
In Prophecy without Contempt, Cathleen Kaveny argues that the public square in the United States is comprised of at least two distinct forms of moral discourse: moral deliberation, which serves to reason through a moral issue, and prophetic indictment, which calls for a return to a community’s fundamental values. She argues that the latter form, which is the subject of the book, has been considerably overlooked and misunderstood. This, she claims, has resulted in an impoverished view of public discourse generally, and the misuse of different forms of moral discourse specifically. In a model of interdisciplinary work, Kaveny engages political theory, American religious history, ethical and even legal reasoning to make this significant and original contribution to the perennial dispute about the role of religion in public discourse. Throughout, Kaveny balances depth and accessibility that make the book appropriate for a wide range of students and scholars of the public square.

In the first section of the book, Kaveny considers three prominent accounts of moral and religious discourse. She examines the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, John Rawls, and Stephen Carter. While she is most sympathetic to MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelianism, she diagnoses each of their projects with an incomplete understanding of moral and religious rhetoric: MacIntyre only recognizes one form of moral discourse (moral deliberation), Rawls does not appreciate the irreducibility of some convictions and the limitations of deliberation, and Carter neither recognizes how demand for civility can be repressive in its own right, nor the way in which the distinction between form and content does not hold for some kinds of discourse. Kaveny therefore argues that, despite their diversity of approach and pedigree, all three accounts present a deficient picture by (perhaps among other things) not considering prophetic indictment as a distinct form of moral discourse.

The second section of the book traces the origin of prophetic indictment to a form of religious rhetoric known as the jeremiad, which emerged in the seventeenth century Puritanism of the North American colonies. Kaveny provides a lengthy historical examination of the jeremiad's origin and evolution, which originally derived its power from reference to a communal covenant. The jeremiad functioned as a form of moral indictment, not moral deliberation, calling members of a community out for their violation of their covenant and back into compliance. Despite the many cultural and ideological changes the United States has undergone since then, Kaveny explains that the jeremiad has maintained a prominent place in the public square.

In the book’s third section, Kaveny transitions to a study of contemporary religious discourse. As case studies, she analyzes Evangelical and Catholic discourse around abortion and torture, two issues at the center of the culture wars surrounding the 2004 U.S. presidential election. She claims that at least some of the breakdowns of conversation were not the result of contrasting moral traditions or even the contestation of facts, but rather of differing forms of moral discourse. Along the way, she reveals the use and misuse of both forms of moral discourse: how a prophetic perspective can employ deliberation to obfuscate the fundamental moral issues at stake and how a deliberative perspective can utilize prophetic indictment to cover over poor reasoning.

The fourth section of the book is dedicated to constructing an ethic of moral discourse, considering when and why each of these two forms is most appropriate. Importantly, she
argues that moral deliberation ought to be our default mode of discourse for obvious reasons. However, Kaveny does claim that prophetic indictment has a legitimate and critical role in the public square when the process of deliberation entails transgressing the fundamental commitments of a community. Nevertheless, she warns it ought to be used with caution because of its disruptive and potentially harmful effects on public discourse. Kaveny then suggests that prophetic indictment ought to be analogously understood to the grand jury process, and here her legal expertise provides an interesting analytic perspective. She further argues that the principles of just war theory can be helpful guides for the use of moral indictment. In conclusion, Kaveny offers two virtues that, over and above the criteria and guidelines she has presented, ought to guide the use of prophetic indictment. First, she draws from Abraham Lincoln's “Second Inaugural Address” the virtue of humility. Second, she emphasizes in the story of Jonah the importance of irony. Kaveny argues that a sense of irony can help provide the critical distance for humility to emerge, which is undoubtedly the most important characteristic for the utilization of prophetic indictment.

Prophecy without Contempt is as enlightening as it is thorough, and its overall structure and argument are well-conceived. Doubtlessly, defenders of Rawls (for one) will have ready responses to her criticisms of his understanding of public reason, but her engagements and disagreements are charitable and respectful. Her suggestions for an ethic of moral discourse are well-taken, but a few questions linger. Behind her longing for and implicit trust in the priority of moral deliberation seems to be a deliberative model of democracy that is itself worth interrogating more thoroughly. Also, I remain unconvinced by the severity of Kaveny’s depiction of the discursive damage wrought by the use of indictment, and am thereby unsatisfied by her recommendation for its very sparing use. Finally, although Kaveny mentions it briefly, more could be said about how it might be possible to resist or overcome the inherent conservatism of grounding of indictment in tradition. It would be instructive to consider further how prophetic indictment could both rely so deeply on tradition and yet be used for at least potentially progressive ends.

These suggestions aside, in this new and exciting work Kaveny masterfully weaves together instructive history, detailed analysis, and creative ethical reflection. Her project succeeds admirably and issues a call for careful, reflective, and impassioned participation in the public square at a time when it is perhaps needed most.

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