

# The Prophet's Fall: A Note in Response to Lawrence Foster's "The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma"

*Len Oakes*

AS IS USUAL AND TO BE EXPECTED, Lawrence Foster's article is excellent. Let me simply share a few additional thoughts about how my understanding of the charismatic prophet's regress and demise has changed since my book *Prophetic Charisma* went to press. I now believe that such prophets die, basically, from lack of love. Their minds are structured in such a way that they cannot be *real* or equal, cannot commune or just *be* with another person in the I-Thou sense because they are constantly attuned to issues of power, trust, and control. Nonetheless, they yearn to be whole and in a genuinely loving relationship. I think we all move towards healing in our own ways, and this is true of prophets as well. Love is what heals, and their mission is an attempt to achieve the kind of love that heals and redeems. The charismatic prophet inspires much loving of a kind that, although naively idealistic, could with time and work become genuine love, that is of a kind that ultimately places the other's welfare before one's own—as when some people marry young and for a number of years seem quite out of their depths but then somehow make the transition from immature, romantic, illusory love to the sort that is realistic, responsible, and mature.

But if one cannot fully accept others, relinquishing control of them and trusting them with one's own ultimate concerns, admitting that one needs them; if long ago one adopted subtle strategies to avoid or delay recognizing other persons as being just like oneself (with equal claims to life, love, and freedom, and with their own integrity and destiny); if one cannot invest oneself in others, nor take them inside as part of oneself, then one's relationships with others will always be unsatisfying. Individuals who are structured in this way don't relate to others; they use them. They don't have friends; they collect followers. But the

subtle rewards of friendship and relating, of being equal and close and open with another human being, the kinds of things that people capable of love say are their bread and water—these elude prophets. Their missions may succeed, they may have great control and influence over their followers, but in the end, this simply does not satisfy.

So they become increasingly desperate and are driven to more and more extreme acts in order to get love. But these acts don't satisfy either, and so charismatic prophets lose affection and respect for their followers, whom they perceive as having let them down. And, indeed, some or all of the followers may have failed the leader in various ways, but a cold indifference towards them grows in the leader's mind that is much more than just a feeling of disappointment in people who have personal failings. Contempt can grow, and some combination of rashness and anger may lead prophets to even wilder behaviors that eventually can cause their demise.