

# **The God That the Poor Seek**

*Conversion, Context, and the World of the Vulnerable*

**Rupen Das**



**Langham**

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*The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises  
and faithful in all he does.  
The LORD upholds all who fall  
and lifts up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food at the proper time.  
You open your hand  
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.  
The LORD is righteous in all his ways  
and faithful in all he does.  
The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.*

**Psalm 145:13–18**

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# Introduction

Theology is an act of repentant humility. . . . This act exists in the fact that in theology the Church seeks again and again to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a Church among men.<sup>1</sup>

*Karl Barth*

The church, which had its origins on the margins of the Roman Empire and of Roman society, breathed new life into the Jewish idea that the Creator God dwells among his people. He cared for them, provided for their needs, comforted them in times of crisis, and gave them eternal hope when they faced death. This idea was so revolutionary that it intrigued people who were not yet part of the faith community that worshiped Jesus Christ. Early church historian Alan Kreider writes, “Rumors that God was present in Christian gatherings may have also attracted outsiders to investigate Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

As I encountered people in many parts of the world who were poor and were turning to worship Christ, I saw something in their new-found faith that had echoes of the life of the early church and had been pushed to the margins of my thinking in the midst of theological studies, research, writing, and ministry: God is not distant but is deeply involved in human lives and history. He answers all who call on him in the name of Jesus.

## **The Missing Piece in Understanding the World of the Poor**

Through my years of working in international development and humanitarian assistance, I have noticed that the poor in the Majority World approach

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1. Barth, *God in Action*, 44.

2. Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 109.

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God very differently than most of us who either live in the Western world or are among the privileged in the Majority World. In my conversations with the poor who have become followers of Christ, I also sensed that they were encountering Christ in ways that were different from what traditional Christian and evangelical<sup>3</sup> theology and recent missional practice constituted as conversion. In the midst of their destitution and suffering, what the poor expected from God when they turned to him surprised me. I expected them to want liberation, freedom, and a pathway to a middle-class lifestyle; but what they yearned for was something quite different. While we are beginning to understand the socioeconomic world of those living in poverty, we really don't yet understand the spirituality of the poor.

It is this intuition or clue that sparked the desire for further investigation. I realized very early on that this investigation would require a paradigm shift in me to understand the dynamics of conversion to Christ among the poor.<sup>4</sup> In order for this shift to happen, I needed to lay aside my worldview's preconceived notions about poverty and the poor, the anecdotal stories as to why the poor were attracted to religion, and then try to see God and his work of redemption through the eyes of some of the poor themselves. This book is about conversion in the contexts of the poor.

The issue of poverty and the poor has become part of the global political agenda as seen through initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);<sup>5</sup> critical discussions

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3. Historically, the mainline Protestant denominations in the Middle East were known as the Protestant Evangelical churches. In Europe, Martin Luther referred to the *evangelische Kirche* (evangelical church) to distinguish Protestants from the Catholic Church. "Evangelical" is difficult to define. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) defines "evangelical" as follows: "The term 'evangelical' comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning 'the good news' or the 'gospel.' Thus, the evangelical faith focuses on the 'good news' of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ." National Association of Evangelicals, "What Is an Evangelical?" Roger Olsen states that "*evangelicalism is not a movement or group but a spiritual-theological ethos* marked by David Bebbington's four hallmarks (Biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, activism) plus a deep respect for orthodox Christianity as expressed by the earliest Christian creeds and councils and by the Protestant reformers." Roger E. Olsen, "What Is an 'Evangelical' and Does It Matter?" (emphasis original).

4. Leslie Newbigin writes that in science and religion, innovation is the result not so much of new facts, but of paradigm shifts which are acts of imagination or intuition. This shift provides a clue which then gives rise to advances in knowledge. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 5.

5. MDGs were not just a one-off, time-bound initiative that ended in September 2015. On 25 September 2015, 193 countries adopted the United Nations' new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to build on the impact of the MDGs.

on the roots of terrorism, violence, and crime;<sup>6</sup> the ethics of international trade;<sup>7</sup> and the question of the obligation of rich nations toward poorer countries.<sup>8</sup> While there has been an increasing focus on how to address the social, political, and economic dimensions of poverty, understanding the spiritual realities of the poor, how they relate to God, and why they seek Christ have received comparatively less attention.

A concern for the poor has always been an integral part of most religions. Religious texts refer to the poor rather than poverty. Obligations as dictated by their religious tradition are their prescription to respond to human needs in the community.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on the poor has not escaped the church. The early church responded to the needs of refugees, the poor, and others on the margins of society.<sup>10</sup> Addressing poverty has been part of the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries through the ministries of its various monastic orders, religious societies, and communities. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII addressed the issue of labor and capital, which is regarded as the first encyclical of Catholic social teaching.<sup>11</sup> Vatican II (1962–65) provided “a theological atmosphere characterized by greater freedom and creativity”<sup>12</sup> within which the issues of injustice and poverty were also discussed. Pope Paul VI addressed issues such as the impact of colonialism and the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, and stressed the need for justice and social and economic development. He wrote, “It is true that colonizing nations were sometimes concerned with nothing save their own interests, their own power and their own prestige; their departure left the economy of these countries in precarious imbalance.”<sup>13</sup> He went on to address how social and economic development should be approached.

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6. Abadie, “Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism,” 50–66; Krueger and Malečková, “Education, Poverty and Terrorism,” 119–44.

7. Bhagwati and Srinivasan, “Trade and Poverty in the Poor Countries,” 180–83.

8. Grenier, “Jubilee 2000: Laying the Foundations for a Social Movement,” 86–108.

9. Das and Brackney, eds., *Poverty and the Poor in the World Religions*; Das, *Poor and Poverty in Islam*.

10. Brueggemann, “How the Early Church Practiced Charity”; Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*; Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*.

11. Leo XIII, “*Rerum Novarum*: Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Capital and Labour,” 592–651.

12. Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 69.

13. Pope Paul VI, “*Populorum Progressio*: Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Development of Peoples,” 26th March 1967,” 7.

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The development we speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man. As an eminent specialist on this question has rightly said: “We cannot allow economics to be separated from human realities, nor development from the civilization in which it takes place. What counts for us is man – each individual man, each human group, and humanity as a whole.”<sup>14</sup>

By the 1960s, *how* poverty should be addressed became a controversial issue with the emergence of liberation theology.<sup>15</sup> The election of Pope Francis in 2013 and his emphasis on social justice has brought the issues of global poverty and injustice into the mainstreams of Catholic discourse again.<sup>16</sup>

The social issues related to poverty and the poor were not always part of the modern Protestant missionary movement which emerged in the late 1700s. It was not until the Liverpool Missionary Conference in 1860 that the impact of poverty was addressed with the first medical missionary being commissioned and the decision made that education (anything beyond literacy) could also be part of the missionary mandate.<sup>17</sup> The succeeding missionary conferences of that period<sup>18</sup> occasionally discussed social issues.<sup>19</sup> However, with the advent of the social gospel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its focus on social progress, issues related to poverty and the poor began to dominate the agenda of mission agencies.

Regardless of this lack of focus on social issues in missional strategies until the mid-1800s, in 1865 William Booth (1829–1912), a former Methodist minister in England, started working with the “undesirables” of society in London. These included morphine and other drug addicts, prostitutes, and

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14. Pope Paul VI, “Populorum Progressio,” 14. These remarks were further elaborated on in Hollenbach, “Gaudium et Spes (1965),” 266–314; Pope Paul VI, “Evangelica Testificatio: On the Renewal of the Religious Life According to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council,” 1–20.

15. Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 87. Liberation theology was not the only driver within the Roman Catholic Church in bringing the issues of poverty and social change to the forefront in recent times.

16. Stan Chu Ilo, “Poverty and Economic Justice in Pope Francis,” 38–56; Tan, “Pope Francis’s Preferential Option,” 58–66.

17. The Secretaries to the Conference, ed., *Conference on Missions Held in 1860 at Liverpool*.

18. London 1878 and 1888, New York 1900, and Edinburgh 1910.

19. The Secretaries to the Conference, ed., *Proceedings of the General Conference on Foreign Missions*; Johnston, ed., *Report of the Centenary Conference*; Askew, “The 1888 London Centenary Missions Conference,” 113–18; Askew, “The New York 1900 Ecumenical Missionary Conference,” 146–50; *The World Missionary Conference, 1910*.

alcoholics. Industrialization in Britain had created significant social problems, and a large section of the population was either unemployed or living in very poor and unhealthy conditions. Booth felt that the church had a responsibility to show the love of Christ to the poor and marginalized in tangible ways.

Because of the theological tensions between the fundamentalists who were dispensationalists and the proponents of the social gospel who ultimately were rooted in liberal theology,<sup>20</sup> evangelicals did not address the issues of the poor and poverty until much later. However, there were dispensationalists who were involved with social reforms between the 1870s and the 1920s. These included A. J. Gordon, Arthur T. Pierson, William Bell Riley, and John Roach Straton, among others.<sup>21</sup> A few decades later, one of the few evangelicals who wrote about the need to also address social issues was Carl F. H. Henry, who in his 1947 book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*<sup>22</sup> challenged the indifference of the fundamentalists and evangelicals. It was only at the 1966 Wheaton Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission, followed by the 1973 Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern, culminating with the Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, that many evangelicals recognized social responsibility and social justice as part of the mission of the church.<sup>23</sup> The resulting focus was to move beyond charity toward stressing the need for social justice and improving the socioeconomic and political status of the poor and marginalized.

As churches, mission agencies, and Christian organizations focused on understanding and responding to the sociopolitical and economic needs of the poor, the paradigm was of the nonpoor and outsiders to the context analyzing the realities of the poor and the dynamics of poverty. Much has been written by them about their understanding of poverty and their proposed strategies for

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20. For a short review of the tensions, see Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God*, 105–34.

21. Timothy Webber at Denver Seminary in his survey of American premillennialism summarizes the range of attitudes toward social change. "Some premillennialists condemned all reform efforts as unsuitable for those who expected Christ momentarily; but others believed that until Christ does appear, Christians should engage in certain kinds of reform activity and do whatever possible to slow down the inevitable decline and breakdown of the social order." Webber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 83.

22. Henry, *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.

23. Though the Lausanne 1974 Covenant was approved by the conference, there were evangelicals led by Peter Wagner, Donald MacGavran, and Ralph Winters who opposed the inclusion of social responsibility as part of the mandate of the Great Commission. Houston, "Story of the Lausanne Covenant"; Hunt, "History of the Lausanne Movement, 1974–2010," 81–84.

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addressing the needs of the poor.<sup>24</sup> The poor were the objects of their charity and subjects to be studied and empowered.

By the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong reaction against this paternalistic approach. The British academic and development practitioner Robert Chambers stressed that the realities of poverty need to be defined by the poor themselves and not by outsiders imposing their own conceptual frameworks and agendas. Chambers' contention was that assessing and addressing poverty at the community level should not just be a top-down process implemented by the government or any external agency, but that people in communities need to be at the center of the process and involved throughout.<sup>25</sup> Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher, wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that the poor having a voice is a fundamental part of empowerment in liberation theology. He refers to this empowerment as *conscientization*, which is the process by which a person “[learns] to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”<sup>26</sup> The attempt of liberation theologians to systematize and interpret the longings of the poor and their biblical reflections from within their socioeconomic

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24. Much has been written in recent years about poverty and how to address it from a Christian perspective. Some of the key publications are Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*; Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*; Nancy Maeker and Peter Rognes, *Ending Poverty: A 20/20 Vision. A Guide for Individuals and Congregations*, Lutheran Voices (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2006). Christopher Heurtz and Christine Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission*, Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2010); Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Scott Bessenecker, *Living Mission: The Vision and Voices of New Friars* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010); Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2010); Eric Swanson and Sam Williams, *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011); Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2012); Ash Baker, *Slum Life Rising: How to Enflesh Hope within a New Urban World* (Amazon Digital Services Inc., 24 May 2012); Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2013); Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Ben Lowe and Ajith Fernando, *Doing Good without Giving Up: Sustaining Social Action in a World That's Hard to Change* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2014); Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2014); Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley, *Church in Hard Places: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy*, 9Marks (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016); T. Aaron Smith and Viv Grigg, *Thriving in the City: A Guide for Sustainable International Ministry Among the Urban Poor* (Pomona: Servant Partners, 2016).

25. Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?*, 46.

26. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 19.

realities was one of the earliest efforts to enable the poor to speak about their spirituality and spiritual priorities.<sup>27</sup>

What has been missing in both the literature on the spirituality of the poor and in missional practice is an understanding of how and why the poor choose to worship Jesus Christ. What do the poor themselves have to say as to what attracts them to Christ and the gospel? A growing number of Majority World and Western missiologists are writing about how conversion in different cultural and religious contexts may vary from the standardized approaches used by Western mission agencies.<sup>28</sup> Recent research has shown that the poor tend to be more religious than the nonpoor.<sup>29</sup> However, there is very little empirical research on how the poor in the Majority World encounter Christ as articulated by the poor themselves.

## This Book

This book is about the stories of some of the poor as they encountered Christ. The stories stand on their own merit and require no justification. The book would be complete even if only the stories that the poor told about their experiences of the living God were recorded. In order to respect the integrity of the poor and their stories of conversion, two chapters (5 and 6) record these stories as told by the poor themselves without any commentary. But the question is this: where would these stories and experiences reside within missiological thinking? In order to answer this question, conversion and the importance of contexts and contextualization are the two lenses through which the stories of the poor will be interpreted for missiological purposes. Missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder write, “If the church is to be in mission, to be in mission is to be responsive to the demands of the gospel in particular contexts, to be continually ‘reinventing’ itself as it struggles with and approaches new situations, new places, new cultures, and new questions.”<sup>30</sup> This book about how some of the poor encounter God revealed in Christ

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27. An example of the process is in Cardenal, *Gospel in Solentiname*.

28. Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*; Hilderbrand, “What Led Thai Buddhist Background Believers,” 400–415; Garrison, *Wind in the House of Islam*; G. Smith, *Transforming Conversion*; Woodberry and Shubin, “Why I Chose Jesus”; J. Woodberry, Shubin, and Marks, “Why Muslims Follow Jesus.”

29. Crabtree, “Religiosity Highest in World’s Poorest Nations”; Rees, “Is Personal Insecurity a Cause,” 1–26; Schieman, “Socioeconomic Status and Beliefs,” 25–51.

30. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 31.

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provides a window into how this God relates to those who live on the margins of society and what is the good news that they seek.

In order to understand how the poor encounter the living God and choose to follow Christ, it is important to look at how conversion has been understood throughout church history and how it was practiced by Christian mission agencies. Chapter 2 will look at the question of conversion and how conversion happens so as to later use conversion as a window into the spiritual lives of the poor.

Chapter 3 tackles the fundamental issue of whether context and culture have an influence on how and why conversion happens. Contextualization in Christian mission has been based on an anthropological understanding of society and culture. Until recently there had been no acknowledgement that economic status influences the culture of a community. This is particularly true when considering the perceptions of who God is and the spiritual priorities and expectations of people. Research has shown a clear connection between poverty and spirituality. So, is there a culture or cultures of poverty that needs to be considered when trying to understand the conversion experiences and spirituality of the poor?

A review of the literature on poverty and the poor, both secular and Christian, reveals that most of the authors are the nonpoor who are outsiders to the community and who record what they observe and understand. This work is influenced by their worldview, values, experiences, and agendas. Where are the voices of the poor describing what it is to be poor? The challenge is that the language the poor use does not fit into the neat conceptual frameworks of the academics and theologians. What is heard is translated conceptually into a format that the researcher, theologian, or government administrator can make sense of and use. Chapter 4 explores whether it is possible to actually hear the voices of the poor.

Chapters 5 and 6 are some of the voices of the poor as they speak about *how* they encountered the living God, *why* they chose to abandon the deities they had worshiped and follow Christ, and *what* is their understanding of who this living God is. Each chapter begins with a description of the context the poor in that chapter live in and from within which they speak, which provides context to what they say and why they say it.

Chapter 7 puts the voices of the poor recorded in chapters 5 and 6 into the context of the literature and missional experience regarding conversion and contextualization documented in chapters 2 and 3. What do the poor who are on the margins of the global church have to say about the dynamics of believing

in Christ and how God relates to those who are not in the mainstreams of society? Chapter 8 looks at what we learn from the stories of the poor.

### **Understanding Poverty Provides Context for the Faith of the Poor**

To understand the faith and spirituality of the poor, it is important to understand the poverty that causes their despair, which then gives birth to their faith and in some strange way nurtures it. Theologian Daniel Migliore highlights the fact that a particular context will shape a person's understanding of who Christ is and how he helps them.<sup>31</sup> So what is the poverty that the poor experience? This question is discussed further in chapter 3 under the section on cultures of poverty.

Poverty is multidimensional and has certain unique characteristics. Measuring it solely by income, living and working conditions, health conditions, or any other single indicator (monetary or otherwise) does a disservice to the poor and really does not help understand their desperation. The United Nations (UN) provides the most widely accepted and comprehensive definition of poverty:

[Poverty] means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households, and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation.<sup>32</sup>

Because of its multidimensionality, poverty impacts every aspect of a person's life, family, and community. As will be noted later in chapter 3, poverty has a negative effect on the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of a person.

The complexity of poverty had not been studied until the past century. The theoretical term "poverty" was not common in sacred religious texts or oral traditions. Instead they refer to the "poor" or to a state of "ill-being," as in the tribal societies of Africa and the First Nations in Canada. There are very

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31. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 197.

32. UNESCO, "Statement of Commitment for Action to Eradicate Poverty Adopted by Administrative Committee on Coordination."

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rich traditions in the world religions of responding to human need in one's own community,<sup>33</sup> and the Bible consistently refers to the poor.<sup>34</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez writes,

Poverty is a central theme in both the Old and New Testaments. It is treated both briefly and profoundly; it describes social situations and expresses spiritual experiences communicated only with difficulty; it defines personal attitudes, a whole people's attitude before God, and the relationships of people with each other . . . [it] is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.<sup>35</sup>

It was not until the twentieth century that empirical studies using specific measurements and definitions were used to identify those living in poverty. Some of the most significant developments in understanding poverty were through the work of Robert Chambers. Poverty is not only multidimensional, but he stressed that the realities of poverty need to be defined by the poor themselves and not by outsiders imposing their own frameworks and agendas.<sup>36</sup> His tools of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) provide those living in poverty with the opportunity to define their own reality and to express their needs.<sup>37</sup>

Chambers' model of poverty identifies five interrelated dimensions based on the poor defining their own reality. According to this model, the profile of poverty will vary between communities, as one dimension may be more prevalent than others. In all likelihood, the poor often experience all five dimensions to varying degrees. Each dimension influences the others, resulting in a web of entanglement or a "cluster of disadvantages."<sup>38</sup>

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33. See Brackney and Das, eds., *Poor and Poverty in the World's Religions*. Also see Das, *Poor and Poverty in Islam*.

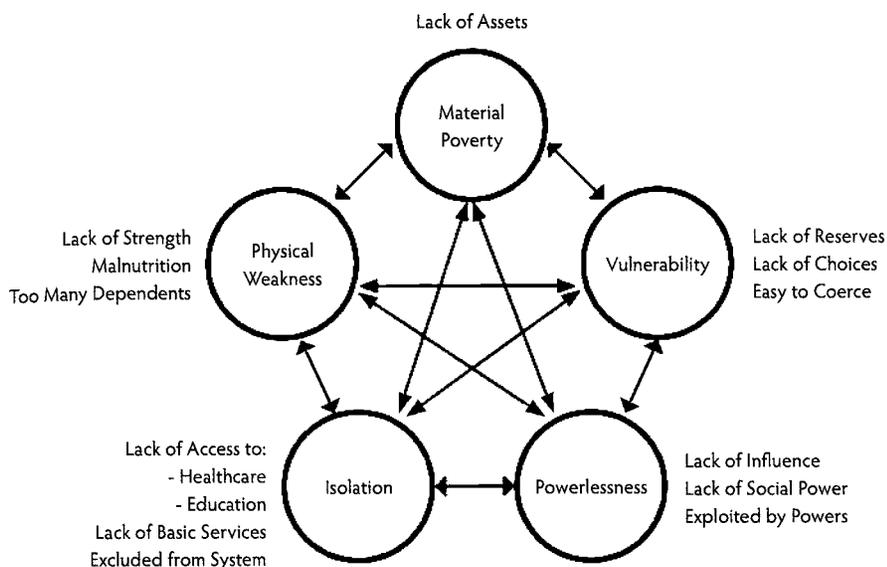
34. The Old Testament uses at least ten Hebrew words that denote different kinds of poverty. The Hebrew terms are *ebhyon* (needy, poor); *dal* (lean, poor, weak); *dallah* (poverty, weakness); *chelekah* (adjectival); *machsor* (one that lacks); *misken* (poor, useful); *aneh* (humble, poor); *ani* (poor, oppressed); *rush* (poor, impoverished); *chelkaim* (afflicted); *yarash* (to become impoverished); and *nouk* (to become low or poor). The words *ani* and *ebhyon* frequently denote the godly poor who are servants of YHWH; *ani* also may denote Israel as a nation in its low estate. The Greek terms used in the New Testament are *penes* (a poor man); *penichros* (very poor); and *ptochos* (trembling, poor). For a detailed discussion of a biblical understanding of poverty see Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God*, 43–92.

35. Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 165.

36. Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?*, 46.

37. See Narayanasamy, *Participatory Rural Appraisal*.

38. Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts*, 103–39.



**Figure 1.1 Dimensions of Poverty**<sup>39</sup>

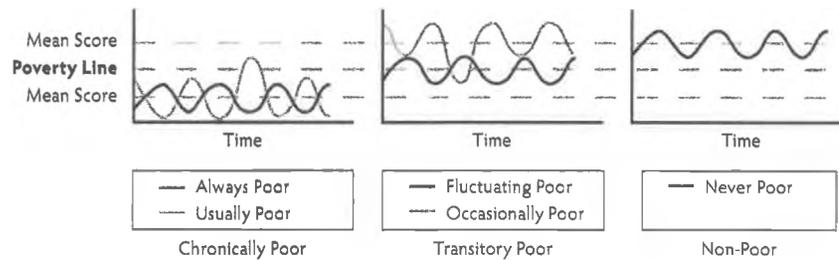
Poverty is not visible in just one form, nor do the poor experience it in any one particular way. Life circumstances and the context within which the poor live may push them in or out of poverty. People may also experience different types of poverty, and the severity may vary. There are three degrees of *severity* of poverty: extreme (absolute), moderate, and relative poverty. Extreme poverty is a situation in which households are unable to meet their basic needs for food and water, health care and education, and shelter and clothing, which ultimately affect their ability to survive. These are people who are destitute. Those living in extreme poverty are marginalized from mainstream society and are unable to access services and benefits that would enable them to improve the quality of their life and their socioeconomic status. Moderate poverty is when basic needs are met, but just barely, whereas relative poverty is “a household income level below a given proportion of the average national income.”<sup>40</sup>

Poverty can also be classified according to the *length of time*. Some people may live the majority of their lives in poverty, while others move in and out of poverty at various times. According to this system of classification, poverty can be categorized as transitory poverty, chronic poverty, generational poverty, and event-based poverty. Generational poverty is also sometimes referred to as

39. Adapted from Chambers, *Rural Development*, 110.

40. Sachs, *End of Poverty*, 20.

traditional poverty and often encompasses groups that are customarily viewed as being poor, such as certain tribal or ethnic groups or residents of slums.<sup>41</sup> Event-based poverty refers to the fact that people may be pushed into poverty through a series of events such as conflicts, forced displacement (refugees), loss of family members, failed harvests, hyperinflation, divorce, etc.



**Figure 1.2 The Fluctuating Nature of Poverty<sup>42</sup>**

Chronic poverty usually lasts throughout the lifetime of a person and may also be generational. The lives of people living in chronic poverty are often characterized by insecure and low-paid employment, health problems, and extremely poor living conditions. They are likely to suffer from social discrimination and die preventable deaths.<sup>43</sup> This type of poverty is found in all regions of the world and is particularly prevalent among the elderly and people with disabilities in economically underdeveloped contexts. People in such contexts are least likely to have assets and capacities that they can use to mitigate or improve their situations. The Chronic Poverty Research Centre notes that this type of poverty is particularly difficult to undo and analysis of the underlying causes is necessary in any response.<sup>44</sup>

This book will try to listen to the voices of those who live in chronic poverty (slum dwellers) as well as those who are experiencing event-based poverty – refugees who had recently been displaced. Does poverty influence who they perceive God to be and what their expectations are of a deity?

41. The perception that tribal groups and residents of slums are poor may not always be accurate. For example, there is significant evidence that many residents of slums may be middle class (economically) but are forced to live in slums because of the unavailability of affordable housing in many urban areas. Sinha and Sinha, *Ecology and Quality of Life in Urban Slums*, 99.

42. Adapted from Chronic Poverty Research Center, *Chronic Poverty Report 2004–05*, 12.

43. These and other criteria are referred to as the “social determinant of health in poverty.”

44. Chronic Poverty Research Center, *Chronic Poverty Report 2004–05*.

Missiologist Allen Yeh provides a wide-ranging overview of the present state of mission as he reviews the proceedings of five of the latest mission conferences – Tokyo 2010, Edinburgh 2010, Cape Town 2010, Boston 2010, and CLADE V (San Jose 2012). His summary of the key missiological issues of this present era are the following: evangelism, frontier missions, ecumenism, post-Christian populations, reconciliation, postmodernities, contextualization, post colonialism, technology, holistic mission, and creation care, among other issues.<sup>45</sup> This list is helpful in positioning this book within the wider discussions on mission, specifically evangelism, contextualization, and holistic mission, at this point in time.

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45. Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology*.