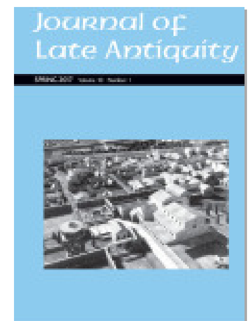
PROJECT MUSE®

Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity by Peter Brown (review)



Susan R. Holman

Journal of Late Antiquity, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 282-285
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jla.2017.0012

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/670884

Access provided at 18 Jun 2019 02:20 GMT with no institutional affiliation

populations of Antioch and Alexandria, highlighting how he acted with due regard to what was practical without provoking bitter urban riots.

The immediate response to this volume has to be admiration of the author's knowledge of the sources, primary and secondary. It is likely that many readers will never have heard of the Misurata hoard of coins, let alone know that it contains "a new coin type from Ostia datable to 313 depicting a divine hand reaching down from heaven to defend the emperor in battle" (56, a pity that there is no photograph of this). Similarly, the statues of Constantine from Termessus and Lepcis Magna (213–14, 217–18) are now drawn to the attention of a wider readership. Disagreements over minor details or points of interpretation are possible, but these seldom affect the larger arguments. For example, one could argue that Lenski takes too seriously the accusations of ritual prostitution made against the shrines at Aphaca and Heliopolis (245) considering that allegations of sexual misconduct were a standard feature of religious polemic. It is also difficult to reconcile the claim that the Lateran *Basilica Constantiniana* in Rome, work upon which began in late 312, was "outfitted with wealth, at least some of which must have been derived directly from the spoils of Constantine's encroachments on civic and temple finances" (183) with the evidence that Jerome specifically dates the "subversion" of the temples to around 330 (171) and that the estates bestowed upon this church were all located "in Italy, Africa, and Greece" (183), that is, in the territories controlled by Constantine before 324. Otherwise, there seem to be few, if any, factual errors, although some slight confusion between the term *labarum* as used of the military standard bearing the new Constantinian symbol and the name of this new symbol itself hinders immediate comprehension in that instance (9–11).

In conclusion, this book, well-illustrated with high quality photographs, maps, and diagrams, synthesizes a huge amount of primary and secondary material to produce a highly readable argument on an important subject. The picture that emerges is one of Constantine as a sincere but practical Christian who realized that he could not convert the whole empire immediately without provoking significant, possibly even violent, resistance, and therefore wisely accepted the limitations of his situation. If one attempts to situate Lenski's Constantine among the range of "modern Constantines" as described in the introduction (4–6), then he probably sits somewhere between those of N.H Baynes and T.D. Barnes. Lenski's main point, however, is that it was possible for Constantine's contemporaries to create their own image of Constantine, and that Constantine let them do so as long as these constructions represented a move towards a Christian state. There was never an essential Constantine, at least not one that he cared to reveal to his empire at large.

Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity

Peter Brown
Richard Lectures for 2012
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. Pp. xxv + 162. ISBN 9780813938288.

Reviewed by Susan R. Holman (Harvard University)

Few scholars have traced the nuances between power dynamics of wealth and ideas of the sacred in late antique Christianity with the creativity, persuasive

elegance, and tenacity of Peter Brown. Brown's newest book, *Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity*, invites readers on a journey that continues to explore how bodies shape social norms in religious history.

In a shift away from the focus of his last two books (*Through the Eye of a Needle* and *The Ransom of the Soul*) on the Latin-speaking West, *Treasure in Heaven* looks east, to Christian monastic trends in Egypt and Syria between the second and fifth centuries. It asks how "holy men" (indeed men are the primary examples here) became "holy poor" in the monastic and lay imagination. In particular it asks how this ancient world addressed questions such as: should monks have to work to support themselves? If so, why and how; if not, why not?

The idea of the "holy poor" has long been a familiar and controversial theme in scholarship about poverty in the New Testament and Late Antiquity. The debate often polarizes a religious "elite" (those who voluntarily divest, such as the Manichaean "Elect") against the "real" poor who struggle with economic destitution, hunger, disease, and social injustice at a molecular level independent of religious loyalties. This tendency to pit Jesus ("Sell all you have") against Paul ("whoever will not work will not eat") begs a definition of the "poor." Scholars in this field have also wrestled with fiscal conjectures to reconstruct elusive social frameworks of class, interdependence, and aid. Brown's narrative flies free over these minefields, with a thoughtful care that enables us to look down on the passing landscape critically mindful of the diverse ideas that tick just below the surfaces, ancient and modern.

Treasure in Heaven is less about poverty than it is about heroized personae and their impact on social and physical work. Brown's focus is early Christian *virtuosi:* ascetic or clerical elite, monks, bishops, and wandering charismatics, whose self-identity and self-denial engaged opposing views about manual labor (*ponos*). Those against were (mostly) rooted in Syrian traditions across the Euphrates and the Mesopotamian basin; those in favor were shaped (mostly) through monastic models in Egypt; Brown readily admits that the reality was more nuanced. Across six short chapters, he traces these competing views through representative stories to argue that the "remarkably stable imperial system" (xvii) of the Greek East made possible a particular monastic economic framework, a blend of the Egyptian pro-work model with Syrian traces, that would ultimately shape medieval norms in the West.

Chapter One outlines the basic questions. If, as Jesus said, total divestment is the way to deposit "treasure in heaven," how did early Christians reconcile the Pauline "feverish correspondence concerning the movement of money in the Christian communities" (2)? Given Paul's insistence both on clerics' work and lay offerings to support spiritual leaders, to what extent do "the poor" include outside-the-box holy ascetics on whose prayers, healing, and wisdom lay Christians depended? The heart of this divestment/investment tension is a tangle of variant views on the nature of the physical world, the physical body, and to a lesser extent Graeco-Roman values for leisure; even rich landowners "favored *ponos*—if only for others" (66).

Chapter Two traces these trends in the second and third centuries. A "deliberately inverted return" of alms reciprocity emerged as bishops gained a central role in church fund administration. These

were not boring Advent or Lenten stewardship drives, but empowered by the dynamic zest that average people poured into religious interests. Christian teachers shaped these energies with a coinage of "truth" and claims to certainty even as they positioned the poor, holy and otherwise, against the evils and errors of a treacherous world.

The prophet Mani was one radical Christian on the rim of this world. Like many Syrians, Manichaeans—the focus of Chapter Three—condemned work. For Manichaeans, work was a polluting encounter with demonic material particles and bondage, and their holy poor, the "Elect," avoided such contact to ensure a purity to impart cosmic treasures to the faithful. Augustine writing against them said that this anti-material view was wrongheaded, in part because it affirmed a spiritual exchange with "no room in it for the real poor." (46) Right-thinking Christians might privilege certain "holy poor," but no Christian group should exclude or denigrate the common suffering laity. To give alms only to religious leaders was thus tantamount to heresy.

Not all Syrian ascetics demonized matter. Chapter Four explores the rank and file holy poor, early Franciscan avatars in fourth- and fifth-century Syria. Practicing holy self-denial in a region noted for what modern archaeological surveys reveal as not desert but a breathtaking "agrarian prosperity" (62–63) shaped views on labor. The challenge for wandering begging monks, stylites, and other ascetic virtuosi was not an evil earth but rather a competitive drive to "be like the angels," to reverse the Adamic curse. The fifth-century *Book of Steps* illustrates the double emphasis on alms for the poor *and also* the spiritual value of ascetic non-work that shaped norms across this region. Adam and Eve sinned not by sex but "by wishing to exercise God's power over the land" (59). In reclaiming Adamic perfection, the holy poor, like the angels, ought not "till the hateful earth" (63) but rather be nourished by the divine presence in a "life of perpetual rapt worship." Stylites in particular modeled this dramatic spectacle in a manner of public highway markers, where they became living signposts poised every few miles across the Syrian landscape. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that support of the Syrian monks was substantial rather than angelic. Keeping them in the neighborhood was, Brown suggests, "not cheap," but "based on a constant, discreet flow of material goods" (69), subsidized by the laity. In Brown's "many Syrias," such lay-ascetic spiritual exchanges might engage wide differences across class, culture, and language.

Chapter Five turns to the Egyptian counter-reaction that developed alongside the Syrian model and ultimately trumped it. The narrative construction of this "authorized" image of the "true" monk developed over two generations, beginning with Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* and settling into a norm (more or less) illustrated by Palladius's *Lausiac History*, which praises work as "an ornament to the men of Egypt." Athanasius's icon of Anthony was, Brown reminds us, part of his own long wrestle over the ecclesiastical power of Alexandria. Indeed, Anthony's portrait might be compared to the death-defying brilliance of iconic Fayyum mummy encaustics in its "denial of an ever-present, unspoken alternative" (78), subversively championing Egyptian monasticism against its more eastern rival. Through such texts, the Pauline/ascetic pro-work view became a dominant voice that rained down scorn on angelic wannabes.

The results were mixed. Aspiring monks did not simply choose to turn left for basket-weaving in Egypt or right to beg or stand on pillars in Syria. Indeed, Brown's characteristic nuancing of the diverse threads across these polarities is perhaps (at least to this reviewer) the most appealing strength of this compact and welcome study. For instance, "holy poor" might still own property despite rhetoric to the contrary. Monasteries were surrounded by social bustle, often a few hundred yards from the nearest village. Families took individual monks under their special care to benefit from their power to heal, bless, and pray. And "sons" and "daughters of the Covenant" across Syria tended to stay put at home and were not necessarily poor at all.

So why did the pro-work model win out for the West? Why are modern Christian ideals of ascetics different from, say, the Hindu sadhu or the Buddhist with a begging bowl? One answer, Brown suggests, may lie in an element often "airbrushed out" of these ascetic narratives: the role and influence of the proximal laity. As both church and monks gained wealth and institutional stability into the fifth century, donors increased their generosity to both "holy" and "real" poor. And work, at least conceptually, was part of dynamic appeals for "treasure in heaven," particularly through language of sacred abundance and incarnational theology. For Egyptian monks, "to accept the body was to abandon any pretense to be an angel. It involved taking on the poor, so as to show compassion for bodies like one's own. . . . Condemned to work so as to eat, the monks were linked by labor to the sufferings of the poor" (108, 117). Lay connections were fundamental to these dynamics.

This does not mean the Syrian model disappeared, of course. Ascetics in both Egypt and Syria were implacably "linked by a continuous muffled dialogue" (xiii) across borders in an interdependent world. By the fifth century, Brown concludes, we find clear evidence of a "blended tradition" that draws from both.

In sum, *Treasure in Heaven* reminds us how religious meaning takes shape in distinctly non-angelic social realities, and what such ideological differences may look like in community and individual expressions of aid, "holy" poverty, and wealth. Its broad-scope exegetical exploration on how work shaped sacred meaning in an important historical moment has far-reaching implications for global conversations that continue today.

Augustine's Vergilian Retreat: Reading the Auctores *at Cassiciacum*

Joseph Pucci

Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. Pp. xvi + 192.
ISBN 9780888441874.

Reviewed by Stefan Freund
(Bergische Universität Wuppertal)

After his conversion in summer 386, Augustine left Milan for Cassiciacum. There, in a friend's country house, he stayed with his closest relatives and confidants until he returned to the city for his baptism during the Easter vigil of 387. During this period of seclusion, Augustine produced his first extant writings *Contra Academicos*, *De beata vita*, *De ordine*, and the *Soliloquia*, in which the author, in dialogic form, reflects on the fundamental questions of happiness and truth in a way that starts from pagan philosophy and leads to God. In his book, Pucci takes both these dialogues from Cassiciacum and the *De doctrina Christiana*—composed a