

What We Can Learn from Non-Biblical Prophet Movements

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Frequently a new religion comes into being by means of a prophet—a person feeling himself divinely commissioned, who has had divine revelations and feels compelled to inform his fellow men of them. Should people respond to his message a prophet movement is born, and it may then develop into a new religion. If a number of prophet movements are examined, so many of their features appear similar or identical that one is justified in speaking about a “*prophet pattern*”. Knowledge of this pattern may help to increase the understanding of more elusive religious movements.

I have examined about fifty different prophet movements from various periods and various parts of the world, and here I will give a brief account of the fundamental pattern which I think they reveal. For various reasons the biblical prophets have been excluded from this examination.

The different elements of this prophet pattern stand out clearly if we try to answer these three questions:

1. Which are the *causes* for the appearance of a prophet?
2. What is the *significance* of his message? What function does it have?
3. Why do certain prophets get *followers*, but not others?

In the middle of the eighteenth century the advance of the white settlers in North America caused the old indian societies to disintegrate. Then quite a number of indian prophets appeared, and they acquired followers in various parts of the country. Usually, in a sort of a trance-like state, these prophets had met some divine figure from their native religion, who had ordered the indians to repudiate the white man and his customs: the indians were to revert to their traditional leather clothing, make fire in the old way etc. This would bring about a state of happiness by means of divine intervention, a state characterized by the old ways of indian life: game would return to the prairie and salmon to the rivers several prophets predicted

that this state of happiness would occur very shortly. The white man would not be allowed to participate in it—he would perish in the course of the world catastrophe preceding it.

What, then, was the *cause* for a movement such as this one? Evidently the decay of the indian society, caused by the white man's tyranny. The indians were facing disaster, owing to the clash between two entirely different cultures and the ensuing loss of their old freedom. Some of them reacted to this by excessive drinking or moral disintegration. Instead the prophet offered a solution to the crisis by promising a return to the happy old indian way of life, which everybody was longing for—even if this solution was of an eschatological nature. It brought certitude that the prevailing hardships would come to an end; it taught the indian how to protect himself from the alien culture of the white man; it expressed the indians' aggressiveness towards the white man, who would perish in the coming world catastrophe. One of these prophets also expressed self-assertion in arguing that the old indian culture was superior to that of the white man.

These three particular features can be found in various movements of a similar nature—a *promise of better living conditions*, an outlet for *aggressiveness*, and a manifestation of *self-assertion*.

This indian movement was ultimately caused by *external* oppression. Let us now look at another example, where *internal* hardships caused a prophet movement.

In Middle Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century the spreading industrialization led to drastic changes in the social pattern, causing great social and economic difficulties to large groups of people. A proletariat was born, and the poor felt bitterness and envy towards the well-to-do, not least the clerical upper classes. As a reaction a number of strictly profane insurrection movements came about, but also many prophet movements. One of the latter was *the taborites* in Bohemia. This movement consisted mainly of workers and craftsmen, later joined also by crowds of unemployed, beggars, and criminals. A kind of "holy city" was formed under the name of Tabor. Various prophets appeared with tidings of a coming millennium. The exact time of this millennium was stated, and it was predicted that every town and every village would then be destroyed by fire, but the taborites would escape the holocaust up in their mountain city. Earth would be rid of sinners, and after Christ's return man would again live in the original, paradisaical state without laws or coercion—the so-called

“original equality of nature” would be restored and death and disease would no longer exist.

However, the taborites were not content just to await this escatological solution passively, for they took the matter in their own hands. They reasoned that the believers ought to contribute actively towards the preparation of Christ’s return by purging the earth of sinners—and all who were not taborites were sinners, particularly the wealthy upper classes, a progeniture which would not exist in the coming world of happiness. The ensuing massacre became very extensive, a preparation for the coming millennium carried out for strictly religious reasons.

The cause for this movement is fairly clear. Social conditions had separated society into two groups, to which the less fortunate group reacted strongly. As to the significance of the prophet’s message it offered a solution to the crisis by promising improved living conditions. However, also in this case the solution was escatological, even if the believers thought they could aid it materially by exterminating “the wicked ones”. Their aggressiveness towards the godless upper classes appeared clearly, and their self-assertion was evident in the maxim about general equality in the future millennium, where all men would be equals.

Now we will look into an entirely different category of causes for prophet movements—religious conditions. These may however imply vastly different things. Among for instance moslem prophet movements there are the Uthman dan Fodio movement in Africa, the wahabism and the Mirza movement in India. Frequently they had the ambition to purge their own religion of degenerated varieties of the true faith, but Uthman also reacted to the sinful life of the people, seen from a purely religious point of view. Of all these movements Mirza’s was the most unilaterally religious one. He aimed at the religion only, while wahabism and the Uthman movement were gradually aimed at such temporal things as “holy war” against intruders and neighbours. However, fundamentally these movements were just a reaction to religious defection and degeneration of faith. It would appear likely that such things are apt to create a sense of religious insecurity in the believers. A religious person feels secure knowing that his relations with the celestial powers are sound—but that security is lost if and when his conviction no longer remains firm.

The examples outlined so far have all displayed *groups* of people being subjected to the same hardships. Let us now have a look at two cases from

modern times, where single persons for various reasons have been unable to reconcile themselves with the conditions of modern society.

One of these movements was born in the USA in the middle 1950's. The prophet was a woman, known in literature under the pseudonym of Mrs. Keech. In those days there was a certain anxiety in her country—people felt the tension between the great powers and were alarmed at the prospect of a nuclear war. During the same period the newspapers contained numerous reports of so-called Flying Saucers, and there was widespread interest in these phenomena. Mrs. Keech was a “religious seeker”, who had previously been interested in theosophy and occultism. She had also had divine revelations, and now she became impressed by the general interest in Flying Saucers and visited a few lectures on the subject. She became convinced that there was a connection between these supernatural phenomena and her own celestial “messages”. Gradually a being who called himself Sananda materialized in her messages and soon he told her that he was identical with Jesus of Nazareth. His messages implied that a world catastrophe was imminent—it would take place on 21st December that year. Mrs. Keech had a small group of followers among the believers in Flying Saucers, and one message told them that they would be saved from the catastrophe by Flying Saucers, which would pick them up. Time passed and tension increased. Once or twice they were told that the time had come. They gathered, dressed and prepared to leave Earth, but they waited in vain, for no Flying Saucers ever came. Soon the little group around the prophet was dissolved. It had never comprised more than about twenty people.

A similar movement came into being in Denmark in 1967. The prophet was a taxi owner, who had had revelations from a superhuman being in space. This being called himself Orthon, but he, too, said that he was identical with Jesus of Nazareth. The prophet had a message that the world would perish from nuclear war in the morning of Christmas Day 1967, but the believers would be saved by Flying Saucers. Later they would land on earth again and a new and happier life would begin. To prepare themselves for the catastrophe the believers constructed a subterranean shelter outside Copenhagen.

It is far more difficult to define the causes for movements such as these two. However, both were studied “from within” by schooled observers, who found that several of the believers had personal problems of a most varied nature; matrimonial adversities, set-backs during studies, economic

problems, homosexuality etc. Some of the believers no doubt regarded society as scattered and disharmonious. Some had had no response to their religious longing through the church, which had made them "religious seekers", moving from one more or less elusive movement to the next: spiritism, occultism etc. The desire of better living conditions apparent in a group of this type took the shape of an escape from an approaching world catastrophe—above all symbolizing that the person wants to escape from the misfortunes of his temporal existence.

After going through these examples we will now make a summary of their details. As to the *background* for these movements, the prophet often appeared in connection with unfortunate social conditions, which were sometimes caused by internal or external oppression. Or he might be a person who felt religious restlessness, caused by the fact that his fellow men did not live in accordance with the commandments of their religion. Or he might be one of these persons who cannot feel at home in society, even if he is not living under any strain or oppression at all. We should then ask ourselves what *psychological conditions* these different situations imply?

If man lives in harmony with his surroundings and with the divine powers he has faith in, then he feels secure, he feels an emotional support. But if this harmony is lost—if society starts to break up, if man suffers or loses his bounds with his fellow men, or begins to lose his faith in the divine powers—then he cannot feel secure any more. Another common negative experience is the frustration which arises when man cannot attain what he has hoped for, or when he is forced to do something he does not want to. Insecurity and frustrations are the seed of aggressiveness, and if conditions also violate man's self-respect this leads to the need for self-assertion. If man has sensations of this or a similar type it may be said that he has lost his *harmony of mind*. I think this very fact is the principal incentive behind most prophet movements.

Then *the significance of the prophet's message* is that it restores this harmony of mind by promising a change to the better—rarely real, tangible changes, but changes which usually are to occur in another world, or a renewed one, i.e. an escatological situation. What has been weighing heavily on man's mind here on earth will then disappear, what man has been deprived of on earth he will then enjoy. He will have the pleasure of seeing his enemies roast in eternal fire, and he will triumph over those who have oppressed him on earth.

Most of these advantages and causes of joy are stored away in a future which every objective observer must regard as utterly uncertain. But the prophet thinks otherwise—he has received his message directly from the divinity, which brings him certitude that the promise will be fulfilled—God cannot lie! This also restores his own harmony of mind, since man can endure hardships more easily when he knows that in the future they will come to an end.

In my opinion the prophet's solution primarily aims at solving his own problem. His own previously more harmonious state has deteriorated and he has lost his own peace of mind in the process. When his negative feelings reach a sufficiently high degree of intensity a crisis occurs—and it is a well-known psychological fact that under such conditions a deeply rooted religious belief may elicit visions, auditions and similar phenomena. The experiences of a person in a more or less pronounced state of ecstasy seem to reflect that same person's thoughts and feelings when in a more "normal" state of mind—the visions and auditions of a prophet are echoes of his own reasoning.

What is it, then, that makes the prophet get *followers*? The number one condition is that some other people have also lost their harmony of mind, and that the prophet's solution can restore theirs, too. There are examples from North American indian tribes showing that a prophet movement with many followers among certain tribes was entirely unsuccessful among others. Why? Because the latter tribes had for some reason not yet had to endure the same hardships as the former ones. But twenty years later they faced the same crisis—and then another prophet movement with a similar message won them for its cause.

It should also be borne in mind that the prophet advocates a religious solution. He cannot receive any response unless his audience has the same general religious concept as his own. Another example from the indians in North America illustrates this: One tribe did not respond at all to a prophet who had been very successful among other tribes in asserting that the spirits of their forefathers would soon return preparatory to the coming new era. Why? Because in that particular tribe the spirits of the deceased were feared—to have them back was the last thing those indians wanted.

Certainly the success of a prophet depends on the strength of his own personality. His followers must have faith in him as a deputy of the divinity who speaks through his mouth.

If it should be correct that a prophet mainly aims at solving his own problem, then one may ask why his attempts at gaining followers is usually such a prominent feature. The answer may be found in the psychological fact that an answer or a solution is regarded as more correct and probable the more it is shared by others—thus the correctness of a solution accepted by everyone would scarcely be questioned at all. The greater the number of followers, the more certain a prophet must be that his solution is the only possible one. We have seen that certain prophets predicted that the end of the world would occur on a specific date—and when this turned out to be wrong they increased their efforts at acquiring followers. If they succeed, this proves to them that after all their message *is* correct, save for one detail, which may be explained away. All this does probably not imply any intentional speculations on the part of the prophet; it only reflects his own subconscious psychological processes.

In every religion lies dormant possibilities of restoring man's lost harmony of mind. It may be said that the prophet brings these possibilities to the surface by creating a belief in divine intervention in a way which answers the demand at hand. It would appear that in times of restlessness or disintegration of society man's personal problems assume a greater dimension than before. In connection with the "Flying Saucer movements" we learned that persons who are on edge with society as a whole often become "religious seekers", moving from one sect or religion to the next. Thus they are looking for a religious solution in order to restore their own harmony of mind, since the solution offered by their original church is unsatisfactory.

Modern society has many traits which tend to make the individual lose contact with his fellow men, and the present state of society is viewed by many as the very disintegration of old values; this gives them a sense of extraneousness in their temporal life. On the other hand it would appear that more and more people do find the messages of established churches insufficient for restoring their lost harmony of mind. If this is correct it would not be surprising to see an ever-increasing number of such persons attempting to seek a religious solution to their problem within independent religious movements.

However, such an assumption is no doubt contradicted by the fact that so many people today seem to have lost every trace of religious conception. This implies the risk of man seeking refuge from the hardships of to-

day by means of alcoholism, drug addiction, or moral disintegration in general. Signs of this alternative are by no means lacking—and that is a poor alternative to a religious solution.

Bibliography

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