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Theodros Assefa Teklu

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Theodros Assefa Teklu

This article provides an overview of the relationship between theology and poverty in the thought of the Christian church over the centuries, as well as of the interaction between theological and non-theological approaches to the conceptual study of poverty. As biblical texts are authoritative for Christians, the article starts by looking at the range of Hebrew and Greek terms used to refer to poverty, while clarifying terminological ambiguities. Then, key biblical texts and themes relating to poverty and the moral duty to the poor are theologically interpreted. Drawing on the history of Christianity, the article provides some paradigmatic examples of the church's responses to poverty that, if appropriately harnessed, could inform contemporary Christian believers and communities in their engagement with poverty alleviation. Finally, some reflections on the interaction between theological and non-theological studies on poverty are presented, along with examples of mutual influences.

Keywords: Christian charity, Human development, Frugality, Liberation theology, Poverty, Voluntary poverty, Option for the poor, Economics, Justice, Ethics, Political theology

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1 Poverty in the Bible

Given their authority in shaping the thought and praxis of the Christian church, the Christian scriptures are the starting point for this analysis of poverty. Unlike contemporary scholarly works, however, the scriptures do not offer a definition of poverty. Nonetheless, this article presents the most ancient and useful references on the subject, which continue to have a profound impact on Christian communities. It will begin by identifying the most common terms used in scripture to refer to poverty and the poor. Some of these terms may be used to refer to either material poverty or spiritual poverty, or both. The subsequent discussion will clarify such ambiguities. Finally, some scriptural motifs and themes relating to the plight of the poor will be presented.

1.1 Biblical terms for poverty and the poor

Scripture contains many terms that refer to poverty and the poor. Rather than using Bible lexicons and concordances to produce an exhaustive list of these terms, this section will focus on the most commonly used terms. In the Old Testament, there are Hebrew terms such as *'ani/anw*, *dal*, *'ebyon*, and *rasy* that designate poverty. According to the biblical scholar Eben Scheffler, the terms *'ani* and *anw*, which occur in the Old Testament eighty times and twenty-four times respectively, refer to both the economically poor and spiritually humble:

> Scholars generally agree that these terms have the same basic root [...] and are therefore indistinct in meaning. [...] They can be translated as 'poor' and 'humble', the latter referring to a more spiritual meaning. Material poverty is implicated in Leviticus 19:10: 'You shall not gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor (*ani*) and the sojourner'. Humbleness is implicated in Numbers 12:3: 'Now the man Moses was very meek (*anw*)'. (Scheffler 2013: 2)

Other occurrences (in Prov 15:15; Eccl 6:8; Amos 2:7; Ps 149:4) have similar implications. Commenting on the term *'ebyon*, which occurs sixty-one times in the Old Testament, Scheffler comments: 'Originally it referred to "beggars" and later it was used to describe the "socially weak" "miserable" or "poor" person' (2013: 2). Similarly, *dal* (Ps 14:1–2; Prov 14:21; Lev 14:21) implies being 'low', 'weak', 'poor', and 'thin'. Here, the metaphor of a limb hanging loosely or swinging is also deployed, which implies both psychosomatic and socio-economic powerlessness (Fabry 1978: 216). It can be deduced that one who is materially poor is also politically powerless. Of similar importance is the Hebrew term *rash* (*rush*), which occurs twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 2 Sam 13:8; Eccl 4:14; Ps 82:3) and is normally used for material poverty (Scheffler 2013: 2).

There are also terms such as *ḥsr* and *misken*. According to biblical scholars (Blomberg 1999: 61, note 7), these two sets of terms (*’ebyon*, *dal*, and *’ani* on the one hand, and *rush*, *ḥsr*, and *misken* on the other) reflect the mindset of two social groups. The latter are used mainly in the wisdom literature (see Donald 1964: 30, 27–41; Wittenberg 1986: 41) while the former are found in the prophetic literature that refers to the plight of the poor (Blomberg 1999: 69–81). Depending on the specific context, these Hebrew terms may refer to either material or spiritual poverty. However, as Scheffler remarks (2013: 3), the metaphorical use of terms for poverty does not necessarily imply the cancellation of the literal meanings of the terms.

In the New Testament, four Greek terms are used to designate poverty and the poor: *ptochos*, *penes*, *endees*, and *penichros* (Scheffler 2013: 1–15). The first term, *ptochos*, which occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament, refers to extreme material poverty and deprivation, implying an ongoing state of being poor (Louw and Nida 1988: 564; see Luke 16:20–22; Jas 2:2). It also refers to the ‘poor in spirit’ (Matt 5:3). The second term, *penes*, implies a more moderate kind of poverty (2 Cor 9:9). However, it is important to consider that what counts as moderate poverty is in part determined by context. Third, the term *endees* means being in need or facing a lack of resources (Acts 4:34). Finally, *penichros* refers to the materially or economically poor, such as widows who lack any means of support (Luke 21:2; Scheffler 2011: 120–121).

1.2 Terminological ambiguities: material poverty and spiritual poverty

As noted above, the terms used to refer to poverty and the poor can be ambiguous, as they may refer to either material and spiritual poverty (or both). Unless clarified, such ambiguities can lead to the conflation of material poverty and Christian piety, resulting in the spiritualizing and idealizing of poverty. Some biblical scholars such as John S. Kloppenborg (2008: 201–232) have used exegesis to counter this problem, while others such as Elsa Tamez also see the necessity of engaging in ideological criticism of the spiritualizing of the text.

Tamez argues against the conflation of poverty and piety: ‘If we make the poor and the pious synonymous then real economic oppression and God’s concern for this very class of people are lost’; consequently, ‘the rich become the piously poor and the poor rich in piety, and the economic order and the unjust power stay as they are’ (2002: 36). For ideologically-aware theologians such as Tamez, a focus on ideology is important because it can shape the contemporary reality of socioeconomic relations, justifying economic exploitation of the poor and the church’s lack of action to address the problem of poverty.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of Latin American liberation theology, offers a theological explanation of the equivocal nature of the term ‘poverty’ (1988: 163). He

maintains that, in the scriptures, the spiritual disposition of humility before God is not juxtaposed to material deprivation. Instead, Old Testament references to spiritual poverty juxtapose the poor and the proud. For example, Zeph 2:3 encourages believers to be humble: ‘Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, […] seek righteousness, seek humility’. Here, spiritual poverty is recommended to all, and people of faith are expected ‘to learn and practise humility as solidarity with the humiliated’ (Wengst 1988: 60).

To be spiritually poor means to be humble and to be blessed. The epitome of spiritual poverty is found in the Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the poor’ (Luke 6:20) and ‘[b]lessed are the poor in spirit’ (Matt 5:1). In both texts, what is considered a blessing is not poverty as such but spiritual poverty. Thus, one may conclude that poverty is never idealized in scripture.

1.3 Scriptural themes and motifs for the plight of the poor

There are two seemingly contradictory biblical positions on the plight of the poor: ‘there will, however, be no one in need among you’ (Deut 15:4) and ‘you always have the poor with you’ (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8). The former text carries normative weight, imposing a duty on Bible-believers to work to eliminate poverty. By contrast, the latter text may be read as promoting apathy and a lack of concern for the poor, conceiving poverty as provisional, resulting in categorizing the poor as either deserving or undeserving (Muers 2021: 42–60). Those who do not espouse the latter position argue that this text is a reminder that the order of society has been affected by the social dimension of sin that arises from human fallibility and results in a descent into a world of scarcity and poverty (Speelman 2018: 3). Christian believers who engage in curbing poverty do not take poverty as the natural order of things.

A cursory review of scripture reveals various themes and motifs relating to the plight of the poor. The first five Old Testament books, known as the Torah (or the Pentateuch in Greek), may seem to say little about material possessions and poverty, yet they contain profound principles for addressing poverty, as for example in the theme of generosity: the Torah speaks of the patriarchs generously sharing their wealth. Their generosity sprang from their grateful attitude towards God: ‘Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want’ (Gen 33:11). Generosity and gratefulness are intricately related throughout the Torah. The idea that material possessions are signs of blessing and thus associated with power and domination is biblically unfounded. Rather, the Torah teaches that God blesses people, people bless (praise) God, and people ought to bless people (Taylor 1992).

Drawing lessons from the laws of the Torah, ancient Israel adopted mechanisms regulating acquisitiveness and the accumulation and distribution of wealth, thereby working against economic marginalization. For instance, land was the primary means of production at

that time, and its allotment to Israelites in proportion to their family sizes stands in sharp contrast to the practices of feudal kingdoms in the ancient Near East (ANE) where the few aristocrats monopolized the land, impoverishing the majority (Brueggemann 1975: 354). Although ownership of private property was allowed in ancient Israel, private possessions were not meant to be used to oppress one's neighbours. Instead, they were to be used to generously support the poor and show hospitality (Waldow 1970: 186). According to Douglas Meeks, 'abundance' was meant 'for sharing with the stranger and sojourner, as well as the widow, the orphan, and the servants' (1989: 88).

Deut 14:28–29 teaches that the purpose of the triennial tithe was not only to support the Levites but also to maintain 'the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows' (Ahlström 1993: 666). In the ANE tradition, these vulnerable groups were considered as having exceptional divine protection under the god-like king since they did not possess land (Fensham 1962: 129–139). Similarly, Deuteronomy conceives these groups as under the protection of Israel's God. Israel's 'conviction that land and its wealth belong to God' led to 'laws such as that of the Sabbath and Jubilee Years which have as their real aim the elimination of poverty' (Hoppe 1987: 13). The Sabbath and Jubilee are motifs for the plight of the poor (Yoder 1972: 64–77). Whether landed or landless, Israel 'knows life as [an] unmerited gift' (Brueggemann 1977: 44). Israel's covenantal laws were intended to protect the poor and eliminate poverty and corruption (cf. Bruckner 2008: 216–223).

The Psalms are a little different. They contain several references to the economically poor and sometimes the pious poor. Some, like Psalm 82, depict poverty as powerlessness and portray God as the protector and deliverer of the powerless. The powerless poor cry out to God in their suffering, which is caused by the exploitative rich (e.g. Ps 69; 86; see Dickson 1995: 1029–1045).

The wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) also contains many references to poverty and the poor. There is much focus on the need for diligent work (Prov 10:4) and poverty is often associated with laziness (e.g. Prov 13:8; 20:13; 23:21; 28:19). The authors' failure to associate poverty with injustice and their lack of insight into the socio-economic factors that make for poverty may be explained by the fact that Proverbs was the product of an urban elite who had little concern for the poor (Whybray 1990: 117). Proverbs does also contain admonitions to be generous to the poor (Prov 19:17; 22:9). There are also references to the vanity of wealth (especially in Ecclesiastes) and to the absence of genuine meritocracy (especially in Job; Fox 1989: 260–261). However, the sages by and large do not see poverty as an outcome of unjust socio-economic relations. Instead, their understanding of poverty is similar to some contemporary behavioural (individual) explanations of poverty, which attribute it to unproductive or counter-productive behaviour or character traits such as slothfulness (Bertrand, Mullainathan and Shafir 2004).

In Proverbs there seems to be a tension between wealth acquisition and what is called the 'preferential option for the poor' (Murphy 1987: 398). The wise give poverty a 'heuristic value' for pedagogical purposes, using poverty to help wisdom-lovers to recognize the limits of wealth and the pursuit of wealth, and to shape their desire for wisdom (Pleins 1997: 297). In fact, '[f]or Qohelet, all striving after achievement is vain' (Washington 1994: 194).

Modern readers who interpret the text in Proverbs as condemning the poor for individual laziness are more than likely failing to understand the systemic and structural nature of poverty (Witherington 2010: 92; Calnitsky 2018: 1–14). Moreover, it is simplistic to apply historical-critical methods to the study of wisdom literature while ignoring the social location of the wisdom writers as servants of the elites and the aristocracy. Some biblical scholars argue that an understanding of 'poverty in African contexts' can greatly enhance our reading of the book of Proverbs (Kimilike 2008: 301).

The prophetic literature is of particular importance as a scriptural source dealing with the plight of the poor. The critical voices of the prophets speaking out against human-made poverty reveal an understanding of poverty that is akin to the structural explanations that relate it to unjust economic relations, which are the product of socio-economic structures and political systems or arrangements (Brady, Blome and Kleider 2016: 117–140). The prophets declared that the rich caused poverty and created the poor by establishing unjust economic relations (Jer 5:27; Ezek 45:9; Amos 3:9; Hab 2:9; Mal 3:5). They saw themselves as called by God to speak out against injustice to the poor in their societies. They were often critical of the Israelite monarchy and its judicial apparatus that fostered the oppression of the poor (Amos 5:7; Mic 3:9–11). Given that land was the essential means of production in Israel, they often criticized landlords for their unjust treatment of landless peasants (Mic 2:1–3; Hab 2:5–6). When it came to trade and merchandise, the prophets were also critical of practices that disadvantaged the poor (Hos 12:7–8; Amos 8:5; Mic 6:10–11).

In the New Testament, Luke and Acts have the most direct engagement with poverty and the poor. They recognize two groups of the poor: the 'working poor', and the needy who have low social status and few political rights (Beavis 1994: 357–368). The needy are vulnerable and liminal groups living at society's economic and social margins (Kraybill and Sweetland 1983: 233–235). Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God and his call to repentance – more appropriately conversion or *metanoia* – was addressed to groups in a society in which economic exploitation was part of the system (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20; Teklu 2017: 299–315). The call for genuine discipleship and a life of generosity that disposes believers to share material possessions with the poor was at the centre of Jesus' ministry.

Paul recognized the importance of addressing poverty. His concern for the poor is evident in his fundraising activities to help the church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:3). In his letters he emphasized the value of work and sharing (1 Cor 4:14; 1 Thess 4:11). Scholars suggest that his letters present four strategies for responding to poverty, namely self-sufficiency (1 Cor 9:8; Phil 4:11), almsgiving (Gal 6), hospitality (Rom 12:13b), and mutualism (2 Cor 8:14 read in light of Rom 15:27; 2 Thess 3:6–12), with the last category being the most prominent (Meggitt 1998: 155–178).

James' message of solidarity with the poor that challenges socio-economic injustice (Bauckham 1999: 185–187) is another vital contribution to the New Testament's perspective on poverty. James reveals a passion for the poor and condemns marginalization and stratification within Christian communities (Jas 5:1–6). Some interpret the 'attentiveness to the cry of the oppressed' in these verses as reflecting Jesus' preferential option for the poor (Maynard-Reid 1987: 98). The 'forgiving love' and 'charitable love' highlighted in the book of James recommend a 'way of life' that is connected to the love command in the Didache (Konradt 2008: 282).

Given this diversity, it is easy to see that hermeneutical lenses are essential when seeking to understand biblical themes and motifs relating to the plight of the poor. Some scholars suggest that it is also important to take note of the people with whom we read the Bible, which entails taking solidarity with the poor as a prerequisite for Christian faith and practice. In the following section, this article includes a brief discussion on the methodological role of poverty in theology.

2 Responses to poverty in Christian history

If scriptural themes and motifs relating to the plight of the poor are to impact society, this will likely come about primarily through believing communities for whom these texts are authoritative. Believers, as individuals and collectives, enact those texts within their communities and the broader society. Such enactment occurs in multifaceted ways and in accord with church doctrines and traditions. The following discussion illustrates two main modalities of Christian engagement that have shaped Christians through the ages. These modalities promote a conception of poverty as either a problem to be alleviated or a mystery to be embraced (responded to). The third item to be discussed is a way of life that promotes moderation and charitable disposition. The fourth and final one accentuates the methodological role of poverty in theology, in order to highlight the conceptual side of poverty and establish the link with the subsequent discussion on the interplay between theological and non-theological discourses on poverty.

2.1 Christian charity: poverty as a problem

Charity, as a theological act, can be seen as expressing one's belief in God and the world he created (Anderson 2013). It is one of the modes through which God's love of humanity (*philanthropia*) is expressed. It is a longstanding practice not only in Christianity but also in other religions such as Judaism and Islam (Gray 1908: 144–184), motivated by the belief that religious believers and society owe something to the poor and should have a charitable disposition towards them. Accordingly, Christian communities throughout the centuries have been committed to acts of mercy (Rhee 2012). It was through the church's philanthropy that, in the post-Constantinian era in late antiquity (third to seventh centuries), the poor came to be recognized as a social class or category (Brown 2002; Rhee 2012).

As the previous discussion has shown, there are solid biblical grounds for Christians of all ages to commit themselves to charitable practices. Patristic theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom drew on these biblical texts as they developed theological resources that motivate charity. For Clement of Alexandria, the purpose of creation is sharing. Just as God shared his word (*logos*) with humanity, so humans need to share the material things necessary for life (Rhee 2018: 2). In the same vein, Basil of Caesarea affirmed the need for sharing, arguing that to be human means to be a social being disposed to sharing (Rhee 2018: 3).

A patristic vision of social transformation is found in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*. He argues that indifference to 'the needy and the useless' is a moral crime and that 'a deed done with justice, piety and humanity is a deed you do without expectation of a return' (6.11.13, cited in Rhee 2018: 4). This highlights the difference between Christian generosity and civic generosity, in that the former is rooted in a theology of gift-giving without return, whereas the latter places a higher value on reciprocity (Brown 2012: 85).

Gregory of Nazianzus emphasized the need to share with the poor to cover the shame of the human race. He saw such sharing as an act that reverses the effect of sin, for poverty is the result of a fall from the original state of equality (Rhee 2018: 5). John Chrysostom also related wealth and poverty to the original state of humanity, arguing that in the beginning God did not make some rich and some poor (Rhee 2018: 5).

The theological view that one can redeem oneself from the debt of sin through almsgiving or charity was predominant in Judaism between the late sixth century BCE and the end of the first century CE. Of course, such a belief has theological implications, and Christian theologians have expressed considerable ambivalence in this regard. Some have argued that almsgiving can merit heavenly treasure, considering it a ransom for post-baptismal sin (Garrison 1993: 119–132). Church fathers such as Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus are often cited as understanding charity as redemptive (Downs 2016: 4–6). However, Christian charity was more often regarded as a way of ridding oneself of earthly passions and achieving inner detachment from ownership (Hays 2009: 260–281).

To ransom members of his congregation from slavery, Ambrose of Milan went to the extent of selling sacred gold vessels of the church. Responding to those questioning his act, Ambrose affirmed that the church should preserve ‘living’ more than ‘golden’ vessels (Siecienski 2008: 214). John Chrysostom, much the same as Ambrose, preferred human vessels over gold ones, highlighting the importance of understanding that God has no need of ‘golden vessels’ but ‘golden souls’ (Siecienski 2008: 215). Both Ambrose and Chrysostom emphasized the preciousness of human vessels, revealed in the spiritual depth of the liturgical splendour and not the physical decorations showing the temple’s magnificence (Siecienski 2008: 211–220).

John Chrysostom criticized extravagance and urged believers to care for the poor as if caring for the body of Christ. His seventy-ninth homily on Matt 25:31–46 declared it the ‘sweetest passage of scripture’, and it was delivered as an exhortation to his congregation to consider people experiencing poverty. He

> paints the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, or imprisoned Christ most impressively before the eyes of his congregation: Christ walks through the streets of our city today, meeting us daily in the form of the miserable beggar. He has made human destitution his own. He sees what is done to the poor as done to him. (Brändle 2008: 133)

Augustine is little known for his commitment to the cause of the poor, even by historians of antiquity such as Peter Brown. Although he had tolerance for slavery, Augustine’s pastoral writings vividly show his position on wealth and poverty (Lepelley 2007: 16, 7). Augustine strongly supported the poor ‘advocating for themselves with the wealthy’ (Ward 2014: 217). He exhorted the wealthy to distribute their wealth to the poor, reminding them that the desire to acquire and retain wealth can open oneself to all kinds of sins (Ward 2014: 219).

Augustine admonished Christian believers to seek a life of sufficiency and the appropriate disposition to orient themselves and use almsgiving to distribute wealth to the poor. Such a link of generosity between the wealthy and the poor would create an interdependent Christian community, with the poor occupying a spiritual place of being a ‘porter to heaven’, a metaphor which implies that giving to the poor is tantamount to giving to Christ and transferring your earthly wealth and depositing it in heaven in an incorruptible currency (Ward 2014: 231–234). Augustine compares the effectiveness and reliability of the porters in transporting wealth to heaven to the catapult (Ward 2013: 60).

The Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas promoted charitable practices in his theological articulation of virtues (Decosimo 2014; Sherwin 2005: 11–15, 147–163). Through the work of mendicant groups such as the Franciscans and Dominicans,

medieval Europe experienced a charitable revolution (Davis 2014: 935–950). This revolution influenced the broader culture, infusing compassion into it, as is ‘evident in hagiographical texts, devotional literature, visual imagery, theology, and the rise of new forms of devotion to the suffering and humanity of Jesus’ (Davis 2014: 943).

Even during the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, with their focus on ‘spiritual’ renewal, the practice of charity was not abandoned. The Protestant Reformation attacked ‘good works’, as they were considered antithetical to salvation by faith. Otherwise, it continued the legacy of charity by redirecting ‘charitable motives’ (Schen 2002: 68, 170). Reformers such as John Calvin highlighted the relevance of spiritual and material poverty and acts of charity (Pattison 2006).

In post-Reformation Europe, modern political economists such as Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus can be understood as writing natural theology – discourse about God based on observable ‘facts’ rather than divine revelation such as the scriptures. Of relevance to the discussion of poverty is the theological structure of such economic thoughts, which requires believers to justify God in the face of the problem of evil (a rhetorical action known as ‘theodicy’; Oslington 2000: 32–44; Waterman 2002: 917; 2021: 17). The Malthusian account of scarcity – that there are not enough resources or goods for everyone – is considered by some as an occasion for ‘human development’ and ‘the exercise of virtue’ (Waterman 2014: 107; 2002: 17). Still, scarcity is a contested concept, since some conceive it as a natural necessity while others argue that it is socially constructed (Long, Fox and York 2007: 29–75; Barrera 2005).

Scholars such as Max Weber, who wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), approach piety differently. It is argued that the Protestant Reformation fostered ‘worldly asceticism’ and led to hard work and a culture of saving, contributing to an increase in wealth (although some have challenged this thesis; Becker and Woessmann 2009: 531–596). According to this view, personal piety leads to economic success as a society that values hard work will foster a frame of understanding that makes the poor responsible for their poverty and its alleviation.

Among the ecclesiastical responses, Catholic Social Teaching is arguably the most developed theological reflection on poverty. Since Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical in 1891, Catholic Social Teaching has developed through a series of church councils, encyclicals, and a growing body of theological literature, and has engaged social problems including poverty. It especially gained momentum from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the rise of liberation theology in Latin America since the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the recent renewal under Pope Francis. An essential aspect of such development is the debate on social sin, first introduced by Latin American bishops who developed liberation

theology. This theological idea of social or structural sin has been well acknowledged in recent magisterial teaching (Finn 2016: 136–164).

Following the nineteenth-century movement, exemplified in Walter Rauschenbusch's *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), evangelicals held various positions on Christian philanthropy and the quest for social justice. It took them some time to clarify the relation between charitable acts and evangelism. Events such as the Wheaton Congress (9–16 April 1966), the Chicago Declaration (1973), and the signing of the Lausanne Covenant (July 1974) all contributed to a renewed commitment to social involvement in alleviating poverty. The majority of evangelicals came to uphold the necessity of charitable works (Sider, Olson and Unruh 2002: 13).

There is a growing consensus that charitable works and faith are inseparable, and diverse ecclesiastical traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) are presently engaged in diverse charitable initiatives. There is a general conviction that the inability to share with the poor and strangers represents a malfunction of faith, not a properly engaged faith (Volf 2011: 91).

2.2 Voluntary poverty: poverty as a mystery

Voluntary poverty means becoming poor by one's own choice. In Christian traditions, it has always been linked to charity (good works) and Christlikeness. The 'transcendent reference point', as with Francis of Assisi, 'was not poverty itself but the voluntariness to be poor, as Christ had realized it in the highest degree' (Melville 2011: 120). In other words, when renouncing earthly goods, one is not becoming poor because of an idealization of poverty itself. Instead, the Christian believer who prefers to be voluntarily poor identifies with Christ and imitates him (*Christoforme*).

Monastic fathers such as St Pachomius, St Basil, and St Benedict taught and practised voluntary poverty as a way of life that fosters charity. At the core of such practices is the belief that one's own satiety should also be the satiety of the other. What is being sought is not satiation of earthly appetites but satiation of the longing for God (a desire that inherently cannot be satiated). Asceticism is a technique that disposes believers to struggle to overcome their passions and attain the goal of the good life in God (expressed in terms of deification). The aim is to achieve self-mastery and virtue, manifested in fraternal charity which is the antidote to self-love (Maximus the Confessor 1995).

Voluntary poverty as a way of spiritual life became predominant in medieval Catholicism because of mendicant orders such as the Franciscans. The founder of the voluntary poverty movement, Francis of Assisi, saw poverty as not just a state into which a person falls but a call to which one must respond. Francis' response to the call of poverty was transformed into a brotherhood. Through this call, poverty becomes a mystery (Speelman

2018: 3; Micó 1997: 275). A mystery is not a problem that needs to be solved. Rather, it anticipates a revelation of the truth to which it points. As such, voluntary poverty makes poverty ‘a virtue and a pathway to a good life’ (Speelman 2018: 2). What constitutes a good life is not the acquisition of property but finding wisdom on how to use earthly possessions in a way that meets the needs of the poor (Todeschini 2009: 28, 76; Speelman 2018: 5).

The positive valuation of poverty and the negative attitude of the Franciscans towards possessions was motivated by what is known as *usus pauper* (restricted use; Speelman 2018: 3). Alongside the so-called Spirituals, who advocated for restricted use of goods, were the Conventuals who emphasized moderate use (Jones 1995: 412). Aquinas’ understanding of voluntary poverty was in terms of relinquishing ownership, not prohibition from using goods as such (Jones 1995: 413). Although they did not own property, the Franciscans received goods for consumption based on restricted use (Lambert 1998: 71). The friars practised restricted use of goods, receiving only worthless material. Regarding money, Rosalind Brooke points out that they ‘outFrancised Francis’ (Brooke 2006: 79).

Small differences aside, groups that promoted voluntary poverty all promoted a kind of de-ownership to share with the poor. The whole idea of voluntary poverty is motivated by a higher spiritual purpose. It is to promote gift-giving without any expectation of a return, to generate ‘an unlimited sharing community’ in the perspective of plenitude (Speelman 2018: 4).

For Gustavo Gutiérrez, the tradition of voluntary poverty is not based on idealization of material poverty. Instead, it is neighbour-love, because poverty is considered ‘an expression of sin, that is, of a negation of love’. Hence it is ‘incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of love and justice’ (Gutiérrez 1988: 168). From this standpoint, poverty is a scandal and Christian believers are exhorted to demonstrate ‘solidarity with the poor’ and ‘protest against poverty’ (Gutiérrez 1988: 172). What Gutiérrez calls for is a synthesis of solidarity with the economically poor and making spiritual poverty an ideal. The model for this is Christ, who in total humility emptied himself of his deity (known as *kenosis*; Phil 2:1–11). He voluntarily impoverished himself to make the poor rich (1 Cor 8:9). The church is called to imitate Christ and his praxis, insofar as it can, to demonstrate its solidarity with the economically poor and protest against poverty (Moltmann 1995).

2.3 Frugality as a way of life

In Christian traditions, frugality is often discussed under the theme of stewardship and is scripturally grounded. The apostle Paul relates stewardship to faithfulness (1 Cor 4:2). Stewardship and its relation to economic faithfulness are discussed in the Heidelberg Catechism, which in its exposition of the eighth commandment offers ‘negative

prohibitions' – vices to avoid – and 'positive mandates' – virtues faithful stewards exercise. These virtues, as Ursinus outlines, are '(1) commutative justice, (2) contentment, (3) fidelity, (4) liberality, (5) hospitality, (6) parsimony, and (7) frugality' (Ballor 2020: 374). Based on this exposition, frugality can be understood as 'a dimension of stewardship'. For the present writer, however, a direct address of frugality is preferred over the 'generic appeal for a stewardship without specified standards and responsibilities' (Nash 1995: 145).

Like voluntary poverty, frugality is a way of life, requiring training (Avotins 1977: 214–217). Unlike voluntary poverty, frugality is not a call to a life of poverty. Instead it is, as Aristotle said, a 'midway between excessive expenditure, waste or extravagant consumption, on the one hand, and avarice, meanness or stinginess, on the other' (2009: 66–67). James A. Nash defines it as 'moderation, temperance, thrift, cost-effectiveness, efficient usage, and a satisfaction with material sufficiency'. He continues, 'as such, frugality thrives on conscientious conservation, restrained consumption, optimal efficiency, comprehensive recycling, and an insistence on built-in durability and repairability' (1995: 144). In brief, it is a way of living with a relatively low level of consumption.

For early Christians, a life of virtue entailed practising moderation when acquiring and consuming economic goods. In 1 Tim 6:6–10, Paul encourages Christians to live a life of sufficiency or 'contentment'. Patristic theologians such as John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose of Milan encouraged frugal lifestyles for the benefit of the poor (Walsh and Langan 1977: 113–151). Even Reformers such as John Calvin wrote that the rule of love shapes the rule of moderation, to make the important point that frugality, as a manifestation of accountability/stewardship to God, inspires neighbour-love or caring for the poor (Freudenberg 2009: 1–7).

Frugality, according to Sir George Mackenzie, is an ancient virtue opposed to avarice and luxury (1691: 2). It is God's design for believers – under the Old and New Covenants – to cultivate frugality by accepting the 'seeds of sobriety and moderation' and rejecting 'avarice and luxury' (1691: 5). God's providence works through practising frugality that encourages stewardship and liberality – generous giving – to the neighbour. According to Mackenzie, the governing principle of the commonwealth should be frugality, which promotes liberality and not gaining wealth through conquest (1691: 8).

For neo-Calvinists such as Herman Dooyeweerd, economics is not a striving for the acquisition of wealth but an activity that overcomes scarcity (Hengstmengel 2012: 421). Frugality implies 'the avoidance of superfluous or excessive ways of reaching our aim' (Dooyeweerd 1984: 67). Frugality 'brings good, not only during scarcity but also during plenty. This not only sustains future prosperity but also stimulates originality, responsibility and generosity' (Basden 2020: 199).

The history of Christianity generally speaks loudly about the importance of frugal living and contains 'important, inspiring sources of an economy of frugality' (Ims and Jakobsen 2008: 181). Frugality is essential because finite goods have 'a natural limit' and because it helps Christian believers practise moderation (Ims and Jakobsen 2008: 181). A minimalist lifestyle, like frugal living, encourages the exercise of self-control in using only those consumable goods that are necessary. However, a minimalist may focus on spending less and avoiding waste without necessarily becoming frugal. Although both frugality and minimalism can be translated into economic principles, frugality can be considered a 'form of spiritual capital' (2008: vii) and opens 'the mind to spiritual goods, such as inner freedom, social peace and justice, or the quest for God or "ultimate reality"' (2008: 3).

Being frugal does not mean that one must refrain from making acquisitions and that the use of wealth is evil in itself. Rather, it suggests that individuals' attitudes towards acquiring material wealth may be evil (Langholm 1992: 209). 'While the calling to frugality does not require sharing in poverty, it still demands sharing in solidarity to eliminate poverty' (Nash 1995: 147). Frugality demonstrates spiritual depth and is oriented towards others, enabling believers to develop a charitable disposition.

2.4 Poverty as a concept: its methodological role in theology

Poverty is not only an empirical phenomenon but also a concept that requires descriptive and normative considerations. Poverty researchers do not agree on the definition, verification, and measurement of poverty, which attests to the fact that poverty is a 'thick' and contested concept (Spicker 2007: 229–243; Laderchi, Saith and Stewart 2006: 19–53; Schweiger and Graf 2015: 2). However, without dialogue with the poor and their agency, any understanding and articulation of poverty may be deficient and may possibly even perpetuate it (Schweiger 2016: 104–115; Deveaux 2013: 125–150).

The classical theologians admonished Christian believers of the need for solidarity with the poor through their sermons and pastoral letters, demonstrating a reading of the Bible from the perspective of the poor. Contemporary biblical scholars suggest that believers read the Bible dialogically with the poor (West 2003: 1–62). Although theologians have historically suggested reading the Bible from the perspective of the poor, this understanding of the option for the poor has recently developed more fully. In the last five decades, understanding the 'preferential option for the poor' has become crucial for constructing theology that aspires to be relevant to the plight of the poor. The option for the poor implies making the poor or the experience of poverty the starting point or source for theology (the *locus theologicus*; Kirwan 2012: 255).

The 'option for the poor' was first articulated by Latin American Catholic bishops, in conferences such as Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). Later, in the 1980s, it officially entered the theological bloodstream of the church (Surlis 1988: 128–130). The elevation

of the poor as a source of theology has drawn much criticism. Nonetheless, the option for the poor is a summons for the coherence of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right action; Gutiérrez 1992: 26–33). Poverty plays a crucial methodological role in theology, fostering solidarity with the poor.

3 Interdisciplinary engagement on poverty and its alleviation

Given that various disciplines study the issue of poverty, it is important to understand some of their salient points of interaction with theology. This article does not allow for an in-depth account of the various points of connection; instead it will offer some examples that draw attention to significant issues. Theologians can benefit from engagement with non-theological studies on poverty, as such studies can reductively and inappropriately position theology (negatively) but can also contribute to the enrichment of theology (positively). Thus, theologians cannot be indifferent spectators, as theology can contribute to discourses of poverty even when such discourses do not make a direct reference to theology.

3.1 The secular welfare state and Christian philanthropy

'Secular' discourses on development often refer to 'religion' (or 'faith') as social capital. They recognize and appreciate religious assets (tangible and intangible) and magnify the utilitarian or functional aspect of religion. However, the Christian community offers more than merely social capital that supports the poor in tackling poverty. Functional or pragmatic views of religion and its teachings (theologies) that are appropriated in faith-based approaches to development have become a topic of debate.

It is important to note that not all Christian development initiatives that claim to be faith-based have theological underpinnings. Moreover, their institutional forms sometimes suffer from a lack of theological thinking about how they operate. Even when there is some theological thinking, it may simply be used to promote or sustain the status quo shaped by liberal free-market ideology. This is why some scholars argue that faith-based development can be an instrument promoting global liberal capitalist ideology (Tsele 2001: 205).

Faith-based development efforts (Christian philanthropy) that operate at the national level have to interact with the state, which is also an entity invested in welfare. Such interaction may involve cooperation (while maintaining autonomy) or subordination of Christian development institutions to the welfare state (Petersen, Petersen and Kolstrup 2014: 81–104). Christian philanthropy existed long before the emergence of the secular welfare state, and both developed while maintaining relative autonomy. Gradually, however, the relationship between the two started to assume a hierarchic form, with the welfare

state subordinating Christian philanthropy. Consequently, Christian philanthropy has been obliged to function under the terms set by the welfare state. Because the state's control may vary in different geographic contexts, empirical considerations are essential to determine which words or frames constrain Christian philanthropy. As a general rule, however, it is crucial to be watchful lest any compromise between the welfare state and Christian philanthropy leads to control and subordination.

These modes of interaction have implications for theology that seeks to address poverty. The subordination of Christian philanthropy results in faith-based entities being seen as simply appendages of the welfare state. Consequently, theological reflection is no longer considered relevant or is acceptable only insofar as it echoes secular voices. Legally, the state can impose legal and administrative demands that separate the church's 'spiritual' activities from its philanthropic services, creating an 'ecclesiological dilemma' in the self-understanding of the church (Brodd 2005: 245–263). Faith-based organizations, which are essential actors of social welfare (Haynes 2007: 43, 47), thus raise important questions related to the theological self-understanding of the church.

Ideologically, this subordination means that theology will not be able to critique the ideological pretensions of the welfare state. Theology has the critical capacity to engage the welfare state inasmuch as the latter fails to deliver what it promises. Although it legitimizes itself based on ensuring the welfare of its citizens (Gough 1979: 11–15; Gray 1908: 68, 324), the state also exists 'over against its subjects', since it prioritizes its interests over the welfare of its citizens (Gray 1908: 67). It is thus vital that a theology of poverty not be subservient to the welfare state.

3.2 Marxism, dependency theory, and liberation theology

One of the earliest theological trajectories to emerge from interaction with secular modes of thought is liberation theology. Latin American liberation theologians honed their analytic tools by drawing on perspectives from dependency theory and Marxism to understand poverty and construct a theology of the poor. Dependency theory is the result of a study conducted under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the 1950s (Ferraro 1996). The study shows that, insofar as economic exchange is mainly about transferring natural resources from underdeveloped peripheral nations to wealthier nations, it further enriches the developed while impoverishing underdeveloped countries (Ferraro 1996). At the time, the two available alternatives for helping the underdeveloped world to develop and reduce poverty were the Marxist and liberal paths. The Marxist conception of global capitalism is that it sustains a hierarchic international system that disposes underdeveloped nations to exploitation (Novak 1991: 126–150). Their interaction with dependency theory and Marxism led Latin American theologians to develop liberation theology as a response to the challenges of poverty.

Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988: 49) considers dependence and liberation 'correlative terms' – one implying the other. Liberation is freedom from the economic and political relations that relegate the underdeveloped world to oppression and exploitation. Methodologically, liberation theology differs from traditional theology. Liberation theologians articulate this in terms of an 'epistemological break' (echoing Louis Althusser in a different context; cf. Sobrino 1981: 35) – a move away from traditional theology (and philosophy) towards embracing the social sciences.

For liberation theologians, God has 'a preferential option for the poor', who are thus the *locus theologicus*. Political liberation from dependence and poverty is considered salvation (Gutiérrez 1988: 150–152, 168). Theologically, this view draws heavily on the biblical metaphor of exodus, saying that the poor should experience exodus (a break-out) from the yoke of underdevelopment and poverty, just as the Israelites experienced deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Hebblethwaite 1993: 105–107). As a theoretical (or theological) reflection on praxis, liberation theology aims at regaining the lost agency of the oppressed to take their destiny into their own hands. That is why liberation theologians privilege praxis over theory.

The use of dependency theory and Marxist conceptual categories as tools to understand relations of dependence and shape a theological response has been criticized in the theological domain (Kirk 1986: 129–136; Ratzinger 1984: 17–20). John Milbank, who advocates 'postmodern critical Augustinianism' (widely known as Radical Orthodoxy), offers at least three critical responses to it. He contends that liberation theology subsumes theology under the social sciences. If theology expresses itself only through Marxism or serves only as motivation for social action, it is devoid of any unique content and stripped of its critical capacity. Uncritical absorption of social theory makes theology subservient to the former and reflects the Kantian distinction between theology and ethics (Milbank 2006: 237–249). He also criticizes liberation theology for reducing salvation to 'quasi-Marxist salvation' or socio-political liberation, and prioritizing praxis over theory (Milbank 2006: 235–237, 250–256).

Some scholars from the Global South have responded to Milbank's critique. For example, Manuel Mejido argues that liberation theology is a critically-oriented science and is distinct from traditional theology, which is a historical-hermeneutic science (Mejido 2005: 119). Nelson Moldonado-Torres contends that liberation theologians should not be charged with subsuming theology under secular thought (Moldonado-Torres 2005: 46, 53) – rather, they bring secular thought into theology.

A further critique of Milbank is that he ignores the broader colonial context and displays an unacknowledged Eurocentric bias. He writes that Latin American liberation theologians should have adopted the French integralism represented by theologians such as Henri

De Lubac rather than the German version of integralism propounded by Karl Rahner. He is seen as treating Latin American theologians as if they are incapable of theological innovation and can only apply theories/theologies honed in the Global North. In response to the above critique from Milbank, there is also a concern that it ignores the Spanish-speaking context represented by liberation theologians such as Ignacio Ellacuría, who employs a ‘noncontrastive view of salvation’ (Lee 2003: 241). Furthermore, treating liberation theology as a monolithic discourse is also a shortcoming of the above critique. For example, the trajectory set by Ellacuría, which draws on Xavier Zubiri’s philosophy, further developed by Jon Sobrino, demonstrates ‘reliance upon a philosophical stream wider than simply Marxist thought’ (Lee 2003: 241). Ellacuría and Sobrino maintain a critical distance from Marxism (Tombs 2002).

It is important to note that liberation theology, with all its shortcomings, is not an exhausted mode of thought. There are theological works which argue that it can still make sense in a global context dominated by triumphal neoliberalism. Daniel M. Bell Jr’s book *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (2001) is a case in point. An important strand of liberation theology that deserves attention is Black liberation theology, first propounded by James Cone (1970) and developed in recent decades by scholars such as Traci C. West. West’s liberation theology follows a dialogical approach to developing a liberative Christian social ethic within the context of racism and gender-based violence (2006). Her approach fosters individual and collective acts of resistance against social injustice (1999).

As a counter-development to liberationism in Latin America and Africa, one may refer to the so-called prosperity gospel. The origin and spread of prosperity teachings are traced to American Christianity, obsessed with a hyper-focus on selfish materialism and consumerism (Fee 2006: 17; McConnell 1990: 170). There is a contention that the prosperity gospel problematizes the poor rather than poverty itself.

3.3 Theology and the human rights approach

While Christian charity aims at dispensing support to the poor, Christian social justice challenges the socio-political structures that make or keep people poor. However, in modern scholarship (including theology, to some extent) the language of justice has replaced the pre-modern emphasis on the notion of charity. Permeating discussions on Christian social justice are questions about whether social justice and Christian love or charity are antithetical to each other (Niebuhr 1980: 244). The term ‘charity’ has even been debased and is contrasted with the notion of justice, as if the two are competitive and mutually exclusive. The former is understood as handouts, while the latter is deemed the right approach to engaging poverty. Yet, if properly understood, charity – as an expression of agape/love – is inseparable from and complementary to the notion of justice (Weil 1959:

96). The very distinction between charity and justice is a modern invention. Fusing the two, one may speak of ‘generous justice’ (Forrester 1997: 233). The complementariness between justice and mercy (or acts of mercy) can be explained as follows: ‘justice involves refraining from taking what does not belong to you (from the poor or the church primarily), and mercy involves giving of what you possess to the poor’ (Tuckness and Parrish 2014: 92).

The tension between love and justice, and between justice and mercy, has also been invoked in relation to epistemic injustice. Addressing epistemic injustice from the standpoint of the poor is necessary to address poverty (Schweiger 2016: 104–115). A theological trajectory known as transformation theology, represented by scholars such as Clemens Sedmak, has argued for the privileging of mercy over justice because, despite the will to reverse epistemic injustice, there is always a limitation of knowledge. There is always the ‘wound of knowledge’ that demands the recognition of the poor out of mercy, considering them as sources of revelation or theological knowledge (Sedmak 2007: 114, 115).

Christian social justice requires recognizing and empowering the poor. In their distinct idiom, liberation theologians have highlighted the need for this. Their focus on ‘base communities’ (Boff and Boff 1984: 9; Boff 1986) and the need for ‘conscientization’ accentuate the need for empowering the poor, raising a critical awareness of one’s social reality with the view of changing it through reflection and action (Freire 1998: 499). More radical is the contextual Bible reading method proposed and practised as a hermeneutical tool by some liberation theology circles. When used to read and interpret the Bible with the poor, it demonstrates another form of empowerment and recognition that reverses misrecognition and epistemic/hermeneutic injustice (West 2003: 1–62).

Some argue that Christian ideas, perceptions, and practices encourage ‘people-centred development’ (Haynes 2007: 21) in which the poor are not treated simply as the objects of charity/love and justice but are considered as agents or active participants in their own development. The Christian community is a community of equal discipleship that empowers the poor by affirming their humanity, their significance in society, and their right to be agents of their own development. The whole edifice of development cannot stand without focusing on the human subjects or agents of development who deserve recognition.

Recognition is also tied to the notion of human rights that has become the ‘global ethic of our secular age’ (McNeill and St Clair 2009: 44). Since the Enlightenment, the question of human rights – whether in its individualist version in capitalistic societies or in its collectivist version in socialistic societies – has gained resonance among those who aspire to realize just economic and social relations. In recent decades, poverty and development have

been conceived in the light of human rights, as can be exemplified in articles 1 and 2 of the Vienna Declaration: ‘The right to development is an inalienable human right’ and an expression of ‘the full realization of the right of peoples to self-determination’ (McNeill and St Clair 2009: 46).

The global reception of the human rights discourse is mixed. On the one hand, there is a positive embrace, since the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals associate human rights and the reduction of poverty. On the other hand, there are criticisms of the use of words like ‘violation’ and ‘abolition’ to advance the argument that poverty is an infringement of human rights. In addition, there is a suspicion that such language may be used by the developed world to vilify the developing world, problematizing the socio-political conditions that exacerbate poverty.

Arguments for the universal validity of human rights are usually based on legal grounds. However, philosophical (normative) and empiricist approaches also ground human rights in extra-judicial sources of morality such as culture and religion. Such approaches argue that human rights are ‘organically rooted in *all* cultures’, so offering a ‘solid empirical foundation for claims to universality’ (Uvin 2004: 26, 25, original emphasis). Theologians such as Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (1990) argue that the intrinsic human dignity rooted in the mystery of being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) should ground human rights. They are not rejecting the legal aspect of human rights, rather they are suffusing human rights with the metaphysical density they deserve. There is also opposition to human rights discourse in the theological domain. For example, postliberal theologians such as John Milbank, Daniel Bell Jr., and Stanley Hauerwas repudiate the secular account of human rights, arguing that it has limitations and is incompatible with the Christian understanding of rights grounded in the church (as opposed to in the *polis*; Regan 2010: 178–204).

The interaction between human rights and theology in their approaches to poverty is not only one of positive reciprocity. There are also disjunctions, of which three are worthy of mention here. First, theologians and human rights advocates may disagree on the grounds for their actions. For example, theologians would argue that the theological rationale for treating people well is not equivalent to affirmation of the universality of human rights. Second, because of these differing stances, theologians might argue that religion (or theology) may take precedence over human rights when the two are in opposition. Third, it must be recognized that religious or theological systems are ‘neither fixed nor monolithic’, implying that they may include contradictory texts (Uvin 2004: 26). For instance, (ambiguous) texts can be quoted to legitimize or tolerate practices such as slavery and patriarchy. The interaction between theology and human rights approaches to poverty and development is thus contentious.

3.4 The capabilities approach: a theological appraisal

Two prominent scholars have advanced the capability perspective on human development. They are the award-winning Indian economist Amartya Sen and the Harvard-based American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. The capabilities approach (CA) to poverty reduction and development focuses on rights and access to basic goods and services that help sustain life and enable flourishing. As articulated in his seminal work *Development as Freedom*, Sen understands development as an expansion of capabilities. It entails removing factors that limit people's freedom to encourage individuals to unleash 'the capacity to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999: 1, 87).

CA is distinct from the Rawlsian theory of justice, which places an emphasis on income and primary goods. It critiques the utilitarianism of social welfarism (Sen 2005: 153–154). Sen argues that welfare economics should go beyond individual utility and embrace the need for information about general health and longevity. In 'Welfare Economics and the Real World', Sen argues that women's caregiving work is not recognized as work and that the human rights approach does not critique this (Sen 1986). The reason is, as Nussbaum points out, that the human rights approach fails to overcome the dichotomy between the private and the public (Nussbaum 2002: 129). In general, CA and the human rights approach agree on the promotion of personal freedom; however, the former goes beyond this affirmation to argue that for persons to be free and have something they must also be free to do that thing (Sen 2005: 154).

Theological reflections on CA have flourished, encouraged by the inclusion of religion and religious notions in CA. In *Women and Human Development*, Nussbaum (2000: 179) acknowledges freedom of religion and religious practices as essential to CA. Such acknowledgement is not based on the function of religion as social capital, which is widely recognized, but on its intrinsic value. This is not to deny that some religious teachings could foster or legitimize harmful practices, as also pointed out by Nussbaum who then embarks on formulating a theory of harm. Steven C. van den Heuvel, who argues that there is an affinity between CA and theology, points out that the 'good life' is common to both CA and theology (2016: 67). He focuses on the rights of bodily life, arguing that there is an affinity between emotional development and 'bodiliness' or 'being human' (Heuvel 2016: 68–71). His proposal that the category of hope be added to CA can be deemed a credible theological contribution.

Recently, Séverine Deneulin has developed 'integral human development' as a productive intersection between CA and Catholic social thought – a 'spiritually extended capability approach' (2018: 1–36). Like liberation theology, CA can be linked to various theological loci. For example, Deneulin and Augusto Zampini Davies suggest that the concepts of 'structural sin' in theology and 'structural in-competence' in CA are congruent and can be synergized to develop an account of moral responsibility relevant to CA (2016: 2).

Reflections on CA from the Global South, such as Africa, expand its horizon through interaction with philosophy and theology grounded in community and relationality. Drawing on the concept of *Ubuntu*, African scholars have questioned the individualistic focus of CA, arguing that the locus should rather be relationality (Hoffmann and Metz 2017: 153–164).

4 Conclusion

This article has discussed some of the most salient features of the ancient and complex relationship between theology and poverty. Given that scripture is authoritative for Christian believers, it began by looking at what the Bible teaches about poverty. This was followed by an account of the church's seemingly divergent historical responses to poverty: on the one hand alleviating poverty through charitable practices, and on the other hand embracing poverty and frugality as ways to participate in God's saving activities. Because contemporary secular discourses on poverty refer to religion and theology, it was also necessary to show that theology has something of relevance to offer to these discourses, whether through the interaction between dependency theory and liberation theology, or through theology's relation to the various strands of development studies. The converse is also true: theology learns from secular non-theological discourses on poverty and its alleviation. Although all the trajectories discussed have their own merits, the recent secular focus on the poor as subjects of development has also affected the theological domain. It has been realized that, without this focus, all development endeavours will be in vain. If theology must speak, it must speak from a subject position and must be wary of any ideological mediation that conceals economic exploitation and oppression of the poor.

Since an in-depth analysis of theological engagement with poverty also demands exploring how the former addresses economic issues, the references listed as further readings include books on economic development from a theological perspective.

Attributions

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