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2018: “The Problem of Poverty” in Review

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Last spring, three undergraduate students spent the better part of their spring semester researching the social safety net. Their research focused on the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Housing Choice Voucher Program. These aren't the justice issues that college students and young adults are often passionate about; t-shirts and stickers aren't sold on college campuses for these programs.

And yet, these programs, and more broadly the social safety net, are so critical to any conversation on domestic poverty. That's why, when designing the [Shared Justice Student-Faculty Research Prize](#), we asked students to write about the role of the social safety net, comprised of both government programs and civil society institutions, in their local communities.

Often our thinking about and response to poverty is formed when we are young. Over time a partisan identity reinforces our response to poverty in the political arena. “Are you for more government or for less?” becomes our litmus test for understanding where someone is *really* coming from. The danger, though, is that much of our society is oriented to think primarily about the relationship between two things: the individual and the state. With this framework, themes of personal failure and responsibility animate one end of the polarized spectrum, while elevation of the state as the only viable solution to poverty represents the other side of the spectrum. This pits one against the other, when in reality there is a necessary role for both personal responsibility and government. It also sidelines the rich and robust contributions of civil society institutions like the Church, faith-based nonprofits, and others in serving the vulnerable.

Instead, addressing poverty requires a “both-and” response. There are merits to individual acts of charity, service, and personal responsibility *as well as* more systemic approaches to addressing poverty through government. This framework allows for the unique contributions of government, while at the same time requires that government to create space for the diverse array of civil society institutions to make their own unique and valuable contributions. In [Unleashing Opportunity: Why Addressing Poverty Requires a Shared Vision of Justice](#), Stephanie Summers, Michael Gerson, and I

wrote, “This book is not mainly about politics. It is about all the ways—including through government—that we can encourage a society in which more people can thrive... People created in God’s image are made to be free from oppression and degradation and to share in a measure of opportunity. People created in God’s image are also called to work to ensure this is true not only for themselves, but for all of their neighbors” (4).

Addressing poverty is a shared calling. Two recent books explore poverty, inequality, and racial disparity and propose what addressing, and ultimately ending, poverty should look like. Peter Edelman’s *Not a Crime to be Poor* and Liz Theoharis’ *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor* both make a compelling case for why poverty, and the degradation of dignity, demands an urgent response.

An Ugly Reality

Peter Edelman, Professor of Law and Public Policy and the Director of the Center on Poverty and Inequality at Georgetown University Law Center, has devoted decades working to end poverty in the United States. In his most recent book, *Not a Crime to be Poor*, Edelman examines the myriad of ways in which domestic poverty has become criminalized, and then in the latter half of the book offers a way forward in undoing this pattern of criminalization. In using the word criminalization, Edelman is referring to the disproportionate toll that our criminal justice system takes on people experiencing poverty.

The United States, Edelman argues in the introduction, has a history of using the criminal justice system to punish people for being poor. And this reality can’t be untangled from the sins of racism that have infected our systems and structures of justice to this day. “Joined together, poverty and racism create a toxic mixture that mocks our democratic rhetoric of equal opportunity and equal protection under law,” Edelman writes (xii).

Edelman offers a brief contemporary history of how we got here. He cites the New Deal as a federal policy that began to positively impact the poor. Key civil rights statutes were enacted in the sixties, Social Security, unemployment insurance, and fair labor standards became the norm, and reducing poverty was a priority. In Edelman’s view, progress slowed in the seventies, though programs like food stamps, housing vouchers, and other social safety net programs were implemented and expanded. In the decades following, Edelman lists a “constellation of factors” that have perpetuated poverty, including tax and welfare policies, a shortage of affordable housing, changes in work and family structure, and ongoing discrimination.

According to Edelman, it wasn’t until the 1990s that our nation “adopted criminal justice strategies to further punish poor people for their poverty.” (xiii) As a result, Edelman says, “Low-income people are arrested for minor violations that are only annoyances for people with means but are disastrous for the poor and near poor because of the high fines and fees we now almost routinely impose.” For the poor, minor offenses like rolling through a stop sign or petty theft often translate to jail time as a result of being unable to afford bail, debt, legal costs, fines and fees, driver’s license suspensions, lost jobs, and lost families. Edelman is careful to note that it’s not just those who have committed minor offenses that are criminalized, it’s also poor children, poor women, and people experiencing homelessness, among others.

In Part One of *Not a Crime to be Poor*, the reader is confronted with story after story that demonstrates the ways in which our criminal justice system is stacked against the poor. Edelman devotes a chapter to each of the following issues: money bail, mental illness, child support, public benefits, the school to prison pipeline, and housing (or lack thereof).

Relying heavily on narrative, each chapter is personal and compelling. Edelman doesn't allow the reader to only see these issues in the abstract, instead they are presented in raw, real, and heartbreaking fashion. A few stories and statistics stand out.

Ten million people owe a total of 50 billion dollars in charges related to the criminal justice system, including fines and room and board in jails in prisons. (xiv). Forty-three states charge the accused for a public defender (6). In 44 states, offenders must pay the costs associated with their probation or parole, and 49 states charge a fee for electronic bracelets worn as an alternative to pre-trial detention (12).

Edelman tells the horrific story of Kalief Browder, an African American teenager who was imprisoned for three years at Rikers Island waiting for trial for a crime he didn't commit (stealing a backpack) because his family couldn't afford the \$3000 set for bail. He was held for two of those years in solitary confinement and was abused by guards and inmates. Browder attempted suicide several times while in prison. Browder's story made national news and when he was finally released, he experienced a myriad of struggles related to his experience in prison. Tragically Browder committed suicide in 2015 (46).

Edelman follows Browder's story with a chapter on mental illness. He reports that 83 percent of jail inmates with mental illness don't receive treatment (66). In his chapter on child support, Edelman cites a 2007 Urban Institute study of nine states which found that low-income fathers were expected to pay an average of 83 percent of their income for child support (85). Edelman goes on to note that 14 states still require child support payments when the parent is incarcerated. Fathers go to prison owing an average of \$10,000 in child support and leave owing an average of \$20,000. "What we hope to achieve by criminalizing the poverty of fathers in this way is not clear," Edelman writes. "But it is clear that this approach makes a bad situation worse and does little to help the children who are not receiving the support due them" (85).

Montana suspends licenses for unpaid student loans, and Iowa suspends licenses for public drunkenness with no car involved (17). Edelman continues to tell powerful stories through the middle section of the book related to public benefits, the school-to-prison pipeline, and housing ordinances.

Each chapter offers glimmers of hope; stories and examples of people and communities organizing for change. Edelman devotes the second half of this book, boldly titled "Ending Poverty", to highlighting examples of civil society institutions, partnerships, and policies that are addressing many of the issues explored in the first half of the book. He tells the stories of, among others, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis, Community Solutions in Brooklyn, and the New Haven MOMS Partnership in Connecticut.

Edelman admits that he is pessimistic about the current state of national politics, which is why he lifts up movements at the state and local level throughout the book. "We must organize—in neighborhoods and communities, in cities and states, and nationally. And we must empower people to advocate for

themselves as the most fundamental tool for challenge. We need elected leaders, judges and lawyers, and journalists, too, but we will get more done and get it done sooner if it is grounded in the people who demand action,” he writes (xix). While the “glimmers of hope and progress” are encouraging, he concedes that “when it comes to more far-reaching outcomes, there is not enough momentum as yet to attack either poverty and racism frontally” (248). His hope in writing this book, Edelman says, “is to help expose even more the extent to which criminalization causes and perpetuates poverty and the continuing discrimination against people of color.”

A Response to Poverty and Inequality of Opportunity

Confronted with the injustices that Edelman presents in *Not a Crime to be Poor*, how are Christians to respond? In *Always with Us?*, Liz Theoharis, the founder and co-director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justices and coordinator of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, offers a way forward.

In *Always with Us?*, Theoharis explores one key question: what did Jesus really mean when He told His disciples in Matthew 26:11, “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.” Theoharis explains that in her experience, this text is “the major biblical roadblock to people coming forward with solutions to end poverty” (145).

Always with Us? continues with a theological exploration of Jesus’ words in Matthew, and Theoharis’ interpretation has implications for how Christians should serve and empower the vulnerable. Regardless of whether the reader agrees with her theological conclusions, the book offers an example of rigorous study and contemplation of how faith ought to inform the rest of our lives, including our political lives. Read together with *Not a Crime to be Poor*, it offers readers an opportunity to apply this lens to issues that Edelman highlights.

Theoharis makes clear from the Introduction that she does not believe that Jesus meant that it is impossible to eliminate poverty. “Many scholars hesitate to see Jesus as political or as advocating anything more than personal piety which, according to this view, has nothing to do with caring for your neighbor,” she writes (25). Instead, she argues that Jesus’ ministry was political, that ending poverty is a biblical imperative, and that “we are called to join and support a necessary and growing social movement to end poverty, led by the poor” (12). In the first chapter, she outlines the ways in which Matthew 26:11 has been misinterpreted and “used to justify the inevitability of inequality and to provide religious sanction for the dispossession of the majority for the benefit of the few” (13).

Theoharis flips on its head the notion that efforts to end poverty are futile. She argues that “the poor you will always have with you” is not a pass, but instead an exhortation. Matthew 26, Theoharis says,

...is reminder that poverty is not God’s will but is the result of people’s disobedience to God’s commandments and Jesus’ teachings. It ought to be understood as saying that a plan to overcome poverty - with the Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions at the core - is central to the gospel message, mission of Jesus, and realization of God’s Kingdom (146).

To make her case, Theoharis introduces readers to key findings and interpretations from the Poverty Scholars Leadership School, hosted by the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary, which invited 160 low-income community and faith leaders to a weeklong session to study and discuss the

Bible together. The Bible Study, Theoharis explains, was “community based, and liberation oriented in both form and content.” This exemplified a method which Theoharis describes as “Reading the Bible with the Poor”, designed to be “a poor-led process of biblical interpretation” and devotes a chapter to explaining its methodology (52).

In the remainder of *Always with Us?* Theoharis conducts an exegetical analysis of Matthew 26:11, and explores its relationship with Deuteronomy 15 as well as the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus in Matthew 26.

“Jesus is criticizing the disciples with this echo of Deuteronomy 15:11, which establishes that poverty is the result of disobedience...Jesus may be warning that if the disciples continue their charity-like dealing and do not follow God’s plan of bigger economic and social transformation, they will indeed never abolish poverty,” Theoharis writes (64).

Here Theoharis levels a broader critique of the largely white, Evangelical Christian culture that has embraced individual acts of charity at the expense of advocating for just systems and structures. Her book makes the case that ending poverty is not something that individuals, or the Church, can accomplish on their own. Instead, she argues, God calls us to pursue larger “economic and social transformation”, which by default, requires engagement in the political sphere. Though her book is primarily focused on a theological case rather than prescriptive policy steps, Theoharis could do more to discuss the role of mediating structures in civil society in ending poverty. Lacking, for example, is a discussion of the importance of healthy and stable families for solutions to poverty.

Edelman gets closer to the “both/and” approach mentioned earlier, with a focus on both government policies and examples of civil society institutions involved in correcting injustice in their community. It’s unclear whether Edelman’s embrace of civil society institutions is out of necessity - he is clear that he thinks little good will come from the current administration - or if this embrace is something he would hold even with an administration in favor of many of his recommendations.

Untangling how society, and even our churches, have taught us to engage with poverty and politics and beginning to pursue a new, faith-informed vision of political engagement is hard work. It may require retraining our political muscles and reorienting our approach to issues we care about. A nuanced and thoughtful consideration of the importance of government and civil society, and the contributions and limits of both, is necessary. Read together, *Always With Us?* and *Not a Crime to Be Poor*, demonstrate that our Christian faith inherently binds us with the cause of the poor and the oppressed – a cause that is still very much with us. But as Theoharis exhorts us, that doesn’t always have to be so.

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