From Prophetic Witness to Public Policy: Rethinking Faith-Based Engagement in Peru

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More than ever before, Latin American Protestants and evangelicals today offer us examples of strategy and discourse designed to engage the public sphere. Each church-related initiative designed to guide involvement and amass power in the public sphere evidences a certain theological and political logic, rationality, and intentionality.

In the past, influential Latin American Christians were, at best, hesitant to leave the four walls of the church to venture out into the convoluted world of politics. Interestingly, many of these veterans have not only ceased questioning the validity of church organizations’ participation in political measures,

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but they have also started to understand the public arena as a strategic field in which to publicize and strengthen religious discourse and practice.¹

This article will review the experiences of groups and networks that—from their active involvement as actors in civil society—promote participation in public initiatives to combat corruption as a factor that aggravates poverty, legitimates exclusion, and normalizes the violation of human rights. Rooted in these experiences where churches have left their mark on the public sphere, I will suggest ways for faith communities to rethink strategies for prophetic witness.

### Two Ways to Understand Public Engagement from an Evangelical Perspective

In the Peruvian experience, we can identify at least two ways that evangelicals understand social protest and public engagement.

The first tendency casts public engagement as a moral battleground. According to this view, many evangelical groups assume that they have acquired sufficient moral capital to grant them the authority they need to participate actively in processes of social change. Here we find those evangelical groups that seek to influence public policy in pursuit of an agenda that includes opposition to abortion and homosexuality, the promotion of religious

From Prophetic Witness to Public Policy: Rethinking Faith-Based Engagement in Peru

liberty—as opposed to religious equality—, the promotion of family values, etc.

These efforts, designed to appropriate public space in pursuit of their religious and moral agenda, are based on the perspective that Michael P. Young calls “confessional protest.” On the one hand, such a strategy treats social problems as a pretext for publicly legitimating a certain confessional discourse about morality. On the other hand, this logic of the construction of social protest undergirds what is essentially a defensive political strategy. Religious groups meeting this description express their opinion or mobilize their followers as soon as they sense that their core moral values are being threatened by public policy or delegitimized by the politically powerful. In such circumstances, these groups implement a series of public strategies to influence political decision makers and to air their voices in both mass and social media.

It is relevant here to note that, unlike in the past, the proselytizing strategies employed by these groups are no longer reduced to preaching about personal or individual change. Instead, their individualistic understanding of conversion has been abandoned and resignified, albeit only circumstantially, in favor of the discourse of social influence. However, this does not necessarily imply renouncing the conversionist tradition that has long defined the identity of significant sectors of evangelical groups. Instead, it indicates a strategic repositioning to garner legitimacy and recognition in the public sphere.

This tendency arises from a religious worldview in which “moral imperatives contain the inherent capacity, if not propensity, to evaluate and judge actual reality as immoral, unjust,

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Rolando Pérez

unacceptable.”

In this sense, the lively protests spawned by this religious worldview constitute for their promoters a useful strategy that helps believers publicly reaffirm their principles and faith values, in juxtaposition to “worldly values.”

Second tendency: A contrasting justification for public involvement rooted in an evangelical framework is to affirm a spirituality of citizenship. According to this approach, the practice of groups, networks, and movements has managed to reconcile faith values with the promotion of rights and justice. These groups make up what James Jasper has called ethical resisters.

They understand their role in society as being rooted in the ethical demand to respond to the structural causes of social ills.

Within the framework of this second tendency, the meanings that these religious actors develop constitute, according to Donileen Loseke, shared social discourses, thus establishing the actors as producers of a religious culture that extends far beyond ecclesiastical circles. Therefore, according to this religious worldview, adherents feel free to participate in instances and initiatives of social protest that arise from within civil society.

This perspective of public engagement, which is based on the logic of prophetic witness, contrasts dramatically with those that understand the public space as a place where Christians are commanded by their theology to conquer strategic strongholds and outposts. Such Christians endeavor to influence the

From Prophetic Witness to Public Policy: Rethinking Faith-Based Engagement in Peru

public sector by promoting a return to and resignification of a traditional theocratic understanding of political power, through which “Christians have a moral imperative or a ‘cultural mandate’ to extend their religious dominion over the earth.”

From the perspective of public engagement as prophetic witness, a variety of initiatives have emerged in recent years. These initiatives seek to promote social change in local contexts in which church actors have sought to respond to the perceived erosion of rights and justice in society. The prophetic witness practiced by many of these groups demonstrates a nonconservative approach to social problems that models new ways of cooperating with other actors in civil society that have been working for years to develop citizen-based grassroots resistance to human rights violations and systems of social exclusion.

Two Case Studies

In this section I will offer two case studies that illustrate strategies of public engagement rooted in the idea of prophetic witness in contexts in which corruption aggravates poverty, legitimates exclusion, and tends to normalize violations of human rights.

Case 1: Evangelical Activists Working for Environmental Rights

La Oroya is one of the poorest areas in all of Peru. It is located in Yaulí Province in the region of Junín. In 2007, the Blacksmith Institute ranked La Oroya among the ten most contaminated

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Rolando Pérez

cities in the world. Against this backdrop, the Movimiento por la Salud de la Oroya (MOSAO, Movement for the Health of La Oroya) was founded by diverse civil-society organizations. MOSAO played a key role not only in bringing attention to the issue of environmental contamination in the region but also in mobilizing citizens for resistance and protest against the abuses that had severely compromised the rights of the community. An absent or lax federal government had allowed Doe Run, a U.S.-based mining company, to continue to operate despite more than a decade of flagrant violations of Peru’s environmental laws.

The influential magazine IDEELE summarizes the facts that led to the social conflict in this region:

Since it set up shop in La Oroya, Doe Run has attempted to avoid its environmental responsibilities through procrastination: on several occasions it has requested an extension on the deadline to comply with PAMA [federal environmental guidelines]. The sole opposition has come from a group of NGOs that make up the consortium Union for the Sustainable Development of Yauli Province, La Oroya (UNES) [made up of various civil-society organizations as well as church-related groups], which MOSAO founded with a few local citizens.

Groups connected to Catholic and evangelical churches were key actors in the development of an advocacy strategy that

8. The 2007 report is no longer available online, yet see other similar and more recent reports by the Blacksmith Institute/Pure Earth at www.worstpolluted.org.
generated a sizable protest movement that extended beyond the local region. The protests ultimately led to the cessation of Doe Run’s business operations which, in turn, stopped the contamination in the region. The Peruvian chapter of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) network Joining Hands Against Hunger and the Filmena Tomaira Pacsi organization, run by evangelical women, played pivotal roles in the campaign that sought to defend community health and environmental rights. This emblematic case demonstrates how actors from faith communities provided the necessary social capital for advocacy actions, pulling together resources on the micro level and mobilizing the grassroots (raising awareness, building bridges of solidarity, getting support networks up and running, caring for victims of environmental damage).

A second contribution by faith communities was to implement a creative communication strategy. They reimagined traditional religious celebrations, using them as spaces for mediation and communication to increase awareness and visibility of the ongoing violation of environmental rights in communities affected by the mining industry. To reimagine religious rituals has important pedagogical value both for those affected by the problem and for the activists working for environmental rights. Just like in La Oroya, many advocacy campaigns designed for communities suffering the effects of extractive industries include public worship services and prayer vigils as ways to raise awareness among average citizens as well as among key judicial and political actors.
Case 2: Evangelical Women Advocating for the Rights of Girls

A second case occurred in the city of Huánuco, located in the north central region of the country. Huánuco is one of the six poorest departments in Peru and is tenth among Peru’s twenty-four departments in terms of the number of cases of sexual violence. In 2012, 758 cases of child sex abuse were documented. Local court magistrates repeatedly handed down questionable verdicts that tended to exonerate the aggressors. A mafia of sex offenders had successfully corrupted the judiciary, leading them to rule against the victims. According to the complaints documented by the Commission of Crimes against Sexual Freedom (terminology used by the Attorney General), between 2000 and 2014, Huánuco ranked tenth in the actual number of cases filed. The District Attorney’s figures through April 2015 demonstrate that 5,761 cases of child sex abuse were registered between 2000 and 2015 in Huánuco.10

Faced with this outrage, more than 200 indignant mothers decided to create an organization to help make their voices heard. They called it the TAMAR Association. The biblical allusion to Tamar was suggested by a group of evangelical Christian women who played a key role in establishing the collective. The women came together with other civil-society actors to defend the rights of their daughters. They initiated a long campaign of public engagement and advocacy which included actions like raising awareness among the general population, using the media to spread their influence, and putting pressure on

key decision makers. They achieved something nearly unbelievable. Thanks to the advocacy efforts of this local citizens collective, with the active participation of several church-related groups, the National Judiciary Council decided not to ratify in their posts the regional judges who had come under fire for releasing perpetrators charged with sexual abuse of minors. A related outcome was that, in response to this citizen-based initiative, the local commercial media launched watchdog campaigns targeting systemic corruption in the region’s judiciary.

Lessons for Advocacy from these Experiences of Prophetic Witness

Based on the above cases, I challenge Christian churches as well as church-related movements and networks to rethink their role as citizens and their political involvement from the perspective of a prophetic missiology.

1. Join and Strengthen Local Prophetic Initiatives that Arise in Civil Society

Many faith communities actively work against the human rights violations that result from systems and cultures of corruption. One challenge for these groups is to establish their public presence of prophetic witness as an integral part of a wide range of citizen initiatives. On the one hand, this requires permanent and strategic involvement in civil society and active engagement with the political contexts where public policy is devised and implemented. In the two case studies we examined, members of evangelical organizations raised indignant voices and got involved in advocacy campaigns as members of...
different civil-society collectives. The experience of these evangelical activists demonstrates that the logic of public engagement requires building long-term bridges of dialogue and interaction with other key political stakeholders. This implies engaging in public conversations and debate, not just on strictly religious issues but also—and most fundamentally—on issues related to the common good, public welfare, and the needs of all citizens.

On the other hand, this logic of public engagement requires us to develop a public theology connected to a pastoral understanding of citizenship. This perspective invites us to give great importance to developing a pastoral understanding of the public sphere that enables members of faith communities to be actively involved in local processes as citizens; at the same time, it requires us to design pedagogical tools that help Christians develop a spirituality that is lived out as committed participants in movements that defend human rights and promote the vigilance of citizens.

In this regard, Clarence Y. H. Lo holds that religious groups that actively participate in citizen movements and efforts to seek structural change in society can be described as a kind of “community of challengers.” That is, they have the ability and desire to challenge, encourage, or revive social mobilizers and citizen activists to pursue social changes that are not necessarily achieved in the short term. For Lo, religious groups can be considered

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challengers for change because their motivation transcends the interests defined by current political contingencies.\textsuperscript{13}

When faith communities adopt initiatives of public involvement geared toward addressing and resolving social problems that can be traced back to systems of corruption and rights violations, they need to strengthen the skills and abilities that allow faith-based agents to insert themselves strategically into the political realm via prophetic disruption.

To achieve this, we must learn from the experiences of those who have become involved with citizen networks on the local level. One recent study focused on the role of religious groups in contexts of socioenvironmental conflict.\textsuperscript{14} This study demonstrates how approaching and practicing this kind of nonconformist spirituality in the public sphere leads to a resignification of faith itself.

The cases of La Oroya and Huánuco attest to the relevant role that agents connected to faith communities play in social mobilization and protests that seek action against impunity, injustice, and rights violations. Here we will mention five ways that religious capital can influence this kind of social mobilization:

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  \item[a)] Religious groups can play a key role in the process of empowering social movements in the public sphere with the goal of developing effective strategies to generate change of both citizen practices and public policy.
  \item[b)] Religious groups and institutions can provide a series of “mobilization repertoires” that correspond to macro resources like political lobbies for advocacy, the
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
creation of bridges with influential decision makers and international activists, as well as transnational communication networks. In the case of La Oroya, Presbyterian and Jesuit groups mobilized clergy in the U.S. city that headquarters the business that managed the metallurgical complex in La Oroya. This helped to diversify the repertoire of mobilization and advocacy. The connection with these international networks strengthened the coalition of environmentalists that lead the campaign in La Oroya and throughout Peru.

c) Church-related groups can offer an ethical perspective for political action that arises from a prophetic religious worldview. Grounded in this ethical perspective, political protest can then expose how corrupt actions grow out of the undermining of moral values and a communal sense of life. Just so, church-related groups must emphasize that corruption not only jeopardizes the ethics of the common good but also leads to a massive concentration of wealth and power in reduced elites to the detriment of the well-being of those who have less, of those historically excluded from society.

From this perspective of prophetic action, the theological option taken by faith actors who are committed to the cause of human rights demonstrates that it is a sense of moral indignation that leads them to break with an instrumentalist understanding of ethics. Instead, they align more with what Juan José Tamayo calls the ethics of alterity. This understanding of ethics affirms not only temporary, circumstantial gestures of solidarity and compassion toward the Other but also, and more fundamentally, the commitment to establishing a system of life that allows others to be incorporated into the community, reclaim
From Prophetic Witness to Public Policy: Rethinking Faith-Based Engagement in Peru

their place in political life, and participate actively in the public sphere.¹⁵

2. Moving from Solidarity-at-a-Distance to Empowering the Affected

It is not possible to develop prophetic advocacy and engagement strategies if the leadership of the groups seeking to change public policy are distant from those impacted by harmful policies and systems. In this regard, public engagement initiatives ought to increase the visibility of and help to empower our brothers and sisters who are suffering the consequences of systems of corruption. Engagement initiatives must increase their visibility and amplify their voices. In the cases of both La Oroya and Huánuco, activists and advocates invested enormous amounts of time and energy to ensure that those directly impacted participated actively in each phase of the advocacy campaign. For example, it was extremely gratifying to see the women from the TAMAR Association hold meetings with political decision makers and pressure them to accept their responsibility for solving the problem of impunity.

This logic of public engagement is based on actions of compassion and solidarity toward those whose rights are being compromised; yet these actions also help to incorporate them fully into the community, recover their place in political life, and be recognized and appreciated for their abilities, thus allowing them to enjoy life to the fullest. Pastoral action in such circumstances should seek to increase the visibility of the excluded


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Rolando Pérez

while also increasing the visibility of the systems of exclusion and social inequality that distort supposedly democratic deliberative processes. This approach to pastoral action invites us to consider that the theological task cannot exist as such unless it incorporates the ethics of alterity, or otherness, which implies prioritizing on the public agenda the recognition of the demands and rights of the sectors that historically have been denied, excluded, and silenced.

In summary, advocacy strategies for our churches can invite us to rethink public engagement as a whole. The experiences in La Oroya and Huánuco expand the notion of a solidarity campaign into something much bigger than a protest march or pressure to remediate any one instance of injustice. A campaign, we discover, includes direct engagement with the institutions, public spaces, and systems that generate injustice in order to contribute to the building of a society based on equality, justice, and respect for human rights. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, such engagement seeks not only to bind the wounds of the victims crushed by the wheels of injustice but also to instigate a change in the wheels themselves.16

3. Activate International Church-Based Networks

One of the key factors in the success of the public advocacy campaigns in La Oroya and Huánuco was the international pressure exerted by churches, organizations, and networks through letters sent to key decision makers, public mobilizations, and liturgical acts in favor of those affected. Faith communities have valuable social capital in the form of the great worldwide network of Christian churches and organizations that can

contribute not only to consolidating a far-reaching chain of solidarity but also to exercising significant political pressure.

In the case of La Oroya, groups connected to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and to the Catholic Jesuit community mobilized leaders and members of both traditions. By focusing on the corporate headquarters of the firm that managed the smelter in La Oroya, these groups helped diversify what scholars of social protest call the “repertoire of mobilization and impact.” The Presbyterians and Jesuits utilized their extensive networks to raise awareness of the conflict and push their leaders to bring pressure to bear on the business leaders.

4. Use the Media to Influence Public Opinion

Another important factor in the success of the La Oroya and Huánuco campaigns was to generate conversation and currents of opinion on the problems in each context. In both cases, this included raising the profile of social conflict and citizen protest in the local and national media. These experiences help us to reconsider the relationship between the media and social change. While some may view the media as merely a technology for broadcasting messages, our experience in these cases makes clear that the media play a key role in advocacy campaigns, becoming a mediation space for building public agendas and forming currents of opinion that influence decision makers. Strategic engagement with the media allowed activists in these campaigns to develop actions designed to influence public opinion. The currents of opinion

Rolando Pérez

thus generated motivated other social actors to support the agenda of the affected communities.

This is one of the challenges for churches and church-related groups that embark upon initiatives of public engagement. Usually, our ability to influence opinion has been limited to intra- or inter-ecclesiastical circles, with little impact on those that form public opinion, on political decision makers, or on society in general. Making an impact requires developing communication strategies that take into account how journalists do their job, that generate analysis and debate beyond the confines of our religious institutions, and that consolidate currents of public opinion that impact public agendas.

The experiences in La Oroya and Huánuco are proof positive that church-related groups contributed to substantive social change not only by facilitating important information and analysis to journalists in each location but also by helping to develop the discourse that citizen coalitions used to impact public debate.

Final Reflections

Churches can help generate creative, democratic resistance to systems of oppression.

These two case studies invite us to recognize that a pastoral pedagogy rooted in a theology that equips Christian communities to be active citizens can sustain public advocacy initiatives. On this journey, churches can help generate creative, democratic resistance to systems of oppression and foster actions of symbolic, political impact in the face of injustice and the abuse of power.

In the context of a fragmented society riven by fundamentalist discourse and authoritarian political practice, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of Christian communities and networks

Latin American Theology
From Prophetic Witness to Public Policy: Rethinking Faith-Based Engagement in Peru

to become agents of transformation that build a society in which the violation of human rights is no longer tolerated. Doing so is not only crucial but also ethically necessary when influential political and economic actors attempt with ever increasing gusto to produce acritical, forgetful citizens. Nor can we ignore the active presence of fundamentalist religious groups that have strategically inserted themselves into the echelons of power.

Finally, public engagement initiatives that contribute to the formation of a liberating, prophetic spirituality of citizenship can help to activate meaningful processes of structural change in society while also sustaining a prophetic pedagogy within the faith communities themselves. In this way, believers can encourage citizen-driven initiatives of resistance to systems and cultures that allow and legitimate abuse, rights violations, and the annulment of alterity and plurality.

In this sense, we need to create a greater conscience within the evangelical community which recognizes, self-critically, that much of our limited engagement in the public sphere has been reduced to advocacy initiatives designed to strengthen or legitimize the church and para-church organizations of which we are a part. The case studies of La Oroya and Huánuco invite us to imagine pastoral action as a process of helping to cast light not only on the faces of excluded fellow humans but also on the logic and rationale behind the political and religious systems that legitimate fundamentalism, ethnocentrism, inequality, and social exclusion.