

Outstretched Arms as Liturgy

BY SUSAN ABRAHAM

THAT CHRISTIANITY ALWAYS WAS and continues to be at the service of the poor and the sick is the lesson to be learned from Susan R. Holman's deeply satisfying book *God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*. The raucous and intractable "debate" on health care reform taking place right now will find resources in this text to address the polarized and contradictory ways in which the debate has shaped up publicly. Some Christians may find it distinctly uncomfortable to realize that the Christian tradition has, from the beginning, invested itself in the care of the sick and dying as a direct implication of what it means to self-identify as Christian. Such activity on behalf of the greater good defined the earliest communities of Christians. While Holman's book is an exercise in historical theology, her complex integration of the personal, the scholarly, and the practical persuasively engages the reader seeking resources from within the Christian tradition to address contemporary issues of poverty and the unequal distribution of social amenities.

There are a number of ways to discuss the book. One could follow Holman's complex organizational reasoning. Chapters 1 through 4 set out various challenges that the contemporary reader might face when attempting to retrieve the complex Christian past. Chapters 5 and 6 are a conversation with early Christian sources to address the gendered nature of poverty in the exemplars Euphemia and Maria of Amida. Chapter 7, "Living Crunchy," is the consummate model for contemporary radical politics of equality and, finally, chapter 8 is a solidly theological discussion. Or, one could follow Holman's tripartite thematic division, which forms the interpretive scaffolding for the book: sensing need, sharing the world, and embodying sacred kingdom.

But it is a third strand, not explicitly stated by Holman, that I will follow here. In my reading, Holman's overarching argument in this book is for a practical, embodied, and incarnational spirituality developed through a self-reflective engagement with historical texts. For example, in chap-

ter 8, the theme of embodying sacred kingdom is developed in the practice of meditation. Earlier chapters present other forms of attentive engagement with different texts, such as Gregory of Nazianzus's Oration 14, also called "On the love of the poor." The specific form of textual engagement to be found in Holman's chapter 8 is that of meditative reflection on a nineteenth-century Russian icon. The icon of Saints Basil and Alexis on page 167 depicts Basil on the left in full episcopal garb and Alexis on the right, dressed in the manner of the poor, and, above them, the image of Christ, whose right hand is raised in blessing and whose left hand holds a book.

As Holman asserts, the viewer is drawn into the image and its theology, which challenges the notion that Christianity has marginal or occasional investment in the social and political context within which poverty and illness flourish. Christian theology would cease to make sense if "need" in the world remains unrecognized by Christians. Further, the icon's capacious meaning insists that all activity of compassion is contained in the framework of the grace of Christ. "Sainthood," in other words, is measured not just by one's capacity to respond to poverty, but by one's capacity to be disposed to the primary grace of Christ through which the needy are recognized as Christ himself. What is demanded is a practical and spiritual discipline in which one clarifies one's identity as Christian in relation to the suffering Christ and his presence in the world.

Holman points out the most astonishing feature of this icon: it is "historically impossible" (169), since at no time in history could Saints Alexis and Basil have shared the same space. First, Alexis's story is hagiographical, an act of narrating history, and an invitation to meditation. It is the story of a saint who becomes a "holy beggar" in deliberate imitation of Christ. Some of the earliest versions of the story date from fifth-century Edessa. Second, even if the man from Edessa were a historical person, he could never have met Basil, for Basil had by then been dead 30 years. While this fact may alienate those in-

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San Luigi distributes handouts to the poor, a painting by Bernardo di Parentino.

vested in literalist notions of truth and history, Holman argues that the icon invites us into a participative theology in the context of a “timeless eschaton.” The lives of Basil and Alexis only make sense as Christian lives enacted under the sovereignty of the grace of Christ, whose figure appears above the two saints. It does not matter whether Basil and Alexis shared temporality, because their actions as Christians indicate that they share a timeless space created by the overarching judgment of Christ who will come in glory as described in Matthew 25:31–46. Incarnational spirituality is to be modeled on these two men, whose stories make sense to the extent that they “go and do” in the manner of the great commandment to all followers of Christ.

For the Christian, acts of Christic imitation are not meant to be occasional or unique. In fact, as Holman reminds us, “*leitourgia* could mean either worship or service,” and the practical behaviors which we associate with public service were always part of the liturgy for early Christians. She writes:

Service to beggars, offerings given to the poor and material provisions for widows, was incorporated at a very early date into

the liturgical pattern of the church “service.” Widows’ prayers were equated with offerings on the altar, and, as the stories of the Cappadocians, John Chrysostom, and Jacob of Sarug illustrate, many early Christian authors described aid to the physical body as literal engagement with the body of Christ. Such “liturgies” to the needy were also understood on a suprahuman level, as actions that contributed to the remaking and healing of the whole cosmic order by enacting the justice and mercy of God in space and time. (157)

The receptive, embodied stance of the liturgical participant is the gesture of outstretched arms (159), signaling that one exists only in relation to others, a view of community under God that is at once ecclesial and participative. It is this gesture that most forcefully captures Holman’s threefold thematic division of the book—sensing need, sharing the world, and embodying sacred kingdom—and practical Christian dispositions necessary for an incarnational spirituality.

She also successfully demonstrates how these three theological paradigms lend themselves to our present moment of crisis, providing for a robust theological relevance

of the Christian past in relation to the crisis of poverty in our current world without denying the differences in their own contexts (15). Holman presents not an ungainly model of application, but a nuanced theological reading of history, articulated as “empathic remembering” (7).

Sensing need is the first theme systematically developed by a spiritual disposition of empathic remembering, and involves a “literal experience of the other” through the senses (15). In developing this theme in chapter 2, Holman points to Salvian of Lérins’s plea to Christians to use their material possessions to encounter Jesus in the bodies of the poor. Our beliefs in Jesus and the Christian God are not separable from our actions to the poor. This sensory encounter leads us to the second paradigm: sharing the world. Sharing the world is “incarnational giving” (19), an act of reciprocal relation. Here, Holman explores the idea of religious divestment in relation to contemporary ideas of the common good, arguing that “the kinetic motion of material goods” (117) does not fit into the market culture and economy we inhabit because it demands that sharing, giving, divesting, and redistributing material goods is essential to the Christian life. Finally, the third paradigm of embodying sacred kingdom asks what it might mean for us to bring embodied experience into relation with the eschaton of the Christian vision. In Holman’s reading, embodying the sacred kingdom significantly challenges colonial or dominative masculinist ideologies and theologies from within an eschatological space and time (20).

As a theological educator in North America, I particularly appreciated Holman’s insightful analysis of “need.” “Need,” she asserts, is related to death and exhaustion and “has nothing to do with desire or personal preferences” (26–27). We have to become aware of need within ourselves before we venture to empathize with the needy and address systemic injustice. Becoming aware of need within and without, however, is part of a spiritual discipline. Given the currency of self-validation and self-gratification in society and the exaggerated presence of this problem in the ministerial and helping professions, her call to spiritual and intellectual honesty is welcome. Even the generosity of well-meaning individuals can

turn corrosive in the context of true need, if it arises out of emptiness, ignorance, delusion, or the need to be needed. Sensing need is less about acts of messianic zeal or heroism and more about acts of repeated commitment, made daily, even in the face of deep despair and doubt. Even the most publicly untarnished works of mercy can be haunted by doubt and depression. Holman points to Mother Teresa as a case in point.

Mother Teresa’s letters to her confessor, released after her death, show that she was haunted by such despair. Yet it remains the true mark of holiness in Mother Teresa that she was able to recognize her human limits even as she persisted in her commitment to the poor in Kolkata. Such honest soul-searching may confuse those who would prefer the “saints” of the Christian tradition to be one-dimensional and uncomplicated. As Holman argues, this is only possible if there is a shallow assumption of a strict correspondence between thought and action in ministerial preparation and experience. In fact, the ability to face and explore one’s ambivalence and negativity, including remembering personal poverty in the most honest way possible, sharpens one’s ministerial “response-ability” to privation and illness.

God Knows There’s Need is a successful negotiation of the complex called the Christian tradition, spanning Christian history, Christian systematic or dogmatic theology, and Christian practice. These dimensions of the tradition are often woefully separated by disciplinary boundaries in the academy. Moreover, the book’s emphasis on the Christian tradition does not vitiate its usefulness for the religiously pluralistic contexts for which students prepare. Holman argues that a common ground between different religious or theological persuasions could be hewn from the primary context of global suffering and poverty, with social justice as a type of interfaith dialogue (40–45). Clearly, for the committed Christian, there is no world—past, present, or future—devoid of the “least among us.” The tradition has often emphasized the Christic presence in these “least.” Scholars and student practitioners of Christianity cannot overlook this important book of Christian history and theology and its practical relevance for Christian life today. ■