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ORTHODOX HUMANITARIANISMS: PATRISTIC FOUNDATIONS

By Susan R. Holman

Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* defines humanitarianism as a "concern for human welfare especially as expressed through philanthropic activities and interest in social reforms." Yet in the two disciplinary fields that connect much of my research—public health and the history of religion in antiquity—humanitarianism is often seen as more of a problem than a solution.¹ And to many in public health today who are concerned with equity and social justice, "humanitarian" approaches seems to privilege crisis response, that is, saving lives right now at any cost, at the expense of effective social change.

Certainly it is important to save lives. Yet humanitarianism is supposed to be part of a higher order good, something motivated by transcendent ethics and visions for human flourishing. Indeed most humanitarian aid workers identify their motives as "emanating from their commitment to 'social justice,' to 'saving lives,' and to 'caring for the poor'; to their universalistic conviction about 'human solidarity,' and the non-otherness of others; to their indignation about the inequities and injustices of the world" (Fox 2012, 115).

The underlying tensions between emergency and systemic responses, ideals and realities, illustrate how, as political scientist Michael Barnett (2011, 22) puts it, "we live in a world of humanitarianisms"—plural. And whether such

actions focus on instant fixes to save lives or more complex long-term efforts to remove the causes of suffering, religion plays an influential role in both the ideal and its perceived limitations and failures.

Religious organizations around the world are known for their power to attract cash donations and volunteers, but often have a dismal reputation when it comes to effective and transparent administration, tolerance for difference, and sensitive flexibility at working together with others. Several recent publications look at how these issues affect health care in settings of need: a *Lancet* series on "Faith-based health care" (Duff and Buckingham III 2015; Olivier et al. 2015; Tomkins et al. 2015), research funded by organizations like the World Bank (e.g. Marshall 2013; Olivier and Wodon 2012a, 2012b, 2012c), and the work of international research groups such as the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (jliflc.com). While such literature often focuses on one particular continent (Africa), some does consider faith-health dynamics more

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globally (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Forced Migration Review 2014).

What is missing from most of these narratives is discussion about the importance of theological perspectives. This gap is understandable, given the emphasis in humanitarian literature on evidence-based medical, behavioral, and social science research. Yet theological foundations matter to those who locate themselves within faith communities, and the words used to talk about theology also matter profoundly. Motives and ethics shape actions and attitudes in every aspect of communications, so there is value in understanding *why* faith issues have such deep meaning for those who apply them to global aid and health care.

Whether humanitarianism is religious or not, it remains, says Barnett, “a morally complicated creature,” one in which decision-makers often make choices based on “the least bad of awful alternatives,” with funding, marketing, and response marked by “good intentions [that] can lead to dreadful consequences” (2011, 6–7). Those who work in faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are often keenly aware of how such dilemmas and tensions may confound their work and even lead to psychological cynicism or burnout. In the face of such stressors, an intentional mindfulness about theological foundations can be especially important in day-to-day interactions, whether one is the person speaking about beliefs or not, and whatever the religious position of one’s conversation partners.

This essay offers a few key observations about the theological foundations of Christian “humanitarianism” as it is expressed in representative texts from the 2nd to 7th centuries, commonly called “Late Antiquity,” particularly as those foundational texts relate to Orthodox Christianity today. Since, it seems to me, truly effective faith-based aid responses must always be essentially ecumenical—that is, welcoming and learning across an intentionally collaborative “otherness”—the four “ethics of aid” discussed below may (or may not) also be relevant for other organizations engaged in humanitarian practices that relate to poverty, justice, and human rights. The discussion here focuses on what we today call economic, social, and cultural factors—that is,

social determinants—that impact health. While this essay emphasizes the relevance of early Christian texts in Orthodox Christian faith-based dialogue for non-partisan collaborative humanitarian action, we cannot forget that the texts that shape theological foundations for action are by definition *religious*. Their authors understood life and meaning through an epistemological lens that values the physical human body, yes, but ultimately transcends the bodily concerns of this present moment. As with listening to any voice, it is important to keep in mind the cultural limitations and inherent biases of past voices (e.g. related to gender and class), while appreciating their often profound theological depth and complexity.

By a “faith-based perspective,” I mean one that affirms the value of a theological rootedness in how one approaches every area of life, and also one that values a relationship between embodiment and the nature of God, conscious that a mindful use of this perspective and one’s sacred texts may ultimately contribute to life and health, broadly defined.² I do *not* here mean that theologically rooted humanitarian actions should aim to “convert” those they serve, although they may convert us who attempt to practice them—especially when we “hear what the poor tell us: ‘nothing for us without us’” (Palazuelos 2012, E9). Affirming and nurturing a theological sensitivity, that is, may enable persons of faith to experience whatever transformation is needed in order to treat fellow creatures with the perceptive respect, dignity, free agency, and empathy they believe to be right and good imaging of the divine as they identify with their neighbors in this world.³

Patristic Voices

Whose are these patristic voices? They belong to a number of religious leaders from the 2nd through the 7th centuries: Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, Lactantius, John Chrysostom, Rabbula of Edessa, Jacob of Sarug, John “the Almsgiver,” and the Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) are those best known in Orthodox Christianity for their formative views on poverty, wealth, and religious

responses to health-related needs. Their letters, sermons, treatises, and reputations helped to shape Christian theological foundations across the centuries in communities and languages as far as China and Southeast Asia (Moffett 1998). As part of still-living tradition, they continue to inform Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox today. Their influence has permeated much of Western culture through literature, liturgy, and hymnody including, for better or for worse, an influence on colonialism and missionary philanthropy.

What they say about how one ought to act toward the poor and needy varies, reflecting diverse opinions within the Orthodox Christian tradition that persist into the present. Patristic writers do not necessarily agree, for example, about how much one ought to give, who should do the giving, or who to give it to. Rather than the dogmatic melody of a solo cantor, they are a motley choir, with variations in tone, note, and key. They defend their views using sacred texts from ancient Israel through the early Christian period. To those who study or worship using such sources, they signify an eclectic mix of old friends, esteemed colleagues, suspicious characters, and holy fools. They are, like humanitarianism itself, morally complicated creatures. Their views on Christian ideals may not match ours. For example, some owned slaves despite Gregory of Nyssa's strident condemnation of the slave trade (*Homily in Ecclesiastes* 4.1; discussed in Harper 2011, 345–346); others condoned inequitable treatment of women, and affirmed punitive norms such as beating and torture. If we want to engage together with their exegetical narratives, we must be honest about flaws, dissonance, and biases, both theirs and our own. Much that they say about human need, poverty, and disease will resonate with our concerns today, and so we impoverish ourselves if we fail to consider them as conversation partners in humanitarian concerns.

In several earlier studies, I explored conceptual paradigms that may help inform responsible contemporary application of such historical texts to social welfare contexts (Holman 2009, 2010, 2011). In this essay I look briefly at four common recurrent themes or “ethics of aid”

we find in these texts that shape patristic theological teachings about poverty relief. Each of these four thematic ethics inform humanitarian action today, some more than others. The texts' original languages and the challenges of translation may complicate comparisons, but my focus is on generalizations. The following sections summarize each of these four “ethics of aid,” then briefly expand on one—human rights—that deserves more attention than it usually receives in this context. Yet even as we parse out such different ideas, we should keep in mind that the ancient authors did not pick and choose. Instead, their writings represent conceptual constructions that interlace together a mix of related ideas.

Patristic Aid Ethics

The first common concept that runs through most patristic texts related to humanitarianism is that of *social justice*. Here we think of *tzedakah*, a Hebrew word with Syriac and Arabic cognates (thus shaping Jewish, Christian, and Islamic charity ideals), where the idea of alms is inseparable from righteousness in the sense of social justice. The “proof text” that patristic authors use repeatedly to emphasize this is Matthew 25:31–46, the New Testament parable of the sheep and goats, with its theology of Christ in the poor. The actions praised in the parable—feeding, clothing, visiting, medical ministry, and so forth—are sometimes called “works of mercy” but in fact there is nothing about mercy in the text. Jesus' focus in the story is on criteria for divine judgment, the sharing of material goods as acts of “righteousness,” mandated divestments, shaped by a divine identification with voices of need. As one American physician learned when his Nepali *sherpa* offered to pay his air fare in exchange for a few weeks of medical care to some destitute Nepali villagers, “The highest degree of *tzedakah* seeks to eliminate social injustices rather than simply alleviate symptoms” (Keidan 2012, 86).

Second, a number of patristic texts—particularly those of the Cappadocians and the Latin writer Lactantius, discussed further below—voice what appears to be a clear appeal to what we today would call the *equality of human rights*. Such an appeal often overlaps with social justice

and righteousness, but the ideas are distinct enough that it is useful here to keep them separate. Equality and human rights are more controversial than discussions about social justice or even sacred righteousness. Given these tensions, there is value in considering this concept separately and in more depth, which I do further below.

Third, patristic texts about faith-based aid commonly argue in terms of *civic or kinship obligations*. Persons in need, that is, are human beings toward whom we owe relational obligations. Patristic texts frame such obligations in language about political governance, family, common humanity, shared citizenship in a heavenly kingdom, or communal neighborliness. These ideas dominate Basil of Caesarea's sermons on famine, wealth, poverty, usury, and justice (see e.g. Holman 2001). Community ideals also run through the sermons of John Chrysostom, texts that overflow with a concern for the needy. Mayer (2009) argues that Chrysostom's main intent in his poverty rhetoric is to persuade his comfortable audience to embrace ascetic divestment, that is, to adopt a lifestyle of *voluntary* poverty. The theological foundation for such action is illustrated well in Chrysostom's famous allusion to the homeless poor in the marketplace as Christ's body and the altar of God on which his audience ought to sacrifice (*Homily 20.3 on 2 Corinthians*). In this image we have a visualization of the incarnate Christ that is meant to define civic relational obligations to one's neighbors, especially encompassing the city's diseased and displaced outcasts.

The fourth theme is what most people think of first—sometimes as if it is the only response to poverty. This is charity, often envisioned as one-sided material distribution driven by emotional “love” or “compassion.” In fact the word “charity” seems too narrow for the breadth of patristic nuances in the texts; reducing material sharing to “charity” risks perpetuating a stereotype that everyone loves to hate. Patristic authors use many different ideas, images, and phrases to describe such exchange: gift, love, mercy, compassion, philanthropy, and God's natural generosity to good and bad alike. The 6th-century melodist, Romanos, for example, in his

Kontakion on Elijah, presents images of famine, hunger, and need repetitively balanced against a refrain affirming God as *ho monos philanthropos* (Grosdidons de Matons 1964; Peden 2004), which is sometimes translated “the only true lover of human kind” (Constantelos 2000, 783–784). Perhaps we might best characterize this fourth ethic as an appeal to the *virtue of imitating God's goodness or lovingkindness* (Hebr. *chesed*). For example, the first of Gregory of Nyssa's two sermons usually called “On the love of the poor” is more correctly titled “On good works” (*euergetism*). Here Gregory bases his arguments for material divestment on the theological idea of imitating a virtue that essentially reflects the nature of God. Gregory of Nazianzus's best-known sermon on aid (*Oration 14*) makes the same point, with its first five chapters comparing specific virtues. Of all the virtues, Gregory says, the best is “love of the poor (*philoptochias*), and compassion and sympathy for our own flesh and blood” (14.15; trans. Daley 2006, 78). This last quote illustrates some of the overlapping emotive language, yet Gregory is not prescribing “touchy-feely” nerve vibrations but rather aspiration toward philosophic *virtue*. Such texts help us appreciate how a range of diversely nuanced ideas might also shape modern faith-based messages, from an Orthodox perspective, about philanthropy.

Human Rights

One of the four themes summarized above, human rights, invites further consideration, given its controversial nature in scholarly discussions on philosophy and ethics, as well as in certain religious circles.⁴ When human rights come up, especially among conservative Protestants but also in self-defined “secular” circles, it is not uncommon to encounter a heated reactionary debate over philosophy, history, types of rights, whether “rights” exist at all, and how religion does or does not fit into or support universal notions of rights.⁵ It is *not* my intent here to fan such rhetorical sparks. Indeed, many Orthodox Christians, including those represented in the other essays in this journal, readily assume both the relevance and value of human rights for faith-based aid (see also Brüning and van der Zweerde

2012; McGuckin 2010; Prodromou, forthcoming).

Whatever one’s view on the broader debates, there are at least two important reasons that those who self-identify with the Christian tradition (whether Orthodox or not) ought to have, at least, a basic understanding of and willingness to enter into, constructive discussions about human rights as they relate to humanitarian activities.

First, human rights are a common recurrent topic in the conversations that faith-based aid workers may have with their nonsectarian NGOs and public health worker partners who share similar goals for justice and health equity. If secular and ecumenical coworkers consider

human rights important enough to understand, support, and advance, there is value for everyone to know how to respectfully speak the language. To speak coherently, one must be comfortable thinking about how it connects with one’s own religious tradition.

Happily, the Matthew 25 parable makes such conversations easy. Jesus’ list of mandatory righteous acts for justice, in this parable, is almost identical to the rights affirmed in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: food, clothing, the “highest attainable standard of health,” and safety and security in housing and economics. Whether we call them natural rights, relative entitlements, or embodied righteous social justice may not matter in the thick of things as much as our attitude in affirming them as comparable ideals of moral obligations.⁶

Second, rights have validity within the Christian tradition precisely because their concepts are clearly contained within some foundational Christian texts, including texts from antiquity. When patristic texts overlap with social justice narratives, occasionally specific terminology about human rights is quite clear. We may thus legitimately appeal to formative Christian texts in efforts to nurture constructive synergies between rights-based activists and faith-based humanitarian

aid workers. This is why an Orthodox appeal to human rights goes beyond a utilitarian use for the sake of conversation with nonsectarian partners.

For example, in *Oration* 14.24, Gregory of Nazianzus uses terms such as *isotes*, which one translator renders “the justice of God” (trans. Toal 1963, 55) and *isonomia*, a Greek political term that could mean either “equity” or “equality of rights.” Appealing to the Garden of Eden before the Fall, Gregory says, “I would have you look back to our primary equality of rights [*isonomia*], not the later diversity ...” (14.26; trans. Daley 2006, 90).

Lactantius, the early 4th century tutor to Constantine’s son Crispus, also discusses social justice at length in his *Divine Institutes* with an explicit appeal to human rights. Justice is at heart, he claims, an inseparable coherence of piety and equity (or “fairness”) (5.14.9; trans. Bowen and Garnsey 2004, 309–310). As “God divides his unique light equally between all, makes springs flow, supplies food,” and sleep, Lactantius says, so, too,

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“No one is a slave with him and no one is a master, for if ‘he is the same father to everyone,’ so are we all his children with equal rights” (5.14.16–17; trans. Bowen and Garnsey 2004, 310). In fact, he says, “the whole force of justice lies in the fact that everyone who comes into this human estate on equal terms is made equal by it” (5.14.20; trans. Bowen and Garnsey 2004, 311). In Lactantius’s world, justice (*iustitia*) was “a steady and enduring will to render to each their right or desert”; and *ius* can also mean “right” (Woltersdorff 2008, 22).

Lactantius illustrates these ideas further in his Book 6, on “true worship.” To act justly toward God is, he says, religion; to act justly toward other human beings is “compassion or humanity” (6.10.2). For Lactantius, rights were not limited to civic law, nor were they incompatible with “soft” virtues such as compassion. They were for him, as in many discussions on modern rights today, part of an ethical argument. We are to treat

others in this way, he argues, because it is something due them, as part of divine or existential justice, not because it is a law on the books or an undeserved nicety bubbling out of good intentions. True justice, says Lactantius, is when we provide for “the needy and the useless” (6.11.28), with food, hospitality, ransom for captives, health care for the sick, and provide strangers and paupers with decent burial. Although he might have used Constantine’s new freedoms to leverage a Christian rhetoric to strengthen civil and political rights, he does not do this. Instead, he focuses on basic material rights for the most socially vulnerable.

Several modern ethicists have also identified human rights language in patristic sources, against the common stereotype of rights as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon (although the 18th century clearly marked a period of distinct political focus on rights). Conservative Protestant ethicist Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, identifies human rights language not only in Ambrose and Basil but also in John Chrysostom. “I see no other way to interpret what John is doing with his powerful rhetoric,” says Wolterstorff,

than that he is reminding his audience, rich and poor alike, of the natural rights of the poor The recognition of natural rights is unmistakably there: The poor are wronged because they do not have what is theirs by natural right, what they have a natural right to. (2008, 62)

And Bas de Gaay Fortman, a Dutch Christian diplomat, argues that the biblical sources themselves suggest how “the connection with religion may provide the necessary cultural basis for the struggle for economic, social and cultural rights” (2012, 128).

Conclusion

The theological foundations of humanitarianism within the Christian tradition—particularly the Orthodox Christian tradition

—depend heavily on patristic exegesis of biblical texts. In this essay I have considered four “ethics of aid” that shape patristic teaching and action and which continue to influence faith-based responses today. I have especially highlighted the role of human rights, given the importance of rights for correcting systemic injustices and in light of the controversial nature of rights rhetoric among persons of faith.

Whether they are used as an inspirational ideal or as justiciable international law, human rights are not a cure-all for the world’s problems. They are a tool. For those who wish to use such a tool as a practical resource in context, rights have value through their potential empowerment of action that can tangibly improve situations of inequity and need, including need in crisis. As such tools, rights have a legitimate place in the Orthodox Christian rhetoric of aid given the relevance of patristic theology to Orthodox praxis. There is immense potential for Orthodox women and men active in humanitarianism(s) to engage globally (i.e. both abroad *and* locally) with these ethics as welcome and positive agents for change. The power, beauty, and immediacy of many patristic texts, and their regular use in an Orthodox embodied liturgy of life, may also inspire and nurture common values and themes present as well in other faith-based aid traditions. Insofar as patristic voices might speak hope into the dark places of our world, such hope calls for a more deliberate intentionality to dialogue with ethical concepts about poverty and need.

How we choose to draw on these intersecting themes will depend on who we are and where we find ourselves. As Rowan Williams, former archbishop of Canterbury, put it (2008, 152), “the denial of rights is a terrible thing; and what takes time to learn is that the opposite of oppression is not a wilderness of litigation and reparation but the nurture of concrete, shared respect.” Through such nurturing hope, let us work for changes about which we can now only dream. ❖

Notes

1. For the criticism that humanitarianism is at fault for rampant corruption, insensitivity, and waste, see, for example, Polman (2011) and Schwartz (2008). A study of the 2010 Haiti earthquake illustrates how even well-intentioned humanitarian responses sometimes look like “disaster tourism,” rushing in short-term aid workers who just make things worse (Farmer 2011). Even volunteers’ best intentions may be suspect: one physician who teaches medical students in health projects at several global sites recalls the humbling taunt of a friend who said, “You guys are going because then you can put your PWAB [Picture with an African Baby] on your CV” (Palazuelos 2012, E7). And Dr Vicente Navarro, Professor of Health and Public Policy at Johns Hopkins, and a leading global voice on the ethics of international health services, refers to “the ‘carrot’ called ‘humanitarian aid’” where

much international assistance, including health aid, generally has been part of the problem more than part of the solution [H]ealth improvement should be based on collective efforts aimed at the establishment of healthy (that is, redistributive, equitable, and sustainable) economic, social, and political institutions and policies and not primarily on the delivery of one-on-one care (2013, xi)
2. For an expanded discussion of this perspective, see Holman (2009, 2010).
3. In this view I have been most influenced personally by the Benedictine monastic principle of “conversion of life;” others may describe such redemptive transformation using different conceptual language.
4. The discussion here on human rights is adapted from Holman (2015, 83–122).
5. The literature on the controversies is vast. For a general sense of the key issues see, for example, Banchoff and Wuthnow (2011); Ignatieff (2011); Ishay (2004); Regan (2010); Woltersdorff (2008); and Yamin and Gloppen (2011).
6. Those trained in law might take the conversation further to help ensure that international legal rights are enforced, but that is another conversation.

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