

## HISTORICAL STUDIES, I

- Topic: Medieval and Renaissance Prophets of New Things to Come  
Convener: Joan M. Nuth, John Carroll University  
Moderator: Helen Ciernick, Mt. Marty College  
Presenters: Franklin T. Harkins, Fordham University  
Shawn Colberg, University of Notre Dame  
Wendy M. Wright, Creighton University

What makes a person a prophet? Three treatments of this question provided a varied and nuanced response. In his paper “‘Slay Them Not’: Psalm 58:12 as Prophecy in Medieval Christian Theology and Interreligious Policy,” Franklin Harkins focused on Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness, and its influence throughout the Middle Ages. Psalm 58:12 (“Slay them not, lest my people ever forget; but scatter them in your might”) functioned as prophetic for Augustine, forming the backbone of his mature doctrine of Jewish witness. Augustine believed it was God’s will that the Jews continue to live as Jews, because of their important testimonial role in support of Christianity. They should not be slaughtered; they are useful to Christians by carrying the prophecies of grace for them. They retain the memory or written record of God’s word, even though they do not understand it correctly, nor do they fulfill it in their lives. Dispersed throughout the world, they have not lost their fundamental identity as bearers of the divine Law. Harkins traced how Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness became prophetic for Christian faith and practice throughout the Middle Ages. Beginning with Gregory the Great, medieval popes adopted a policy of legal protection for Jews, prohibiting their forced baptism, physical harm, disturbances of their worship, or desecration of their cemeteries, always with the caveat that they not plot against the Christian faith. Harkins then traced how Augustine’s doctrine was seen as prophetic and used by medieval theologians such as Remigius of Auxerre, Rupert of Deutz, Baldwin of Ford, and Thomas Aquinas.

How discern a true from a false prophet? This question was treated by Shawn M. Colberg in his paper “Martin Luther on the Difference between Prophet and Enthusiast.” While Luther was certainly not shy in his condemnation of “papists,” he seems to have reserved his most deleterious terminology for his evangelical opponents. Colberg focused on two specific instances where Luther delineated the difference between true and false prophecy: in his confrontation with the Zwickau Prophets and with Andreas von Karlstadt. In December 1521, three men from Zwickau entered Wittenberg, presenting themselves as prophets, claiming to have received personal visions from God. In his assessment of these men, Luther established three criteria for prophetic authenticity. First, authentic prophecy is always situated in the context of a Christian community from which or to which the prophet is called externally, not merely by personal revelation. Second, some external sign is necessary to demonstrate divine approval. Third, the interior disposition of the prophet should be rooted in the gospel witness of the death and resurrection of Christ, in the condemnation of the law and the saving action of the

cross. Luther finds the Zwickau prophets lacking on all three counts. His next opponent, his former colleague Karlstadt, presented a more complex target. Like the Zwickau prophets, Karlstadt too, to Luther's mind, lacks an authentic call, but Luther's main criticism of Karlstadt adds a fourth criterion for authentic prophecy. In his preaching against images, and his precipitous reforms of the liturgy, Karlstadt has failed to preserve the gospel's order and content. Instead he is a false "prophet of Moses," an enthusiast, heaping new laws on those freed by the gospel. Colberg concluded by emphasizing how Luther's criteria for authentic prophecy are radically consistent with his theology—quintessentially Lutheran. Others might (and do) propose different criteria for establishing prophetic authenticity.

Wendy M. Wright's paper, "Francis de Sales: Making All Things New," looked at several of de Sales' distinctive teachings, considering them as prophetic of future theological developments. As a "hinge person," spanning medieval and modern times, Francis de Sales can illuminate how theology might be true to its heritage and yet respond anew to the "signs of the times." Wright discussed three of de Sales' characteristic ideas under this rubric: the universal call to holiness, the church as *universe* (unity in diversity), and marriage as a school for mutual spiritual growth, all of which have found further development in contemporary theology. At the core of each of these, Wright sees a radical eschatological vision of reversal. Influenced by the theme of reversal in the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* (riches, honor, pride vs. poverty, contempt, humility), de Sales did something new with it, merging it with the Jesus of Matthew 11:28-30 who calls, "Come to me and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart." Having a heart like Jesus means practicing the "little" relational virtues: gentleness, humility, patience, cordiality, simplicity. De Sales advocated a "domestic mysticism," typified by a transformation of the heart into the heart of Christ, through the practice of these virtues in everyday life. Such mysticism has room for the socially insignificant: women, the laity, and the poor, who are called to bring about a transformed world. Wright acknowledged that the practice of the "little virtues" can be "tricky" as an eschatological sign. Cowardice can mimic gentleness; unhealthy self-loathing can masquerade as humility. However, accurately understood, this vision is an eschatological one, reversing the status quo, one to be enfleshed now, not merely longed for in the distant future. The theme of unity in diversity sees Jesus living uniquely now in each woman or man, simply being who they are.

JOAN M. NUTH  
*John Carroll University*  
*Cleveland, Ohio*