

Christian Prophecy

The Post-Biblical Tradition

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I

Introduction

“Isn’t there here a prophet of Yahweh, that we may inquire of Yahweh by him?”¹ These are the words of a king in ancient Israel who in frustration cried out for a prophetic word as he and his people found themselves in threatening political circumstances. Prophecy continued to be a means by which God guided and saved his people throughout the Old Testament, so that their well-being was directly dependent on his prophetic works that kept them on God’s track, which they easily lost when the prophets were silent or silenced: “Where there is no vision the people get out of hand.”²

But what happened with the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ? Did God stop speaking to his people until the day the Son of man will “come with the clouds of heaven?”³ Or does he continue to guide, build, and aid his church through the works of his servants the prophets just as he did with the people of Israel?

I.I. Thesis and Purpose

Many Christians believe that prophecy died either with the last Old Testament canonical prophet, with John the Baptist, with Jesus, with the last apostle, with the closure of the canon, with the rise of Montanism, or with Islam. The purpose of this work is to show that this conviction is inadequate. It posits the argument that prophecy, as known in ancient Israel, continued in Christianity as an

inherent and continuous feature and charism in the life of the church and that prophets have a vital role to play in the new covenant. Although the claim of prophetic revelations always required careful and difficult discernment, the experience and preaching of many a prophetic personality had great and often very positive impact on the life of the church. Despite the challenge of how to discern between prophecy true and false, healthy and unhealthy, the prophetic charism proved to be leading to purified, renewed, and revitalized faith. Through historical evidence and theological discourse, the aim of this work is then to shed light upon the preconditions, nature, and function of prophecy in the Christian church.

The topic of Christian prophecy has proven to be of interest to readers even outside academe. Furthermore, surprisingly little has been written on Christian prophecy from a perspective of systematic theology. Therefore, this book constitutes an edited version of my dissertation aimed at being accessible and relevant to both professional and nonprofessional theologians; it can function as a general introduction to the issue of Christian prophecy, yet readers with particular interests may find resources in sections relevant for their specific needs. The book is written from a primarily Catholic perspective while seeking to be informed by and be a resource for other Christian traditions as well.

Thomas Aquinas is one of many medieval theologians who held Christian prophetic charisms in high esteem and heralded their continuation in the church. Thomas Aquinas mainly saw the purpose of prophecy as addressing the moral conduct of the faithful, and as such, prophecy will continue to have a great role in the life of the church: "The ancient prophets were sent to establish the faith and to amend morals. . . . Today the faith is already established, since the promises have been fulfilled in Christ. But prophecy that aims at amendment of morals has not ceased, nor will it ever cease."⁴

In another passage regarding Christian prophecy, Thomas Aquinas writes:

The prophets who foretold the coming of Christ could not continue further than John, who with his finger pointed to Christ actually present. Nevertheless as Jerome says on this passage, "This does not mean that there were no more prophets after John. For we read in the Acts of the apostles that Agabus and the four maidens, daughters of Philip, prophesied." John, too, wrote a prophetic book about the end of the Church; and at all times there have not been lacking persons having the spirit of prophecy, not indeed for the declaration of any new doctrine of faith, but for the direction of human acts.⁵

This assessment of St. Thomas Aquinas has been reiterated many times, as in the radio address by Pope John XXIII at the centenary of Lourdes (February 13, 1959):

The Roman pontiffs, guardians and interpreters of divine Revelation . . . have a duty also to recommend to the attention of the faithful (when after mature examination they judge them opportune for the general good) the supernatural lights which God pleased to dispense freely to certain privileged souls, not for the sake of proposing new doctrines but to guide our conduct [non ad novam doctrinam fidei depromendam, sed ad humanorum actuum directionem].⁶

As Thomas Aquinas did, so do a number of contemporary theologians endorse the continuation of Christian prophecy: prophets “form a major line of continuity between Israel, Judaism, and the church, both historically and theologically”;⁷ “the history of the church is marked through and through by the fact of prophecy”;⁸ and the prophets “always possess a permanent and irreplaceable significance for the church.”⁹ As Migaku Sato writes about prophecy in the ancient church: “Without this rebirth of prophecy, there would have been no Jesus movement, no Gospels, and thus no Christianity.”¹⁰ Ben Witherington has summarized this well:

[The prophets] stood as constant reminders that God was not finished with God’s people just yet, nor had God left them without a living witness. To a significant degree, both Judaism and Christianity can be called communities of the word, and one form in which the word often came to these communities was through prophets and prophetesses. They reminded them not merely that “in the beginning was the word” but also that God would have the last word.¹¹

One of the theologians, to whom we shall return frequently because of his constructive reflections on Christian prophecy, is Karl Rahner. Rahner highlights the significance of revelations in the church and the need for a theology that places them in their right context:

If there were such phenomena at the establishment of the Old Testament revelation and of the Christian revelation, then the possibility of similar manifestations occurring in subsequent history cannot be denied *a priori*. It is certain *de fide* that there have been genuine revelations and prophecies in former times, especially under the written law. The same is true under the law of grace. To deny that there have been genuine revelations and prophecies since the time of

the primitive Church would not be heretical but would be at least temerarious and impious.¹²

During the course of this work I shall, however, do more than highlight prophecy's continuous Christian presence, for the debate on prophecy leads to profound, often surprising, insights on the nature of Christianity and the church as such. For instance, some have argued that Christianity is a perfect state and that salvation simply occurs in the world when people accept its doctrine as the truth. However, reality is more complex. As we shall see, a differentiated approach, present throughout the history of Christian theology, sees Christianity's positioning in salvation history as an intermediary state between the first and the second coming of Christ. Thus, in order fully to be itself, the church is in constant need of the presence, guidance, and instruction of the ever-living Word in the church who also speaks through his prophets. From this perspective, the *telos*, or aim and ultimate goal of Christianity, may be just as significant a light post on its course on the ocean of history as the *arché*, or starting point. Just as the Old Testament prophets pointed to the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and Moses, so the Christian prophets serve to keep alive Christ's promise of coming again to fulfill all things. In this way, Old Testament and Christian prophecy share the similar fundamental structure of building on and serving to realize a revealed normative salvation economy while promising its fulfillment in a yet greater economy in the future.¹³

From a phenomenological point of view, Old Testament and Christian prophecy share many traits. Both Old Testament and authentic Christian prophetic messages are defined by implying the experience of direct divine revelation and intervention and not just of rational reflection.¹⁴ The same God speaks to both Old Testament and Christian prophets, although the Christian prophet mainly experiences revelations of Christ. Both Old Testament and Christian prophets are authorized and ordered to forward the revealed words to the people of God for their edification. Thus, their fundamental traits are similar, especially in the writings of Luke: "The *functions* accorded to early Christian prophecy by Luke are wholly within the scope of prophecy as we know it from the OT and other parallels in religious history."¹⁵

Nonetheless, the two phenomena have received very different treatment. While Old Testament prophecy usually kept its proper name—*prophecy*—Christian prophecy was, as we shall see, at least after the Montanist crisis degraded to designations such as *private revelations* or *epiphenomena of the mystical life*, or simply relegated to the broader category of Christian mysticism. However, such terms do not give enough credit to Christ's free choice of addressing his people for designs of which only he knows the importance. If

the phenomenon is identical in both contexts of the Old Testament and the church, why do we grant them so different theological treatment?

It is possible to discern a number of reasons for this enigma. First, the concern for the radical nature of the Christ-event and its normative testimony in Sacred Scripture caused many to avoid using the term “prophecy” as a designation for revelations occurring after the completion of Sacred Scripture. The same concern led to the widespread teaching of an “end of Revelation with the last apostle” that in turn led to further resistance to the presence of prophecy in Christianity. We shall return to this vital concern later. Second, as Karl Rahner noted, Christendom was from the beginning marked by a Platonic preference for the wordless and imageless faith to the detriment of the more prophetic and kerygmatic spirituality that he actually considers more authentically Christian than the former.¹⁶ Third, Rahner believes the problem arises from what he calls theological jealousy toward the charismatic authority of prophets, an authority no theologian is able to compete with.¹⁷ Fourth, prophecy has always been connected with the possibility of false prophecy. As Tadeusz Czakanski points out, prophecy’s most difficult problem is “how to recognize [the] true and unmask the false.”¹⁸ While I personally believe that this fourth point may have contributed most to the misappraisal of Christian prophecy, a differentiated investigation shows that none of these reasons constitute sufficient ground for the so different treatment between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy.

With Rahner, we must therefore ask ourselves the question “whether anything God reveals can be ‘unimportant.’ . . . If it be said that [Christian] private revelations contain only such things as can be known independently of them from public Revelation (e.g. the possibility and fruitfulness of a new devotion), then the question arises why God reveals these things instead of leaving it to the sagacity of theologians to deduce them.”¹⁹ If Christian prophecy is received and functions in much the same way as its Old Testament counterpart, why treat it differently? Why not admit the importance of Christian prophecy and enhance the exploration of its theological value, place, and function in the church? This work is a modest contribution to this purpose of a responsible theological appraisal of Christian prophecy.

1.2. Limitation

One of the problems with the notion of Christian prophecy is that it has been watered down. It has become, with Erich Fascher, a “frame concept without concrete content.”²⁰

In secular life, the terms *prophecy*, *prophet*, or *prophetic* are used, for example, for antiglobalization protesters and for visionary politicians who read the signs of the times. In the Christian context, something similar has happened, so that the prophetic category metaphorically is applied to various instances in the church. In Lutheranism, prophecy has been viewed in light of the *Munus propheticum*—the prophetic criticism of Gospel-faithless Christianity—so that the prophet is the protestant, the religious rebel, or just the inspired preacher of God’s word. Protestant Eugene Boring has characterized this tendency well:

Modern religious leaders who are suspicious of charismatic phenomena but want to claim the biblical prophets as their heroes can consider the essence of “prophetic” ministry to be championing the cause of the oppressed in the name of social justice, as in Protestant liberalism, or simply identify “prophecy” and “preaching with authority,” so that “every real preacher is a prophet,” as in some conservative streams of Protestantism.²¹

The term has been applied in a similar direction in Catholic liberation theology, as a theology distinct from universitarian or academic theology.²² Apart from this application, Catholics have, however, mainly applied the prophetic category to the Spirit’s operations in and through the Catholic Magisterium, guaranteeing its infallibility charism or assuring that it mediates God’s truth through time. Thus Rahner talks about the general assistance of the Holy Spirit as a prophetic element,²³ just as the anthology of texts on Vatican II *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Carisma e Profezia*, edited by Tommaso Stenico and Francis Arinze, investigates the prophetic novelty of Vatican II.²⁴ The prophetic category has been applied to the wider context of the church that carries out a prophetic task for the world of forwarding God’s word and ministering his salvation. This has been iterated by the Second Vatican Council,²⁵ and is a view accepted by most denominations, although Hans-Ruedi Weber is puzzled by “the strange lack of ecumenical reflection about the prophetic vocation of the church.”²⁶ Similarly, the anthology *Chiesa e Profezia*, edited by Gianfranco Calabrese, features numerous applications of the prophetic term to the Christian context, without directly treating the prophets in the church such as Birgitta of Vadstena (Bridget of Sweden) and many others who directly preached the revealed words of Christ to the church of their times.²⁷

In other situations, the term is used for individuals who acted under the inspiration of the Spirit, consciously or unconsciously. Thus John Conley and Joseph W. Koterski entitle their book on John Paul II *Prophecy and Diplomacy*,²⁸ and B. Häring calls Francis of Assisi the greatest Christian prophet ever,²⁹

although he never wrote down revealed messages as did the Old Testament or Christian prophets.

As Eugene Boring has pointed out, even New Testament scholarly works on prophecy are often watered down. Thus he criticizes David Hill's *New Testament Prophecy* for using the vague phrases "pastoral preaching" and "exhortatory teaching" as his working definition of prophecy, which "allows him to designate Paul's sermon in Acts 13, all of Paul's letters, and the Letter to the Hebrews as 'prophecy.'"³⁰ Walter Houston's 1973 Oxford dissertation uses "creative manipulator of traditions" as his working definition for prophecy. This description leads him to consider Matthew, Mark, and Luke to be prophets.³¹

We should not be surprised by the fluctuations in terminology, for many phenomena come close to Christian prophecy, without deserving that designation in its fullest sense. Thus, one concern in Marianne Schlosser's excellent dissertation on the medieval evaluation of prophecy was to investigate how the Scholastic theologians viewed the relationship between prophecy and "quasi-prophetic" charisms.³² However, while wider applications of the prophetic category have important contextual validity, they remain *applications* of the term, not full treatments of the original phenomenon itself. This book seeks to investigate Christian prophecy in this immediate and original form. But what exactly is that?

1.3. The Object of the Investigation

In order to be able to investigate prophecy both for its historical development and evaluate it for its theological significance and function, we need to arrive at a working description of Christian prophecy. Such a description can only arise from an analysis of the phenomenon's New Testament identity, since Christian prophecy emerges directly from the function of prophecy in the early church.

In spite of the pessimism of some, most exegetes do agree that it is possible to arrive at a working description of prophecy as it emerges from the New Testament, even though the phenomenon is quite complex. We will return to a more detailed analysis of the essence of New Testament prophecy in section 3.3.1. Since the New Testament setting must be our normative framework, I shall in that section briefly present the different attempts that have been made in modern research to provide a definition of New Testament prophecy. With this description, we are then equipped with the tools needed to move beyond Scripture and search for the phenomenon in the history of the church, even when it is not labeled prophetic.

We may anticipate the debate between the various exegetical opinions: Christian prophecy requires privileged insight in the mysteries of God, and “Divine revelation is a *sine qua non* of prophecy.”³³ As Wayne Grudem puts it: “A ‘revelation’ from the Holy Spirit is necessary for prophecy to occur. If there is no such revelation, there is no prophecy.”³⁴ But for *mystical experience* to become *prophecy* another element is equally constitutive, namely divine commission,³⁵ which urges the prophet to forward the revealed communication to the people of God, “building them up and giving them encouragement and reassurance” in order to “build up the community.”³⁶ In its essence, then, *the New Testament prophet, whether labeled as such or not, is a Christian who, through experienced revelations, receives a message that he or she is directed to hand on to the church for its edification as part of a firm design in God’s will to save, guide, and bless his people.* It is this phenomenon, in the framework of the above limitations, that this work seeks to elaborate theologically. I will not treat the rediscovery of prophecy in the charismatic movement in this book, since this particular form of prophecy requires a treatment of its own that transcends the limitations of the present study.

1.4. Private, Particular, Special, Dependent, or Prophetic Revelations?

The primary vehicles of prophecy, that is, visions, apparitions, and locutions, are often referred to as *private revelations*. This concept is, however, ambiguous for various reasons. First, as Pierre Adnès writes, private revelations almost always contain an intelligible message, while visions and apparitions may stand alone without accompanying messages. A distinction should hence be made between visions, apparitions, and locutions on one hand and on the other hand revelations as such, which always carry a message. Second, the term *private revelation* not only fails to apply to the individual occurrences of visions, apparitions, and locutions, it also does not address the communication of prophetic messages, which are never “private.”³⁷ In fact, prophetic writings such as those of Hildegard of Bingen and Birgitta of Vadstena cannot be said to have been private. In fact, they always aimed at the edification of the church as a whole. It may happen that a person has a message that is intended for the person herself, and this would be the only legitimate application of the term. But here we leave the scene of Christian prophecy that always aims at the edification of the congregation. When dealing with Christian prophecy, the term *private revelation* is therefore of little avail and has, in fact, been the object of increasing critical scrutiny.

Pope Benedict XVI has argued how the term *private revelations* could be understood in the best way; he has said that the designation “private” can be compared to the term “private mass,” which is never private in essence:

In theology, the concept of “private” does not mean regarding only the person involved and no one else. Rather, it is an expression of the degree of importance, as is the case, for example, with “private Mass.” That is to say that the “revelations” of Christian mystics and prophets can never aspire to the same level as biblical Revelation; they can only lead to it and they must measure themselves by it. But that does not mean that these types of revelation are not important for the Church in its entirety. Lourdes and Fatima are the proof that they are important. In the final analysis, they are but an appeal to the biblical Revelation and, for this very reason, they are important.³⁸

The widespread success of the term *private revelations* seems mainly due to its employment by sixteenth-century Thomists such as Cardinal Cajetan, Melchior Cano, and Domingo Bañez. Their insistence on this terminology could, as we shall see, be partly explained by the fear of the Lutheran Reformation that, although not being built on prophetic revelations as in Montanism, came across as a modern example of an independent movement breaking off from the church and its leadership (see section 2.2).³⁹

The Council of Trent (1545–1563), however, did not employ this terminology. It referred to revelations in its discussion on justification and argued that no one could be certain to be among the elect, unless this had been revealed through a “special revelation.”⁴⁰ The phrase was hereafter used by other Thomistic theologians, especially Andrea Vega, Francisco Suarez, and Juan de Lugo, who inferred from the council’s teaching that the content of postapostolic revelations could indeed be believed with *divine faith*.⁴¹

Another terminological possibility is the phrase *particular revelations*. As Avery Dulles writes, the phrase was “used by some theologians in their presentations at the Council of Trent.”⁴² René Laurentin uses the term as a general designation to cover both the particular revelations that are truly *private* (such as, for instance, the three secrets that Bernadette of Lourdes received and whose content no one ever came to know)⁴³ and the *public* particular revelations, addressed to a greater number of people.⁴⁴ The danger with such terminology obviously is a confusion of the Deposit of Faith (see section 4.2) with particular revelations, for the term “public” is used both with regard to the public Revelation (Deposit of Faith) and to those particular revelations that are addressed to the entire church. But this danger seems minor, since public Revelation always assumes a singular case, whereas particular revelations assume a plural case.

Avery Dulles believes that the mentioned designations *particular* or *special* revelations, used at the Council of Trent, might be more apt, but duly notes that the term *private revelations* has “wider currency.”⁴⁵ Augustinus Suh agrees with Laurentin and Dulles, and writes: “Keeping in mind the nature and the functions of posterior revelations for the life of the Church, the term ‘special revelations’ or ‘particular revelations’ might perhaps be more pertinent, because the formula ‘private revelation’ risks to reduce its reach and purpose to the dimension of a single individual.”⁴⁶ Interestingly, however, these observances have little practical importance, as Suh in spite of his criticism employs the term consistently throughout his book, even in its title, *Le rivelazioni privati nella vita della chiesa*.

Rahner opts for yet a different distinction. He distinguishes between mystical visions (Laurentin’s private particular revelations) and prophetic visions (Laurentin’s public particular revelations). Rahner’s differentiation is taken from the religious sciences (Religionswissenschaft), and according to his own words it is a problematic concept even there.⁴⁷ Rahner’s careful self-criticism is reinforced by Volken, who considers it not to apply to reality.⁴⁸

Gerald O’Collins proposes a distinction between what he calls “foundational” and “dependent” aspects of revelation and salvation, designating “the divine self-communication ‘now’ and its absolute climax ‘then’ in Christ.”⁴⁹ This distinction could be fruitfully applied to the different aspects of Revelation that are central to the issue of Christian prophecy: “Foundational” Revelation would hence be the establishment of the economy of salvation and its normative testimony in Sacred Scripture. “Dependent” revelation (or revelations) would designate postapostolic particular forms of divine self-disclosure to actualize Revelation in history. The term would make good sense in regard to prophecy, since the authenticity of postapostolic prophetic revelations are always evaluated on the Deposit of Faith (see section 9.2), hence the “dependence” thereof. Second, they can be said to be “dependent” from the foundational Revelation ontologically, as authentic prophetic revelations can but be a postapostolic manifestation of the one Word, incarnate in Christ, but ever alive in the church.

Having reviewed all the different proposals, and keeping in mind that the function of postapostolic revelations is identical to that of Old and New Testament prophecy, at least in its function, I would argue for using the simple but clear term for postapostolic revelations addressed to a greater number of people, namely, *prophetic revelations*. It is this term that is primarily used in this book. This term marks the difference between the postapostolic revelations and the *revelatio publica*. It indicates not only that such revelations are the direct result of divine intervention, but that they actually fulfill the function in the church of communicating an intelligible message to the congregation and that it has a prophetic purpose.

1.5. Motivation

As it shall be clear during the course of this work, prophecy never ceased in the Christian church but has continued to play a vital role, especially in the Catholic tradition. It is hard to consider the Catholic church without the prophetic tradition that has accompanied its entire history. Prophetic visions and divine instructions accompanied the founding of the vast majority of its religious orders. The same accounts for most pilgrimage sites, which usually became what they did after apparitions of Christ, of the Blessed Virgin, or of an angel to a privileged soul.⁵⁰ Much Catholic hagiography has eminent prophetic traits, so that individuals such as Gertrude the Great of Helfta (†1302), Birgitta of Vadstena (†1373), Catherine of Siena (†1380), Joan of Arc (†1431), Julian of Norwich (†c.1416), and Margaret Mary Alacoque (†1690) all come across as classic Christian prophets.

The manifestation of prophetic charisms in the church has not decreased; on the contrary theologians such as René Laurentin speak of an “increase” of prophetic manifestations in our time.⁵¹ Since the big Marian revelations of the last century, beginning with La Salette, Lourdes, and Rue du Bac in France, and Fatima in Portugal, Marian apparitions, mostly to children, have become ever more frequent.⁵² The Catholic authorities have, only recently, recognized Banneux and Beauraing in Belgium. In the 1960s the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared to four girls in Garabandal, Spain. In Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, she has since the summer of 1981 reportedly been appearing to six children. All six claim to continue to receive apparitions. Three experience them daily, whereas the other three only experience an annual apparition. Thirty million believers are said to have visited Medjugorje.⁵³

The messages of the Greek Orthodox mystic Vassula Rydén are another interesting example of apparent contemporary Christian prophecy. Mrs. Rydén is reported to have received messages from Jesus and Mary since 1986. These writings have garnered enormous attention and debate, so much so that the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) in 1995 saw itself obliged to issue a “Notification” to Catholic faithful not to consider the authority of her words above that of Sacred Scripture. The initial caution was followed by deepened study of her messages and a written dialogue with her, leading the CDF’s prefect at the time, Joseph Ratzinger, to conclude that she had provided “useful clarifications” of the issues formerly raised against her.⁵⁴ As a result of this interest, her messages, first published in 1991 with the title *True Life in God*, were translated and published only ten years later in forty different languages. Respected theologians have written over twenty books about her. Since her

first public meeting in 1991, believers have invited her to give over seven hundred public lectures in over fifty-eight nations.⁵⁵ Modern experiences such as these show that prophecy continues as a vigorous element of contemporary church life.

Modern forms of communication, and the Internet in particular, serve to enhance the way religions communicate and evangelize.⁵⁶ Sociologists of religion discern between *religion online* and *online religion*, referring to the way religions express themselves versus religious activity occurring *online*.⁵⁷ On the one hand, the Internet offers great opportunities for religious expression and communication (*religion online*). John Paul II was one of many religious leaders who pointed to the internet's great opportunities:

The Church approaches this new medium with realism and confidence. Like other communications media, [the Internet] is a means, not an end in itself. The Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. . . . Finally, in these troubled times, let me ask: how can we ensure that this wondrous instrument first conceived in the context of military operations can now serve the cause of peace?⁵⁸

On the other hand, Internet-based religious communication seems to constitute a new form of religiosity (*online religion*). More than most other forms of religious life, *online religion* has a highly individualistic character—the religious navigator may remain hidden and private without participating in communitarian worship, which has been of the highest importance to Abrahamic traditions.

The Internet's impact on Christian prophecy is no less significant. As the anthropologist Paolo Apolito shows, the Internet is a major resource for interest in prophetic charisms, so much so that one can speak of a new form of post-modern spirituality combining charismatic and traditionalist religious trends with modern communication and media opportunities.⁵⁹

Inasmuch as prophecy itself continues to grow, and reports of prophetic messages proliferate through the mass media, the need for serious theological reflection increases as well. Since true prophecy always has been and will be accompanied by its false counterpart, the need for criteria to “test the spirits” is evident. It seems a norm that for every occurrence of prophecy the church deems positive there usually follow multiple related or associated false prophetic occurrences. This multiplies the need for careful discernment exponentially. Such discernment is presented by New Testament authors as a gift of the Spirit. In the words of David Aune, “there is a connection between the gift

of prophecy and the gift of ‘distinguishing between spirits.’”⁶⁰ But even if God provides his grace to facilitate discernment, prophetic messages have primarily been judged in the light of doctrinal investigation of their conformity with Sacred Scripture.

The purpose of this study is not to provide an overview of false prophetic manifestations and their effect on the life of the church, which has been documented elsewhere—although the damaging results of these cannot be underestimated.⁶¹ Rather, my purpose is to evaluate the nature and function of the authentic charism of Christian prophecy. Nevertheless, the criteria for discernment are of the highest importance as a response to the pastoral need for identifying true Christian prophecy. For only with these criteria is the church today able to apply Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians: “Do not stifle the Spirit or despise the gift of prophecy with contempt; test everything and hold on to what is good.”⁶² The discernment that Paul speaks about is twofold. Christians are called to be on guard against false prophets and at the same time to make sure they do not judge and ultimately kill the true prophets.⁶³ It is a serious matter, for on the one side, false prophecy can, as history has shown, create true confusion in the church. On the other side, it must be remembered that rash judgment of the obviously true prophetic gifts ultimately is a judgment and rejection of the Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, one of the oldest nonbiblical manuscripts speaking of prophecy in the ancient church, even equates the rejection of obviously true prophecy with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, because “to put those who speak in the Spirit to the test means testing the Spirit working within them.”⁶⁴

Along the lines of Max Weber’s differentiation between institutional and charismatic authority,⁶⁵ it is possible to discern today a tendency to differentiate popular and academic approaches to the life of faith. “Popular spirituality” is easily moved and inspired by charismatic phenomena, both true and false, whereas theologians seem less attracted to such occurrences in the church. The dichotomy between popular, often less theologically grounded, charismatic spirituality and academic, often more rational theology easily becomes polarized to the point that the popular circle of believers are a priori suspicious of the “narrow-minded” attitude of theologians, while theologians are contemptuous of the unreflecting faithful because of their attraction to what Rino Fisichella labels “less demanding forms of faith.”⁶⁶

The apparent dichotomy between “lay” and “religious” spiritualities⁶⁷ is regrettable, for the different “spiritualities,” popular and academic, are in reciprocal need and should enrich rather than antagonize each other. Even true divine charisms need theology to appear in their full significance, while good catechesis could prevent many false charismatic developments. Conversely,

theology is in need of the prophetic, for, as Joseph Ratzinger says, “the true and proper way from which great theology may again flow is not generated by the rational side of theological work but by a charismatic and prophetic thrust. And it is in this sense, I believe, that prophecy and theology go hand in glove.”⁶⁸ Fr. Antonio Gentili has summarized the interdependency between the charismatic and the institutional well:

The institutional and the charismatic mediations are altogether complementing and enriching each other. Without the support and the ratification of the institution, the charismatic mediations would dissolve in tyranny and . . . disorder as we learn from the first pages of Christian history (see 1 Cor v 12 and 14). Likewise, without the support of the Charisms, the institutional mediations encroach in routine gestation and formal repetitiveness of rites, doctrines and precepts.⁶⁹

Gentili argues that the laity are greatly enriched by charisms in the church. Vatican II has enhanced the awareness of God being free to diffuse his gifts among his people and that the experiences of the laity are important to the life of the church. While it is true that believers at times do follow easy and often false forms of faith, it is also true that history has shown the benefits of charisms in the life of the faithful. God’s life is mediated through the church by the ordered means of the Sacraments and the teaching office of the Magisterium, as well as through the noninstitutional, free mediation of the Spirit of God to the lay faithful. Although they serve in different ways to actualize Revelation in the life of the church, both forms of mediation are vital to the well-being of God’s people.⁷⁰

This is why Vittorio Messori finds it a tremendous shame that theological and institutional powers in the church often appear to be prejudiced against prophetic gifts among God’s people. Vatican II called the faithful to scrutinize and interpret the “signs of the times” in light of the Gospel, yet Messori observes that these very signs “are, on the contrary, removed, even ridiculed, often by the very ones who have been invaded by that Biblical term (‘signs of the times’) and have made a banner of it for a ‘mature’ Christianity, as they call it.”⁷¹ Messori argues that the theological opposition to God’s charisms in the church is such that it is even dangerous for a writer to elaborate these issues, as they constitute too much of a minefield.⁷² Yet he is convinced that this danger should be met with courage, as theologians cannot ignore the true and actual context of the people of God in the twenty-first century. Messori reminds us that the spirituality of the laity has its justification and proper place in the church and that revelations are one form in which God builds his

church. Agreeing with Fr. Antonio Gentili, Messori even has the “courage to ask whether it might not be the ‘obscurantists’ who were right; and if it might not be in the presumed ‘obscurantism’ of the disquieting signs that we would receive from the Mystery the greater light.”⁷³

Theological elaboration of the prophetic is in this perspective no marginal occupation, but the illumination of a vital function and form in the life of the church that not only thrusts the faithful toward more engaged forms of faith but even catalyzes theological progress. With regard to the actualization of Revelation and the development of dogma, the Second Vatican Council, in the Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, stressed the collaboration of the pastors of the church and the faithful with their particular experiences of faith:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a *penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience*, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.⁷⁴

Much has been written on the role of the Magisterium in the handing on, actualization, and unfolding of Revelation, as well as on the role of the faithful. However, surprisingly little has been written on the *penetrating understanding of spiritual realities that the Christian prophets experience* and that form the basis for their evangelization.

As we shall see, few theological issues have received such scarce attention as the problem of Christian prophecy, so that Rino Fisichella compares the theological elaboration of Christian prophecy to “wreckage after shipwreck” (see chapter 2 here). Therefore, both pastoral and academic interests motivate the debate on prophecy. We shall return to this need for theological elaboration of the prophetic in chapter 2; nevertheless, it seems appropriate here to summarize with Karl Rahner the motivation for a theological elaboration on Christian prophecy:

We should be quite precise about the nature of these private revelations posterior to Christ, and which have value for the Church and not just for the recipient; because these revelations should be perfectly

inserted into this final phase of the economy of salvation. We have seen that it is not sufficient to say: private revelations are not addressed to the Church or humanity taken as a whole, and their content is not positively guaranteed by the Church's Magisterium. To content oneself with affirming that the content of these revelations has only an accessory and quasi-insufficient relationship with the Christian public Revelation, would raise the question: Can anything that God reveals be insignificant?

Again, to say that private revelations never contain anything but truths which one could know through the common Revelation—for example, the possibility and utility of a new devotion—this is to pose yet another question: why then does God reveal it, and not rather leave to the intelligence of theologians the concern of making explicit this new aspect of Revelation?⁷⁵

Another dichotomy between different approaches to prophetic gifts can be discerned between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. This divide is not between professional theology and lay spirituality, but rather between different spiritual *and* theological approaches to faith. Christianity is growing in the developing countries, whereas it is stagnant at best in the industrialized West. As is often said, Christianity is moving from North to South. One of the hallmarks of this growing Christianity, “the future of Christianity,” is that it is charismatic.

Already, Karl Rahner has said that the “religious man of tomorrow will be a mystic, someone who has experienced God, or else he will no longer be.”⁷⁶ Philip Jenkins argues similarly in his book *The Next Christendom* that the future of Christianity lies in the developing world, with a form of Christianity that gives space for experiential and charismatic sides of faith.⁷⁷

Worldwide, Christianity is actually moving toward supernaturalism and neo-orthodoxy, and in many ways toward the ancient world view expressed in the New Testament: a vision of Jesus as the embodiment of divine power, who overcomes the evil forces that inflict calamity and sickness upon the human race. In the global South (the areas that we often think of primarily as the Third World) huge and growing Christian populations—currently 480 million in Latin America, 360 million in Africa, and 313 million in Asia, compared with 260 million in North America—now make up what the Catholic scholar Walbert Buhlmann has called the Third Church, a form of Christianity as distinct as Protestantism or Orthodoxy, and one that is likely to become dominant in the faith. There is increasing tension

between what one might call a liberal Northern Reformation and the surging Southern religious revolution.⁷⁸

In this development toward a form of Christianity that the South considers closer to Christianity as the Bible portrays it, we see growing wariness toward what has been termed “Western theological imperialism.” The South criticizes this theological imperialism for its distance to the biblical accounts, especially with regard to prophetic charisms and spiritual dynamism in general. For instance, Jenkins quotes a contemporary follower of the African claimed prophet Johane Masowe:

A literal interpretation of the Bible can be tremendously appealing. To quote a modern-day follower of the African prophet Johane Masowe . . . “When we were in these synagogues [the European churches] we used to read about the works of Jesus Christ . . . cripples were made to walk and the dead were brought to life . . . evil spirits driven out. . . . That was what was being done in Jerusalem. We Africans, however, who were being instructed by white people, never did anything like that. . . . We were taught to read the Bible, but we ourselves never did what the people in the Bible used to do.”⁷⁹

The problem is that the gap between northern and southern religiosity and related theology is deepening: “Across the denominational spectrum, Catholics and Protestants alike preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic. In this thought world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith healing, exorcism, and dreamvisions are all fundamental parts of religious sensibility.”⁸⁰

Christianity in the developing Southern Hemisphere is neither atheological nor antitheological; rather it breeds theology of a different kind with particular characteristics, and among these are constructive reflections on charismatic gifts.⁸¹ Werner Kahl argues that people, including theologians, relate to miracles and charismatic gifts on the basis not primarily of theological reasoning but rather their sociocultural mindset. Similarly, people in biblical times valued alleged charismatic experiences on the basis of their cultural and religious identity. According to Kahl, Christians in the developing world are closer to the New Testament mindset and so relate more easily to the miracle stories of the Bible than Christians in the First World. Kahl believes that Western culture has become distanced from the mindset in which miracles, including prophetic gifts, make sense and can be received fruitfully in the Christian community.⁸² Hence, without giving up critical thinking, he calls for Western theology to be wary of “ideological imperialism.” African American

authors⁸³ and the Latin American liberation theologians have voiced similar criticism, often highlighting problems connected with Western theological imperialism, and especially with critical biblical exegesis.⁸⁴ These authors argue that the danger with such imperialism is that it deepens the divide and makes First World critical research seem unappealing, even dangerous, to Third World theologians, not because of the research methodology itself, but rather because of the naturalistic ideologies that threaten the inherent objectivity of Western theology. The Catholic Church has repeatedly been warning against such inherent dangers of objective biblical research, just as it has pointed out the dangers of its opposite extreme: biblical fundamentalism.⁸⁵ An important underlying motivation for this book, then, is the desire to bridge “Northern” and “Southern” traditions by investigating the theological foundations for charisms in the church that exist in classical Christian theology and that will be of the highest importance in “the next Christendom.”

1.6. Outline

In chapter 2, we shall deal with the theological elaboration of prophecy, examining possible reasons that the theme has for so long been shrouded in the dark and why, apparently, most theological branches have started bringing it to the fore only now.

If history could prove that there is no such phenomenon as prophecy in the church, then there would be no real issue to investigate theologically. The only way the prophetic category could make any sense would be by applying it analogously to elements in the church with which it would seem to fit. Chapter 3, therefore, investigates the historical development of prophecy and shows that it did not cease but only continued to remodel itself according to the needs of the church as it continued to evolve through time. Having examined the existence of specific Christian prophecy, in chapter 4 we shall investigate different models of Revelation and what image of prophecy they produce. We will then be ready to deal in chapter 5 with the much-debated notion of the “end of Revelation with the last apostle” that often has been used to proclaim the necessary end of prophecy. We will then proceed to see how modern theologians consider the concept more a theological artifice fitted for specific apologetic purposes rather than reflecting the reality of salvation history. With theological and historical research, we shall in chapter 6 see how prophecy can be seen to play a continuous role in Christianity of mediating God’s salvation, attained in Christ, to every new generation of the church. This accounts especially for the fruits of prophecy in the inner life of the church, which we will

examine in chapter 7. The results of prophecy's interaction with tradition and the development of doctrine are summarized in chapter 8, wherein we shall examine a useful typology of different forms of belief and how Christian prophecy fits within that system. Having thus identified the place and function of prophecy in the church, we will be ready in chapter 9 to identify the criteria needed for discerning true from false prophecy in the church. These criteria are vital to Christian prophecy if it is to continue to have a role in the church.