

Robert H. Woods and Paul D. Patton. *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010. 182 pages. \$19.95.

This book is not what I expected from reading the title. I thought maybe I could get some tips on becoming the next religious Roger Ebert. Then, when the Foreword by Quentin Schultze mentioned Kierkegaard in the first sentence and the Preface by Clifford Christians began with a discussion of Nietzsche, I became curious (worried!) about what I was getting myself into with this book. But not to worry. The book is thoroughly accessible. The title does, however, contain a hint about its content. The authors hope to make each of us a “small-p” prophet in our media-saturated cultural milieu. In the authors’ words, “our book seeks to introduce readers to the possibilities of cultivating a wise prophetic sensibility as they engage popular media and its technologies.” The authors move us to be responsible, thoughtful, ethical citizens as much as media critics.

I think one could well do a global replace, changing “media criticism” to “preaching,” and the advice and guidance provided would be as compelling. Preachers simply cannot ignore the pervasive and embedded impact of the media on our consciences and on our consciousness. Leaving the television off is no assurance that media values are not insidiously impacting our values and decision-making processes. In this regard, in the final chapter, among other tactics, they suggest having occasional media fasts or, alternatively, media appointments, that is, intentionally choosing some medium/media to engage, rather than just having the television set on mindlessly because it is evening or morning or a free afternoon.

Before moving to the prophetic stance they hope we will strike, they explore the priestly role of media in the first chapter. The priestly role of media is intended to “confirm and exploit what the community wants to believe about itself” (3). “Priestly media informally, and chiefly, sanction our culture’s ethos of consumerism” (6). They include Christian media in the priestly position and claim “Christian media must ultimately be less concerned with evoking applause from their audiences than provoking thoughtful, sometimes uncomfortable, reflection.” This obviously is not a very friendly description of the priestly role. And, in this regard, I wonder why it is that the more conservative, more tense elements in American Christianity have tended to be the more effective or at least more prolific users of media (16). Chapter Two then begins the discussion on the prophetic role. More than media critics, prophets are social critics, “stewards of an alternative consciousness” (21). Further, “the prophetic vocation today is to keep the ministry of imagination alive as part of a company of critics” (32). The prophetic critic asks, “Where in the media do I find clear evidence of the Bible’s call for justice and servanthood along with its unmistakable warnings about wealth and greed?”

Chapter Three pushes us to become more aware of the impact of media on consciousness and values. Chapter Four explores the human plight, alienation from God, from self, from others, and from the environment. Media have aided and abetted the creation of this plight. Chapter Five provides some ways to ameliorate this plight and push back against media’s influence. Chief among the impacts of media is focus on self. To counter this, the authors propose, as part of a prophetic stance, the “mindset and habit of gratitude,” which “requires focused attention on the contributions of others.”

Chapter Six proposes a prophetic “shock therapy” to move us out of calcified, cherished but ultimately destructive practices and perspectives. They use examples from the art world and from television, *The Simpsons*, for example, which seek to do just this. In a decidedly mixed metaphor, they hope to provoke prophets to use shock therapy on sacred cows, a rather

regrettable image (97). They provide some principles for application of this shock therapy. Chapter Seven takes on television as a case study for the would-be small-p prophet. Prior to this, the authors have focused on media content; here they examine the nature of the medium itself, using two descriptors: immediacy and intimacy. This is a topic that warrants much more discussion. Every medium has its own characteristics that in turn shape those who employ them. This is the old Ong/McLuhan discussion which seems to ebb and flow over the decades. We might well say that media can be used for good or for ill, as did St. Augustine, but they are not neutral, not without embedded values.

In the Conclusion, Woods and Patton issue both warning and encouragement. “Prophetic criticism from one tribe often looks like disloyalty or liberal or conservative propaganda to another” (122). The dangers are those of depression and despair, arrogance, ruthless truthfulness, harmful images, tunnel vision. This can particularly happen when the prophet is isolated and operates outside a community, which can provide helpful feedback. The countermeasures to these dangers are: maintaining a sense that “faithful” choices matter, practicing the sense of God’s abiding presence, holding oneself accountable to a community, the realization that not everything need be analyzed prophetically, and loving one’s neighbor.

All in all, the book provides some solid insight into becoming a literate consumer of media and, perhaps inadvertently, a more astute preacher. It might have gone more deeply into the theological underpinnings of the foundations for their perspective, however.

Rick Stern
Saint Meinrad School of Theology
Saint Meinrad, IN