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Peter Brown

Remembering the Poor and the Aesthetic of

Society When Leland Stanford and his wife founded Stanford University in order to commemorate their only child, a boy who had died at the age of sixteen, they thought to be fulfilling the exhortation that their dead son had given to his father in a dream, “Live for humanity.” Not surprisingly, therefore, they ensured that the University Chapel displayed a mosaic that showed the Christian virtues praised by Paul in I Corinthians 13:13—faith, hope, and love. But they also insisted that the mosaic show not three but four such figures, adding charity to it. In the mosaics, love was presented as family-based and inward-looking: A mother cradles her child in her arms. Charity, by contrast, was outward-looking: Mother and child both reach out to another child who kneels at the mother’s knees. Precisely because it involved reaching out beyond the family to a wider society, charity, for the Stanfords, represented a separate and supremely important virtue. Thus did they honor a well-known Victorian tradition of philanthropy that reached back to the period studied in this special issue of the journal. The articles herein are principally concerned with charity to the poor, not about love of the poor. The main emphasis is on those charitable institutions that reached out beyond the family to provide for the relief of the poor in European Christian, in Jewish, and in Islamic societies.

Interest in the study of charitable institutions goes back to scholarship that first emerged one-third of a century ago, created by scholars of late medieval and early modern Western Europe. From the early 1970s onward, a succession of scholars came to focus on the problems of poverty and on the various institutional arrangements for its relief that characterized the Christian countries of Europe, Catholic and Protestant alike, between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Students of poverty and charity in Christian Europe had abundant archives to exploit in the study of

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the poor within the overall structure of pre-industrial European societies. The ensuing “history from below” betrayed the influence of the French school associated with the journal *Annales*. The archives of Europe conferred on it a circumstantiality, a vividness, and even (at times) a statistical grounding that resulted in a new mastery of early modern (and even of late medieval) Europe.

How does this thematic issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* advance the field of charity studies? In the first place, the articles show that the Jewish and the Islamic world have a place in the historiographical revolution first begun by students of Western Europe. Hitherto distinct regions and religious communities have become instantly recognizable to each other, and nuances have emerged in the understanding of poverty and poor relief. Each chapter, in its own way, serves “to forefront a comparative approach.” Mark Cohen, for instance, uses the Geniza archives of medieval Cairo to learn about the poor from hundreds of detailed alms lists and registers of donors, in the same manner as other scholars have mined sources to reveal the pasts of such European cities as Venice, Toledo, London, and Lyons. The statistics made available by Amy Singer, from the budgets of the great Ottoman imarets of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Istanbul, Edirne, and Jerusalem, can be added to those provided by the budgets of their better-known counterparts in Christian Europe. From Hadleigh in Suffolk to Edirne and Jerusalem, realities of complex, pre-industrial societies—Christian, Jewish, and Islamic—as they took the measure of the poverty in their midst, have become more concrete.

Not all societies in all times are so supremely well documented as those that are studied in these articles. In the absence of such abundant documentation—and, above all, in the absence of any form of statistics—the study of charity and poverty in earlier periods (such as the ancient world and early medieval Europe) must make do with largely literary evidence, of a predominantly ideological nature, that reveals more about the expectations of a society and its view of itself than about what actually happened on a day-to-day basis.

Looking at the medieval and (largely) early modern societies described herein with more ancient eyes reveals patterns of expectations that are familiar from the longer history of the three major religions studied in this collection. First and foremost, those who

founded and administered the charitable institutions of early modern Europe and the Middle East plainly carried in the back of their minds what might be called a particular “aesthetic of society,” the outlines of which might be blurred by the quotidian routines of administration. This “aesthetic of society” amounted to a sharp sense of what constituted a good society and what constituted an ugly society, namely, one that neglected the poor or treated them inappropriately.

Europeans and Ottomans alike instantly noticed when charitable institutions were absent. Of the great imarets of the Ottoman empire, Evliya the seventeenth-century traveler, wrote, “I, this poor one, have traveled 51 years and in the territories of 18 rulers, and there was nothing like our enviable institution.”¹

A similar sense of social aesthetics in the matter of charity marked the first contacts of the Portuguese Jesuits with the far-away Christian kingdom of Ethiopia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ethiopian Christian world was far closer to that of Dark Age Europe than to the Spain and Portugal that the Jesuits knew. It had no civic almshouses, and no organized system of care for the poor. Instead, a predatory nobility was challenged to spasmodic moments of headlong generosity, in the name of “love of the poor,” by equally predatory hordes of professional beggars, down-at-heel warriors, and innumerable members of the lesser clergy. In the words of Lobo, a Jesuit father, “Their Charity to the Poor may be said to exceed the proper Bounds that prudence ought to set to it, for it contributes to encourage great numbers of Beggars, which are a great Annoyance to the whole Kingdom, and . . . afford more exercise to a Christian’s Patience, than his Charity.”²

The shock of contact with contrasting options made Europeans and Ottomans alike realize that they knew a proper society when they saw one. The sincerity of their commitment to a specific vision of a “godly and compassionate society” should not be underestimated. Nor should the variety of forms that this society might take.

Divided as European Protestants and Catholics were in their

1 Evliya Çelebi (ed. Orhan Saik Gokyay), *Evliya Celebi Seyahatnamesi. I. Kitap: Istanbul* (Istanbul, 1996), 132(a).

2 Jerome Lobo (trans. Samuel Johnson), *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (London, 1789; orig. pub. 1735), quoted in John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (New York, 1987), 9.

ideas about the good society, the differences between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire were even more decisive, subtle though they sometimes could be. Christian Europe concentrated on a quality of mercy that was essentially asymmetrical. It strove to integrate those who, otherwise, would have no place in society. As the founder of Christ's Hospital wrote in the sixteenth century, "Christ has lain too long abroad . . . in the streets of London." To him, those deserving of mercy were "lesser folk," and those who "raised them up" were "like a God."³ In Catholic countries, much charity was "redemptive," directed to tainted groups who might yet come to be absorbed more fully into the Christian fold—including Jews, some of whom might yet be converted, and prostitutes, some of whom might yet be reformed. In the more bracing air of Protestant Hadleigh, however, "reform" meant making sure that those who were "badly governed in their bodies" (delinquent male beggars) were brought back to the labor force from which they had lapsed. For both Catholics and Protestants, the "reform" of errant groups was a dominant concern.

By contrast, in Ottoman society, receiving charity brought no shame. To go to an imaret was not to be "brought in from the cold." Rich and poor were sustained by the carefully graded bounty of the sultan: "Hand in hand with the imperial generosity is that of a strictly run establishment, carefully regulating the movements of its clients and the sustenance each received." The meals at the Ottoman imaret are reminiscent of the Roman *convivium*, great public banquets of the Roman emperors, in their judicious combination of hierarchy and outreach to all citizens.⁴ Nothing like it existed in Christian Europe.

By the year 1600, the weight of a millennium lay behind these differences. The overall similarities of practice between Christian Europe and the Islamic world, and the well-documented osmosis of the Jewish communities with the institutions of their Christian and Muslim neighbors, are clearly evident. Nonetheless, the "aesthetic of society" that each group embraced was not interchangeable. Despite the confidence of Evliya in the

³ Jerome Drexel, *Gazophylacium Christi; sive, De Eleemosyna, in Opera Omnia* (Lyons, 1647), III, 204.

⁴ John D'Arms, "The Roman *convivium* and the Idea of Equality," in Oswyn Murray (ed.), *Symptica: A Symposium on the Symposium* (New York, 1990), 306–330.

Ottoman way of life, not everybody's "enviable institution" was necessarily the envy of all others.

One issue concerning the "aesthetic of society" that deserves to be stressed is often taken for granted in studies of poverty: Why should the poor matter in the first place? The heirs to centuries of concerted charitable effort by conscientious Jews, Christians, and Muslims are liable to forget that concern for the poor is, in many ways, a relatively recent development in the history of Europe and the Middle East, not necessarily shared by many non-European and non-Middle Eastern societies.

The Greco-Roman world had no place whatsoever for the poor in its "aesthetic of society." But ancient Greeks and Romans were not thereby hardhearted or ungenerous. They were aware of the misery that surrounded them and often prepared to spend large sums on their fellows. But the beneficiaries of their acts of kindness were never defined as "the poor," largely because the city stood at the center of the social imagination. The misery that touched them most acutely was the potential misery of their city. If Leland Stanford had lived in ancient Greece or in ancient Rome, his philanthropic activities would not have been directed toward "humanity," even less toward "the poor," but toward improving the amenities of San Francisco and the aesthetics of the citizen body as a whole. It would not have gone to the homeless or to the reform of prostitutes. Those who happened, economically, to be poor might have benefited from such philanthropy, but only insofar as they were members of the city, the great man's "fellow-citizens."

The emergence of the poor as a separate category and object of concern within the general population involved a slow and hesitant revolution in the entire "aesthetic" of ancient society, which was connected primarily with the rise of Christianity in the Roman world. But it also coincided with profound modifications in the image of the city itself. The self-image of a classical, city-bound society had to change before the "poor" became visible as a separate group within it.⁵

Similarly, in the context of the Chinese empire's governmental tradition, the victims of famine were not so much "the poor" as

5 Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 1-9.

they were “subjects” who happened to need food, the better to be controlled and educated like everyone else. This state-centered image had to weaken considerably before Buddhist notions of “compassion” to “the poor” could spread in China. Until at least the eleventh century, acts of charity to the poor ranked low in the hierarchy of official values, dismissed as “little acts” and endowed with little public resonance. They were overshadowed by a robust state ideology of responsibility for famine relief, which put its trust, not on anything as frail as “compassion,” but on great state warehouses controlled (it was hoped) by public-spirited provincial governors.⁶

If the phrase “aesthetic of society” connotes a view of the poor deemed fitting for a society, one implicit aspect of it notably absent from the ancient world and China was the intense feeling—shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims—that outright neglect of the poor was ugly, and that charity was not only prudent but also beautiful. Despite the traditional limitations of charitable institutions—their perpetual shortfall in meeting widespread misery, their inward-looking quality, and the overbearing manner in which they frequently operated—they were undeniably worthwhile ventures. The officials who ran them and the rich who funded them could think of themselves as engaged in “a profoundly integrative activity.” This widespread feeling of contributing to a “beautiful” rather than an “ugly” society still needs to be explained.

Why remember the poor? There are many obvious answers to this question, most of which have been fully spelled out in recent scholarship. Jews, Christians, and Muslims were guardians of sacred scriptures that enjoined compassion for the poor and promised future rewards for it. Furthermore, in early modern Europe, in particular, charity to the poor came to mean more than merely pleasing God; it represented the solution to a pressing social problem. To provide for the poor and to police their movements was a prudent reaction to what scholars have revealed as an objective crisis caused by headlong demographic growth and a decline in the real value of wages.

Yet even this “objective” crisis had its “subjective” side. Contemporaries perceived the extent of the crisis in, say, Britain as

6 Hugh Scogin, “Poor Relief in North Sung China,” *Oriens Extremus*, XXV (1978), 30–31.

amplified, subjectively, by a subtle change in the “aesthetic of society.” The poor had not only become more dangerous; their poverty had become, in itself, more shocking. As Wrightson recently showed, forms of poverty that had once been accepted as part of the human condition, about which little could be done, became much more challenging wherever larger sections of a community became accustomed to higher levels of comfort.⁷ When poverty could no longer be taken for granted, to overlook the poor appeared, increasingly, to be the mark of an “ugly” society. Moreover, that the potentially “forgettable” segments of society were usually articulate and well educated, able to plead their cause to their more hardhearted contemporaries, had something to do with how indecorous, if not cruel, forgetting them would be.

Paul’s injunction to “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10) and its equivalents in Jewish and Muslim societies warned about far more than a lapse of memory. It pointed to a brutal act of social excision the reverberations of which would not be confined to the narrow corridor where rich and poor met through the working of charitable institutions. The charitable institutions of the time present the poor, primarily, as persons in search of elemental needs—food, clothing, and work. But hunger and exposure were only the “presenting symptoms” of a deeper misery. Put bluntly, the heart of the problem was that the poor were eminently forgettable persons. In many different ways, they lost access to the networks that had lodged them in the memory of their fellows. Lacking the support of family and neighbors, the poor were on their own, floating into the vast world of the unremembered. This slippage into oblivion is strikingly evident in Jewish Midrash of the book of Proverbs, in which statements on the need to respect the poor are attached to the need to respect the dead. Ultimately helpless, the dead also depended entirely on the capacity of others to remember them. The dead represented the furthest pole of oblivion toward which the poor already drifted.

Fortunately for the poor, however, Jews, Christians, and Muslims not only had the example of their own dead—whom it was both shameful and inhuman to forget—but also that of God Himself, who was invisible, at least for the time being. Of all the

7 Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000).

eminently forgettable persons who ringed the fringes of a medieval and early modern society, God was the one most liable to be forgotten by comfortable and confident worldlings. The *Qur'an* equated those who denied the Day of Judgment with those who rejected orphans and neglected the feeding of the poor (Ma'un 107:1–3). The pious person, by contrast, forgot neither relatives nor strangers who were impoverished. Even though he might have had every reason to wish that they had never existed, he went out of his way to “feed them . . . and to speak kindly to them” (Nisa' 4.36, 86).

The poor challenged the memory like God. They were scarcely visible creatures who, nonetheless, should not be forgotten. As Michael Bonner shows, the poor, the *masakin* of the *Qur'an* and of its early medieval interpreters, are “unsettling, ambiguous [persons] . . . whom we may or may not know.” In all three religions, charity to the easily forgotten poor was locked into an entire social pedagogy that supported the memory of a God who, also, was all-too-easily forgotten.

The poor were not the only persons in a medieval or an early modern society who might become victims of forgetfulness. Many other members of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic societies—and often the most vocal members—found themselves in a position strangely homologous to, or overlapping, that of the poor, and they often proved to be most articulate in pressing the claims of the poor. They also demanded to be remembered even if, by the normal standards of society, they did nothing particularly memorable.

Seen with the hard eyes of those who exercised real power in their societies, the religious leaders of all three religions were eminently “forgettable” persons. They contributed nothing of obvious importance to society. Take the case of the rabbis and their students in Late Antiquity. There was always something arrantly counterfactual in the inclination of young males to devote their time and energy to the seemingly purposeless study of *Torah* when they might have been doing more socially useful things. Yet these *bouches inutiles*—these adult males who did not work, trade, or fight—claimed tax exemption on the grounds that their ethereal study of the *Torah* “made the world stand firm.” Despite the fact that fourth-century Tiberias plainly “stood firm” because solid Jewish citizens paid their taxes and contributed their time and

money to the building of city walls, the rabbis insisted that their claim to special privileges and exemption from public labor be remembered.⁸

The Christian clergy, as we know, made similar claims for themselves, even more persistently than did the rabbis. Throughout the early centuries of the Christian church, the clergy expected tax exemptions in exchange for prayers in behalf of the Roman armies. They also expected to be largely supported by the offerings of the faithful.⁹ Yet, surprisingly, the intimate dependence of the clergy on being “remembered” by others through lay donations to the Church is rarely mentioned in early Christian sources. Many of the numerous volumes of the *Patrologia Graeca* and the *Patrologia Latina* contain long and moving addresses about the need to “remember the poor.” But hardly a single sermon preached on the need to support the local clergy and to fund the building of a local church still survives.

The pedagogy of Christian giving, however, certainly included gifts both to the poor and to the Church. Those who forgot the poor were likely to forget their local clergy, too. Hence, perhaps, the urgency with which the clergy preached on the need to “remember the poor.” The very habit of Christian giving, distributed between two groups of “forgettable” persons, was at stake in such sermons.

In the early medieval period, monks and nuns, like the clergy, were debarred from carrying arms and producing children. As such, the monks were profoundly marginal to the needs of a community based upon warfare and kin. But the safety of kings and the salvation of souls were thought to depend on their remembrance in the prayers of these strictly unnecessary persons. Furthermore, these unnecessary persons demanded to be remembered in return, through the laity’s solid gifts of land and children. To “forget” monks and clergy was tantamount to neglecting the “poor.” Indeed, whether the “poor” needing charity in early medieval Europe referred primarily to the lay poor or to monks and clergy is not always easy to decide. Both groups were “poor” in that they had reason to fear being forgotten.

The poor scholars of Islamic law who were assured of their

8 M. Jacobs, *Die Institutionen des jüdischen Patriarchen* (Tübingen, 1995), 154–157, 274–284.

9 Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 23–31.

place in the imarets of the Ottoman Empire could claim to be necessary persons. They lived in a society that valued them as judges, legal experts, teachers, and preachers. But, given the vagaries of the patronage systems that controlled their employment, none of them was assured of being remembered as necessary to anybody in particular. Such scholars might not have had to face the utter destitution of the poor, but their position in the social network was fragile in the extreme. At any time, they might feel the cold chill of “forgetfulness” by the great. Hence, they needed to subject the great to a moral pedagogy that encouraged them to remember the forgettable, whether the poor or themselves.

A proper appreciation of the vehemence with which the need to remember the poor was asserted in such societies must give due weight to a subliminal alliance characteristic of many complex religious societies—both ends against the center. Not only were the poor in danger of being forgotten; so, also, were the rabbis, the clergy, the monks, and the *ulema*. Despite the prestige allotted to them in their different milieus, their social networks did not invariably reach deeply enough into the coarse and vigorous heart of “normal” society. Their chances of survival did not seem as certain, and their contribution to life as palpable, as those of the majority of their contemporaries. The rich always needed a little reminding of the ethereal benefits brought by religious experts, just as they needed to be reminded of the presence, at their side, of an invisible God, and of the existence of the wraith-like poor.

In earlier societies, men of prayer and men of the pen (rabbis, clergymen and *ulema*)—persons committed to elevated, weightless words of no obvious social utility—were the tacit beneficiaries of the same “aesthetic of society” that protected the poor from being forgotten. The manner in which a society remembers its forgettable persons and characterizes the failure to do so is a sensitive indicator of its tolerance for a certain amount of apparently unnecessary, even irrelevant, cultural and religious activity. What is at stake is more than generosity and compassion. It is the necessary heedlessness by which any complex society can find a place for the less conspicuous elements of its cultural differentiation and social health. Scholars owe much to the ancient injunction to “remember the poor.”