

### God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty

by Susan R. Holman

Oxford University Press, New York, 2009. 206 pp. \$29.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-19-538362-1.

IN THIS RATHER UNCOMMON but provocatively thoughtful book, Susan Holman draws on extensive historical research as well as her own personal experience in order to explore and reflect on a range of (primarily ancient) Christian attempts to respond to poverty. Some of the literature Holman explores is well known (e.g., from the Cappadocians and John Chrysostom), but other texts and stories she explores (e.g., from John of Ephesus and Jacob of Sarug) have been relatively inaccessible to non-specialists. As a result, most Christians concerned with responding to concrete situations of poverty have not had access to these resources that, for Holman, have much to offer today.

One of the strengths of this eight-chapter book is the conscientious and straightforward manner in which the “essays” reflect on and address methodological challenges that confront any attempt to make connections between ancient texts and modern circumstances. First, Holman employs a reading strategy she describes as “empathic remembering” (p. 7), illustrating by means of narrative how early Christians dealt with issues of “need, justice, relief, and poverty” in order to link such concerns “with modern responses to those issues in Christian tradition today” (p. 2). Next, Holman articulates—and the rest of the book is framed around—“three interpretive paradigms” (“sensing need,” “sharing the world,” and “embodying sacred kingdom”) that she argues can help us utilize “early Christian narratives on social issues . . . as constructive cross-disciplinary and ecumenical bridges” (p. 15) between ancient and modern discussions.

By eschewing an arm’s-length analytical posture characteristic of traditional academic research, Holman allows her own concerns and experiences to be engaged and, in effect, interrogated by the Christian narratives she explores. The result is a complex but revealing picture of diverse responses to poverty—ancient and modern—with all of the wisdom and shortcomings that we might expect to find in them. The stories Holman tells are often

fascinating, and the insights she distills from them can challenge and energize contemporary attempts to “embody” the gospel message of service to, and identification with, the poor. She points in particular to “three common themes in contemporary relief rhetoric that might be enriched by integration with early Christian examples, namely, “justice and ‘the common good’ in human rights language, the generosity of poverty, and hospitality” (p. 140).

Given the complex themes and varied historical contexts Holman brings together, *God Knows There's Need* may, at points, feel a bit less focused than more traditional scholarly works. Yet careful readers will find much worth pondering in this book thanks to Holman’s articulate, personally-engaged historical study.

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### Saving Creation: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston III

by Christopher J. Preston

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HOLMES ROLSTON III’S NAME may not be familiar, but his lack of notoriety should not dissuade one from reading his many books, or this excellent biography of his life and work. Selected in 1997 to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures, and in 2003, awarded the Templeton Prize for his pioneering work in science and religion, Rolston is one of the most important philosophers of science and environmental ethicists living today. His 1987 volume, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (Templeton Press), is still one of the best books of its kind, and his 1988 book *Environmental Ethics: Values in and Duties to the Natural World* (Temple University Press) is hands down the best book on environmental ethics written in the last forty years. His Gifford Lectures, published in 1999 as *Genes, Genesis, and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Cambridge University Press), is one of the most informed and sophisticated discussions of the topic named in the subtitle ever written.

Christopher Preston, a philosophy professor at the University of Montana, Missoula, has written a