

A Book of Prophets

Review of

*American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals
and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*

By Albert J. Raboteau

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016

xvii + 224 pages / \$30 cloth

Reviewed by **Jim Forest**

“To us, a single set of injustices – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is slight; to the prophets disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them a catastrophe, a threat to the world. . . . To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.” So wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the seven individuals Albert Raboteau singles out as models of religiously-ignited social conscience in his latest book, *American Prophets*. The other six are Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., A. J. Muste, Howard Thurman and Fannie Lou Hamer.

If a minor injustice is seen by the biblical prophets as a matter of cosmic importance, how much greater are the major injustices: acts of genocide, the killing of the innocent, the destruction of entire cities, the poisoning of the planet, the dehumanization of those whom we regard as enemies, the subjugation of entire peoples on the basis of minor physical or cultural distinctions? All these and other great social sins feature in the prophetic protests of the men and women Raboteau has selected for his study.

One of the major threads running through the book is the iniquity of racism. It is eye-opening to discover, in the most economical of definitions, that Abraham Joshua Heschel diagnosed racism as an “eye disease” – an inner blindness resulting in the inability to see the image of God in each and every person, which, Raboteau points out, “is to see it in none.” Martin Luther King, Jr., he notes, had a similar insight: “To deface the divine image in another is to that extent to efface it in oneself.” Thomas Merton would agree. At the opening session of the peacemaking retreat held at the Abbey of Gethsemani in November 1964, he drew special attention to the Latin words “*Domine ut videam*” – “Lord, that I might see” (Mk. 10:51). What we see and how well we see defines who we are and how we respond to the world around us. If the inner eye perceives the other – the stranger, the enemy, the different one – through a lens of fear, our relationship with the other will be ruled by fear.

For all the wide-eyed prophets profiled by Raboteau, fear was not a dominant force in their lives. Dorothy Day, for example, did not hesitate to sit in a car in the small hours of the night in

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1957 posted as an unarmed guard at the entrance to the interracial Koinonia community in Georgia; it was the one time in her life that she became a target of gunfire. King repeatedly put his life at risk and finally died of an assassin's bullet. Heschel stood side by side with King as they marched across Selma's blood-stained Edmund Pettus Bridge. Fannie Lou Hamer, victim of repeated vicious beatings for her heroic civil rights work, remarked, "I guess if I'd had any sense, I'd have been a little scared – but what was the point of being scared? The only thing they could do was kill me, and it kinda seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."

Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* will have special interest in Merton's place in Raboteau's study. The biographical preface to the Merton chapter is compact and engaging but, for *Seasonal* readers, covers familiar territory. What sets this chapter apart is Raboteau's special attention to racism, a somewhat neglected area of Merton studies. So many themes that Merton would develop and deepen later in life were first presented autobiographically in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. There Merton not only described the volunteer work he did with Friendship House in Harlem before becoming a monk, but challenges the reader with a cry of the heart about the sin of racism. It was in Harlem that Merton developed a deeper awareness of the implications of being part of the Mystical Body of Christ. This was, as Raboteau shows, in part thanks to a Friendship House retreat led by Fr. Paul Hanley Furfey in late November 1941, just weeks before Merton left for Gethsemani. Taking to heart a vision of humanity being literally united in Christ was a revelation for Merton of "the one infinite source of life." He returned from the retreat, as he wrote in a letter to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, "all on fire with it." This breakthrough remained embedded in Merton for the rest of his life, renewed by such mystical experiences as his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut in 1958 and flowering in his later writings on such topics as war, racism and care of the environment.

In the summer of 1963, Raboteau reminds us, Merton wrote three "Letters to a White Liberal," included in *Seeds of Destruction*, published in November 1964. For many readers, the letters were disturbing and even off the deep end. Martin Marty, in a book review, accused Merton of "posing as a white James Baldwin." He took issue with Merton's accusation that northern white liberals didn't mind supporting the civil rights battle going on in the South but few were willing to face up to the forms racism took in the North. "North or South," said Merton, "integration is always going to be not on our street but 'somewhere else.' That perhaps accounts for the extraordinary zeal with which the North insists upon integration in the South, while treating the Northern Negro as if he were invisible, and flatly refusing to let him take shape in full view, lest he demand the treatment due to a human person and a free citizen of this nation."

Avoiding our true selves, Merton declared, we look for identity in what we possess. This insight, Raboteau points out, resonated with that of another prophetic figure, the same James Baldwin Marty accused Merton of aping. Raboteau quotes from a letter Merton sent Baldwin after reading *The Fire Next Time*, an essay that first appeared in *The New Yorker* before its publication as a book. "As I went through column after column," Merton wrote to Baldwin, "I was struck, as I am sure you were, by ads all along each side of your text. What a commentary! They prove you more right than you could have imagined. They go far beyond anything you have said. What force they lend to all your statements. No one could have dreamed up more damning evidence to illustrate what you say."

Every chapter of *American Prophets* has its surprises – stories, insights, striking and often unfamiliar quotations that, if you keep a chapbook, you may want to copy down as seeds of contemplation. Perhaps the greatest strength of this compact volume is that it is not only about a

number of prophetic figures but is itself a prophetic summons not only to know but to enact. The issues that were so urgent to Merton, King, Dorothy Day, Abraham Heschel, A. J. Muste, Howard Thurman and Fannie Lou Hamer remain unresolved and in some areas even worse than they were half a century ago. Albert Raboteau's book could not be more timely.