

Education and Outreach Materials

PROPHETIC VOICES

PROPHETIC VOICES is a Special Collection of five award-winning documentary films profiling remarkable religious figures from one of the most turbulent centuries in history. Through their timeless writings and prophetic witness, they helped shape the contours of how to create a moral and ethical response to the social and political challenges of their era. Most importantly, what they left behind is a roadmap for how to faithfully confront our own issues today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Howard Thurman, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Day and Abraham Heschel each came from different faith traditions and varied cultural backgrounds. What they shared in common was an abiding love for their tradition, a willingness to challenge established powers, including their own religious leaders, and an acceptance of the cost that voicing truth entails - both professionally and personally.

The following themes come with the understanding that each one of the previous films has extensive study materials already posted at Journeyfilms.com. This material is designed to help the viewer engage these figures in a collective fashion.

I. WHAT IS A PROPHETIC VOICE?

At the beginning of his landmark book *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel asks, "What manner of man [or woman] is the prophet?" Heschel's question animates each of the *Prophetic Voices* films, asking the viewer to consider what a prophet is, what a prophet does, and the difference that a prophet makes - by voice or stance - to her or his era and to those beyond. In the Biblical tradition, a prophet is one who speaks on behalf of God and, according to Heschel, experiences "divine pathos" - the emotions and reactions of God - in response to the words and actions of humankind.

Biblical prophets critique the foibles and wilful misdirections of humanity, while casting a vision of how the world could and should be under the authority of God. Few Biblical prophetic utterances are as well-known today as the timeless words of the prophet Amos, famously quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington, to "let justice roll like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24). Similarly, many unfamiliar with the Bible itself may know the timeless injunction of the prophet Micah: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Justice, righteousness, love, and mercy are almost always at the heart of the prophetic message, both in Biblical times and today.

In this section, we consider **what it means to be a prophetic voice** and how each of the figures of these films - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Day, Howard Thurman, and Abraham Joshua Heschel - were prophetic voices for their time.

1. Looking back on these films and the related study guides, what commonalities do you see among these five spiritual giants of the twentieth century? What motivations or perspectives do they share? How are they different?
2. In his introduction to *The Prophets*, Heschel states that “[p]rophecy is a way of thinking as well as a way of living,” and that “the most important philosophical problem of the twentieth century [is] to find a new set of presuppositions or premises, a different way of thinking.”

After watching these five films, how would you describe the prophet’s way of thinking? How is it different from that of others?

3. In *Spiritual Audacity*, the film about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Rabbi James Rudin corrects the mistaken view that a prophet is someone who only sees into the future:

When you say “prophet” to a person they think someone who predicts the future. It’s prophetic. That’s not what a Hebrew prophet was; the Hebrew word is ‘Navi’ meaning truth-teller, facing the truth, coming to a community and telling the community things it doesn’t always want to hear. Prophets are not popular.

Rabbi James Rudin

Similarly, Heschel wrote that the Biblical prophet “was an individual who said NO to his [or her] society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism.”

Rather than being some sort of fortune teller or soothsayer, the prophet was and is a critic of his or her society, calling out the injustices and evils that the society wrongly condones, and calling that society back into right relationship with God.

After watching these films, would you agree that this is a primary role of the prophet? What other roles - in addition to societal critic - might a prophet take on?

Make a short list of the kinds of roles a prophet might play, including that of social critic.

4. Prophets have paid and often do pay a steep price for speaking their truth. Many Biblical prophets were exiled, imprisoned, threatened with death, or ostracized from their communities. The prophet Jeremiah, who attacked the apostasy of the people of Judah and warned of future calamity at the hands of the Babylonians, also lamented the price to be paid as a prophet of the Lord:

I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. (Jeremiah 20:7-8, NRSV)

The prophet Elijah escaped the soldiers of the wicked Queen Jezebel by hiding in a cave, where God came to him as a "still small voice." And Jonah infamously sought to run away from God's call until he was swallowed by a whale. Prophets have never had it easy.

In the modern era, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi paid for their activism with their lives, Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison, and the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu faced nearly constant threats of violence. In the *Prophetic Voices* series, apart from Bonhoeffer, both Dorothy Day and Reinhold Niebuhr were on the FBI "watchlist" for decades, and Day was arrested and imprisoned several times.

Do you think there must always be a cost paid for being a prophetic voice? What other costs might be associated with speaking truth to power? And if there is most always a cost, does that mean the majority of people will never offer that kind of voice?

5. The films in the *Prophetic Voices* series look at five prophetic individuals in the Jewish and Christian traditions. From the content of these films, how would you describe the idea of the prophetic voice in these two traditions, especially since they share so many similarities?
6. From the films and your own reading or study, who do you identify as key prophetic figures in the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament? What might they share in common? In what ways have these figures served as models for more contemporary prophets in our own era?
7. Which of the five prophetic voices profiled in this series was most familiar to you? Who was least familiar? Which figure had the most impact on you personally? In what ways did they impact you, and why?

8. Apart from the figures in these films, who else would you consider a prophetic voice in modern times? In American history?
9. Do you think a prophetic voice must be a religious person—someone coming out of an established religious tradition or practice? Who do you consider a prophetic voice who does not come out of a religious tradition?

II. THE PROPHET AS COMMUNITY-BUILDER

Historically, one of the prophet's primary functions is to critique the injustices, inequalities, and evils of the society in which she or he finds themselves. We see this in each of the *Prophetic Voices* films. But a second and related function of the prophet witness is to build community. During the period of Nazi oppression in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer founded a pioneering seminary community, where he trained a generation of seminarians who would stand for truth and the justice of God against dehumanizing Nazi practices. Having experienced the scars of racial injustice firsthand, Howard Thurman created remarkable spiritual communities at Howard and Boston universities and co-founded the groundbreaking Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples - designed to be the first interracial, interfaith community in America.

Similarly, Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement, which became an organizing center for social and political activism, spawning a nationwide network of communities directly responding to the needs of America's poor.

1. Each of the figures in *Prophetic Voices* was involved in shaping and creating community in some way. Looking at these five figures, what similarities or differences do you see in how they approached this idea? How was community practiced and lived out in their own lives? What things were similar, and what things different?
2. Can you identify the models for community that each of these figures drew upon? How does Dorothy Day's model - each person thinking of themselves as their brother's keeper - differ from Heschel's model of the prophet working to reconcile a community to God? Or Howard Thurman seeking to break imposed racial boundaries in the communities he fostered?
3. What do you take away from these films in terms of the meaning of community, how authentic community is fostered, and how you might further strengthen and support the communities with which you are involved?
4. Although these films deal primarily with religious communities, can you apply some of the lessons learned from these figures to secular settings as well? Why or why not?

III. THE PROPHET STANDS BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THEIR TRADITION

As has been noted, prophets often stand both within and without the traditions that shape them. In most cases, this is because the tradition itself engenders the thirst for justice, mercy, and goodness that the prophet articulates. In the Christian New Testament, Jesus notably declares that “prophets are not without honor, except in their own hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4). It is the nature of the prophet to critique the errors in her or his own tradition precisely because of their respect and love for it.

1. After watching the five *Prophetic Voices* films, what would you say are some of the primary differences between the traditions of each of these figures—dissenting Lutheranism (Bonhoeffer); Roman Catholicism (Day); Reformed Church, now United Church of Christ (Niebuhr); Baptist (Thurman); Conservative Judaism (Heschel)?
2. Compare the upbringings of each of these figures. How did the religious environment of their early years - or lack thereof - impact the choices they made in terms of a religious life?

You might consider that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was raised in a family that was political but not very religious. On the other hand, Reinhold Niebuhr was the son of a pastor and he, his brother H. Richard, and their sister Hulda all became noted religious scholars. As a young boy, Howard Thurman swore he would never enter religious life after an itinerant preacher - presiding at his father’s funeral - suggested Thurman’s father was going to Hell. Yet only a few years later, Thurman entered the ministry.

Dorothy Day was raised in a non-practicing Episcopalian household. Early on, she realized that she would have to satisfy her deep hunger for spiritual things on her own—through the study of the saints and a blossoming love of Church hymns.

By contrast, Abraham Joshua Heschel’s religious vocation seemed pre-determined, and he never questioned its reality:

“Because of his ancestry and the role of a rebbe in a community as the leader, adults would rise when he would enter the room. He would be lifted up on a table and he would give a sermon at the age of 5, 6, 7 years old. A little boy and he would speak. He was brilliant.”

Susannah Heschel

3. Can you identify specific moments or interactions in these figures’ lives that shaped their choice of ministry?

4. What persons, texts, or practices in or outside these figures' traditions shaped their thought and work? Were you surprised by any of these?
5. What did you learn about the individual upbringing of these characters that might be worth reflecting on in your own life and choice of ministry or vocation?
6. Considering the five *Prophetic Voices* figures together, what do you learn from them about the nature of a life of ministry and the various forms it can take? Does this open a new way of thinking or a new avenue for ministry in your own life?
7. Each of these figures faced pushback, in one way or another, from their own religious traditions. In his twenties, Bonhoeffer was shocked and distressed to learn that his church leadership was generally supportive of the Nazi regime. Reinhold Niebuhr and Abraham Heschel were often criticized by colleagues for their stands on social issues, civil rights, and American involvement in Vietnam. Catholic Church leaders openly challenged Dorothy Day to remove the word "Catholic" from her organization. (She refused.) And Howard Thurman was sometimes at odds with school administrations and church members over his inclusive and progressive religious practices.

What do you learn from these films and these figures about the nature of life within religious institutions and organizations? Do the challenges these figures faced make you disappointed or do they offer you a useful dose of stark realism, understanding that religious institutions—like secular institutions—are imperfect, malleable, human constructions. We work within them in hopes of bettering them and of being bettered by them.

8. Considering the criticisms each of these figures faced from within their own traditions, how do you think it possible that people from the same tradition, who study the same sacred texts and worship the same God, can have such different understandings of how to apply their faith to contemporary issues?
9. Do you think it is part of the prophet's role to be willing to stand up to his or her own faith tradition when they believe it is wrong?
10. If each of the *Prophetic Voices* figures faced criticism from within their own traditions, they also received support and care from them. Identify the kinds of support each figure received from his/her tradition and from those outside of it? Can you discern any patterns?
11. One of the great legacies of these figures is that they were willing to engage persons and ideas from other traditions. Dorothy Day received help from

those outside of Catholicism; Dietrich Bonhoeffer received support from friends in America and at Union Theological Seminary, in particular; Reinhold Niebuhr engaged colleagues from different traditions and cultures, as did Howard Thurman; Abraham Heschel marched with Martin Luther King, Jr and the activist priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan.

- A. How does the example of these figures impact your own thinking about engagement with people from other traditions?
- B. The late Buddhist teacher and writer Thich Nhat Hanh once stated that his goal in engaging with Christians and Jews was not to convert them to Buddhism, but to help them become better Christians and Jews. Do you think that the engagement of Bonhoeffer, Day, Niebuhr, Thurman, and Heschel across traditional religious boundaries made them better, more committed exemplars of their own faiths?
- C. Do you see a danger of religious pluralism or of muddying one's own religious commitment in this kind of interreligious engagement? If so, why?

IV. THE PROPHET AS PUBLIC THEOLOGIAN

As we have noted, one of the prophet's primary roles is to speak truth to power, and oftentimes, to do that publicly, offering an example and encouragement to others. This was the case with most of the Biblical prophets, as with many modern figures we consider prophets, including the subjects of the *Prophetic Voices* films.

Overview

In the late 1950's, Reinhold Niebuhr was interviewed for national television by famed news reporter Mike Wallace. Wallace introduced Niebuhr this way:

"This is Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most important and challenging religious thinkers in the world. Through his writing, Dr. Niebuhr has helped mold the world's thinking about religion, morality and politics."

It was a fitting introduction to an American audience already familiar with the country's leading public theologian.

Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Day, Howard Thurman and Abraham Heschel were celebrated and trusted figures in their day. They regularly appeared in the media to offer opinions and perspectives on the great moral and ethical questions of their time. Reinhold Niebuhr appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* with the subtitle: "*Man's Story is Not a Success Story.*" Thurman was celebrated in *Life Magazine* stories

and on radio, and Heschel and Day were regularly quoted in the national news.

1. What qualities did each of these figures possess that attracted media attention? Looking back at each film, how did the media tend to portray or depict each of these figures?
2. How did each of these figures use the public attention afforded them? How did that attention become a vehicle for - and occasionally distract them from - their prophetic function?
3. If “public theology” is about theological and moral engagement with society beyond the church or synagogue, in what ways were each of these figures public theologians?
4. What particular issues did each of these figures bring to the public spotlight? What difference did this make, both for the person and the issue/s?
5. Can you think of contemporary persons you would consider prophetic figures who are also public theologians? Is this a rarer phenomenon now than in the past?
6. What was present in mid-20th century American culture – especially the media - that sought out figures who could offer a moral perspective? Did religious and moral voices hold a different position in the culture then?
7. Is the media today more or less open to someone offering the “moral perspective” to our current social and political issues? Why or why not?

V. THE PROPHET AS ETHICIST AND MORAL VOICE

As noted above, the prophet offers a moral and ethical voice for their time. Biblical prophets such as Amos and Micah repeatedly called for justice, mercy, righteousness, and care for the poor. In modern times, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up against the Nazi regime and its horrors, going so far as to engage in a plot against Adolph Hitler. Reinhold Niebuhr critiqued unjust and immoral political and social structures in his books and lectures. Dorothy Day critiqued the injustices of a society that did not care for its poor and needy. Howard Thurman and Abraham Heschel critiqued the racism and discrimination that ran deep in American history and culture.

1. Consider each of the subjects of the *Prophetic Voices* films. What kind of moral and ethical issues does each address through their words and their lives?

2. America has always valued the strong separation of Church and State. At what point does a religious figure cross the line when exercising his or her religious values in connection with social or political policies? How is moral concern and even moral outrage a part of each figure's prophetic function?
3. What role did social justice play in each figure's public persona, writings, and private life? What difference did their statements and actions make?
4. Do you consider some of these figures to be more successful when it comes to moral authority than others? If so, why?
5. What role did religion play in the moral stance and moral voice of each figure? Was it decisive, or did their moral authority derive wholly or partly from other sources?
6. Do you consider morality and social justice to be primary religious concerns? Why or why not?
7. What do you take away from the moral example and moral authority of each of these figures? Are there lessons you have learned from each? How might they be exemplars for your own action and exercise of moral authority on the issues that concern you?
8. Has following the lives of these five figures made you more aware of and more willing to speak out about issues of injustice, inequality, or morality? Why or why not?

VI. PROPHETIC VOICES TODAY

Sadly, many of the issues these five prophetic voices confronted in their lifetimes are still with us – racial injustice, economic inequality, political oppression, and the threat of nuclear weapons, to name a few. But our own historic moment also faces issues that were not foremost in the minds of Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, Thurman, Day, or Heschel. None of these figures were compelled to address injustices around sexual orientation or gender identity. Environmental concerns, now an existential threat, did not loom large for most of these figures, although Thurman did address them on occasion, as in this excerpt from his book *In Search of Common Ground*:

“Man cannot long separate himself from nature without withering as a cut rose in a vase... It is but a single leap to regard nature as being so completely other than himself that he may exploit it, plunder it and rape it without impunity... Our atmosphere is polluted, our streams are poisoned, our hills are denuded, wildlife is increasingly exterminated while more and more man becomes an alien on the earth and a fouler of his own nest.”

Because Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, Thurman, Day and Heschel are such well spoken and profound thinkers, our instinct may be to engage contemporary concerns like those above by asking ourselves, “What would Bonhoeffer do?” or “What would Dorothy Day do?”

While that is high praise for these figures, it comes with inherent danger.

Heschel often said that to follow another’s spiritual path was essentially “spiritual plagiarism.” We can draw something from others, admire others, but each must carve out their own path.

1. As you re-examine each of these figures, what is the main takeaway for your own spiritual journey? Who or what has inspired you most? What do you now recognize in your own spiritual journey that you want to address? Make a list of your responses to these questions that you can refer to later.
2. Are there things in the lives and stances of any of these figures that you disagree with? Why? Can you articulate the basis of your disagreement?

You might consider the following: Howard Thurman was criticized for choosing not to be on the front lines of the Civil Rights Marches. He felt his place was to be “the sage” who inspired and encouraged the marchers.

Dorothy Day refused to pay her federal taxes for fear the funds would be used to support immoral military action. She also never voted.

Reinhold Niebuhr, once a self-proclaimed pacifist, was an early advocate for military preparedness against the rising Nazi regime in Germany.

Can you disagree with some of these figures’ thoughts or actions and still find them sources of strength and inspiration for your own spiritual journey?

3. Finally, consider prophetic voices today. Who first comes to mind when you think about such figures? Draw up a list of those you would like to consider. Share that list with people from different faith traditions or different cultural backgrounds to see who is held in common and who is unknown to you.