The margins and the mission of advocacy

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In our globalised world with its struggle for dignity and justice advocacy has become an ardent form of mission. This is all the more significant in a post-Christendom and post-colonial world where the Church has found itself displaced from the power equations. A major portion of the Bible is a narrative of advocacy, whether of God for the marginalised Israelites in bondage in Egypt, or of Abraham for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah or of the prophets for the poor and the exploited. Jesus' own mission, largely, was of the nature of advocacy for the poor. In this spirit this paper argues how a major expression of the contemporary mission of the Church is advocacy for the margins making the Church a hope-inducing sign.

Keywords

Bible • mission • advocacy • racism • the poor • kingdom

The idea of advocacy has become all too familiar in the secular society making it an essential feature of modern polity. Yet in missiological literature, by and large, it has remained a rare theme. This is all the more significant since advocacy is a key ingredient of the Bible and it could bring a freshness of perspective to mission theory and practice.

One of the challenging ideas of the Bible, as Jonathan Sacks, author and Rabbi, has pointed out, is the ethics of responsibility, i.e., God invites humans to be partners in the work of creation—naming, tilling, caring for the earth, building the ark and so on.1 For a long time, the Christian community considered its partnership with God as a call to bring an otherworldly salvation to the miserable inhabitants of the colonial world. The trade-inspired exploratory expeditions of Christopher Columbus ignited the missionary vision of European religious congregations to save the souls of the poor heathens, the vintage "being gathered by the devil and the flesh," depriving Christ "of enjoying the possession of the souls which he purchased with his blood."2

Thankfully, the conquest, expansion and displacement model of mission has rapidly declined without much regret. This is a challenge to return to

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the original biblical spirit. As John Corrie has argued, the eclipse of the past "managerial missiology," with its aggressive approach, its targets and goals, its well-oiled financial and resourceful structures, and its well-developed sending strategies, must enable the Church to opt in favour of an incarnational, relational, culturally diverse, flexible and spontaneous model of doing mission.\(^3\)

We need to retrieve the mission of the Lord who was anointed "to proclaim the good news to the poor" (Luke 4: 18). A major consequence of the modern globalisation process and people movement, for whatever reasons, is that a sizable number of people are pushed to the periphery of nations and societies. This has prompted Pope Francis to emphasise "a constant outreach to the peripheries" as an important aspect of mission today.\(^4\)

This paper argues how advocacy is a significant form of the proclamation of the good news to the poor in the post-colonial world, paving the way for ushering in the acceptable year of the Lord.

**Biblical foundation**

As Christopher Wright has rightly emphasised the bible is more than just advocacy, but the advocacy dimension cannot be underestimated.\(^5\) Even a casual reader cannot fail to be impressed by the centrality of advocacy in the bible. No doubt, the bible is a narration of God's reaching out to humans and creation. However, this reaching out is woven into the power and pattern of advocacy.

Obviously the biblical vision of our life with God is God's reign, the kingdom, that manifests itself in a socio-religious and political transformation. In this, the bible "combines sharp political criticism and passionate political advocacy," writes Marcus Borg.\(^6\)

We have in the bible not only the passionate protesting of injustice, but equally—a passionate advocacy for justice as well, based on a God of love, justice and compassion. Borg calls this biblical option for the margins "a political passion,"\(^7\) for it is the result of the "systemic injustice, sources of unnecessary human misery, created by unjust political, economic and social systems."\(^8\)

The biblical concern for the margins is concretely expressed in its innovative commandments: Yearly tithes were to be gathered for the poor and farmers were to leave some of their crops behind for widows and aliens to glean (Leviticus 19:9-10); loans to the needy were without interest and, if they could not repay in seven years, they were to be forgiven (Deuteronomy 15:1-3); if hard times forced a farmer to sell his land, it was to be returned in the year of jubilee (Leviticus 25:28).

Lois Tverberg shows how the distinctive feature of the Torah was its great concern for society's vulnerable.\(^9\) Israel's very first experience of Yahweh occurs in the context of advocacy. Yahweh has seen their affliction and heard their cry and has come to plead for them through Moses (Exodus 3:9-10).

Moses who encountered the divine at the burning bush does not come off with deepened convictions about the physical nature of God, but with the attitudinal, psychological nature of the God who is moved by the affliction of the slaves in Egypt. It is shaped by the divine passion for the poor, the divine undertaking of "a justice marked by enough bread and freedom from debt, worry, and sorrow."\(^10\)

Redemption, in the bible, is not primarily an otherworldly or an after-death reality, but most of the time it deals with life on earth as we can see from the Exodus. Exodus-shaped redemption demands exodus-shaped mission. It is a holistic understanding of God's mission. This is significant when we speak of advocacy as a major expression of mission today.

Most of the biblical prophets are moving in this spirit. They perceive how the existing reality is not in conformity with the divine plan. The powerful make use of their power and influence to exploit the poor and the prophets' protest against it and plead for the cause of the poor.\(^11\)

When we come to the gospels we see how Jesus, "the decisive revelation of God,"\(^12\) without denying whatever he is believed to be, was a social prophet in the line of the Old Testament prophets. The mission of Jesus Christ is to be situated in the context of the Jewish messianic expectations.

There is no uniform expectation of the Messiah in the Jewish tradition,\(^13\) though it began with the hope of a restoration of the Davidic kingship, a new king from the house of David who would unite the kingdom of Israel and Judah. The Messiah is the one promised and anointed by God to deliver the Jewish people from oppression and to bring in a new era on earth.\(^14\) From this emerges the hope of a saviour king who would appear at the end of time to usher in a new era.\(^15\)

Jesus began his ministry, particularly in the Marcan gospel, with the claim that the hoped for Messiah has come.\(^16\) Marcus Borg writes: "Mark affirms at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the hoped-for and longed-for anointed one of Israel. The good news is the story of Jesus the Messiah."\(^17\) The Marcan inaugural proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (1:15), indicates not only the beginning of Jesus' public activity, but names its content as well.\(^18\)

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Jesus' option for the socially and religiously marginalised is obvious in all the four gospels. He was the prophet of the kingdom. He was inclusive of all who were left on the margins, economically, socially, religiously or according to gender. In his inaugural teaching at Nazareth, according to Luke, Jesus selects Isaiah 61:1-2 showing how he has been sent to preach the good news to the poor, all those who are on the periphery—the blind, the lame, the leprosy-affected—all those who are bound in any way.

The divine goodness reaches them as an experience of the good news that the long awaited messiah sets in. It is a manifestation that, "God accepts them and, although they are empty-handed, Jesus himself rejoices with them", observes Lucien Richard.19

The most visible public activity that demonstrated this prophetic advocacy was his all-inclusive meal practice.20 As Marcus Borg insists, the salvation that Jesus proclaimed was seldom about an afterlife, "rather, it is about transformation this side of death."21

Similarly, Geza Vermes, in the context of speaking about the religion of Jesus writes: "In the religion of Jesus customary priorities were reversed. Not only did he embrace prophetic preferences, placing the poor, the orphans, the widows and the prisoners before the conventionally devout, but he offered privileged treatment to the sick and to the pariahs of society."22

The prayer that Jesus taught, with its kingdom petitions, is advocacy per excellence! It is not only a prayer of Jesus' vision, but equally an invitation to us to participate in God's vision. For John Dominic Crossan it is the Lord's "revolutionary manifesto", proclaiming "the radical vision of justice that is the core of Israel's biblical tradition."23

Jesus' message is not about believing a set of doctrines about him, rather it is about the coming of God's reign, with its challenge to engage oneself in the same mission. We need not only have faith in Jesus, but also develop the faith of Jesus. As Ray Vander Loan has pointed out, "To be a disciple of Jesus I need to know why and how he lived out his faith, so that I could follow him more closely."24

Though God's word Incarnate, the greatest success of Jesus was his reading the signs of the times, i.e. the Jewish society with its religion stood in need of a transformation from its legalism and ritualism, and priestly careerism. He began with the baptism of John when he experienced the divine grip on him.

From then on there is no turning back. Robert Funk invites our attention to the fact how some of the earliest collections of Jesus' sayings and deeds, the Q and the Gospel of Thomas do not contain the passion narrative. More important was his ministry of the kingdom, which they expected to be completed by the second coming soon to happen.25

This dialogue of the gospel with the contemporary times must lead to an involvement of advocacy for the world. The miracles of Jesus were not for proving his divinity, but to show how God is already taking steps to transform the society. Today, advocacy can release the organic energy of the gospel for the transformation of the world. Advocacy for the restoration of the divine plan for humankind must fire the Church's evangelistic imagination.

Evangelism and advocacy

The primary service of the Church today is to bring the messianic hope to the world of today especially for those suffering various forms of slavery rooted in the structures of power and domination. Poverty with all its ingredients constitutes a basic cause of misery and marginalisation in God's creation where all have a place with harmonious relationship with one another.

Yet this is disrupted through human selfishness tending to power and possession engendering inequality and dehumanisation. In his address to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Office in 1998, Pope John Paul II invited the participating nations to work for solutions which would lead to a world "in which there are no longer people living side-by-side in hunger and others in opulence, people who are extremely poor and those who are extremely wealthy, people who lack the bare necessities and others who waste things without thinking twice. Humanity cannot tolerate such contrasts between poverty and wealth."26

Unfortunately this is a scandal our world tolerates with ease and admits in a matter-of-fact spirit. This is an area in which the Church has to spend itself to bring the awareness of the gravity of the fact and the injustice involved to all people, challenging them to be converted so that the divine reign can come for the poor of the world.

As Roger Etchegaray has emphasised, "The scandal is that today we can repeat and repeat, in analysis after analysis that extreme poverty still exists when we have the means to eliminate it. The scandal is that we can enthuse about the progress of globalisation while this primeval form of the failure of true human cohabitation continues to exist and in some, areas to grow."27

It is taken for granted that the global society is going through great change, though the magnitude of
change and the response required may not be that clear. What is even less known is the changes that began with Adam Smith’s economic theory of the maximum amount of wealth production when one acts upon selfish interest rather than listening to any divine promptings, adding that an invisible hand would ensure the trickling down of the wealth to the poor as well.

This in turn triggered off the western industrial revolution and economic growth along with the trickling down of the wealth to the poorer sections of the society, as Adam Smith had visualised.

However, the sad part of the whole development was that European powers launched into the new world of Asia, Africa and Latin America to produce a maximum amount of wealth for themselves without any sanction to ensure that part of that wealth trickled down to the poor of these nations. To a large extent the woes of the so called third world today are related to this surge of the industrial revolution.28

This, arguably, has serious missionary implications in so far as mission to the south was under the shadow of colonialism. The spirit of the times can be gauged from the infamous justification of the colonial and missionary enterprise of Sir Francis Drake: “Their gain shall be in the knowledge of our Faith, and ours such riches as their country hath.”29

This realisation must impel the Churches in the west to exercise a new form of mission, not for the expansion of home Churches, but through international advocacy for the poor of these former colonies so that people bound to their economic woes and dehumanised life by forces outside their control can experience the blessings of the arrival of the divine reign.

As Pope Francis observed while receiving the secretary general of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, we need to promote “a true, worldwide ethical mobilisation that will spread and put into practice a shared ideal of fraternity and solidarity, especially with regard to the poorest and those most excluded.”30

Down through the centuries, the Church has exercised a major role in social and political change not only through its many educational and social institutions, but also through its advocacy as in the renowned instance of Bartolomeo de Las Casas. A classic example is the role played by Pope John Paul II to usher in democracy in East Europe.

In contemporary times the role played by what is known as liberation theology and the articulate theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino and others for social transformation and political action in the context of injustice, more so in Latin America, cannot be ignored. Political advocacy has been an area at the service of the powerless and voiceless that the Church has engaged itself in to influence the decision-makers to adopt policies that are beneficial to the poor and marginalised.

Though the Church is not and cannot be a political institution, as the sacrament of the divine reign, its political role, the political content of its service, cannot be ignored.

It not only reflects on the social implications of the gospel, but somehow makes it operational at the service of the disenfranchised. Most of the martyrdoms in modern times, like that of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and many in other places like India, are, in fact the result of this political advocacy.31

Racism and advocacy

Xenophobia and ethnocentrism existed from ancient times, but the age of enlightenment became a watershed moment in the development of modern racism.32

Pierre van den Berghe describes racism as “any set of beliefs that organic, genetically transmitted differences, whether real or imagined, between human groups are intrinsically associated with the presence or absence of certain socially relevant abilities or characteristics, hence that such differences are a legitimate basis of invidious distinctions between groups socially defined as races.”33

Racism does not believe in the individual, but in membership in a particular human group, attributing all characteristics to the group’s physical heritage. “In the racist worldview there is no human individuality. Each individual is merely an inevitable manifestation of the collective to which s/he belongs, with the nature of that collective determined by shared heredity.”34

This vision needs to be challenged and the Church has to advocate a value system that believes in the common origin and shared nature of all human beings, showing how race is socially constructed.

Advocacy against Apartheid is a success story against any form of racial oppression. The Church will always argue against any claim of racial supremacy justifying the right of one race to rule or exploit another race, or not allowing the space for another.

The Church will have to be sensitive also as not to promote racism even in theology by foisting theology

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from any one particular geographical area as universal theology while describing theologies that have developed at the periphery as local theologies!

**An alternative future**

Jacques Matthey, commenting on 1 Corinthians 1, where the apostle Paul reminds his readers of God's purpose of electing people from the down-trodden of the world so as to shame the powerful and wise, and on James 2:5 pointing to God's calling the poor as a challenge to the rich, and the Church's duty not to make distinctions, writes how both the authors in different ways remind us to have a spirituality of taking God's priorities seriously, "both for life within as well as without the Churches, and let itself be shaped by a bias for the poor, marginalised, despised, suffering, vulnerable, and powerless."35

We want a world without division and exclusion, which is our alternative vision, based on the bible. The voice of this vision is advocacy, in contrast to the politically expedient solution of expanding production. It is a time when violence becomes rare, women can feel fully integrated in the society and children are not exploited.

Opposition to violence, in particular, is an area that is to be accentuated. The first impulse of religious thought ought to be that of peace. Yet, it is no secret that most religions have been instruments of violence even as religious scriptures, including the bible, cannot disclaim elements of violence.

No wonder then, "many people connect violence with religion generally," as Jan van Henten wrote.36 The attack on the New York Twin Towers in 2001, triggering a new round of violence, is a typical example of the link between religion and violence.

Yet, religions in general and Christianity in particular have become a healing power where violence holds away through advocacy for peace, though always mindful of justice as well.

Pope Francis' inclusion of a Rabbi and a Muslim leader in his team during his visit to Jordan, West Bank and Israel for the 24 to 28 May 2014 trip is a sign of the key role of advocacy for peace.

In fact, some commentators have compared the image of the Church, after the initiative of the pope, to a "field hospital" to bring healing to battle-scared warriors.37

Domestic violence against women is a universal issue that has to figure in Christian discourse on advocacy. Even in Australia most divorces are attributed to domestic violence. Gender discrimination in any form is violence and women anywhere in the world are victims of it in many forms including the exclusion from religious ministries and decision making.

**Kingdom-centred ministry**

Society in general, in most spheres of life—like religion, politics, culture, economics and others, is structured in such a way that the powerful are at the centre with the powerless at the periphery. This has to be altered so that all can feel at home, participating in the resources as well as decision making.

This is very much associated with justice and human rights and in this context the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights 1948 assumes great significance. Dehumanising marginalisation with little share in the fruits of their creativity is the lot of a vast majority of people.

It is a matter of encouragement that the Catholic Church since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (New Order of Things) has been a strong advocate of the working class and social justice in general. A series of encyclicals and Church documents has contributed to the amelioration of life for the workers in general.

Similarly the World Council of Churches *Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism* (Busan, Korea, 2013) called for a mission from the margins. "Through struggles in and for life, marginalised people are reservoirs of the active hope, collective resistance, and perseverance that are needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God."38

Advocacy, in the context of the kingdom, simply is a "strategy to generate social change,"39 more so in the context of the existing world situation of marginalisation and injustice. This requires a sound acquaintance with the ground reality with its associated problems and forces that control the reality.

This is an area for the Church to get a deeper understanding even as it did in the past with regard to cultures and religions. The Church has to familiarise itself with the systems, structures and social forces that shape the society, the pull and push factors, population, freedom of religion, social development, national product, state of life expectancy, environmental change and, in general, all those factors related to holistic development.

The Church aligns with the margins allowing the margins to speak—and not only for themselves. In this the Church is aware also of the biblical polarity, relation between the particular and the universal, the few for the many.

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Abraham’s call to become a blessing for the nations (Genesis 12:1-3) is manifestative of God’s economy of the few serving the many. As Ross Blackburn reminds us: “The tension between the universality of the goal (all nations) and the particularity of the means (through you) is right there from the very beginning of Israel’s journey through the pages of the Old Testament.”

However, we have to remind ourselves, “committing oneself to justice, peace and ecological integrity demands prophetic living, prophetic speech and prophetic action individually, communally and institutionally.”

What we are interested in is not so much levelling economic inequalities, but in ensuring economic security for all. The response to rising economic inequality is not cutting wealth at the top, but empowering the poor so that they can get richer and poverty is eliminated, by providing decent opportunities and security for all, for as Franklin Delano Roosevelt argued: “A clear realisation of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.”

It includes a right to a good education, a useful and remunerative job, a right to earn enough to provide food, clothing, shelter and medical care for one’s family and freedom from economic fears of old age, sickness, accident and unemployment.

**Concluding remarks**

Similar to the past evangelical method of education for developing good leaders and enlightened population, today we have to move to social analysis to point out the ills of the society, with a view to foster a better vision of society, providing models of social change to ensure a genuinely inclusive society, especially of the poor and the excluded ones.

In the context of the growing significance of the impact of advocacy, as manifested through the working of the United Nations and the many non-government organisations and Churches are to ready themselves to be engaged in this form of missioning as well as make adequate resources for this ministry.

Generating social transformation through diverse ways is acknowledged as an effective way of following the Lord, who “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Influencing the leaders of nations to carry the society along with a sense of purpose and mission is a service the importance of which cannot be exaggerated.

Taming the dominant sections of a society so that remedial steps are taken to empower the powerless and the disenfranchised so that they can also sit along with the powerful and the privileged and thus build an inclusive society is a major paradigm of mission today. Such a mission makes the Church a sign of hope for the contemporary world, especially for those who are on the margins of this world. It brings a freshness of perspective, i.e. the Church is a community that is in solidarity with the suffering and the down-trodden peoples, more so due to the denial of justice and equality.

This resounded in Archbishop Romero of El Salvador’s advocacy for the margins when he addressed the soldiers on 23 March 1980, the day before his assassination: “We are your people. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear the voice of the man commanding you to kill, remember instead the voice of God. Thou shalt not kill. In the name of God, in the name of the tormented people whose cries rise up to heaven, I beseech you, I beg you, I command you, stop the repression.”
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11. Is 58:6-7; 61:1-2; Jer 9:24; 22:13-14; Amos 4:1; 8:4-6; Micah 6:8, and others


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