PROPHECY IN THE HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

A brief survey of four prophetic figures in the history of South Africa (Ntsikana, Nongqawuse, Siener van Rensburg and Beyers Naude) show that a prophet is a visionary intermediary, mediating a message between an authority (God) and an audience. Operating in stressful situations, prophets speak and act with the authority conferred on them by appreciative audiences, often in alliance with (or in opposition to) political powers. The HIV/AIDS pandemic and poverty are stressful situations calling for prophetic voices in contemporary South Africa.

PROLEGOMENA

It is impossible to present a complete overview of prophets and prophecy in the history of South Africa in one paper. I therefore decided to attempt a sort of social-analytical narrative (if such an animal exists!) about a few leading prophetic figures in the history of South Africa. The choice is in some sense arbitrary, and does not imply that these were the most important or most influential prophets.

In order to do this, I provide a working definition of prophecy. Following Overholt (1989), I describe a prophet as a visionary intermediary, mediating some message between an authority (God) and an audience. All three elements are important in the prophetic process, as it does not consist of one-way traffic from authority to audience. It consists rather of a pattern of interrelationships among authority, prophet and audience which involves revelation, proclamation, feedback and supernatural confirmation (22), a thoroughly interactive process. As Overholt (81) also points out, prophetic figures "appear in societies in times of crisis — at the personal, family or some wider societal level in which the normal order of things seems to be threatened with collapse." Prophecy is therefore, apart from other things, a social phenomenon.

It is necessary to add a word about prophets and prophecy in Africa. It is important in Africa to differentiate between prophets and seers, diviners or mediums. The latter group can be said to act not on their own initiative, but on the initiative of their clients; they are consultants and not leaders of men.

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Prophets, on the other hand, “speak forth the divine word directly without reading it off a symbolic medium... It is this directness of communication, scope of leadership, and tendency towards novelty which distinguishes the prophet from the diviner” (Ray, in Hodgson 1985:171). Furthermore prophets do not act on the initiative of their audience/clients. Instead, they “...go directly to the people and inspire religious and political movements... prophets are often sources of creative religious change” (:171). It is these social dynamics, the initiation of religious change which will mostly interest me in this paper, rather than the issue of true and false prophecy (i.e. foretelling the future), which will be addressed only in an oblique way.

**NTSIKANA (c.1780 – c.1821)**

Ntsikana was born around 1780 as a member of an important Xhosa clan. His father was a councillor of king Ngqika and Ntsikana had a traditional Xhosa upbringing. It is not clear whether he had any contact with white missionaries, although there is an oral tradition that as a child he had heard a sermon of Dr Van Der Kemp. What one can safely deduce is that his contact with white missionaries was at best minimal. By the year 1815, when he was already a married man, he converted to Christianity. Apart from the vague possibility that he had heard Van Der Kemp, missionaries apparently played no role in Ntsikana's conversion (Hodgson 1985:129-136).

Immediately after his conversion Ntsikana started holding two daily meetings for all the people living at his homestead. At these meetings there were singing, praying and preaching. Especially singing played an important role in his ministry, and we know today of at least four hymns which he composed and which were the first indigenous Christian hymns in Xhosa. The best-known of these was his so-called ‘Great Hymn’, in which Ntsikana acted as the traditional eulogist singing the praises of his new king, God himself.

The hymn in its earliest published form goes thus (in Hodgson 1985:249):

He who is our mantle of comfort,
The giver of life, ancient on high
He is the Creator of the Heavens
and the ever burning stars:
God is mighty in the heavens
and whirs the stars round in the sky.
We call on him in his dwelling place,
That he might be our mighty leader,
For he makes the blind to see:
We adore him as the only good,
For he alone is a sure defense,
He alone is a trusty shield,
He alone is our bush of refuge:
Even HE - the giver of life on high,
Who is the Creator of the heavens.
The history of prophecy in South Africa

Ntsikana's genius lay in his ability to use well-known traditional concepts and fill them with new content, perhaps nothing less than a new faith. This is all the more remarkable if we keep in mind his lack of contact with Christian missionaries and his inability to make use of Christian scriptures. He indeed placed great emphasis on 'the word of God,' which for him was a word God directly revealed to him. According to oral tradition this word was revealed on the hem of his cloak. Ntsikana therefore succeeded in maintaining the connection with traditional Xhosa religion, while at the same time making the transition to a new religion easier. In Hodgson's words (1985:222):

Although it was primarily a new form of religious association, the ties of clan and lineage among the disciples satisfied the need for a corporate sense of belonging and integration within Xhosa society as a whole, rather than as a group apart like the mission station people. Through Ntsikana they expressed their new beliefs and practices as part of the Xhosa world, living among Xhosa in a Xhosa way.

According to Hodgson (:163) his greatest novelty lay in the completely new concept of time he introduced. Sometimes he acted like the traditional imboni or seer, advising his chief on important events in the near future, "but it was his prophecies relating to a distant future that caused problems because they introduced a radical new concept of time which was outside his people's reality" (:163). Two of Ntsikana's important prophecies dealt with the penetration of Xhosaland by the Mfengu and the whites. About the latter he prophesied:

There is another race with long hair (resembling tails of cattle) coming from the west. This is a wise race; be careful not to take all their wisdom. The main thing for you to receive from them is the word of God. Take care of the button which has no hole (money), it will mislead many. These are my witnesses who will bear me record. If you do not accept the word, I see this land being taken from the Ngqikas, and divided out to white men.... (Hodgson 1985:164).

As far as his political role in his tribe was concerned, Ntsikana remained a councillor to King Ngqika even after "this [new] thing (had) entered him, this thing that hated sin" (Ntsikana's own characterisation of his new faith, in Hodgson 1985:158). These were turbulent and eventful times on the Eastern Cape border. Bloody confrontations followed each other as the colonists sought to push the Xhosa further and further north-eastwards. Alliances of convenience between groups of trekboers and various Xhosa sub-groups resulted also in internecine strife among the Xhosa. Ngqika's grandfather as well as his father were killed in battle. As Ngqika was still a minor, he became the ward of his uncle Ndlambe, who also served as regent. An uneasy relationship existed between them, and this flared into enmity when Ngqika came of age at a time when Ndlambe was at his most powerful.
Confrontation followed confrontation, reaching its peak in 1818 in the war of Amalinde (1818). Ntsikana counselled Ngqika not to go to war against the other Xhosa leaders gathered around Ndlambe. This advice was rejected by Ngqika's other councillors, as they felt that the source of this advice was a new, strange God, not the traditional God. This strange new God with his pacifism was contrary to their understanding of Xhosa tradition (204-206). The link between Ntsikana's political advice and his new faith is described thus by Hodgson (166):

The Xhosa response to the white advance is generally seen in terms of two opposing 'strategies for survival'. The one is for resistance and is epitomized by the leadership of Ndlambe with Nxele as his adviser. The other is for collaboration as followed by Ngqika and Ntsikana is supposed to have given him full support. But we shall see that though Ntsikana accepted the white man's religion, he counselled Ngqika against asking the British for aid in deciding the struggle for power with Ndlambe. Those who would see him purely as a political innovator, articulating the need for change, do not do justice to his Christian conviction and the price he paid for his witness in the form of persecution and suffering at the hands of both black and white.

According to his holistic African world-view, Ntsikana did not see any contradiction between political involvement and his faith. His new-found faith became for him the well-spring of his political actions. This is one reason why his heritage could be easily integrated with growing African nationalism. In this respect one dimension was of great importance: his claim that God had revealed himself directly to him (Ntsikana): “His appeal is precisely because he seems so unrelated to Vanderkemp and is revered as one sent directly by God as a prophet to the black people” (Hodgson 1985:183f).

**NONGQAWUSE (c.1841 - ?)**

Into the unstable Eastern Cape brew of bloody conflict over land ownership, discontent and religious change was born around 1841 a young girl, Nongqawuse. She was an orphan; her parents may have been killed in the War of Mlanjeni. Her uncle, Mhlakaza, was her guardian. He regarded himself as a Christian and a 'Gospel man', having accompanied the Anglican Archdeacon Merriman on various preaching expeditions around the Eastern Cape (Peires 1989:309f). Mhlakaza developed his own dual religious system containing dimensions of both Christianity and Traditional Religion, as part of which he started preaching a cattle-killing message (308f). It is very important to take into consideration the context within which the cattle-killing message started spreading. A great epidemic of lung sickness had reached

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1 More about this in the section on Nongqawuse below.
Xhosaland in 1855. It caused incredible havoc, killing between 50% and 100% of cattle in some areas. As there was no remedy for the sickness and it was so highly contagious, many Xhosa “began to believe that their cattle were rotten and impure, and they might as well kill them since they were probably going to die anyway” (:312).

It was in these circumstances that Nongqawuse, while guarding the crops against birds one day in 1856, heard her name called. According to the best written records (based on oral tradition) the message she received was the following:

Tell that the whole community will rise from the dead; and that all cattle living now must be slaughtered, for they have been reared by contaminated hands because there are people about who deal in witchcraft. There should be no cultivation, but great new grain pits must be dug, new houses must be built, and great strong cattle enclosures must be erected. Cut out new milksacks and weave many doors from buka roots. So says the chief Napakade, the descendant of Sifuba-sibanzi². The people must leave their witchcraft, for soon they will be examined by diviners (Peires 1989:79).

Discussions about the exact meaning of the message would follow, and minor adjustments would be made (for example, selling rather than killing the cattle), but this was the basic message which set in motion the tragedy of the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement.³ Some Xhosa immediately accepted, or at least partly accepted, the message, while others immediately rejected it and a great number adopted a wait-and-see attitude. The attitude of the various kings, and especially of Sarhili of the Gcaleka (recognised as overall king of all the Xhosa, including those in British Kaffraria), was very important and they were lobbied by spokespeople of the two ‘camps’ that developed: the ‘soft’ party of believers, and the ‘hard’ party of unbelievers (the characterisation was made by the Xhosa themselves).

Many delegations, official and private, went down to the Gxarha river where Nongqawuse lived, either to hear the message from her own lips or in the hope of encountering the spirits speaking on behalf of the ‘new people.’

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2 Napakade, the Eternal One, presented himself as an indigenous divinity of the Xhosa people. Sifuba-Sibanzi, the Broad-Chested One, presents a more complicated identity. He was also regarded as an indigenous divinity, but it seems probable that he actually resulted from a fusion of Xhosa Traditional Religion and mission Christianity. Many Xhosa indeed ascribe the name (today a recognised praise name for Jesus Christ) to the teachings of Ntsikana. According to Peires (1989:137) the juxtaposition of the two names ‘probably reflects the Christian dichotomy between God and Christ, and Xhosa uncertainty regarding the relative status of the two’, creating problems in defining a relationship in which God/Napakade is senior but Christ/Sifuba-sibanzi is more active.

3 The material in the rest of this paragraph is based on Peires (1989).
Nongqawuse steadfastly stuck to her original prophecy, also later when dis­appointment in the delay of the promise had begun to set in. Cultivation came to an end directly, but (as can be expected from people for whom cattle literally was life) the slaughtering of the cattle went ahead in fits and starts. People mostly killed part of their herds, retaining the milk cows or favourite oxen. With every disappointment in the delay of the fulfilment of the promise, paradoxically the pressure on the unbelievers increased, as they were blamed for the delay. It seems that the scale swung in the believers’ favour mainly for two reasons: the support of king Sarhili (and king Sandile in British Kaffraria), and the evil machinations of Governor Grey. Grey warned the kings to stop the cattle-killing, but once he realised that they were going to press ahead, he started planning how to use the tragedy to the best advantage of the Cape Colony, once and for all breaking Xhosa power and obtaining labourers for the colony.

By the end of 1858 the devastation was complete. Around 40,000 to 50,000 Xhosa had died, more than 150,000 became displaced refugees, around 400,000 head of cattle had been killed, and 600,000 acres of Xhosa land were lost to the British (Peires 1989:319). All because of the irrational prophecies of a young Xhosa girl – or was it? Peires (:123) suggests that it was not quite so simple. He proposes three contextual factors at work which made the prophecies seem logical (if not attractive) to the Xhosa in the 1850s:

- the form which the movement took, namely the killing of cattle, was suggested and determined by the lungsickness epidemic of 1854.
- The resurrection of the dead was only an aspect of a much wider event which the Xhosa believed to be in prospect, namely the regeneration of the earth and the re-enactment of the original Creation.
- The movement was by no means a ‘pagan reaction,’ but one which combined Christian and pre-Christian elements, fused under the heroic leadership of the ‘expected redeemer, the son of Sifuba-sibanzi, the Broad-Chested-One.

SIENER VAN RENSBURG

For my next choice we move from the Eastern Cape to the Western Transvaal. Near the town of Wolmaransstad was born in 1864 a boy, Nicolaas Janse van Rensburg, destined to become known as Siener (Seer⁴) van

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⁴ As he became generally known by the name ‘Siener’ van Rensburg, I use this Afrikaans form of his name throughout this paper.
Rensburg. He was born to poor farming parents, his father having been a teenaged Voortrekker. He attended school for no more than 20 days, as his help was needed in farm labour. His mother eventually taught him to read with the help of the Bible, the only book he ever read. As a boy Siener was not as strong and robust as his brothers, to the disappointment of his hardworking father. While still a toddler his mother noticed that he had the ability to 'see' things not visible to other people. As was widely accepted among Afrikaners at that time, this ability was considered to be a special gift from God. Siener's parents were devout Christians, members of the Reformed Church at Wolmaransstad, and this was the atmosphere in which he grew up.

Siener experienced many hardships while growing up. His father was very poor and often had to leave his family alone on the farm while he went on ox wagon trips to barter and try to earn money. When Siener was 16 years old he joined the Boer commandos in the First Anglo-Boer War, remaining in the field for the duration of the war. Eventually he would also join the commandos in the Second Anglo-Boer War and remain in the field to the bitter end. As a soldier he was a contradiction in terms, because he abhorred violence and through all his years on commando he never carried a gun. Siener was very aware of the fact that he had to use his gift in the service of his people (described as the Afrikaner Boer Nation). Eventually this gift in service of his people brought him much pain and sorrow, because he "saw" how his people... would be oppressed, downtrodden, and how traitorous some of his own would be" (Snyman 1999:19-25).

It is impossible to give an overview of Siener's visions. From 1871, at the age of seven, until his death in 1926 "he had more than 700 visions about his people in South Africa, other nations, as well as world affairs" (:14). A majority of his visions were written down by one of his daughters at his instruction, while many more were transmitted orally until written down. Where other nations and "world affairs" featured in his visions, it was mainly in direct or indirect relationship to South African, and especially Afrikaner affairs. Today his visions carry great weight with right wing Afrikaners, although one

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5 Afrikaners had a name for such gifted people: they were "met die helm gebore" (lit. "born with the caul").

6 This was probably why he went on commando though a pacifist, in order to use his gift to help the Boer fighters through his visions.

7 The main body of his visions has been collected and published by Snyman (1999).

8 The Mail and Guardian newspaper of 1-8 Jan 2004 (:4) reported that a Mr J van Heerden, a leader of one of the most virulent Rightwing groups (The Israel Vision) stated: 'We will not endure the hardships anymore. If you read the Bible, listen to the prophecies of Siener — it says we will rise against our oppressors. The signs of the times are there for all to see. The Israelites'
sometimes has to stretch one's imagination to make sense of their interpretations. So, for example, a vision he had on 3 September 1917 is today interpreted as a prophecy about the dismantling of apartheid. The vision (in Snyman 1999:301) reads thus:

Many black and white goats are mixed together east of Johannesburg. A road runs from East to West and in this road a little 'Kaffir' is driving pigs this way. Many donkey carts assemble in the Free State; a dusty road runs West and I suddenly take this road.

And the interpretation runs thus:

With this vision, Van Rensburg saw the dismantling of apartheid coming (black and white goats mixed together). England (pigs) under pressure from Africa (little 'Kaffir'), influences our leaders. The Afrikaners stand together for unity and self-preservation (donkey carts assembling). But they return to their fixed traditions and erstwhile home (republics?) (A dusty road and I suddenly take this road).9

Siener was no charlatan. During the Second Anglo-Boer War he had visions which, for example, saved General de Wet from losing a decisive battle (Snyman 1999:57-59) and prevented President Steyn from being captured by the British (:59-61). It is probably for this reason that right wing Afrikaners revere him so much and hold on faithfully to his vision of another “free Boer republic” (:210-239).10

**BEYERS NAUDÉ (1915-2004)**

I have opted for an approach in which I tell the story of prophets in South Africa according to individual life stories. With the story of Beyers Naudé a proviso is in order: he belongs to a group which may be called the Struggle Prophets, referring to the era of the struggle against apartheid. This group really formed a prophetic community and would include prophets such as

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9 The interpretations were partly provided by Siener himself, and are obviously embroidered upon by listeners over the years. So, for example, a vision he had on 2 October 1923 is today interpreted as a prediction of the Chernobyl disaster. In such cases Siener would provide the primary interpretation of symbolic figures, while the concrete application in terms of actual people and events would be added later by his followers.

10 It is very interesting to see the similarities between Siener's visions and the fantastic coup plans of the so-called 'Boeremag,' the militant right-wing Afrikaner movement that allegedly plotted the overthrow of the South African government after 1994. These details have emerged in the Boeremag Trial, first treason trial of the democratic South Africa.
Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane and others. I am therefore telling the story of Naudé as representative of a community of prophets.

Naudé was born an Afrikaner of the Afrikaners, son of a prominent Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) minister who was chaplain to one of the very important Boer generals during the Second Anglo-Boer War, General C.F. Beyers (after whom Beyers Naudé was named), and a founder member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. He therefore grew up in a very pious and patriotic home, attended Stellenbosch University and became a DRC minister himself. He served in various congregations before being called to a congregation in Johannesburg (Aasvoëlkop) and was eventually elected moderator of the Southern Transvaal Synod of the DRC. By that time he was a prominent member of the Broederbond himself.

In terms of pedigree and performance Naudé was therefore an Afrikaner leader, destined for great things if he toed the line. This however became impossible for him as a result of ecumenical encounters which convinced him that the race policy in state and church was basically unjust and in conflict with the clear demands of the gospel. The Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 and the subsequent Cottesloe Consultation called by the WCC was the turning point in his life. He started an institute (the Christian Institute of South Africa), meant to be the forerunner of a confessing church along the lines of the German Confessing Church during the Second World War (De Gruchy 1985:17).

The mouthpiece of the organisation was the monthly journal, Pro Veritate, and although ecumenical in nature, the aim was specifically to reach out to Afrikaner clergy and laity in the DRC. The three main issues addressed were the unity of the church, ecumenical participation, and the struggle against apartheid (De Gruchy 1985:14). It was his involvement in the Christian Institute (CI) and Pro Veritate which precipitated Naudé’s break with the DRC, since the church demanded that he distance himself from these commitments if he wished to remain an ordained minister and moderator of the church. He did not see his way open to do this and after preaching his farewell sermon to his congregation on the verse “Obey God rather than man,” he lost his status as a minister and to all intents and purposes left the DRC. He continued his involvement in the CI and Pro Veritate until both were shut down by the government and Naudé served with a banning order in 1977.

Naudé’s main prophetic contribution was his willingness as white Afrikaner to cross the racial divide unconditionally and through his own involvement to provide an opportunity for many people to catch a glimpse of the

11 All the material in this section is based on Villa-Vicencio 1985:3-13, unless indicated otherwise.
other South African world out there. Naudé himself very soon realised that liberation was not something which whites could "do for" black South Africans. Being 'a voice for the voiceless' was important, but listening to the voiceless and aiding their empowerment to fight their own battle was much more important. Walshe (in De Gruchy 1985:17) puts it thus:

Naudé and the Christian Institute had a long way to go before coming to the full realisation of the centrality of the black viewpoint for the future of Christianity and of justice in South Africa. Nevertheless, something new had been started in the Institute. A prophetic Christian voice was being heard and simultaneously there emerged the prospect of a prophetic ecumenical movement.

It is greatly to Naudé's credit as prophet that, once he became aware of the centrality of black thinking through his greater exposure to and involvement in the black world, he was willing to accept the challenge. As a result,

every effort was made to relate to black consciousness organisations, trade unions and black leaders... The CI was rapidly moving away from an organisation aimed primarily at changing white attitudes and the white church, to one which understood its role as that of support for the black struggle for justice and liberation" (De Gruchy 1985:22).

In this role Naudé earned so much support, credibility and trust that, though not a member of the ANC himself, this Afrikaner of Afrikaners was included in that organisation's team which initiated negotiations with the National Party government for the change to a democratic dispensation in 1991.

CONCLUSIONS

I wish to draw some preliminary conclusions about the role of prophets in South African history.

Prophets and their role in stressful situations

Large scale religious change (from Traditional Religion to Christianity) took place amidst the upheavals associated with colonialism. Ntsikana and Nongqawuse acted in such crisis situations. This is not strange, because "Prophetic figures tend to appear in societies in times of crisis — in situations at the personal, family or some societal level in which the normal order of
things seems to be threatened with collapse" (Overholt 1989:81). Both colonialism and large scale conversion to Christianity were certainly experienced as threats to the normal order of things. Ntsikana prophesied and acted in favour of a pacifist, measured and controlled adaptation to a new order in which the Xhosa prophets would control the pace and the content of change. One would therefore perhaps be justified in characterising him as a prophet of inculturation (in today's terms). Nongqawuse proclaimed an apocalyptic message of a restoration of the old order. At the time of her appearance, the results of European incursion, loss of land and wealth, all apparently in the name of a new religion, had become unbearably stressful. I think Shirley Thorpe (1982) is correct therefore in characterising the cattle-killing of which Nongqawuse was the prophet as a "millenarian response" to stress:

A millenarian movement is one in which believers envision a new age, a millennium, which will arrive if people follow certain injunctions; but their vision of the future is heavily influenced by an idealized picture of the past. Millenarian movements have been described as reactionary or backward looking because the golden age is supposedly modeled on ideal notions about the past and because the techniques for creating a new age seem to be irrational and unlikely to succeed, at least from the point of view of outside observers. This is too simplistic, however, since millenarian movements are equally an attempt to cope with the present, to change it, and to create a more promising future (Keller in Thorpe 1982:136).

In the light of continual European encroachment onto Xhosa land, bloody wars, and several treaties signed and dishonoured, distrust and confusion grew into despair. In these circumstances the prophetic promise of a glorious millennium based on an idealised vision of the past, to be attained after the people had been cleansed of sin and had made a (supreme) sacrifice of devotion and dedication, became an attractive possibility to deal with the overly stressful present (Thorpe 1982:135f).

"God sent me...": the question of authority

Inherent in any prophetic action or message is the claim to authority:

12 Beyers Naudé and the struggle prophets were also active in a very stressful situation. Although Siener van Rensburg's prophetic career spanned a long time, he actually also achieved his status as a prophet during the Anglo-Boer War years, a time of great stress for Afrikaners.

13 '[Ntsikana's] response, far from on the one hand rejecting his own culture, or on the other simply protecting it, was to enrich and enlarge it. He was not taking a leap into someone else's culture and failing to get there' (Hodgson 1985:181).
(prophet) do not speak or act simply on my own authority; I have been sent by a higher authority (God). Obviously no group of hearers will accept this claim without further ado. The claim to speak or act on behalf of an authoritative sender needs corroboration of some kind. And in this process the audience plays a very important role. Their role is so crucial that Overholt (1989:71) indeed argues that people choose their own prophets, in that

...they attribute authority to them, because they perceive in the proclamation continuity with the cultural traditions sufficient to make what they say intelligible and at the same time innovations sufficient to offer the possibility of a new interpretation that will bring order out of what is perceived as chaos.

For this to happen, the audience must be convinced of the effectiveness of the prophet's words and/or actions. This effectiveness is usually experienced in rhetorical skill (the ability to proclaim a message and adapt it where necessary, which makes sense out of a chaotic and stressful situation) and/or supernatural confirmation in deed (fulfilled prophecy) (71). A prophet claiming to speak in the name of God is therefore in a sense dependent for authority both on God and on the audience.

It is quite interesting to view the history of prophecy in South Africa from this vantage point. Nongqawuse provides perhaps the clearest example of the important role played by the audience in attributing authority. It has been indubitably established that the cattle-killing message was already drifting around before she started her prophetic career. She started proclaiming her message with great rhetorical skill and gave it wide credibility. Although she could not point to any supernatural confirmation to confirm her prophetic authority (indeed, quite the opposite — failure followed failure), she skilfully adapted the basic message to changing circumstances and with the help of powerful aides such as her uncle Mhlakaza and others, managed to convince enough of the Xhosa about her prophetic authority to drive the process to its disastrous conclusion.

In the case of Siener van Rensburg, though, he seems not to have had the same rhetorical skill, although the fact that he couched his prophecies in language and images redolent of Old Testament language and imagery no doubt contributed to the prophetic authority attributed to him in the Afrikaner community. At the same time he could indeed point to supernatural confirmation in his war prophecies. As for Beyers Naudé and the struggle prophets, this provides perhaps the clearest instance of prophetic authority arising from the community.

There is, though, another dimension to the question of prophetic authority. That is the relationship between prophets and the ruling powers. A much used Hebrew term for prophet is nabi. Würtwein (in Overholt 1989:74) says that the call to be a nabi "is a call to an office like that of king, priest, or
wise man, in which a fixed function – and not the specific tasks or attitudes of a given individual – is central.” It is therefore expected of the prophet “to undergird the welfare of the nation through acts of intercession and proclamations about the future.” In this understanding of the term prophet there is then a close alliance between the prophet and the ruling powers. As an example of this Würthwein (in Overholt 1989:74) refers to Amos, who started out his prophetic career as a nabi in Bethel but then was conscience bound also to prophesy a message of doom, as a result of which he was expelled from his prophetic office in Bethel. In terms of my historical narrative above this is also an interesting point to consider: Nongqawuse, ward of a recognised councillor with some prophetic dimensions to his actions, can be considered in nabi terms. Certainly she would not have been able to drive her prophetic movement to its logical disastrous conclusion without strong support from the Xhosa ruling powers. It is equally clear in the case of Siener van Rensburg that he was fulfilling an expected social function in the armies of the Boer Republics. His strongest allies were indeed the Boer generals. Which brings us to Beyers Naudé, whose history shows remarkable similarities to that of Amos. Naudé in his early years fulfilled a function as “court prophet” in the Afrikaner community. When he became convinced of the fact that the road would lead to disaster, though, he became in Afrikaner terms a prophet of doom and was kicked out of “the court,” but remained a prophet. The question of the social location of a prophet is therefore of great importance in understanding prophetic authority. To conclude this paragraph I therefore wish to quote Overholt (:75) at some length:

First, social roles and expectations are understood to be culturally defined, which means that the social location in which a prophet carries out his (sic) activity is relevant to the problem of understanding the nature of his authority. Second, social location has to be defined broadly to include not just institutional settings in the strict sense but whole culturally determined patterns of expectation on the part of the prophet’s audience as well.

What I have said in the previous paragraphs should not in any way be interpreted as a disclaimer to any divine authority. If I point out the role of the audience or ruling powers in attributing prophetic authority, I do not mean to imply that there is no place for a call to divine authority. The fact that the audience contributes to the phenomenon of prophetic authority does not imply that they can actually confer prophetic powers at will. The fact that the prophet claims to be acting on divine authority means, as Overholt (:72) points out, “that they already have, or are perceived to have these powers.” What the audience does, then, is to confirm the prophets in their role (:72).
And what about the present?

"Where have all the prophets gone?" ask both Cedric Mayson (2000) and Hennie Pieterse (2000), with reference to the period since the first democratic elections in 1994. "The reason for the silence of the church and for 'religion's incapacity to take us forward'," says Mayson (2000:59), "is that religion does not know which way to go. It has not found its role in the new South Africa." In terms specifically of the Christian faith community, it seems as if the consensus was, "Let us return to being the church and take care of real church business", which generally meant turning back inward to issues of self-preservation (60). Pieterse (2000:89) argues that a consensus must exist about "a situation of oppression and suffering and an attack on human dignity due to a government applying an oppressive ideology or political system" before prophets can arise. Since there is no such consensus, we are living in a time of prophetic silence. Can the review of a few individual prophets in the history of South Africa perhaps help us understand this situation better? I think so.

We have seen above that prophets arise especially in times of great existential stress in a given community. In South Africa these times of stress generally arose on the racist fault line running through our community. More than 300 years of colonialism and racism, culminating in apartheid, have conditioned us to expect that prophets will show the way out of this specific crisis. Since 1994 the situation has, however, changed dramatically. Racism is still alive and well, but the institutions that keep racism alive have changed. It is commonly accepted that the democratic elections of 1994 propelled South Africa into the modern world, dominated as it is by a globalised political economy (cf. Pieterse 2000:83). This has radically changed the social dynamics at work in our society. Although there will always be homegrown situations of crisis (for such is the nature of humanity), our crisis situations in the present dispensation will rather be dominated by the effects of globalisation (cf. Kim 2001; Saayman 2003).

We are already experiencing two crises which can be termed global: the AIDS pandemic and poverty. 14 We should perhaps be looking for our present generation of prophets among the activists at work in these areas. Two possibilities come to mind: TRAC (the Treatment Action Campaign, and especially its leader, Mr. Zachie Achmat) in the area of AIDS, and the Jubilee campaign (in which Archbishop Ndungane of Cape Town plays a leading role) in the area of poverty. If we cannot identify prophets in their ranks yet, another

14 I cannot argue the precise dimension of the crises here, but refer to Saayman 2003 and the literature mentioned there.
possibility arises from my historical analysis: maybe the awareness of the crises in the community is not such yet that prophetic authority can be attributed to leading individuals.

This seems to be the case especially in the case of HIV/AIDS. Political leaders send out ambivalent, if not contradictory and vacillating, signals about the pandemic, and many communities (especially religious communities) seem still to be in denial. Many religious people who are HIV positive either hide their status for fear of ostracism, or people who have come out openly complain that they receive little if any religious support; condemnation seems more likely. In any case, it seems to me that we are not necessarily suffering a dearth of prophets, but rather a lack of community awareness to confirm the prophetic message, for as Overholt (1989:183) says: "Prophets can exist only in dynamic interaction with an audience." In Christian terms, this is a very important missionary and missiological challenge for the present: using David Bosch’s characterisation of "mission in many modes" to formulate and define "mission as prophecy" (Botha 1994) for South Africa in the 21st century.

**LIST OF REFERENCES**


