

The Prophetic Act of Bearing Witness

The Work of Sebastião Salgado

In Salgado's photographs, the symbols expose themselves from the inside to the outside. The artist does not extract the symbols from his head, to generously offer them to reality, requiring that they be used. Rather, reality selects the precise moment that speaks most perfectly for it: Salgado's camera denudes it, tears it from time and makes it into image, and the image makes itself symbol—a symbol of our time and our world.

These faces that scream without opening their mouths are "other" faces no longer. No longer, for they have ceased being conveniently strange and distant, innocuous excuses for charity that eases guilty consciences. We are all those dead, going back centuries or millennia, who nevertheless remain stubbornly alive—alive down to their profoundest and most painful radiance, who are not pretending to be alive for a photograph.

These images that seem torn from the pages of the Old Testament are actually portraits of the human condition in the twentieth century, symbols of our one world, which is not a First, a Third, or a Twentieth World. From their mighty silence, these images, these portraits, question the hypocritical frontiers that safeguard the bourgeois order and protect its right to power and inheritance.

—Eduardo Galeano

(We Say No: Chronicles 1963-1991)

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO: PROPHETIC PHOTOGRAPHER

We live in an age of constant visual stimulation: billboards, television, video screens all vie for our attention. Much of this mass media is dominated by the "music video model"—fast-paced packages of stimulation, free-floating sets of symbols and colorful objects bombarding the senses—aimed at entertaining us while inducing us to buy something. It is no small wonder, then, that the still black-and-white photograph retains the power to engage our attention, invite contemplation and

nudge us to action. The photographic essay tells a visual story in a compelling "voice," allowing us to glimpse a world heretofore unknown to us and revealing new angles of vision on worlds we thought we knew.

Could it be that these photographs compose a visual narrative, a visual text of our own history that we are called upon to read with religious and theological meaning? Visual stories from the social documentary tradition¹ are not so different in content or context from the stories told in the holy writings of the Jewish people—stories of exile, oppression, war, foreign occupation and displaced peoples; stories of human dignity, hope and the struggle to live in community. Like messages from the prophets of old, these photographic essays stir the conscience and invite us to create a more just and humane world. There are some images so powerful that they seem to "name grace,"² revealing in the face of the other—the seeming victim, the apparent stranger—the face of the sacred.

For me this is true in the work of Brazilian-born photographer Sebastião Salgado. After reading dozens of articles, reviews and criticisms of his work, I am compelled to ask: What is it about his images that stimulates so many writers and viewers to identify in his work the "most dramatic Judeo-Christian symbolism"?³ These writers are not just addressing his images with explicitly religious content such as photographs of indigenous rituals in Mexico, base ecclesial community meetings in South America or spiritual pilgrimages in Portugal—they are writing about his images of refugees in the famine-stricken Sahel region of Africa, gold miners in Brazil's Serra Pelada pit mine, and manual workers from around the world whom Salgado has been documenting for almost a decade. Nor do these writers simply identify religious imagery, stories and scenery; some of them also draw spiritual and theological significance from this body of work—reflections on

by
Mev Puleo

Mev Puleo was a widely published photojournalist whose work appeared primarily in the religious press. Her book, The Struggle is One: Voices and Visions of Liberation consists of photographs and interviews with Brazilian church people and was released by State University of New York (SUNY) Press in 1994. Puleo was working on a doctorate in the area of "Worship, Proclamation and the Arts" at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, when she became ill and passed away, just shortly after this piece was originally published.

NOTES

1. Social documentary photography, distinct from photojournalism, involves long-term projects (from months to decades), often instigated by the photographer. The final project, which typically reflects the individual commitments and interests of the photographer, is a series of images intended for magazines, newspapers and/or books, usually accompanied by text.
2. This expression comes from Mary Catherine Hilbert, in "Naming Grace: A Theology of Proclamation" (*Worship*: Fall, 1986). Informed by Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Louis Dupre and Langdon Gilkey, Hilbert writes of the need to name the presence of God amidst the "signals of transcendence" in the human experience. See page 442.
3. Fred Ritchin, "The Lyric Documentarian," *An Uncertain Grace* (New York: Aperture, 1990): 148.
4. Ritchin, 149.

suffering and salvation, transformation and transcendence. This essay explores the work of Salgado and its religious implications by focusing on the Sahel project.

When he showed his images to the staff members of the World Council of Churches, they hired him on the spot to photograph the famine in Ethiopia. At the age of twenty-nine, Salgado parted



Each day refugees come from Eritrea, like this man holding his dying child. Exhausted, at the end of their resources, they arrive at the Wad Sherifay camp in hope of assistance. Each day, this giant camp sends for food and water by truck in order to provide for the needs of 70,000 people. Sudan, 1985.

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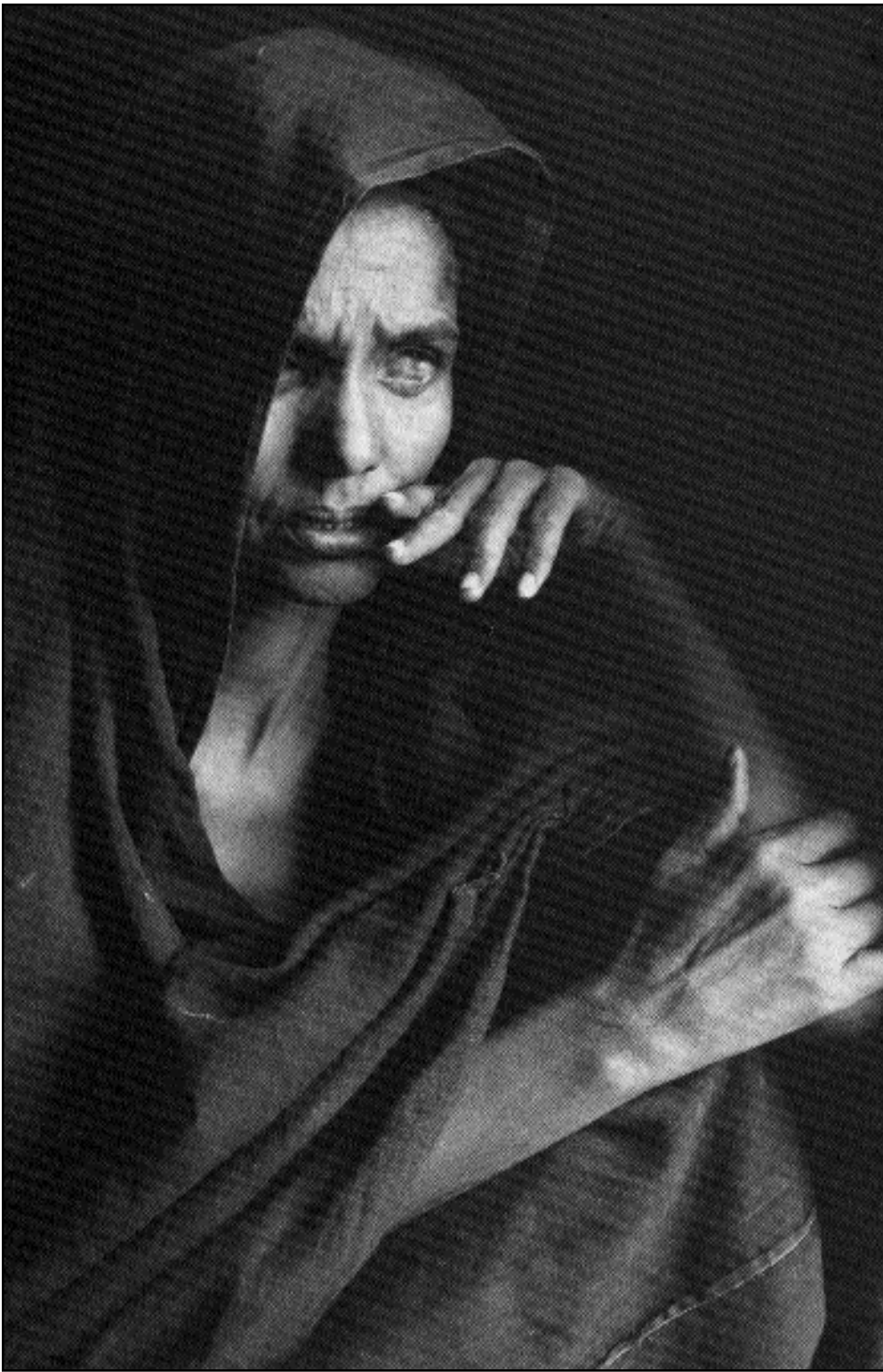
THE SAHEL

For the past two decades we have seen a waning of the epic black and white photo-essay, a form which reached prominence in the FSA project in the 1930s and celebrated its glory days in *Life*, *Look* and other picture magazines of the 40's and 50's. Today, however, Salgado is breathing new life into black and white documentary photography. While there have been other gifted documentarians photographing in recent years, Salgado's insistence on black and white, his awe-inspiring artistic skill, and the epic proportions of his projects distinguish him from most other photographers.

A political exile from Brazil living in France, Salgado took up photography in 1973 while on a business trip to Africa, then working as an economist for the International Coffee Organization.

from professional economics and embraced photography as his way of life.

Salgado's photographic work in Africa culminated in a fifteen-month project sponsored by the French medical relief organization, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) in 1984 and 1985. During this time he documented people's struggle to survive war, drought and famine in the Sahel region of Africa (Mali, Ethiopia, Chad and the Sudan). This project was published as a book in France, *Sahel: L'Homme En Detresse* (*Sahel: Man in Distress*) in 1986, in Spain as *Sahel: El Fin Del Camino* (*Sahel: The End of the Road*) in 1988, but never in the United States. It seems that these images of human struggle and suffering were too graphic and disturbing for the U.S. arbiters of public taste, or perhaps they were too challenging of our stereotypes. Other



With dead eyes worn out by sand storms and chronic infections, this woman from the region of Gondan has arrived at the end of her voyage. Mali, 1985.

© Sebastião Salgado/Contact Press Images

5. From my interview with Sebastião Salgado, September 25, 1993. He explains, "I spend 1/500th or 1/250th of a second to take each photograph! You have less than a single second of photography in one image! Think about it: It's very difficult in such a tiny fraction of time to conceptualize a religion or religious symbols."
6. Francis Wilkinson, *Rolling Stone* (September 16, 1993).
7. David Levi Strauss, "Epiphany of the Other" in *Art Forum*, 29 (February, 1991).
8. Ritchin, 149.
9. William Shawcross and Francis Hodgson, "Sebastian Salgado: Man in Distress," in *Aperture 108* (Fall, 1987).
10. Henry Allen, "Of Beatitudes and Burdens," in *The Washington Post* (Sunday, January 19, 1992): G6.
11. From his slide presentation at the Mother Jones International Fund for Social Documentary Photography fundraising event, September 23, 1993. I also heard him say this in New York in 1991, and have read it in several interviews as well.
12. Strauss, 99, quoting Emmanuel Levinas's *L'Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972). In an essay in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, by Adrian Peperzak, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), Levinas writes, "Consciousness of my injustice is produced when I incline myself not before the facts, but before the face of the Other" (p. 116). This moral reflection posed by the face of "the Other" resonates with Eugene Smith's words about finding Japanese orphans at the end of World War II, "The bloody dying child I held momentarily in my arms...that child was my child. And each time I pressed the release it was a shouted condemnation hurled with the hopes that it might survive through the years and at least echo through the minds of the men who will sit down hence to plan the next period of liquidation." From *Let Truth Be the Prejudice—W. Eugene Smith: His Life and Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 1985).

than two pages in the *New York Times* and four pages in *Newsweek*, the images went virtually unnoticed for more than four years.⁴ Only with *An Uncertain Grace*, Salgado's book and exhibit that began touring in 1990, did a limited number of the Sahel images and a collection of his other work burst upon

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the American art and photography scene. His most recent opus, *Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1993) has brought him even wider recognition.

When we speak of the religious dimensions of Salgado's images, I think it helpful to see his photography as work that functions religiously in our secular society, both in evoking traditional religious iconography (albeit unintentionally) and in seeking to "convert" or move the viewer to compassion and action. It is work from the social documentary school, that included such figures as Jacob Riis, Eugene Smith and Dorothea Lange, which went beyond a neutral "witnessing" of events to a "bearing witness" that brings a moral sensibility to the situation being photographed. While Salgado insists that he does not have the time or mindset to frame consciously an image to look like a religious or biblical scene,⁵ such analogies continually appear in the literature about his work. I will quote just a few of the many allusions of art and photo critics (most of these in reference to Salgado's *Sahel* project): Salgado bathes his subjects in "beatific light" and with a nearly "religious quality,"⁶ these are images of "the sacred" and "spiritual transcendence," recalling "Lot's wife" and "St. James,"⁷ scenes of "spiritual ascendancy" and "religious epiphany" at times "reminiscent of the most dramatic Judeo-Christian symbolism,"⁸ images that "seem to be placed in a long tradition of the iconography of suffering" such as a descent from the cross, the Madonna, the Exodus, and the Holy Land.⁹ Referring to Salgado's

images, Henry Allen, writing for the *Washington Post*, goes so far as to claim, "We love these pictures. They are religious art for the twentieth century."¹⁰

Salgado's images *are* religious art for the twentieth century in the sense that they call us to contemplation and conversion. While many of the above writers make analogies (some weak and others more grounded) to religious iconography, I believe that there are deeper reasons why these writers reach into the realm of religious language to describe Salgado's work. I am grappling to identify these reasons and will put forth some provisional suggestions, aside from pure aesthetic appeal.

First of all, Salgado's work deals with subject matters that stir the moral conscience. He recognizes this and finds himself continually reminding audiences, "I'm not showing these pictures to make anyone feel guilty, but to provoke a discussion."¹¹ The discussion must address the issues *behind* the photographs, which are ultimately moral issues. For example, with the *Sahel* images, famine is not just caused by drought and crop failure, but by human-made corruption and war with superpowers supplying weapons to both sides. Salgado, still seeing through his lens as an economist, also points to unfair terms of international trade, the market pressures to deforest timber for export, and the World Bank's austerity plans for these African nations. While Salgado donates the profits from the *Sahel* book to Doctors Without Borders, he also makes it known that humanitarian aid alone is not enough to address the root causes of the suffering. At a time when our secular culture seems to lack a language to discuss morality, it is not surprising that the critics retrieve religious language to describe and discuss images that so deeply stir their consciences.

Second, these images, along with most images in the social documentary tradition of "bearing witness," help to familiarize us with what seems different and humanize those whom we consider "other." In writing about Salgado's images, photo critic David Levi Strauss quotes the moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, saying that through his photographs Salgado aspires to that "transcendence of self which calls for epiphany of the Other."¹² The religious terms that Strauss uses to describe Salgado's work all undergird this analogy to such an epiphany:

“transforming of people into images of the sacred,” “portraying aspects of the divine,” how “the sacred” lies behind nearly every image of the *Sahel* series.¹³ Ultimately, this is an epiphany of the sacred in the face of the other—a face that evokes not just pity or compassion, but a reverence for human dignity and a realization of the interconnectedness of our lives and our fates.¹⁴

Such a compassionate revelation of “the Other” is a subversive act in our culture since it flies in the face of sanctioned stereotypes. The mass media feeds us images of perpetually starving Africans with swollen bellies, begging for food—objects for our charity. While a *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial cartoon shows a malnourished African child being spoon-fed by a U.S. marine and the child then shooting the marine dead, Salgado shows us an African child lying dead of dehydration in his grieving father’s arms. The editorial, published soon after the November ’93 violence in Somalia against U.S. soldiers, portrays not just a passive, starving victim, but a tiny child who becomes a murderous villain. Salgado’s images, though taken long before the U.S./U.N. intervention in Somalia, insist that “starving Africans” are also human beings, people who live in families and communities, who comfort one another, who celebrate religious rituals, and cry at their children’s funerals.

Third, by showing us the face of the other as a reflection of our own, I believe that Salgado’s work can nourish a theology of incarnation. In many of Salgado’s images, we are stirred to recognize and even revere the human dignity of the person photographed. In the Hebrew Scriptural tradition, human dignity is affirmed because humans are made in the image and likeness of God. In the Christian tradition, God makes a dwelling among humans in the “word-become-flesh” of Jesus. While these photographs are not explicitly religious, they function in our society to awaken an awareness that is central to religious faith: the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the manual worker, the refugee in Ethiopia is my sister and my brother, and how I respond to these is how I respond to God.¹⁵

“BEARING WITNESS” AS A PROPHEPIC ACT

To help us understand the religious dimension of photography that “bears witness,” I propose five points of

convergence between this kind of photography and the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures. In his time-honored work, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, Abraham Joshua Heschel devotes his introductory chapter to describing what kind of person the prophet is.¹⁶ I will focus on those

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characteristics that mirror those of photographic “bearing witness.”

First, because for Heschel no human voice can convey the full terror of human agony and greed, “prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor...” (p. 5). And “the prophet’s ear...is attuned to a cry imperceptible to others” (p. 7). One of the primary ways that documentary photography “bears witness” is by giving not just a voice, but a face to those we otherwise might never see. The documentary photographer is attuned to that which others are not attentive. These photographers “lend their voice” through photographs by rendering specific that which is general, by giving a face to those we otherwise might not see, by giving voice to the person photographed through a text of interviews.

Second, “reading the words of the prophets is a strain on the emotions, wrenching one’s conscience from the state of suspended animation” (p. 7). The purpose of prophecy is to “conquer callousness. To change the inner man [sic] as well as to revolutionize history” (p. 17). As stated above, the photography that bears witness presents its subject matter in a moral context that is meant to shake its viewers into a new way of seeing the world and into a renewed commitment to the world. Salgado’s *Sahel* project strains our emotions and our empathy. It is these images’ power to “[wrench] our conscience” that frightened editors from sharing these images with the U.S. public for several years.

Third, according to Heschel, the prophet functions not as a messenger but “as a witness” who must “bear

13. Strauss, 98.
14. In interviews and presentations, Salgado tries to impress upon people that humanity is one family. He believes that photography lends itself to demonstrate those bonds of a human family and can serve as an instrument of solidarity between peoples. See Amanda Hopkinson’s, “Sebastian Salgado,” in *The British Journal of Photography* (March 19, 1990).
15. In an interview with me on Sept. 25, 1993, Salgado said that he’s “non-religious” but isn’t offended when people compare his work with the Bible: “What is in the Bible is in my photographs. Persons. In the Christian religion, God is represented on earth by a human being. Look at the Depression photographs of the FSA—they also repeat Bible stories, but these stories aren’t just in the Bible! These are the stories of social groups that continue in our history. These are very important *human* stories!” He adds that the Bible is “one of the greatest works in sociology and anthropology ever produced in human history.”
16. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*. Vol. I (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1962).
17. This notion is prevalent in liberation theology, especially in the work of Gustavo Gutierrez for whom the “preferential option for the poor” is not rooted in the quality of the poor, but in the nature of God. See my interview with Gutierrez, “How do you tell the poor God loves you?” (*St. Anthony Messenger*, February, 1989): 13.
18. Hopkinson, 14-15.
19. Hilkert, 442.
20. Hilkert, 442.

See also *An Uncertain Grace: Photographs by Sebastião Salgado*. Essays by Eduardo Galeano and Fred Ritchin. (New York, NY: Aperture, 1990).

testimony" (p. 21). Heschel explains that the messenger does not simply deliver a word, but the witness must convince the people that the word is divine or of ultimate importance. In photography, what distinguishes "bearing witness" from "witnessing" is that the photographer contextualizes or

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sequences the images in a way that helps make meaning of them, pointing the viewer in a direction of how to respond. While the photographer does not explicitly name "the divine," they do remind the viewer of the urgent meaning and the importance of a response to that which is portrayed.

Fourth, Heschel portrays a prophet who does not argue or prove but "reveals." "The prophet reveals God. In his [the prophet's] words, the invisible God becomes audible" (p. 22). So, too, the photographer bearing witness reveals and makes visible what we could not see before. Heschel also describes prophecy as the "exegesis of existence," that is, the interpretation of a particular moment in history or the lending of a "divine understanding" of a human situation (p. xiv). Again, while most photographers would eschew the idea of offering a "divine" interpretation, social documentary photographers do interpret history, usually from the underside or margins. In the perspective of liberation theology, a view from the margins is a theologically privileged view because God is a God of life who draws closest to those in the clutches of death or oppression.¹⁷

And, finally, Heschel believes that the prophet's ability to enter "divine pathos" comes from their "intimate involvement" with God and God's people (p. 26). Intimate involvement with the people is *essential* to the work of a photographer who "bears witness." Salgado also advocates "integration" with the communities one photographs. Explaining why he traveled alone in Africa, Salgado says, "Only by rendering yourself as defenseless as the people you photograph, by entering

their world as a vulnerable stranger, will they not only tolerate but welcome your presence."¹⁸ I have experienced this when traveling in Brazil or Haiti, and believe it names something true for all social documentary photographers: the ability to immerse oneself, with vulnerability and reverence, into another's reality is essential for the prophetic task of "bearing witness."

Again, just as some photographic images function as "secular icons," we can now see why the photographer who bears witness is a kind of "secular prophet." In the view of liberation theology, these photographers carry on the prophetic task of announcing and denouncing—announcing the human dignity of the other and denouncing those conditions that afflict the human community.

Like the great photo-essays of the social documentary tradition, Salgado's visual story of the *Sahel* brings to our consciousness and to our *conscience* situations where human dignity is under attack. Not only does this epic essay tell us what is happening, but it points to how we can respond—not merely through material assistance (Doctors Without Borders), but also in beginning to understand and address the "human-made" international arrangements that contribute to such disasters.

NAMING GRACE

In writing about a theology of proclamation, Mary Catherine Hilker calls for preachers who can "name grace," that is, name the presence of God in human experience. Such a task requires extending oneself to the "boundaries of human life" where threats of finitude and experiences of "overwhelming meaning" signal transcendence.¹⁹ She says, "Here language ultimately becomes religious or we must remain silent."²⁰

We who are teachers and preachers should look deeply at the works of these photographer-prophets—Dorothea Lange, Sebastião Salgado and so many others. We are invited to adopt what Hilker calls the "contemplative task": that is, to name grace in the midst of the human experience—to name holy the face of those oppressed by famine and war. If we look deeply at these photographs, they will impel us toward prophetic intervention—to struggle for a world where human dignity and community are revered. ❖