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Poverty and the Poor in the World's Religious Traditions

Religious Responses to the Problem of Poverty

William H. Brackney and Rupen Das, Editors
Foreword by Dr. Clinton Bennett



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Introduction

This book began as an outgrowth of doctoral research conducted by Rupen Das under the direction of William Brackney at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada. The parts of the doctoral thesis were later published as *Compassion and the Mission of God: Revealing the Invisible Kingdom* (2016). Dr. Das has spent years in international development and disaster relief and has had countless opportunities to assess poverty up close. He has been an agent of relief efforts, crossing geographic and religious boundaries. Dr. Brackney has studied human rights and ethical issues related to poverty and published on the topic: *Human Rights and the World's Major Religions* (5 vols., 2005; rev. 2013). In his travels, he too has observed poverty firsthand. Clinton Bennett, an international scholar of world religions, suggested the topic as filling a necessary niche in scholarship and reference tools, especially in the area of poverty and social justice.

All the major religious traditions examined in this work have perceptions of poverty and the poor as a phenomenon of human history and experience. Some account for poverty as a socioeconomic given, while others seek to alleviate or eliminate poverty. The plight of the poor elicits different identifications and responses in each of the religious traditions.

Inevitably, in their articulation and responses to poverty and the poor, religious traditions advance notions about deity, humanity, justice, equity, distribution of resources, and the exercise of political power. As a category of inquiry, religion offers an ancient and contemporary window on poverty. From texts, commentaries, and nonliterary sources, religious orientations have suggested a morality of poverty that has created obligations and relationships for their adherents.

Chapter 1 identifies the theories, paradigms, and strategies that community development professionals use when addressing poverty. The various human rights conventions and instruments provide a secular philosophical framework that helps them interpret the reality and dynamics of poverty.

Chapter 2 asserts that, as a discipline of inquiry, religion itself can provide a viable framework for understanding poverty and the poor. The religions identify and interact with the issues that the poor face and the social reality of poverty. There are different perspectives on how poverty is to be addressed. Some try to alleviate poverty; others condone it. Some even provide an eschatological perspective.

Chapter 3 focuses on the poor and poverty in the Chinese religions. The chapter states that the issues of poverty and the poor are interconnected with community relationships, self-governance, collective virtues, and the development of the individual. It examines the issues of the poor and social justice from the perspective of classical Confucianism and Daoism from the perspective of an Asian writer and scholar.

Chapter 4 explores the poor and poverty within the Buddhist tradition. Two specialists tackle the problem of variant forms of Buddhism in concluding that there is no single ethical framework that identifies how the poor are to be treated and poverty addressed. Rather, different texts and performative and practical contexts at different moments in history have grappled with these issues, resulting in varied interpretations of and responses to poverty.

Chapter 5 looks at the Jewish tradition and how it has grappled with the reality of the poor and poverty. It draws on 4,000 years of texts and historical experiences. Besides the Hebrew Bible, it also refers to the Mishnah, the Talmud, and other texts. Through exiles and migrations, a concern for the poor would remain. They addressed contemporary issues through new forms of study and collecting appropriate Jewish writings. The writer makes use of unusual illustrations of understanding poverty in the modern Jewish communities.

Chapter 6 studies the poor and poverty in the Christian tradition. It starts with the Christian Bible, which is composed of the Hebrew Scriptures plus the New Testament, and the apocrypha, and then moves beyond that to examine the writings of the Church Fathers to see how the Early Church and then the Church in the Middle Ages responded to the poor. It then explores the Roman Catholic orders and the Age of Reform, starting in the early 1600s, as intentional Christian efforts to address poverty. It concludes with the modern era, identifying Christian nationalism and the state's response to poverty, the nonprofit relief organizations, the Social Gospel, liberation theology, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Chapter 7 covers the Islamic perspectives on the poor and poverty. It draws extensively from its two main religious texts: the Qur'an and the hadith. The chapter starts with the Islamic worldview, which provides perspective on why poverty exists. It then identifies who the poor are, the causes of poverty, and how the Islamic tradition responds to the needs of the poor through such efforts as *zakat* and *sadakah*. It is a fresh examination of the tradition's views on the relation of the poor to the Creator.

Chapter 8 insightfully examines the religions of India, specifically Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism. The challenge of Hinduism is that it is not a monolithic religion but a conglomeration of varied traditions over the centuries. The chapter draws extensively from the sacred Hindu texts in Sanskrit and the vernacular languages and introduces the traditional and reformist responses to poverty and social change. Jainism does not have a single sacred book. This chapter draws from the writings of Mahavira and his immediate and later followers. Sikhism emerged in reaction to Hindu and Muslim influences as a new monotheistic religion in the 15th century. It borrowed ideas and practices from both religions. The main religious text of the Sikhs is the *Guru Granth Sahib*, from which this chapter draws extensively.

Chapter 9 views the poor and poverty in the various African religions. Unlike the other chapters, the African religions do not have a single corpus of literature, thus providing a considerable challenge to the writers. The chapter instead encompasses a geographic region. It presents a pan-African tapestry because there is minimal sociocultural coherence between the cultures and people across the continent. It differentiates between formal and folk religion and identifies the influence of Christianity and Islam. It questions the language of poverty and the poor, stating that poverty as assessed by colonial and modern indicators, did not exist before the colonial conquests. Instead, the paradigm consisted of “well-being” versus “ill-being,” with the poor being a political, religious, and social concern. Finally, the writers look at poverty in contemporary Africa and the effort to decolonize poverty models.

Finally, chapter 10 examines the poor and poverty in North American indigenous traditions. The writer provides unique analyses from several aboriginal traditions. Similar to the African context, the North American indigenous context consists of a variety of tribes and cultures, with religions based on oral tradition rather than religious and cultural texts. It is noted that, until recent history, poverty was not assessed by an individual’s status but by the temporary status of a community whose resources, based on the land, were either abundant or scarce. Therefore, poverty was understood differently than that of a society that was individualistic and driven by capitalism. The prevalence of poverty in indigenous communities is a modern reality. The chapter explores the “life in the old days, and in the old ways, [that] had prescribed sets of remedies structured in society for maladies such as temporary poverty.”

We are very pleased that Praeger/ABC-CLIO has taken on this publication. We are especially grateful to Anthony Chiffolo, the former editorial director, who first caught the vision of this idea at ABC-CLIO, and Jessica Gribble, the senior acquisitions editor at Praeger Publishing, who has energetically guided the manuscript to fruition. Appreciation is also expressed to

Theresa Pieper, at Oldenburg University, and Laura S. Levitt, at Temple University, for their advice in identifying contributors.

It is our fondest hope that a better understanding of the subject of this work will influence religious thinkers and leaders to redouble their efforts to address and alleviate poverty. It is also our desire that international development practitioners will develop a respect for the values of compassion and social justice intrinsic in the world religions and build local poverty alleviation programs based on these values and worldviews.

William H. Brackney
Rupen Das