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## 'Has anyone here seen Amos?' – re-establishing 'prophetic imagination' at the centre of religious education and formation

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**'Has anyone here seen Amos?' – re-establishing 'prophetic imagination' at the centre of religious education and formation**

**Cover Page Footnote**

No cover page footnote appears in the article.

## **‘Has Anyone Here Seen Amos?’ – Re-establishing ‘Prophetic Imagination’ at the Centre of Religious Education and Formation.**

### **Introduction**

*In the presence of that powerful, extrapolated text of Enlightenment autonomy, we become aware of how feeble the biblical text has become among us. Likely, we should say that in the Bible we ‘had’ a text for preaching; but it was largely, unwittingly lost among us and has stayed largely lost. In the interest of recovery of that text, we may reflect on how we lost it. (Brueggemann, 2006, p. 5).*

In 1989 Australian author and illustrator Bob Graham (1989) published a children’s book entitled *Has anyone here seen William?* This is a wonderful and inspiring tale of a small child and his ‘adventures’, as well as the frustrations of his parents trying to keep track of his elusory movements. William could be described as a child with *wanderlust* (McKeown, 2008, p. 1873). He wanders everywhere — no one can say exactly where he is. He has no GPS attached and he always seems to be getting into trouble and going missing. This scenario is reminiscent of the current ‘positioning’, or perhaps better put, as the ‘missing in action’ status, in some critical areas within educational discourse, of the figure of the prophet — hence the title of this article (compare Moses and Job as examples of “wandering prophets”; see Batnitzky & Pardes, 2015, pp. 151-153). The more radical actions and proclamations of the prophet, as described by biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann have strangely gone ‘missing’ from some theatres of educational discourse. In particular, there exists a silence and lack of conversation around one of Brueggemann’s key insights — the “prophetic imagination”. This absence is particularly noticeable within the fields of R.E. and formation. While it is true that many schools and formation teams “teach” the prophets, there is less evidence to demonstrate that they understand the key, deeper concept of “the prophetic imagination” and how this might have an impact on students’ thinking and praxis.

Why have theory, praxis and discussion around “prophetic imagination” in these twin contexts diminished and in some cases disappeared? Perhaps this absence is due to a

perceived threat to teachers', students' and leaders' "comfort zone" with regard to prophetic discourse and its challenges to contemporary society. Generally speaking, Catholic school personnel, including R.E. teachers, tend to emphasise passages connected with the first two sections of the Old Testament (Pentateuch and Wisdom), often to the exclusion of the more radical social critiques of the minor and major prophets, as well as their embodiment in the Gospel teachings of Jesus. As Rohr (2015) pointed out: "The Prophets have clearly been the most neglected part of Scripture for both Jews and Christians, because neither showed much capacity for healthy self-criticism... The Roman Catholic Church did not allow prophetic/critical thinking for almost 500 years after the Reformation,..." (p. 1). Perhaps too, this absence is due to the prophets' capacity to make their readers feel uncomfortable, or lacking in the willingness to engage in social justice and prophetic-style declarations.

Our critique aligns with broader discussions within educational discourse at the present time which lament the technocratic shift within education systems that now tend to focus more on cultivating students who know how to 'do' certain things, rather than students who know how to think outside of established paradigms and offer constructive critique of self and society (Nussbaum, 2010). It also synchronises with certain philosophical analysis, such as that of Durant (2014), who lamented the contemporary state of an education depleted by scientism and technocracies:

Today our educators who once bravely led the way towards scientific and technical emphases in America's schools, are disturbed by the completeness of their victory, and stand in sorrow before their accomplished dream... That education is of most worth which opens to the body and the soul, to the citizen and the state, the fullest possibilities of their harmonious life (pp. 138-139).

Such statements about unshackled technocracy and instrumentalist education are also echoed below in the writings of Brueggemann, Possamai, and others.

The authors' position is that this undesirable scenario is especially the case for those education systems which understand themselves in theological terms, and here we take as our

focus those within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the contexts of religious education (R.E.) and formation. As we will show through dialogue with Brueggemann, West, and others, that tradition privileges what we term 'prophetic imagination' as a way of engaging with the world, and this has implications for the manner in which R.E. and formation are theorised and practised.

As a final prefacing comment, this paper is guided by the belief that religious education and formation are twin dimensions of the one concept — and thus cannot be separated. We argue that a teacher within the classroom and total curriculum teaches content and skills at the same time as he/she is modelling praxis, values and virtues. In this article, "faith formation" is therefore understood as that process which allows teachers and students to explore and deepen their experience of faith and discipleship, and to grow in their understanding of and confidence in their baptismal vocation to proclaim Jesus Christ in a prophetic manner to the world in a personal, communal and practical manner (cf. Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn, 2017).

The article is also written in the spirit of the recently released document entitled *A Framework for Formation for Mission in Catholic Education* (National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), 2017). This seminal document argued unapologetically for the education of the whole person, and asserts that "an education which sidelines or excludes the mystery of God from consideration is an education which can only ever be less than complete" (p. 3). Throughout its pages, this document affirmed the leading of teachers, students and parents to the fullness of life, to formation for mission in a faith community, and to a firm stance of "missionary discipleship" (see pp. 4-17). The latter term echoes many elements of "prophetic imagination", discussed in more detail below. According to the document, "formation for mission" is characterised by "greater engagement between individuals' lives marked by 'accompaniment' in the service of others" (p. 16). The related

sub-term “missionary discipleship” is in turn affiliated with the practical concepts of: living a spirituality of communion; preaching Christ; engaging in worship; serving Christ; and, witnessing to Christ (p. 17). As will be seen below these are features and praxis responses that are also at the heart of engaging the prophetic imagination within the ambit of R.E. and in today’s society.

### **The Prophet, Prophetic Challenge, and ‘Social Responsibility’**

*The prophets understood the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life. They understood the strange incongruence between public conviction and personal yearning. Most of all, they understood the distinctive power of language, the capacity to speak in ways that evoke newness “fresh from the word” (Brueggemann, 1978, p. 9).*

#### **What is a ‘Prophet’?**

Redditt (2009) characterised biblical prophets as ‘Forthtellers’ rather than ‘Foretellers’. The great majority of their proclamations “dealt with explanations of past and present events and exhortations for the people to live righteously, priests to teach properly, and rulers and judges to administer fairly” (p. xiii). Three Hebrew words were used in relation to the prophet. The first is *ro’eh*, derived from a verb meaning ‘to see’. The prophet was one who saw things. The second word *hozeh* was used in connection with things a prophet ‘saw’. The third and most frequent designation is *nabi*’ which is usually associated with the prophet delivering a message (Redditt, 2009, pp. 4-5). Redditt also pointed out that there are eight key prophetic themes referred to in the major and minor prophets. The first seven are: God’s election of Israel; the oneness of God; the worship of God; Israel’s fidelity to God; punishment for sin; God’s fidelity to Israel; and, eschatology (Redditt, 2009, pp. 356-363).

#### **The Litmus Test of ‘Social Responsibility’**

However, it is the eighth theme that the authors wish to focus on here in relation to R.E. and formation, assuming at the same time that each of these themes are symbiotic and

continually overlap with and inform each other. This eighth theme is 'social responsibility', which reinforces the concept of justice, particularly in relation to more "difficult passages" such as Amos 8:4-6. Here unscrupulous manipulators are condemned for gouging the poor:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,  
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,  
saying, "When will the new moon be over  
so that we may sell grain;  
and the sabbath,  
so that we may offer wheat for sale?  
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,  
and practice deceit with false balances,  
buying the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

and Isaiah 1:16b-17:

...cease to do evil; learn to do good;  
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

For the prophets Amos and Isaiah, the act of seeking justice was synonymous with securing fairness for people least able to fight for both. They were echoed by the prophet Micah who pinpoints the tripartite path of holiness that God asks humanity to tread: "make justice, love covenant fidelity, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) (Redditt, 2009, p. 359).

Such texts raise the challenge of preaching and enacting justice in the R.E. and formation context. How can teachers, students and parents critique and unveil unjust practices in school, society and the global marketplace (for example, fair trading and other forms of Western consumption, materialism versus humanitarianism). This in turn links with understandings of Catholic mission and the active promotion of God's Reign in the world. It is assumed in what follows that schools, formation groups and theological institutes exist, not only to cultivate the above values, but primarily to actively promote God's presence in the world, principally through advancement of the mission of God. This mission of God (*missio Dei*) is itself understood as God's work of prophetically bringing about the Reign of God

through the person of Jesus and his Church within the situation of the contemporary world. In this context Connolly (2016) asserted:

The three Persons of the Trinity are constantly creating, healing, reconciling, transforming and uniting the world. The mission of the Spirit comes to its fullest expression in Jesus...Caught up in God's mission, the Church is missionary by nature. Its particular task is to seek, uncover and celebrate God's presence in the world...God is especially active wherever people are inspired to strive creatively for justice, truth, freedom [and other qualities]...Missiology aims at greater knowledge of God's purposes but also at intelligent participation in them. (Connolly, 2016, BBI faculty presentation, Slide 20; the author's emphases)

### **Prophetic Imagination**

Following on from this analysis of the prophet, the authors now explore views related to the 'prophetic imagination' in the writings of Brueggemann, Rolheiser, Chomsky, Chittister, the biblical prophets, West and others. At the same time we explore their relevance to R.E.. Brueggemann (2011) referred to the prophet's challenge as needing to transform "the royal engine room of public distortion" into "face-to-face neighbourliness" (p. 72) (refer to more insights from Brueggemann in section 3 below). Rolheiser, citing Daniel Berrigan, posited the fresh perspective: "A prophet makes a vow of love, not of alienation" (Rolheiser, 2016, p. 1). Rolheiser referred to those who promote unnecessary division, anger and alienation as 'warrior prophets'. He urged his readers to understand that the voice of God also exists inside secular culture, and that secular culture is not the anti-Christ. He concluded: "A prophet has to be characterized first of all by love, by empathy for the very persons he or she is challenging...Prophecy has to an act of love; otherwise it's merely alienation" (Rolheiser, 2016, p. 2).

Chomsky (2010) employed similar metaphors that echo the prophetic texts above, in his analysis of 'Contemporary Challenges' when he stated: "The primary challenge facing the people of the world is, literally, decent survival" (p. 165). In a later address entitled 'Who owns the earth?', he posed a series of chilling questions: "Or, to adopt the phrase used by

indigenous people throughout much of the world, Who will defend the Earth? Who will uphold the rights of nature? Who will adopt the role of steward of the commons, our collective possessions?" This is a struggle "in which we must all take part, with dedication and resolve, if there is to be any hope for decent human survival in a world that has no borders. It is our common possession, to defend or to destroy" (Chomsky, 2015, pp. 118-119). Students, teachers and school executive are challenged to ask similar questions and to develop practical responses. For example, they need to locate and articulate where the following concepts are proclaimed and enacted within the total R.E. curriculum: face to face "neighbourliness", love and empathy, and defending the Earth? Chittister (2009, p. 4) nominated the confronting challenge of the prophet in these terms:

We shrink from the very idea of the prophetic dimension of religion or, at best, relegate the idea of it to times past when God bent stiff necks with mighty swords. We shrink from the very thought of raising our voices above the crowd. We want a religion that chants but never howls, that prays but never brings the foolish standards of the Gospel to the issues of the time.

It is timely at this point to introduce the theoretical framework of the African-American philosopher and theologian, Cornel West. West is famous for his work on race, especially within the American context. Importantly for our study, he situates such work within the context of what he refers to as 'prophetic critique.' For West (1999), prophetic critique is a method of critical philosophical analysis which takes place from the outside of a dominant social discourse, normally from the perspective of those who are oppressed within such a system. The motivation for such critique rests not on metaphysical argument, but rather on sacrificial love, "a leap that we make in our short lives that gives it so much meaning and infuses it with so much significance. It is a dangling experience. You take a tremendous risk, you become tremendously vulnerable, but there is no metaphysical ground. No security, nothing guaranteed, no surety whatsoever" (p. 228). As with Brueggemann and the other dialogue partners noted above, West locates his thought within the Judeo-Christian tradition,

which follows “the biblical injunction to look at the world through the eyes of its victims, and the Christocentric perspective that requires that one see the world through the lens of the Cross – and thereby see our relative victimizing and relative victimization” (West, 1999, p. 370). This too is a formidable challenge for R.E. teachers, directors of formation, and the Catholic school community in general. What then is the “risk” of prophetic critique that teachers and students can take? How can they become the face and hands of Christ and see the world through the eyes and wounds of victims and the marginalised? (for an excellent theological and hermeneutical source see Pool, 2011, pp. 35-45).

### **Recovering the ‘Prophetic Imagination’**

*Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet, and more than a prophet we argue, practiced in most radical form the main elements of prophetic ministry and imagination. (Brueggemann, 1978, p. 110)*

The NCEC (2017) document, to which the authors referred earlier, affirms that faith formation for mission is Christ-centred, in the sense that “it articulates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and his Gospel as a revelation of God’s love for us and the way to true freedom as it is proclaimed and lived in the contemporary Catholic Church” (p. 12). This is a formation and mission engaging the “head, heart and hands” of the whole person (p. 6). Or, as an earlier related document by Brisbane Catholic Education (2009) proclaims: Christian spirituality “defines one’s whole way of life. As such, spirituality can be defined as a way of being, seeing and acting that is founded in, and takes its inspiration from, the person and vision of Jesus Christ”. This in turn assumes “following the way of Jesus” and “working for God’s way of doing things in the world (Mission)” (p. 13). Both documents do not specifically mention the exact phrase “prophetic ministry and imagination” but they nevertheless embody its essential elements and promote its key tenets.

### **‘Prophetic Imagination’ Within the Context of ‘Prophetic Ministry’**

When schools and their staffs are called to engagement with prophetic imagination, what exactly are they called to participate in? Brueggemann (1978) contextualised the ‘prophetic imagination’ within the broader domain of ‘prophetic ministry’:

*The task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. Thus I suggest that prophetic ministry had to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, . . . , the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated.* (p. 13, his italics)

Brueggemann (1978) argued for the importance of nurturing this ‘alternative consciousness’ (for example, the gospel message of justice) in two specific ways — criticising and energising. He asserted that, on the one hand, the alternative consciousness “serves to *criticize* in dismantling the dominant consciousness” (for example, consumerism, flagrant disregard of the poor, torture, systemic corruption). On the other hand, it “serves to *energize* persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move . . . to live in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give” (p. 13, his italics). We note in passing that other authors such as Adam Possamai (2016) have written eloquently on similar concerns, each challenging in their own way to the teaching of R.E. About consumption, for example, he wrote: “Now, since the advent of mass consumption, which is one of the key aspects of postmodernity, all people from all wages who are included in this society take part in it — those who do not take part, the non-consumers, are simply excluded” (p. 71). One of the illusory building blocks of mass consumption and capitalism is ‘rational mastery’ which is “embodied in quantification and lead[s] to the fetishization of growth” *per se* and its maximisation process treats other values, such as human nature and traditions, instrumentally (p. 70). Brueggemann (1993) has engaged the prophetic imagination to critique such blind excesses throughout many of his publications (passim).

For Brueggemann (1978), the prophet (here visualised as the modern school teacher and student) sees and does something new through the power of God. The prophet works against the machinations of Pharaoh's/Caesar's empire but at the same time seeks to form a new community centred on God's freedom, justice and compassion (pp. 16-28). One of the most iconic figures who has radically criticised and dismantled the dominant consciousness through pathos and anguish is Jesus of Nazareth. As with his forebears such as Jeremiah, Jesus achieves this ultimate criticism through "his decisive solidarity with marginal people and the accompanying vulnerability required by that solidarity... [one] characterized by the same helplessness they know and experience" (Brueggemann, 1978, pp. 80-81).

The prophetic imagination is also sensitive to the reality that both the prophet and the faith community (and those outside it) are *in exile*. Drawing on the traditions of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, Brueggemann (1986, *passim*; see also similar themes in Fleming & Mudge, 2014, pp. 71-80) sought to articulate a 'new poetic imagination' — one that joined the common threads of prophetic imagination, exile and hope. Thus, *the* governing metaphor of both this literature and the prophetic imagination is *exile*. Its identifying movement as well as its pastoral orientation is "to help people *enter into exile*, to be *in exile*, and *depart out of exile*" (Brueggemann, 1986, p. 1). Any teacher or student who seeks to cultivate the prophetic imagination finds him/herself in a perpetual state of 'exile'. Such views are strongly endorsed by Beach (2015) who argues: "The motif of exile is necessary for the church today in order to help it fully understand and honestly name its true cultural circumstances. Only then can it begin to respond to them in a way that will enable it to reject assimilation and recapture its true identity as God's distinct people in this world" (p. 233).

This is well captured in West's (1999) reflections on prophetic critique. When one takes the view from below, and seriously dialogues with those who are persecuted and oppressed, the dominant discourse is interrupted. Given that this typically represents one's

'home worldview', one experiences this as being "unsettled, unnerved and unhoused. This experience of dialogue — the I-Thou relation with the uncontrolled other — may result in a dizziness, vertigo or shudder that unhinges us from our moorings or yanks us from our anchors" (p. xviii).

### **Cultivating 'Prophetic Imagination' Today**

*The prophetic task occurs amid a denying, despairing, totalizing ideology that is wilfully set against the inscrutable holiness of God...In the face of that [ideology] ...come the prophets who have words of 'truth-telling' and 'hope-summoning' (Brueggemann, 2012, p. 143)*

What might be some praxis expressions of the 'prophetic imagination' today that will enable it to return to the centre of educational discourse — whether one considers schools, formation groups, social groups, parishes, or online university students (and many other groups)? The authors commence this section with four guidelines advanced by Brueggemann in dialogue with West on how to enact the prophetic imagination in society. These guidelines have spawned a number of responses (by Brueggemann himself, but also by other scholars; (see for example Gates & Mann, 2012, passim, with articles by twenty-one scholars). We then follow up with some possible praxis applications.

First, the task of prophetic ministry is "to evoke an alternative community" which has "a variety of relationships with the dominant community" (Brueggemann, 1978, pp. 110-111). Second, this ministry is not something special enacted a few days a week but is the continually enacted foundation of all ongoing acts of ministry. Third, it "seeks to penetrate the numbness to face the body of death in which we are caught" (p. 111). This is a numbness not salved by rage and anger but that needs to be penetrated by grief and lament, by anguish and the public sharing of pain. Fourth, prophetic ministry "seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us." In a prose-flattened world that lacks energy and has grown weary, the alternative community believes that "the only act that energizes is a word, a gesture, an act that believes in our future and affirms it to us

disinterestedly” (Brueggemann, 1978, p. 111). We now explore some possible praxis applications for the prophetic imagination in R.E. under these four headings.

#### **Four Praxis Applications for Prophetic Imagination**

*1. Alternative community challenging dominant community/consciousness.* In his commentary on Jeremiah, Brueggemann (1998) observed: “The book of Jeremiah...entertains the convergence of the *will of God* and the *rise of empire*...Prophetic faith does not live in a religious vacuum but must take sides on the public issues of the day” (p. 243). It is an understatement to note the difficulty of maintaining such a stance. Such prophetic faith manifests as the ‘alternative consciousness’. Ideally, this would be most easily engaged through building upon a school’s social justice, outreach, retreat, and prayer/liturgy structures and programs. It challenges the “modern world, with its technological commitment to consumer-militarism, [which is] a mode of life that systematically produces exiles.” In addition, it produces “an endless parade of displaced persons —unwelcome immigrants, fugitives, refugees, and a permanent underclass” (Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim & Petersen, 2005, p. 379). The prophetic imagination challenges educators to address such displacement. For West (1999), this means advancing the “indispensable nonmarket values of love, care, concern, intimacy and gentleness’ against ‘money making and profit taking” (p. 557). Schools tend to be very effective in communicating narratives about the prophets, but may be less effective in cultivating a prophetic imagination that critiques the dominant consciousness in society (consumerism, advertising, capitalism, sexism, sensationalism and its many other forms).

*2. Not a few days a week but constant and perennial.* The voice and praxis of prophetic imagination is constant and unwavering in its articulation of a *novum* in Israelite and any society — a voice experienced as disruption and sometimes as transformation (Brueggemann, 2002a, p. 159). Such a voice needs to be proclaimed by the whole school —

not just through the formal (timetabled) curriculum but through the total curriculum. This disruption can occur through Greenpeace-style activism and dramatic enactment, or through learning the art of peaceful protest, or even through studying the rap poetry of a performer such as Kate Tempest (2016). Teachers and students can be easily trained to engage in such activities. Its call to transformation can present as genuine interior change, an authentic witness to virtues such as humility, compassion and detachment (see for example: on humility, Wengst, 1988; on mercy/compassion, Armstrong, 2011; and on detachment, Radler, 2006). All of which raises the question: What values are central to schools engaging in prophetic imagination? Do some of these values need to be shifted or revised? Do schools, perhaps unconsciously, privilege materialism and image to the marginalisation of justice, mercy and humility?

*3. Penetrates the numbness of death, grief, and lament by asserting poetry, truth-telling, anguish and the public sharing of pain.* As Brueggemann (2002b) noted, the majority of prophets “have remarkably little to say about specific issues, and they rarely urge particular action. They are primarily poets who bring the world to voice outside of settled convention... In that ancient community, these poets were characteristically countervoices, mostly unwelcome and resisted” (p. 161). As West (1999) posited, this captures the essence of what it means to be an intellectual today — someone who speaks “a truth that allows suffering to speak. That is, it creates a vision of the world the puts into the limelight the social misery that is usually hidden or concealed by the dominant viewpoints of a society” (p. 551).

Faith communities and those involved in educational discourse today are called to do likewise. This can be initiated through a process of poetry and ‘truth telling’ about homelessness, ecological irresponsibility, diminishment of species, and/or injustice towards indigenous people and other marginalised groups. It can also take the form of resistance towards destruction and commodification of the Sabbath (Brueggemann, 2017, p. xiv), where

the dominant consciousness seeks to make people so exhausted that they cannot engage effectively in the theory and praxis of prophetic imagination (Brueggemann, 2014; see also Brueggemann, 2007, pp. 41-47). What are the approaches of educational communities to Sabbath, to genuine rest, re-creation, and re-souling? Are there prophetic voices in school and society that create discomfort and yet need to be heard and responded to?

*4. It asserts the latter by enacting a word or gesture of joy and hope that energises the future and creates a new narrative.* Such words and gestures of joy and hope can materialise even with the prophetic challenge directed towards ‘churchly traditions’. In this regard, Brueggemann (2012) does not let church organisations, exegetes and homilists ‘off the hook’. In fact, he is “suspicious of churchly traditions of theological interpretation, not least because they often seek to control the text in the interest of supporting ecclesial commitments... The text for him [does the opposite – it] always challenges preconceived categories and breaks them open” (p. 154).

For Brueggemann, the biblical God is one of ‘imagination’ rather than ‘regulation’. The God of revelation can be interpreted in multiple images and manifold disruptions that continue to disturb and stretch people. Like the prophetic imagination, the biblical text wishes to continually engage people in the alternative project of joy and hope, incorporating both “the tribulation and wonder of the world”. This dialogue between God and the human person “resolvedly refuses closure and bouyantly offers newness” (Brueggemann, 2009, p. 17). In sum, the prophetic imagination challenges people within this final guideline to interrogate their home religious institutions and their interpretation and application of texts. Equally, it calls people to a personal vocation of disturbance, openness and imagination. These are difficult challenges to engage with within the framework of R.E. and the Catholic ethos. As such, they need to be faced with honesty, prudence, and sensitivity.

A crucial point concludes this section. It should not be forgotten that the prophetic imagination will unavoidably include grief, lament and weeping, but ultimately it leads to the joy and hope of the kingdom. The prophetic imagination holds up viable and superior options after one has compared the offerings of the dominant consciousness with those of the alternative consciousness. For example, it offers wonder instead of self-invention, emancipation instead of the rate of production, nourishment instead of unsatisfactory and exhausting labour, covenantal dialogue instead of tyrannical monopoly or autonomous anxiety, and waiting/waiting upon instead of having/consuming or despair generated about not having (Brueggemann, 2012, p. 12).

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew asserted similar values within the recently published document *Laudato Si'* (promulgated by Pope Francis). Like Brueggemann and West, Bartholomew offered clear choices for those seriously embracing the prophetic imagination expressed via ecological conversion — choices that are accessible for schools, formation groups, and other educational bodies. Here they harness the equivalent of the alternative consciousness or prophetic imagination with respect to the dominant worldviews of habitat destruction and contamination and inappropriate uses of technology. In words that resonate with many of the previous authors, they agreed that humanity needs to “replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing.” Both call for “an asceticism which ‘entails learning to give, and not simply to give up. It is a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God’s world needs. It is liberation from fear, greed and compulsion’” (Pope Francis, 2015, para. 9, citing Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2003).

### **‘The Arts Get There First’**

The article concludes with a biblical image and tying together of key themes. The heading is drawn from a statement attributed to Freud (cited in Garber, 2010, p. 69), referring

to his belief that paintings, diagrams, collage, architecture, masks and other forms of art are often ‘first on the scene’ and pre-eminent in their ability to ‘tell the truth’ about a situation — in this case the nature of the prophetic imagination. The diagram below attempts to sum up the key themes identified in this paper through its reference to Exodus 1-15, the Crossing of the Red Sea. It employs the background of a wall mural by Bartoli di Fredi (completed 1356) entitled: “Collegiate Church of San Gimignano, Italy. From the Old Testament cycle: The Israelites safely cross the Red Sea, but Pharaoh and his troops are drowned’ (Crossing the Red Sea, 2016).

This archetypal threshold crossing narrative is foundational to many of Brueggemann’s writings (1978, pp. 1-20). The accompanying text identifies features of the dominant consciousness (slavery in Egypt, left) and alternative consciousness (freedom after the Crossing of the Red Sea, right) along with the dispositions necessary to recognise and cultivate the prophetic imagination (liminal zone or crossing over, centre) within school R.E. and formation contexts. The diagram posits that one of the chief challenges of engaging the prophetic imagination is the need to respond to God’s grace and move from passive acceptance of the dominant consciousness to active engagement with the alternative consciousness. Note that the final transition to “reorientation” (the paradigm of security through disorientation to reorientation is from Brueggemann, 2002a, pp. 10-15) is invitational and aspirational rather than automatically guaranteed:

**From secure orientation (Egypt):** entrapment within the 'dominant consciousness'.  
*Key features* = exile, loss of hope, repressive labour conditions; growth, mass consumption; veneer of 'security'; domestication and control of people.  
*Primary locus* = slavery of the Hebrews, 'the fleshpots of Egypt', the city, exploitation. Pathos and lamentation, longing for liberation.  
*Focal text* = Exodus 1-3.

**Towards disturbing disorientation (crossing the Red Sea):** confined within a liminal zone;  
*Key features* = numbness of death, grief, suppression of poetry, pain and anguish.  
*Primary locus* = conflict with Pharaoh over slavery, 'Let my people go'. The Hebrews seek freedom, face the anger of Pharaoh. They are in between staying and leaving, home and homelessness. Moses encounters the Burning Bush and is called with Aaron to be a prophet. As prophets they identify with the sufferings of the people and yearn for freedom and the 'Exodus'.  
*Focal text* = Exodus 3-11.

**Towards hopeful and surprising reorientation (freedom via Exodus in the Desert):** shift to adoption of the 'alternative consciousness'.  
*Key features* = joy, hope, poetry, dance, song, return of community, emergence of 'Chosen People', birth of many descendants.  
*Primary locus* = freedom, justice, compassion, the desert, 'covenant relationship' with God, ethical responsibility, flourishing.  
*Focal text* = Exodus 12-15.



© Bartolo di Fredi / Wikimedia Commons / SG OT 304 Crossing the Red Sea.JPG

Figure 1. "Collegiate Church of San Gimignano, Italy. From the Old Testament cycle: The Israelites safely cross the Red Sea, but Pharaoh and his troops are drowned", by Bartolo di Fredi (completed 1356), set against Walter Brueggemann's three part psalmic and prophetic transition.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This article has argued that, while prophetic narratives are generally well taught and understood, in some significant scholarly and practical contexts, certain valuable insights of Walter Brueggemann – especially about prophetic imagination – have gone missing and have

even been ignored. This understanding has been reinforced by supportive insights from the biblical prophets (Chittister, 2009; Possamai, 2016; West, 1999). It focuses in particular on the significance and yet “low visibility” of the prophetic imagination as a framework that needs to be rehabilitated within contemporary educational discourse, but particularly within school R.E. and formation contexts. It has emphasised the crucial importance of prophets, of social responsibility, along with four practical guidelines for activating the praxis of prophetic imagination today.

The paper has also conducted a type of “conversation” between Brueggemann and prominent commentators, such as Cornel West and Noam Chomsky, who have stressed the role of prophetic critique within dominant social discourse, particularly from the viewpoint of the poor, suffering and oppressed. In addition, it has explored four major praxis applications for the prophetic imagination, and argues that the joy and hope issuing from the prophetic imagination should not be ignored. It concludes with a diagram that seeks to sum up the principal movements of an emerging prophetic imagination — from secure orientation, through disturbing disorientation, and towards hopeful and surprising reorientation (refer to Figure 1 above).

We close with Mary Oliver’s composition entitled ‘Hurricane’. This poem is germane to current debates about climate change and particularly poignant in light of the history of flooding and other state disaster incidents throughout Australia (Wells, 2015). It relates well to recent experiences of devastation connected with, for example, cyclones Nancy, Yasi, Debbie, Marcia, Quang and Blanche. On the surface this is a poem about the dreaded aftermath of a terrifying force of nature. All in the hurricane’s path seems destined for obliteration. One cannot ignore the hurricane — one is forced to confront it. Similar to engagement with the prophetic imagination, along with the challenge to rehabilitate its power in context where it has been ignored or ‘gone missing’, one must enter such a maelstrom and

endure the savagery of its demands, the inconvenience of its “alternative consciousness,” and at times the unjust responses of others. This is the type of risk that those involved in R.E. and spiritual formation need to take. However, on the other side of that experience, after its “disturbing disorientation” (Brueggemann, 1982, pp. 41-44), those who engage it with honesty and integrity might witness new growth in the form of trees that “pushed new leaves from their stubbed limbs”, inexplicably and “in the wrong season”. One is struck by the “what I dream of for me” element in the poem, as eerily similar to Jesus’ dream for the new heaven and new earth that he referred to as the ‘Reign of God’ – a Reign that is not without cost (see for example Mt 6:33):

#### HURRICANE

It didn't behave  
like anything you had  
ever imagined. The wind  
tore at the trees, the rain  
fell for days slant and hard.  
The back of the hand  
to everything. I watched  
the trees bow and their leaves fall  
and crawl back into the earth.  
As though, that was that.  
This was one hurricane  
I lived through, the other one  
was of a different sort, and  
lasted longer. Then  
I felt my own leaves giving up and  
falling. *The back of the hand to  
everything.* But listen now to what happened  
to the actual trees;  
toward the end of that summer they  
pushed new leaves from their stubbed limbs.  
It was the wrong season, yes,  
but they couldn't stop. They  
looked like telephone poles and didn't  
care. And after the leaves came  
blossoms. For some things  
there are no wrong seasons.  
Which is what I dream of for me (Oliver, 2012, pp. 21-22, italics are by the poet).

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