

paradigmatic models to guide a narrative reading of such texts that might enable us to practically apply them to social welfare issues today. The twenty-first century is radically different in many ways from the world of late antiquity between the second century and the seventh century. But are not our friends often very different from ourselves? Do we not value our best companions for their counterpoint, their ability to broaden the depth of our own perceptions, and their power to get us “out of ourselves”? Even when we hold certain beliefs and opinions with kind but firm conviction, do we not also gain wisdom by listening to others, open to their diversity and new perspectives?

Simply reading and being familiar with these ancient texts does not in itself ensure their critically constructive use in modern discourse. Early Christian writers and social activists did not always treat the needy poor as we might wish. Different societies and cultures vary in how they define and apply religious and ethical ideals, even when those ideals are (at least in theory) the same as our own. Consequently there is always a risk of quoting from these authors out of context, with unhelpful, or even harmful results. And yet the challenge to sensibly apply these ancient moral writings to related problems in our own world also offers exciting opportunities. Exploring such texts in depth may enable us to reevaluate and reshape traditional views and practices in ways that offer new perspectives, encouraging fresh approaches to issues of poverty and social justice. This book explores just a few of those opportunities.

AN INVITATION TO EMPATHIC REMEMBERING

The stories in this book are discussed using an approach that I have called empathic remembering. The word “empathy” is from the Greek *en* (in) and *pathos* (passions), meaning the capacity to participate in the visceral emotions or thinking of another. It differs from sympathy, which is a slightly more distanced feeling alongside the other person. Simply put, to sympathize is to feel *for*, while to empathize is to feel *in*, as if the other is part of one's very self. Individuals influenced by Christian traditions often explain the second half of the “Golden Rule,” “love your neighbor as yourself,” in terms of such an empathy that expresses itself in action. While empathy involves closely identifying the other person with yourself, it is not about confusing or transgressing interpersonal boundaries. Philosopher Edith Wyschogrod writes that both empathy and sympathy are part of embodying the other and that “in empathy I do not merge with the others but retrace the lines of the others' affect.”³ Those with whom I may empathize—whether they are early

Christian writers, the needy poor, or both—remain ever “other,” ever “not-me,” different from myself in many ways, and worthy of dignity and respect for their differences, whether they live in the distant past or share my present space. Relief narratives and social actions are too often a sharp delineation between “us” and “them.” An approach characterized by empathy allows both the self and needy “other” to stand together yet to be distinct within the same encounter.

Pairing empathy with the concept of “remembering” invites that hopeful reconstruction of the past that is always at work as we shape our present. “Remembering” can have several meanings, and two possibilities are most relevant here. First is the ordinary sense of the word, the internal recall of personal experience, things we ourselves have seen, felt, known, or learned from others. But the word can also signify a reconstruction. This is the act of membering again, or “re-membering” the needy voices and bodies of the past, internally refiguring through an imaginative but carefully empathic reconstruction, and in the process giving them new consideration and engagement in the present. Such “remembering” requires both empathic reconstruction of the other and recall within the self. In such an act, we must remain ever acutely aware that although we take the greatest care with historical sources, reconstruction remains a thing that we have made; others’ reconstructions will often differ from our own. Indeed, the original “reality”—of early Christian responses to the poor, of Wilfrid’s role in the distribution of fish from the eel nets, of Reinfrid’s inspiration to build a monastery at Whitby—might be something very different again, even perhaps unrecognizable from the stories that shape our own constructions. While “remembering” is used here in both ways, I have chosen to avoid the hyphenation of the second concept precisely because both meanings perpetually intersect in the subtle encounter of present mind and historical construction.

By its appeal to empathic remembering, in an exploration of stories from very different periods in Christian history, this book is in the end a creative narrative. It reads both past and present with an imaginative caution, even as it also offers broad conceptual guidelines to link the past with the present in religious responses to social need.

This book is more personal than I had originally intended. Although most of my work is in the academic study of early Christian texts and issues of social justice, health, and human rights, the early Christian history of social welfare cannot be neatly boxed into academic scholarship, confined to the classroom, lecture hall, and job market. It speaks to us all, oozing and bleeding into contemporary life and into our own personal experiences and memories of encountering needs and poverties both in ourselves and others. Historical studies on religious responses to poverty provide a vital foundation to this topic but are not sufficient for those who

struggle to develop practical ideologies that can be applied to modern problems of needs, injustice, hunger, and related issues from an informed historical and religious perspective. Similarly, the packaged solutions and neat, time-defined projects and political consensus documents that usually characterize modern social action are limited in their potential to build an empathic creativity that opens new possibilities for talking, thinking, and acting on these concerns and issues. These essays occupy the space between these two worlds: between historical textual studies and contemporary social action and between the life of the academic library and the life that strains toward effective prayer. As a result it is, I hope, a book that might interest anyone bothered by the problems of poverty and injustice in the world, whether they believe they can do anything about it or not.

The most difficult task has been the challenge to include some of my own experiences and my own stories. While I have never personally suffered from the more catastrophic effects of poverty or many of the other crises of need that we find in these texts from the ancient world, I could not apply an “empathic remembering” to these stories without also considering my own journey to this topic. This required me to lower the screen of academic, objective distance. Consequently, the book borders at times as much on memoir as on religious history. As I wrote, I spent months pushing away first-person narratives only to find them breaking through repeatedly, clinging to my lined yellow writing pads like Styrofoam droplets from a package gone awry. Ultimately I was forced to ask if I had the guts to be vulnerable about myself where it touches on these issues, and not limit the narrative to a voyeuristic adventure into the needs of others. The texts from the past are hardly objective, after all. Early Christian writers ultimately tell their own stories. They are constantly bringing personal agendas to their plans and ideals for private relief, social outreach, and philanthropic institutions. In exploring the practical relevance of their ideas for today, could I speak of what “need” means to me as well, as it relates to this complex issue? Did I dare to mix in my own relevant engagement with liturgy, my explicitly structured designs and models for reading and engaging with these writers from the past? Surely the equal transparency of an author’s subjectivity has a place. Most of this personal narrative is in Chapter 2.

BETWEEN THE LINES: INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

The issues that this book explores are not just for readers within the Christian tradition, although that is the source of most of the stories and the direction that