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Marginal Readings: Implications for the Lutheran Communion¹

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Introduction: Marginal – the Where and the Who?

One of the most significant insights offered by twentieth century Christian theology is the notion of the "preferential option for the poor," which argues that people marginalized by the economy have a claim to "special consideration." Arising out of various theologies of liberation, this option for the economically disadvantaged and for those at the fringes of society have provided major and new impulses for biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, ecclesial practice, and the academic study of religion. Opting for the margins continues to be an important issue at a time when the gap between rich and poor is growing at an alarming rate in many parts of the world, and when other gaps (based, for example, on differences in gender, caste, sexual orientation or race) continue to linger.

Margins? What are they? Again, theologians, sociologists and others have commonly made a range of assumptions about margins and marginality, and their discussions have often categorized marginality as ecological, economic, or socio-political or a combination of these and more. Whilst it has been common to privilege one or other of these categories in order to explain how societies worked, they are rarely mutually exclusive. In addition, since marginality is relative, virtually any group might be made marginal depending on people's perspectives in the past or present. Sometimes marginality can be imposed (economically or politically or culturally), and sometimes even actively chosen. The term "margin" and its definition is a complex business, and the term needs sensitive, context-orientated use to make it useful for us theologians.

Besides the uncertainty around definition of the term, options for the margins have also been challenged by postmodern shifts in intellectual, social, political, and economic realities that often replace preferential options with other emphases, such as general concerns for pluralism, otherness, and difference. Options for the margins are therefore (at best) reduced to the special interests of certain minority groups, or (at worst) rejected as antiquated and irrelevant for the twenty-first century.

For want of time, I hesitate to enter into the debate on the definition of marginality. These debates could result in the masking of patterns of oppression and provide an excuse for deafness to voices from the margins. Instead, I would like for us to acknowledge that the margins are simply those areas/places in society that are on the periphery, on the fringes, sometimes concealed. These places are neither deserted nor quiet, but crowded and noisy with people drawn from among a long list of dis-privileged individuals and communities, whether by race, caste, tribe, gender, economy, politics, sexual orientation, mental health, physical disability, HIV/AIDS. Those who live at the margins—or simply exist—cannot be

¹ A Draft Presentation.

reduced to or dismissed merely as "untouchables," "prostitutes," "criminals," "sinners," "downtrodden," "the oppressed," "minorities" "homosexuals" or even the "poor." They are not categories or statistics but women and men, flesh and blood, created, redeemed and loved.

Significance of Margins?

Margins as the space of God's visitation

God is also discernable and present in the margins. It is inappropriate to center God's presence (2 Samuel 7:5-9). The biblical story has revealed that God journeys to the margins and is also to be found in the periphery and one has to therefore journey from the centers of power to the fringes of society and experience God in new ways and in new forms because God comes to us in disturbing and unsettling questions. "She speaks when we are silent and allow ourselves to be challenged and taught by realities around us"². The hope expressed by these communities while being in the midst of demoralizing despondency and 'slumdog' despair and powerlessness is a celebration of the power of God on the margins. God is at the margins and on the side of the poor and when we stand with those at the margins we are with God.

Margins as a place for affirmation of self and identity

The language at the margins is the language of plurality and diversity because it is within difference that the poor and the marginalized have a space. They're places occupied by people who go unnoticed, misfits who seldom figure in when the mainline world defines itself and esteems itself. And yet it is in the margins that they are affirmed and acknowledged. Difference is allowed to flourish in the margins and it enables them to come to a consciousness about themselves, establish an identity and define who they are. In their assertion of difference we also hear and discern God's language of plurality in operation.

Margins as the sites of theologies

Immeasurable is the complexity of the realities confronting communities in the margins. But despite their "slumdog" existence, they bring to the fore reflections and interpretations that are subjective, based on knowledge derived from experience which is more important than any quantitative generalizations. They are pushing the church to overcome stagnation by disturbing the sterile complacency of the dominant social groups and traditions, and by challenging their set mores, fixed modes of looking at reality and their established literary canons. These marginal readings and interpretations bring to focus neglected, suppressed or suppressed aspects of experience, vision, language and reality and force the Communion to observe itself critically and refashion its mission and its theology thereby offering fresh, new and exciting resources for fashioning a theology that is unconventional, radical in its spirit and orientation made possible by borders, both religious and cultural, that are fluid and porous.

Why Marginal Readings?

Improving the range of texts we attend to and of issues we take seriously and encouraging the inclusion of a range of marginalized voices into academic institutions and

² Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008) xi.

public debates, remain important social, political and ecclesial tasks. But the stakes involved in such a project, diverse and multicultural go beyond the reduction of parochialism and enlarging the understandings of the mainstream. They go far beyond a simple “inclusion.” Marginal readings need to be welcomed as critical interventions not only into mainstream Western culture’s readings of the Biblical text but also into many non-western theological and biblical discourses thus expanding their own vision in useful ways. As is sometimes forgotten, these readings are also “cultural positions” within the moral and political fabric of their social contexts, that are trying to expose ideologies and justifications for practices or institutions that are unjust and exclusionary and work to dis-empower and marginalize a great many of the inhabitants of these cultural contexts.

Marginal readings need to be heeded for their liberative potential since they free us from a narrow understanding of faith or self, conditioned by centers of tradition and power. They transform the understanding of the margins and ones who inhabit those spaces and they raise questions and issues that are either neglected or not often raised by the dominant. They free faith from being reduced to a matter of knowledge, truth and understanding and root these in concrete praxis.

The Bible at the Margins

The Bible became ‘polyvalent’ in its use as a colonizing book, a meta symbol of the colonialists, to inculcate European manners, values and symbols, a medium through which education and literacy became available, and an icon in a culture with a history of iconizing material objects³. Yet it was popular among the ‘newly converted,’ because it was accessible to all who could read irrespective of race, caste or gender. It became an instrument of emancipation for the colonized. The Bible holds a central place in theologizing at the margins because it is seen as a source of power and comfort and provides Christian identity and continuity with the Christian tradition. The Bible is also significant because of the commonality that exists between their experience and the struggles and experiences of the marginalized communities of the Bible. This is probably the first and most important consideration – the points of convergence in the matrices of both the biblical and the world of the marginalized. The biblical dictum of a preferential option towards the poor and the marginalized struggle for justice, equality and freedom is one such point of convergence.

Thus, this affinity between the marginalized of the Bible and the subjugated also contributes to the appeal that the Bible holds for them. The potential of biblical texts for liberation negotiated and renegotiated in the light of their subjugated experience, makes possible the discovery of God within their social and cultural milieu and their liberation from oppressive forces.

The Bible is a source of life, and more specifically to the life of the community. Carlos Mesters puts it:

³ Sathianathan Clarke, “Viewing the Bible through the Eyes and Ears of Subalterns in India,” *Biblical Interpretation*, 10, 3 (2002): 245-66

The people’s main interest is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible. They try to be faithful, not primarily to the meaning the text has in itself (the historical and literal meaning), but to the meaning they discover in the text for their lives.⁴

Features that bind marginal Readings

Context as medium of interpretation

The first and foremost issue that is central to marginal readings of the Bible is the context of the interpreter. Any interpretation begins with a reading of the context — the context of the community to which the interpreter belongs. The exegetical starting point and the material force that grips the marginal reader is grounded in a materialistic epistemology that is characterized, among other things, by its location of truth not in a world beyond history, but indeed within the crucible of historical struggles. The social, cultural, economic, and political world of the marginal reading community constitutes the valid hermeneutical starting point for reading Scripture for liberation. The point of departure here is their experience in their struggle for survival and liberation. Biblical interpretation is inescapably linked with a specific historical, social situation and it is through the context that the Scripture becomes meaningful. In making this claim, biblical interpreters representing oppressed communities apply to their interpretations the “sociology of knowledge.” Dermont A. Lane summarizes its central thesis: “Knowledge is not neutral or value free. Instead all knowledge tends to embody the social circumstances and conditions of time.”⁵ Theorists take the matter a step further. Because knowledge is socially conditioned, it tends to reflect the vested interests of the knower. And these vested interests vary from society to society, from culture to culture, and even from social class to social class.

From this insight arises the widely evoked “hermeneutic of suspicion.” At its foundation lies the assumption that in every claim to knowledge someone’s vested interests are operating, generally those of the dominant and powerful in society. If this is the case, then we must be suspicious of all knowledge claims, we must come to see how they reflect and serve the interests of the powerful while victimizing the marginalized.

Experience, tested and revised in conversation with others is another starting point of these interpretations. The appeal to experience as a source of knowledge in the hands of those who feel oppressed and discriminated against is a useful tool in opposing authoritarian powers. The strength of this appeal to experience lies in the fact that it is shared by others. Clearly, experience is a powerful source of knowledge. It is the fire in which we test what we know and what we do. Our thinking and acting are born of experience. Experiences of pain and joy shape our views and our values, past and present. Experience is never “pure” or unmediated; it is always impinged on by the communities and circumstances in which we live. Appealing to experience means acknowledging the fact that experiences are often ambiguous, certainly limited, and often contradictory. Any claims to truth are therefore partial.

Textual Activism

⁴ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 9.

⁵ Dermont A. Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process and Salvation* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 77.

The Bible is received as a text, a result of human effort that arises out of a particular context and situation of human life. In other words, the Bible is not seen as being divinely inspired, but becomes the "Word" when read in community and in the light of the community's experience and community consciousness (shaped by the affirmation of one's roots, collective struggle, the experience of suffering and of liberation, and the vision of liberation and of restoration). The ultimate goal is to instill in the community the impetus to strive for political and social liberation and to provide the community with possible blueprints for action towards liberation, a new identity, and fullness of life. This process, propelling text into life in order to influence change, is textual activism. The Bible and Christianity as a whole "contains something of truth not because of its origins, but because it liberates people now from specific forms of oppression"⁶

Therefore, the reading and interpreting of the text plays a major part in the social, cultural, and political mobilization of marginalized communities and for the maintenance and preservation of life.

Sensitivity to the present moment – the here and the now

The effectiveness and relevance of a reading is measured by the extent to which a reading has touched upon the life of the individual and the community. There is therefore a special sensitivity to the practical implications of the reading for the reader. New interpretations are futile unless they motivate and provoke the community into action. The move from their particular experience to the Bible, from the Bible to action, and then back again to the Bible is emphasized, requiring a process of mutual validation between experience and text. Only then can one envision liberation, renewal of the church and transformation of society. Marginal biblical hermeneutics are closely bound up with their direct involvement in the process of production and hard physical labor. By their physical exertion they contribute to the maintenance of life not just of themselves but the entire society. This life needs to be protected when it is threatened and hence they are skeptical and suspicious of religious sources that do not vibrate with their daily lives, instead seem to contain ideological legitimization of their subjugated condition and bondage. The lack of fulfillment of their basic material needs for a dignified life makes the dalit reader very sensitive to the present moment. They challenge the theological and social determinism of the dominant to keep others in subservient roles by finding ways to either revise or reject both scriptural and social dictums that have imposed on them a life of drudgery. Through openly performed rituals,⁷ through song, dance and act⁸, they re read, enact or revise oppressive traditions and thereby

⁶ Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, 53.

⁷ Charsely citing Gluckman, Max. 1954. *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, identifies these performances as "rituals of rebellion" (Charsely: 2004: fn.11, 287).

⁸ Charsely, has through his study of the Madiga community in Andhra Pradesh shows how they undermine the claimed superiority of the dominant Brahman calling on cosmogonic traditions emphasizing the female *Shakti* and making secondary and junior the great male gods of contemporary Hinduism. The practical importance of this community (traditionally assigned to work with leather and hence considered polluting) to others is emphasized and an embraceable caste identity at odds with sheerly negative conceptions of "the Untouchable" is constructed. The problematic aspects of their identity as untouchable, polluted, excluded are also accounted for within contextualized positive elements. For example, "The ability to move and skin dead cattle is given a forcefully positive evaluation. The eating of beef is not represented as a mistake," p.285.

equip themselves and the community with strength and hope to address and cope with the predicament of exclusion, discrimination and exploitation.

Faith – more than just intellect but faith in all its 'earthliness'

Faith is both a starting point and the end result of interrogation of scripture by the marginalized. Faith is considered as an effective hermeneutic because such a perspective helps the interpreter be cautious in his/her use of tools that sift the text of the bible for meaning irrespective of the method that is used. The study of the bible is a matter of faith and biblical research is not merely an intellectual exercise but ultimately a means to respond to God and God's demands and this provides both the motivation and goal in all aspects of biblical research. But this faith cannot be equated with the intellect alone. Rather it is characterized and defined by its "earthliness," a term used by Wilfred⁹. It indicates urgency, an immediacy, and directness with which it is bound up with the material and physical realities and needs of life

Use of creative methods and non-textual resources

Marginal readings are open to the use of oral resources, rituals, symbols and enactments and other rituals of rebellion to understand the biblical text. They are welcoming of imaginative, creative and non-formal methodologies for the reading and interpretation of religious sources including the bible. Since marginal communities are collective by nature, and places where learning is engendered through collective and communal exercises, the resulting interpretation is rich and

Implications for the Lutheran Communion

Marginal readings are born out of a spiritual experience with God and out of a context of oppression and injustice. A reading that seeks to be of service to these people must necessarily start from a meeting with God, a meeting that takes place within a situation of challenge, a situation that awakens Christians to a contemplative commitment. They are what have been termed as "combative readings" since they seek to equip the community with the power to rebel, resist and liberate and provide a biblical basis for doing so. They are ecclesial because these communities are rooted in the church even in those instances where the institutional church has not been supportive of their cause.

They accept and proclaim their belonging to these churches, experiencing this belonging as a reference and sometimes as a challenge. But they share a common feeling that "the church of Christ is God's instrument for the liberation of the human spirit and for demonstrating the first fruits of God's reign. They are rooted in the church and their resolve

⁹ In his discussion of those dalits who converted to Christianity in exchange for rice and hence called "rice Christians," Wilfred writes, "The seeds of a subaltern hermeneutics were present in the acts of the subaltern peoples in their quest for a religious affiliation which would respond to their needs for rice, wheat, security and other material necessities. Today this hermeneutic is unfolding itself with greater incision and force. The growing critique by the subalterns of the religious traditions for denying equality of treatment, freedom and dignity is a further elaboration of their hermeneutics of religion through "rice" – a symbol of all that a human being requires to live and to live with dignity. This critical earthliness forces the religious traditions to find their true bearings in a politically, socially and culturally situated praxis. p.59.

to read from within the church in accord with the longings and aspirations of the people of God is something they share in common¹⁰.

Despite their strong criticism of the ecclesiastical institution, are actively involved in the life of the church and working for its transformation. One can say that the theologians of struggle have not given up on the church, although in spite of the church the people will rise.

There has been an irruption of these voices from the margins, an irruption that cuts across gender, race, caste, class and religion. The challenges they pose are radical and may be construed as threatening to the church. In our day to day work of theologizing we hardly take seriously the concerns or the articulations of our partners from different contexts. If we can exist without them year after year then there is no compelling reason why they should be taken seriously at all. But the church cannot pretend any longer to hide behind the façade of neutrality. These readings challenge the community to discern a new way of being church. The hope lies in the fact that the creative and liberating side of the church has been expanding, and so has the consciousness that the church does not exist for itself but for the life of the world.

How might marginal readings enrich the Lutheran communion? Perhaps more constructively, it is in the engaged dialog between different perspectives that human understanding of God, and of Christian discipleship in the modern world, is most likely to be enlarged. A truly critical theology will always be a dialectical theology, not fixed on one track solutions, but ready to listen and to learn new truths from unexpected directions including interpretations of the biblical text offered from the margins. If a cross fertilization of ideas is encouraged one can emerge more clearly aware of one's own identity and determined to live and develop their theological mission as a contemplative commitment, in which methodology, choice of subject matter, and systematic examination of the experience and struggles of the oppressed will combine to produce a real experience of God and proper attention to the God of others. We as theologians are called to see the revelation of God shining in the faces of others, those who are different from us, and to make our theology too an effective and gratuitous instrument of conversion.

¹⁰Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, "Preface-Third World Theologies: Conversion to Others" in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*, edited by K. C. Abraham. Maryknoll: NY: Orbis, 1993) vii-xiv.