

Advocacy for economic justice: Toward an ecumenical ministry of presence¹

ABSTRACT

The mode of advocacy serves as a new, meaningful and propitious mode of engagement confronting the ecumenical and civil society movements in working for a ministry of presence that contributes to the ideals of economic justice and transformation. This article explores the theological foundations that could potentially provide the resources necessary for the churches in this regard, drawing on the insights by Paul Tillich, H Richard Niebuhr, and José Comblin.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of advocacy has become a new buzzword in ecumenical and civil society networks in recent years. It attests to a methodological shift taking place within the broader ecumenical movement vis-à-vis its mode of engagement in public life. A new era of economic globalisation and superpower politics is not constructively engaged through bilateral and multilateral dialogues on the nature of authority or questions around Eucharistic hospitality, neither through the specific action of protest per sé as a key weapon of choice in the previous milieu. Rather, as some like T Maluleke (2005: 118) suggest, the appropriateness of “lament and lobbying” to “be honed as one of our main instruments in order to change the world” is currently in view.

Maluleke ponders the question of advocacy in post-apartheid democratic South Africa and contends: “I am not convinced that the churches have done enough advocacy, lamenting and lobbying ... I am not convinced that the churches have kept a close enough relationship with the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable members of our society” (2005: 118). What challenges are posed to the South African Council of Churches (SACC), Economic Justice Network, congregations and parachurch organisations, in the light of these remarks? This article argues for a renewed vision of and commitment to an advocacy mode that could potentially contribute to the socio-economic ideals demanding attention in contemporary society through the constructive and transforming presence of the believing community within the manifold spheres of life.²

1 This article is a revised version of a keynote address on “Advocacy for Economic Justice” for the South African Council of Churches – Parliamentary Office (SACC-PO), the Western Cape Provincial Council of Churches (WCPC), and the Economic Justice Network (EJN), on 26 July 2006 at the Ritz Hotel, Sea Point.

2 For example, see Njongonkulu Ndungane, *A World with a Human Face: A Voice from Africa* (Kenilworth: David Philip, 2003), *passim*; “Poverty and the Church” in *NGTT* 45:2 (Supplementum 2004), 200; Keith Vermeulen, “The Role of the Church in Shaping Public Policy” at <http://www.sacc-ct.org.za/kavchrch.html> (April 2005); Nico Koopman, “Churches, Democracy and the Public Sphere” at <http://www.sacc-ct.org.za/koopman.html> (May 2005). See also Steve de Gruchy, “From Church Struggle to Church Struggles” in John W de Gruchy with Steve de Gruchy (Eds), *The Church Struggle in South*

In this article it is assumed as well as demonstrated that there exist various theological foundations for exploring the public role of the churches. In the first place, Paul Tillich's contribution for understanding the spiritual rationale of a ministry of presence is discernible in his discussion of life and its ambiguities, the healing power of the Spirit in life, the relation of the churches to the spiritual community, and in the relational roles of the churches in society. In the second place, H Richard Niebuhr's contribution for gaining insight into the conflict of faiths as a dynamic factor in fulfilling a ministry of presence is reflected in his discussion of the tension between social faith and radical monotheism and how it impacts upon economic life. In the third place, the ideal of responsibility (Niebuhr) along with the values of love, power and justice (Tillich) are described and applied to the demand for economic justice. In the fourth place, José Comblin's contribution for working towards a transforming advocacy and presence is outlined for its potential to guide the churches.

2. THE SPIRITUAL RATIONALE OF A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

Paul Tillich (1963: 30ff) discusses at length the question of life and its ambiguities in its moral, cultural and religious domains in which the actualisation of human potentiality for individuals, social groups, nations and societies is impeded. The mixture of the good and the bad within these realms contributes to disintegration, destruction and profanisation in human – including economic – experience.³ In stark contrast to these actualisation compromises, Tillich discusses the Spirit, or 'Spiritual Presence', as the revelatory Christian symbol for 'God present', who prevails in all spheres of life fulfilling an actualisation mode towards overcoming and healing life's ambiguities (1963: 108-109, 111ff). This is mediated through 'word' and 'sacrament', understood in the broad sense of including all media that serve as vehicles of the Spiritual Presence (1963: 120ff). All such functional dimensions of the human spirit under the impact of the Spiritual Presence take place in fragmentary and social ways.

For Tillich, the 'church' and 'spiritual community' are not necessarily synonymous. The Spiritual Community is his way of drawing attention to the Spiritual essence effective in a body

Africa, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition (London: SCM, 2004), 254. The efforts by the churches in the ecumenical tradition attest to their attempt to wrestle with the question: "How do we live our faith in the context of globalisation?" For a recent, comprehensive and heuristic discussion of the churches and globalisation, see *Alternative Globalisation Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE): A Background Document* by the WCC's Justice, Peace and Creation Team (Geneva 2005) at <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/agape-new.pdf> (Accessed 06/2006). Another extremely resourceful contribution is by Greetje Witte-Rang, Hielke Wolters e.a. (Eds), *Uitsluitende participatie: Theologische overwegingen bij globalisering* (Utrecht: Stichting Oikos, 2005).

3 Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); *Liquid Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives* (London: Profile, 2002); Ben Agger, *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism* (London: Paradigm, 2004); Edward Webster and Karl Von Holdt (Eds), *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace: Studies in Transition* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005). For some discussion on how economic challenges impact the world of work in South Africa, see Clint Le Bruyns, "The World of Work 'As It Is' and 'As It Could Be': A Challenge for Theology and Ministry in Africa Today" in *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 14 (2005), 1-7; Clint Le Bruyns, "Work and Education in South Africa: A Macro-Level Inquiry", Arnoldshain, Germany (December 2005), forthcoming 2007, draft available at http://www.evangelische-akademie.de/materialien_255.html.

“through its power, its structure, and its fight against their ambiguities” (1963: 163). It is “their invisible, essential Spirituality”, their “inner *telos* and ... as such ... the source of everything which makes them churches” (1963: 164-165). Based on the story of Pentecost, Tillich highlights five elements characterising the Spiritual Community: ecstasy, faith, love, unity, and universality. Without any of these elements, there is no Spiritual Community (1963: 150-152). In the light of this discussion, therefore, it is important to explore economic systems, frameworks, organs, institutions and structures for their apparent Spiritual import.

Since the Spiritual Community is not equated with the institutional churches as such, Tillich is able to talk about a certain duality (not the old Protestant distinction between the visible and invisible Church) in his understanding and experience of the churches. He refers to the ‘latent’ and the ‘manifest’ church “in order to take into account the Christian humanism which exists outside the churches” (Tillich 1966: 66-67; 1963: 152ff). For those who had become alienated from the institutional church, Tillich recalled his religious socialism involvement and remarked (1966: 67):

In living among these groups ... I learned how much of the latent Church there is within them. I encountered the experience of the finite character of human existence, the quest for the eternal and unconditioned, an absolute devotion to justice and love, a hope that lies beyond any Utopia, an appreciation of Christian values and a very sensitive recognition of the ideological misuse of Christianity in the interpenetration of Church and State. It has often seemed to me that the “latent Church” ... was a truer church than the organised denominations, if only because its members did not presume to possess the truth.

Tillich understood that while they did not belong to a church, they were nevertheless not excluded from the Spiritual Community (1963: 153). At the same time, the churches were not necessarily excluded from “instances of profanisation and demonisation of the Spiritual Presence” (1963: 153). He viewed those in latency as teleologically related to the Spiritual Community, thus calling for Christian ministry “to consider pagans, humanists, and Jews as members of the latent Spiritual Community and not as complete strangers who are invited into the Spiritual Community from outside” (1963: 154-155). Among the advantages the manifest church assumed were the religious and organisational weapons necessary for the struggles in society (1966: 67), as well as “the principle of resistance in itself” (1963: 154) to hold itself accountable against potential profanisation and demonisation and for “the ultimate criterion of both faith and love” (1963: 153; cf. Tillich 1954).

Since the ambiguities of the religious life were conquered in principle in churches’ life, they bore a certain responsibility through their various functions. While Tillich (1963: 182ff) discusses several functions (constitutive, expanding, constructing, relating), it is their relating functions that are worth noting in the present discussion. He points out that the churches “have continuous encounters with other sociological groups, acting upon them and receiving from” (1963: 212) (e.g. government, multinational corporations, labour movement, civil society, etc.). He contended that various “ways and principles” needed to be formulated “by which the churches as churches relate themselves to other social groups” (1963: 212). As a critical question, Tillich suggests the following three ways: “the way of silent interpenetration, the way of critical judgement, and the way of political establishment” (1963: 212).

We may understand these approaches as contributing potentially to an advocacy rooted in a ministry of presence. The way of silent interpenetration involves “the continuous radiation of the Spiritual essence of the churches into all groups of the society in which they live” (1963: 212-213). In this way, it is their very existence in society that should impact social existence: “One could call it the pouring of priestly substance into the social structure of which the churches are a part” (1963: 213). But, this influence is mutual as “the churches receive the silent influx of the

developing and changing cultural forms of the society, consciously or unconsciously” (1963: 213). So, they “silently give Spiritual substance to the society in which they live, and the churches silently receive Spiritual forms from the same society” (1963: 213). This relating function could be understood with Tillich’s axiom in mind: ‘religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion’.

The way of critical judgement is a relating function that is also mutually exercised. Tillich suggests that this ‘prophetic’ mode when exercised is already successful: “Its success may be rather limited, but the fact that the society is put under judgement and must react positively or negatively to the judgement is in itself a success” (1963: 213). For, such a society that “rejects or persecutes the bearers of the prophetic criticism against itself does not remain the same as it was before. It may be weakened or it may be hardened in its demonic and profane traits; in either case it is transformed” (1963: 213). But since the relation is mutual, society’s criticism of the churches is similarly understood as prophetic in character: “It is the criticism of ‘holy injustice’ and ‘saintly inhumanity’ within the churches and in their relation to society in which they live” (1963: 214). Tillich sees this as “a kind of reverse prophetism ... just as a reverse priestly impact” (1963: 214). We should take careful note, therefore, of how society critiques the churches and various economic structures.

The way of political establishment seems to go beyond the religious domain of the priestly and prophetic modes. Tillich has in mind here the royal or political function of the church, including the local as well as international (1963: 214). This political responsibility should be of a humble and spiritual character (1963: 214-215), with one of its tasks being to influence the leaders of other social groups (1963: 214).

3. THE CONFLICT OF FAITHS AROUND A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

Richard Niebuhr (1960: 11) identifies the challenges confronting humanity as a “problem of faith” whereby “our whole culture is involved in a conflict of faiths”. He defines faith as confidence and loyalty: “On the one hand it is trust in that which gives value to the self; on the other hand it is loyalty to what the self values” (1960: 16). He refers to “henotheism” as “that social faith which makes a finite society, whether cultural or religious, the object of trust as well as of loyalty”, and which is thus the chief rival to “monotheism” (1960: 11). A classic example of this ‘henotheism’ is found in the “patriotic nationalist” for whom the nation is the ultimate value-centre; its goodness or rightness is irrelevant, while its significance is discerned in how it measures all actions in contributing to or impeding “national life, power, and glory” (1960: 17). The nation is what gives value and meaning to the nationalist and that which drives him / her to the nation’s cause in loyalty. Even more specific to this discussion around economic justice, we could reflect more on how ‘the market’ and other economic ‘principalities and powers’ serve as objects of ultimate concern and loyalty, and how this reality presents churches and the ecumenical tradition with a faith challenge.

According to Niebuhr, faith is a universal feature of life and thinking. “Faith is the knowledge of the meaning of human life, in consequence of which man does not destroy himself but lives” (1960: 20). For “it is the force of life. If a man lives he believes in something. If he did not believe there was something to live for, he would not live. ... Without faith it is impossible to live” (1960: 20). Hence, there is “the dependence of a living self on centres of value whence it derives its worth and for the sake of which it lives” (1960: 20-21).

In no small measure, therefore, economic powers, ideologies and resources typically feature as a matter of trust and loyalty within society as an ultimate concern, reference point and basis for decisions. All beings are not necessarily valued, but only insofar as their being finds congruency with the ultimate concern of economic realities. Niebuhr finds this clearly contrary to the grain of “radical monotheism” (1960: 32):

For radical monotheism the value-centre is neither closed society nor the principle of such a society but the principle of being itself; its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist. As faith, it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists. It is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefore it is worthy of love. It is the confidence that whatever is, is good, because it exists as one thing among the many which all have their origin and their being, in the One – the principle of being which is also the principle of value. In Him we live and move and have our being...

Niebuhr wants to make clear that human being “is not a relation to any finite, natural or supernatural, value-centre that confers value on self and some of its companions in being, but it is value relation to the One to whom all being is related” (1960: 32). For monotheism would be “less than radical if it makes a distinction between the principle of being and the principle of value; so that while all being is acknowledged as absolutely dependent for existence on the One, only some beings are valued as having worth for it” (1960: 32). In this way, it becomes increasingly clear that Niebuhr’s monotheistic lens poses a direct challenge to current economic realities and paradigms, a perspective that is informed by the belief “in God the Father, Almighty Maker of heaven and earth” as “a primary statement, a point of departure and not a deduction” (1960: 33).

This equating of the principle of being with the principle of value has implications for the loyalty demonstrated to one’s neighbours. While universal loyalty should “not express itself as loyalty to the loyal but to whatever is”, the equation is distorted in polytheistic faiths as “the neighbour is defined as the one who is near me in my interest group, when he is near me in that passing association”, whereas “in radical monotheism my neighbour is my companion in being; though he is my enemy in some less than universal context the requirement is to love him” (1960: 34).

The problem with less-than-monotheistic faiths is that “they all fall short of the radical expression; each excludes some realm of being from the sphere of value; each is claimed by a cause less inclusive than the realm of being in its wholeness” (1960: 37). Instead, “Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent” (1960: 37). The exclusionary character generated by economic globalisation processes and ideologies is an apt case in point of the shortcomings economic systems might manifest in affirming the wholeness of the created order (cf. Bauman 2004). In incarnate radical faith all human relations are transformed into covenant relations, where promise-keeping and promise-making feature pre-eminently (Niebuhr 1960: 41).

4. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LOVE, POWER AND JUSTICE THROUGH A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

Niebuhr discusses the meaning of the responsibility demanded by radical faith (1963: 43). In fact, what he claims makes him a Christian is his identification with what is understood to be the cause of Christ. The question of the meaning of responsibility concerns the question of agency. Niebuhr highlights three symbols of agency: “man as maker”, “man as citizen”, and “man as answerer”. Concerning the first symbol, responsibility has to do with accomplishing various goals, ideals, and purposes aimed at ‘the good’ (1963: 48ff). Concerning the second symbol, responsibility has to do with obeying various laws, rules and regulations aimed at ‘the right’ (1963: 51ff). Concerning the third symbol – Niebuhr’s preference – responsibility has to do with responding to various challenges demanding appropriate action aimed at ‘the fitting’: “To be engaged in dialogue, to

answer questions addressed to us, to defend ourselves against attacks, to reply to injunctions, to meet challenges” (1963: 56).

His preferred theory of responsibility comprises four elements. In the first place, it is the idea of *response* (1963: 61ff). Responsibility is action that responds to action upon us. Secondly, it is responsive in accordance with our *interpretation* of the question to which answer is being given. So it is action that responds to interpreted action upon us, thus bearing meaning. Thirdly, it has to do with *accountability*, where actions are deemed responsible insofar as they are made in anticipation of answers to our answers. And fourthly, it concerns *social solidarity*. Thus Niebuhr concludes: “The idea or pattern of responsibility ... [is] ... the idea of an agent’s action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents” (1963: 65).

So, advocacy as facilitating the development of responsibility among others has a place for the value of ideals (vision) regarding economic justice, as well as the value of laws and policies (hopes) regarding economic justice, but it is particularly interested in the value of responses and initiatives (drives) regarding economic questions. How civil society structures and networks could contribute in assisting ordinary people in their daily economic arenas to make sense of what is going on in what confronts them and ways in which to respond is a critical matter for ongoing reflection and exploration.

Tillich’s (1954) discussion of love, power and justice contributes to the development of responsible actions and decisions around economic matters. Concerned with an ontological analysis of these three categories because of much confusion around their interrelationship, Tillich explores how love, power and justice are rooted in the nature of being and contribute to God’s cause. Love as “the drive towards the unity of the separated” (1954: 25) strives to reunite the estranged selves, selves who essentially belong together but are separated in self-centredness and individualisation (1954: 25ff, 29). Different qualities of love as equally legitimate qualities – to the extent that these are exercised legitimately – play roles in facilitating self-fulfilment (*libido*), uniting with that which is a bearer of values (*eros*), and so on (1954: 30ff). Here is an advocacy that might contribute to economic justice through its high premium on ‘the other’ that also reflects a high view of the vulnerability of persons and their dependence on ‘the other’. We belong, therefore we are.

Concerning power, Tillich draws attention to the self-transcending dynamics of life in overcoming internal and external resistance or non-being (1954: 36ff, 40ff). For “Life includes continuous decisions, not necessarily conscious decisions, but decisions which occur in the encounter between power and power”, which demands that “Everybody and everything has chances and must take risks, because his and its power of being remains hidden if actual encounters do not reveal it” (1954: 41). Against each constellation of powers encountered, the possibility of transforming or adapting to the powers is in view (1954: 42).

Exercising love as the drive towards reuniting the separated, the excluded, the victims of injustices, necessitates doing battle with power constellations in the hope of overcoming whatever external and internal opposition and non-being. It should contribute to the actualisation of human potentiality, against economic compromises. For “Love, through compulsory power, must destroy what is against love”, even though “love cannot destroy him who acts against love” (1954: 50). Here is an advocacy that might contribute to economic justice through its courageous risk-taking and determination to grapple with ‘the powers’ in society that too easily jeopardises the realisation of human dignity and human rights within the economic arena.

Regarding justice, Tillich affirms “the intrinsic claim for justice of everything that has being” (1954: 63). He refers to various forms of justice, but underlines the value of a “transforming or

creative justice” (1954: 64ff) that is aimed at “reuniting love” (1954: 71), and “expressed in the divine grace which forgives in order to reunite” (1954: 66). Here is an advocacy that might contribute to economic justice through its commitment to the values of transformation, forgiveness and reconciliation.

5. THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE SPIRIT IN THE WORLD AS MODEL MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

José Comblin (1989: 61) discusses the action of the Spirit in the world by commenting on five fruits of the Spirit’s transforming presence in society: freedom, speech, action, community, and life. He adds that the Spirit has been active in all peoples since the dawn of humanity, but that these fruits of the Spirit are not too common in the world at large. As such, these “represent five aspects of the human calling, since what the Spirit produces is also what men and women are called on to produce”, although “There is no separation between what the Spirit does and what human beings do, despite the fact that far from everything that they do proceeds from the Spirit” (1989: 61). These fruits of the Spirit are existentially threatened in situations of economic injustice (cf. inherited colonial capitalism and hegemonic global capitalism), but form part of the calling in ministry to discern and embody the works of the Spirit in the public square. His pneumatological framework deserves further reflection and ongoing discussion in the light of a globalising South Africa.⁴

Under the Spirit and freedom, Comblin defines it as “the capacity to act on the level of the new humanity, to act in a fully human way, overcoming the resistance that comes to humanity through sin” (1989: 62). In “its most radical expression, no system of laws and obligations, no system of repression and of course no system based on domination and poverty could stand” (1989: 63). Under the Spirit and speech, he underlines the power of speech and draws attention to the ways in which God’s power is demonstrated through speech, especially on the part of the poor and oppressed (1989: 69). Under the Spirit and action, the active and dynamic nature of the Spirit is affirmed. Without any “material grandeur”, the works of the Spirit produce “human realities, free people and free communities” as “The Spirit produces complete human beings” (1989: 70). He adds: “While the world produces works of self-aggrandisement that have nothing to do with the power of the Spirit, it also contains forces working to build up humanity and restore it” – which can be embraced as signals of the Spirit at work (1989: 71).

Here the work of the Spirit contrasts with the human problem of “overhumanisation”, by which W Schweiker (2004: xiii) refers to “the relentless pursuit of knowledge in order to extend our power so that we might possess and control nature and make it serve human purposes” so much so that it involves “the triumph of the will and with it the conviction that all that is of worth, what should direct actions, relations, and social projects, is the extension of the human power to shape and create realities”. Ironically, Schweiker acknowledges, it paves the way for “the demeaning and the profaning of human existence and all of life through wars, ecological endangerment, and cultural banality” (2004: xiii).

Under the Spirit and community, Comblin refers to community formation as “the proper work of the Spirit, the effect of freedom and of liberating speech” (Comblin 1989: 71). Working to bring

4. In the 1980s a WCC project resulted in a resourceful framework for assessing economic systems, which included the following criteria: meeting basic human needs; justice and participation; sustainability; self-reliance; universality; peace.

all people together through *agapē*? in active solidarity and service, the Spirit “generates a communion of peoples in an overall community embracing the whole of humanity” (1989: 71-72). Under the Spirit and life, he highlights the life brought about through all that the Spirit does: “Everything the Spirit brings about in this world converges on the one end, which is life – ever more life and an eternal life. Freedom brings life, speech brings life, action brings life, and community brings life. All these mean more life and form the actual content of life” (1989: 73).

6. CONCLUSION

The mode of advocacy confronts ecumenical and civil society networks with a meaningful and strategic opportunity to contribute both critically and creatively to socio-economic transformation in contemporary society through a ministry of presence. Based on the insightful discussions by Tillich, Niebuhr and Comblin, various connecting threads between their respective contributions and the contemporary economic challenges were continually noted.

Some specific questions for deeper and critical reflection, based upon the aforementioned insights, include the following: 1) What is contained and involved within the public ministry of the church? 2) What religious and organisational weapons does the church have in advocating for economic justice? 3) How do we challenge people’s loyalty to the market and globalisation? 4) What is the appropriate church action to take in engaging global structures, and whom do we target? 5) How do we promote the life that freedom brings within the economic arena?

To this end the notions of spiritual presence, radical monotheistic faith, responsibility, love-power-justice, and the transforming work of the Spirit are offered to the churches as foundational resources in their attempts to fulfil their public calling with theological integrity and faithful obedience.

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