Interview with Susan Holman “God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty”

PLT: What kinds of issues interest you? How do you engage with these issues using both an intellectual and hands-on approach?

SH: I’m fascinated with the details of social history: how people in the past created their material world, what they wore, ate, read; how and what they built, how they made their tools. I love maps, floor-plans, aerial photographs, physical evidence, and the glimpses into daily life that we find in historical texts. I’ve learned history by starting with historical fiction, then moving to art and archaeology, and then (if I’m still interested) really studying whatever aspects keep drawing me. I’ve always been most interested in the role of religion in this context, particularly how people’s social background and culture influence the way they express and practice their religion. I engage with philosophical ideas best when they are connected with concrete details.

These interests and various experiences led me easily into a fascination with details about poverty in the early church. The connection between the “intellectual” and “hands-on” approach was there from the start. When I first encountered early Christian texts on poverty, I was working as a registered dietitian doing public health nutrition education with low income families in the inner city. I realized that many mothers were making food choices for themselves and their children based on cultural and religious beliefs, and not on the evidence-based nutrition “science” that I was using to counsel them on how to feed their kids. Their poverty was also shaped by complex forces that were not easily “fixed” by programmatic solutions. I began to wonder if I wasn’t just wasting time simply to feel like a “good person.” Was I using my gifts most responsibly? These frustrating experiences taught me that ideologies have more power than “facts” in how public health is actually put into practice in everyday life. I also realized I was more interested in the history of public health ideologies and their social and religious applications than in telling people what to eat. Yet even after I left the clinics for grad school to study early Christian responses to poverty, I was constantly thinking about what these historical and religious texts had to say to the social realities of today, religious responses to poverty in the here and now, particularly how it might be better nuanced within a Christian perspective.

I’m not a social activist; “service” roles burn me out fast. So I try to live with a consonant inner honesty by using my skills and interests as a scholar and writer to empower the voices and actions of those who are on the “front lines” in religion, human rights, and justice issues. Some of these “voices” are from the distant past. These days I’m also pairing historical research with academic writing and editing in health and human rights on contemporary issues. I enjoy being

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a resource and mentor of sorts behind the scenes, working with graduate students and learning from senior scholars, health professionals, and activists, as part of a broader vision to contribute to some form of "healing the world."

PLT: What do you find compelling about the early church?

SH: The people and the mysteries! I grew up in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, in a small German mission church, just outside of Boston, that took worship and theology extremely seriously. My childhood was profoundly shaped by this Reformation framework. Our pastors and teachers skipped over anything about the entire early church that was not explicitly contained in the New Testament. Yet in spite of this historical gap, there was an early church mystery contained in Lutheran liturgy that was never quite admitted or defined. Our order of service was so traditional that it was later easy for me to participate in Episcopal and Roman Catholic services. Weekly worship readings included selections from four different biblical texts, every week. We had professional-level musical training, from lay people who taught us for fun; services included chanting of psalms and canticles, and hymns attributed to second, third and fourth century authors. Sometimes someone mentioned Augustine (because he agreed with Martin Luther, of course!) or Ambrose (because like Luther he wrote hymns in the vernacular). Every year on Trinity Sunday we enthusiastically recited the late antique "Athanasian Creed," which condemns theological dissidents to hell. We defined our doctrine within Reformation emphases: the priesthood of all believers, an essential coherent balance between law and grace, and near-Jeffersonian equality of sainthood for each person who admits being a sinner and depends wholly on the grace of Christ. All this, year in and year out over fifteen years, in an urban parish of maybe fifty people. I never consciously thought about the "early church" during the "patristic" period after the New Testament until college, when in a course on the history of the New Testament I began to learn that there actually *was* an "early church!"
Add to this background all the worst ingredients of a searing theological controversy. Late in high school, theological differences about biblical and New Testament exegesis literally tore apart our close-knit parish. Watching firsthand these hostilities (that were to last for over a decade), I knew that no matter how interested I was in the history of Christianity, I did not want to wade into the charged atmosphere of Biblical studies. In college, I slowly realized that the early church history in the period following the New Testament did not trigger the same tensions: that one might be able to debate the influence of social history on the development of Christian traditions without the nasty atmosphere that defined the playing field in New Testament and pre-ministerial studies. One could treat the early Christian "patristic" authors (those who lived and wrote between the 2nd and the 6th centuries) like ordinary fellow believers who lived in a different time. And I realized that this area offered all the details that most fascinated me: personal stories, material culture, traces on the Roman maps, archaeological and architectural realia. These texts addressed exactly the questions I was asking, on how religious beliefs translate into daily practice. I simply fell in love with the early church.

PLT: What does the study of historical poverty contribute to modern dialogue?

SH: *God Knows There's Need* addresses this very question in great detail. I'll highlight here just a few thoughts.

First, the study of historical poverty broadens our awareness of context. We are less likely to develop responses that just "reinvent the wheel" if we know what was done in the past, why, and (sometimes) how it turned out. Christians have been responding to issues of poverty and need for a very long time, arguing, disagreeing, and debating about the same issues that face us today: the value and dignity of the poor person, the focus on community, God's role in modeling response and judging behaviors. Often the modern poor are, like the past, a distant "out there" "other." Cross-cultural intersections are vital components of any modern dialogue that cares about being honestly respectful and humane in the way we treat one another's needs in this world. The study of historical responses to poverty demolishes any notion that there is one "right answer;" yet it also opens up our vision to a range of options and alternatives that might energize our own ideas for modern response. Persons of any religious tradition can engage in social action much more sensitively when they have some appreciation of the historical narrative, what "religious responses" have meant across history. These stories vary from good to bad, strange, humorous, and horrifying. Yet the Orthodox church very explicitly views the "kingdom of God" as an eternal now, and this concept helps me envision ancient writers as fellow believers who are partners with us in a desire to heal the world through often very similar concerns about need, hunger, disease, poverty, and injustice. Second, historical responses to poverty contain issues that are present in most or perhaps all modern religions. There are many differences, of course, and this too is important and exciting. Reading the past can equip us for–and through–dialogue and engagement with people within other religious traditions who share our vision for social welfare and justice.

Third—and this is the focus of much of the book–historical texts remind us that any response to poverty is ultimately about a human person and her or his story. This is easy to forget in modern macro-level reports, projects, poverty indexes, economic fact sheets, global relief strategies, and policy development, even when these modern initiatives are exciting and do promote the individual child, family, and community. In contrast, early Christian texts that describe need and explore "right" and "just" responses are, fundamentally, narrative stories. Even ancient sermons are PR "stories," illustrating a particular culture and preacher's bias that may give us an insight into context. Stories show us daily life, often very different from our own but containing human details to which we can relate. Thanks to a recent scholarly interest in wealth and poverty in early Christianity, many texts are available in English translation, perfect opportunities for individual or group reading and discussion. We know how modern relief stories are often used as media propaganda, to get us to react, often quickly and viscerally. Historical narratives (which often had the same goal for their original audience) give us more of a freedom to encounter the poor—and our own reactions—in a way that lets us, as one friend puts it, "sit and pray a while," as we think about how to improve the shape of the response. Meditating on historical examples of issues that we can't "fix now" also gives us space to face our own internal issues of need, to think about how our personal history shapes the way we see the needs of the world. In the early church, helping the poor was not just about empowering the poor person to realize dignity and justice in the now. There was an equal focus on the

spiritual benefits to the one who did the "giving," sometimes against her or his will. To summarize the three paradigms I use in the book: such historical texts remind us that engaging with issues of poverty and need is not "feeling pity" but "sensing need;" not "giving charity" but "sharing the world;" not patronizing an "inferior" member of society but seeking in empathic and discerning wisdom to enter with that individual into a path of "embodying the sacred" that leads to the healing of our own deepest blind spots, sins, and failings.
These are just a few observations. How historical texts matter for us, now, will depend on the issues that cause us concern, and the perspectives of those who sit to talk about them together.

PLT: How does your book tie in with the Seminar's mission to write in sustained engagement with critical issues in religion and public life?

SH: The book is by definition about sustained engagement with critical issues in religion and public life. But this did not happen easily! Because I am not a social activist—I'm actually very much an introvert who "energizes" only through very long periods of time when I can be absolutely alone—it has always seemed to me some divine joke that I find myself with a vocation so deeply caught up in communal welfare! Writing the book forced me to think how this had happened for me personally, and also what the history of monastic responses to poverty might say to a modern Protestant audience (those most obviously drawn to the work of the Seminar and the Project on Lived Theology). Christian monasticism has always been a deep part of my own spirituality and most of my scholarly research focuses on early Christian bishops who were monastics. But this book challenged me with my first opportunity to intentionally integrate such influences into a narrative about modern social action. The book offers a wide variety of stories, models, and paradigms; it invites imaginative thinking but it doesn't provide an "answer." Modern social action is, like everyday public life, a sustained engagement with constant surprises. The book takes very seriously that open-endedness as well as the inevitable role of personal engagement.

PLT: How has the interaction with the other theologians and scholars of the Virginia Seminar affected your work and your thought?

SH: First, it's profoundly shaped the book itself. Because I'm a scholar-writer—and not a pastor or teacher with a phone ringing off the hook, visits to make, and sermons (or lectures) that force personal conversations—this project was my first opportunity to apply a deliberately "personal" voice to work that has been largely (though not wholly) academic. Participating in the Seminar, I found myself at a table with several expert and eminent memoirists who are also academic scholars. Such a group would not allow me to park my personal perspective at a safe historical distance! This gave me permission to write in ways that were very new to me. The toughest part was finding the right weave for my own story. On several occasions I chose to be quite vulnerable in allowing a few select peers to review drafts that were extremely raw and experimental. Yet because I valued the viewpoints of these individuals (even those who were anonymous and/or I knew strongly disagreed with my approach), their comments helped me negotiate a path along this unusual genre; any good that comes out of the book owes much to

the Seminar group and the revered but nameless external readers. I could never have written such a book without them.

The Seminar also quickly became a fellowship of friends. We've had fun together! In what other context can you go from breakfast at the Harvard Club to lunch at a city mission in Harlem, with a clear conscience? Or experience both a blues guitarist and George Washington as Cincinnatus? Who else would have listened, empathized, and appreciated all the delightful nuances of story when I burst in upon the group late one year to describe a morning train crash that had been followed by a Manhattan taxi ride where my Jamaican cab driver read (aloud) from the Psalms (KJV) at every stop light? I came home from each Seminar with an ever-astonishing list of new books I simply must (and did) read. I will forever be a better person for knocking elbows with this gang.