membership and financial stability of the institution.

While priests directly serve their congregations as just described, they are also responsible for the welfare of their institution. Here lies a danger to the priesthood. Most institutions are founded to serve some good purpose, but in time their main goal becomes their own survival. It was this desire to preserve a religious institution that allowed the child abuse by the clergy in the Catholic church and in other denominations. It was the same desire that had Chaucer's Pardoner preaching that love of money is the root of all evil even as he sold the church's forgiveness of sins.

The Mystic:

Where the priest leads an institution that provides public, organized worship, the mystic seeks a personal and private experience of the Numinous. The public worshipper is often concerned with prayer considered as speaking to God, the mystic listens for God's communications. Where the church with its sacraments and creeds is essential to the public worshipper, the mystic seeks direct contact with God and finds an institutional mediator unnecessary. Where the religion of the priest is often creedal and may involve systematic theology, the mystic trusts intuition and feeling in experiencing the Divine.

The mystic may rely on spiritual practices such as meditation, dream interpretation, active imagination, chanting, and repetitive prayer to focus the mind in the present and so open it to God. The mystic seeks spiritual growth to fulfill her potential. The mystic may seek self-understanding in order to understand creation and the creator. Mysticism is a belief that union with God or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge unavailable to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.

Mysticism gone wrong appears overly emotional and silly to its critics, one of whom defined it as a "belief characterized by self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought, especially when based on the assumption of supernatural qualities or mysterious agencies."

The Poet:

Those writing about mysticism often complain that language cannot convey the mystic's experience of the Divine. But an able poet read by a sensitive reader can get that job done. Where nonliterary writing strives to be exact, concise, and clear-cut, literary writing is diffusely suggestive and multifaceted. It simultaneously plays intellectual and emotional scales for its readers. A literary whole means more than the sum of its parts. This extra meaning comes from how it is put together—its structure—and its powers of suggestion. Thus, literature has what writer Ernest Hemingway called a fourth dimension.

This power is what a spiritually minded poet can use to express the ineffable in her experience of the numinous. The true poet can express what the rest of us can't.

The poet gone wrong writes shop-worn ideas and feelings in bouncy Hallmark rhythms. He stops trying to express the inexpressible and restates religious clichés. He

uses what Hemingway once called “tricks of telling”—substituting the stock emotional response for the true account of how it was.

The Example of Ezekiel:

I said earlier that the roles of prophet, priest, mystic, and poet are not mutually exclusive. They can all be taken on simultaneously by one person—with good or bad results. Without going into any detail about the failures, they can result in a Charles Manson or a Jim Jones or a TV evangelist. But the union of a good prophet, a good priest, a good mystic, and a good poet in one human being can be extraordinary. Take the case of the biblical Ezekiel.

Ezekiel lived in the Sixth Century BCE in Babylon with a group of Jews exiled from Jerusalem after Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar defeated them in battle. When Ezekiel was about thirteen, God called him as a prophet 1) to explain to the Jews that their defeat was a judgment brought on by their failure to keep God’s law, 2) to condemn the nations around Judah that had betrayed it, and 3) to paint an encouraging picture of Judah after it had repented and was redeemed by God. Ezekiel belonged to the Zadokite line of Jewish **priests**--an elite order allowed to enter the Holy of Holies annually in the Temple in Jerusalem. His **prophecies** came in the form of **mystical** visions. Finally, Ezekiel recorded and told these visions with the tongue of a **poet**.

Let’s look at Ezekiel’s first vision. The young man is sitting beside the Chebar waterway near Babylon deep in thought. As a Zadokite priest, he has a terrible theological problem. His religion revolves around the presence of God in the Holy of Holies room in Solomon’s Temple in the city of Jerusalem in the nation of Judah. The Babylonian army has recently taken Judah, besieged, and then destroyed Jerusalem, leveled the Temple, and gutted the Holy of Holies. What does that mean for this religion that worships God in a single place that no longer exists? Does God still exist? If so, where is He?

The **mystic** Ezekiel has a vision of God set beside the Chebar canal. The **poet** Ezekiel describes the experience in vivid detail as portrayed in the picture inserted into your bulletin. Notice the color, movement, complexity, grandeur, and power of God in this vision. Notice that God has come to Babylon with his beleaguered people. And God is not defeated or weakened or destroyed like His former dwelling places. The **poet** has shaped a powerful portrait of the God seen in the **mystic’s** vision that answers the **priest’s** question of “what next?” and is the substance of the **prophet’s** message to the people: *Our God is close to us wherever we are; our God is with us—in us.*

This vision led to the synagogue form of worship for the Hebrews based on the idea that God was in many places among them. It prepared the way for the Christian belief that God occupied a human body and came for the sake for all people—Hebrew and Gentile alike. It led to the idea that there is a Divine spark within you and within me. You can even find parts of Ezekiel’s vision of God today in the four corners of the S.T.A.R. labyrinth.

And this is just Ezekiel’s first vision. He goes on to build an imaginary Temple about the size of three football fields or six of Solomon’s Temples. Ezekiel then builds a New Jerusalem around it and creates a new map of Judah with lands logically parceled out to the twelve tribes as they had never been before. There seem to be no bounds to

what this man can see and describe and build in the air. And while the actual new Temple, rebuilt Jerusalem, and restored Judah never matched Ezekiel's grand dreams, those dreams inspired his discouraged people and helped them to begin again after their exile. Ezekiel strikingly filled all the roles of **prophet, priest, mystic, and poet** in the service of the divine and of humanity. Using all his gifts together, he was a truly compelling and pivotal figure.