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Always with You: Questioning the Theological Construction of the Un/Deserving Poor

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Abstract

The cultural persistence and political salience of the 'un/deserving poor' – the moral categorization of people in poverty – rests, *inter alia*, on the use of Christianity to construct a class-inflected position from which to judge or categorize the lives of others. Interpretation of the claim that the poor are 'always with you' (Matthew 26:11) plays a role in this process of asymmetrical moralization, specifically through the framing of 'the poor' as a class with divinely-mandated functions and virtues. To develop theological challenges to asymmetrical moralization, I examine patterns in contemporary and historical interpretation of the gospel accounts of the woman who anoints Jesus (the wider context of the claim that the poor are 'always with you'). I propose that, while many interpreters attempt to use these texts to establish a position from which to judge both the woman and 'the poor', they can be reread in a way that undermines that construction.

Keywords

poverty – class and theology – moralisation of poverty – undeserving poor – woman anointing Jesus

In this article I examine the implication of Christian theology in the moral categorization of people in poverty – the construction of the poor as the 'un/deserving poor'.[1] Particularly in the United Kingdom and North American con-

1 I acknowledge with gratitude the valuable advice and comments received from colleagues at the University of Leeds, from seminar attendees at the University of Winchester and the

texts, this categorization is politically powerful, historically deep-rooted, and has wide-ranging material effects. It is, however, rarely far from the surface in debates about welfare and poverty relief – as, for example, the experiences of survivors of Hurricane Katrina, precariously suspended between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' status as both disaster survivors and welfare recipients, makes clear.[2] High-profile voyeuristic media portrayals of the spending and lifestyle habits of people in poverty both reflect and reinforce the cultural salience of moral categorisation as a response to the phenomenon of poverty and economic inequality.[3]

Specific moralizing claims made about people in poverty are frequently criticized from Christian theological and ethical perspectives, *inter alia* – in books and articles that argue, for example, that the dominant portrayals of specific groups of impoverished people are inaccurate or misleading, or that the stigmatization of poverty is directly opposed to the consistent biblical approach to the poor.[4] This article does not repeat those critiques, but instead focuses on a different and prior concern – the inequality, or indeed the radical asymmetry, in exposure to moral judgement and categorization, that runs along the faultlines of economic and social inequality. The problem is not simply that some or all of 'the poor' are *mis*categorized as 'undeserving', lazy, feckless, or whatever class-inflected condemnatory label is currently in vogue. The problem is that they are subject to the categorization in the first place – and, conversely,

University of Manchester, and from anonymous referees, in the preparation of this article.

2 Megan Reid, 'Social Policy, "Deservingness" and Sociotemporal Marginalisation: Katrina Survivors and FEMA', *Sociological Forum* 28/4 (2013), 742–63. See Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Lauren D. Applebaum, 'The Influence of Perceived Deservingness on Policy Decisions regarding Aid to the Poor', *Political Psychology* 22/1 (2001), 419–42; Jeffry Will, 'The Dimensions of Poverty: Public Perceptions of the Deserving Poor', *Social Science Research* 22/3 (1993), pp. 312–32. For an example of an attempt to evaluate the utility and validity of the categorisation, see Noah D. Zatz, 'Poverty Unmodifed?: Critical Reflections on the Deserving/Undeserving Distinction', *UCLA Law Review* 59 (2012), 550–97.

3 As for example in the TV series 'Benefits Street'. See for a study of audience responses to this series, which demonstrates how these responses reflect and feed into a wider moralisation of poverty, Isabelle van der Bom, Laura L. Paterson, David Peplow, and Karen Grainger, '"It's not the fact they claim benefits but their useless, lazy, drug taking lifestyles we despise": Analysing audience responses to *Benefits Street* using live tweets', *Discourse, Context and Media* 21 (2018), 36–65.

4 For recent examples, focused on UK contexts, see Laurie Green, *Blessed are the Poor? Urban Poverty and the Church* (London: SCM, 2015), pp. 37–45; Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams, *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor* (London: Jubilee+, 2014); Joint Public Issues Team, 'The Lies We Tell Ourselves: Ending Comfortable Myths About Poverty' (Methodist Publishing 2013), available from http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Truth-And-Lies-Report-smaller.pdf [accessed 28th January 2021].

that the nonpoor, or some subset of them (the middle classes, the political elites), enjoy an assumed right to categorize the poor.[5] In the first part of this article, then, I consider the Christian 'background' of the un/deserving poor. Historical accounts of societal and governmental responses to poverty in the United Kingdom and the United States have recognized, both the central role of ecclesial institutions and structures in developing and implementing successive categorisations of 'the poor', and the contribution of Christian theology to the ideological underpinnings of successive moralzsed approaches to poverty. From this complex picture, I highlight the connection between, on the one hand, the belief that the existence of a class of 'the poor' is providentially ordained – with the use of Matthew 26:11 (and its New Testament parallels, and its antecedent in Deuteronomy 15:11) – and, on the other hand, the exposure of 'the poor' to asymmetrical moralisation. The claim that the poor are 'always with you' gives divine sanction, not merely to the continued existence of economic and class division, but also to the theological and moral judgement of 'the poor' by a privileged group ('you') who can prescribe the correct response to poverty.

In the second part of the article, then, I focus on the question of how theology is used to justify – and then to challenge – structures of asymmetrical moralization such as the 'un/deserving poor'. To explore this broader question, I turn to the wider context of the 'always with you' text – the narrative, found in importantly different forms in all four gospels, of the woman with the jar of ointment (Mt 26:6–13; Mk 14:3–9; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 12:1–7). This narrative context, and especially the history of its interpretation, draws attention to the wider phenomenon of asymmetrical moralization – such as the disproportionate exposure of women to moral judgements about their sexual behaviour. A consideration of these texts suggests new directions for theological research on the phenomenon of the 'un/deserving poor' specifically, and of asymmetrical moralization more generally.[6] It highlights, for example, the construction of

5 See Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organized Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 61 – he initially describes the 'right to categorize' at more length, as 'the basic premise that superior social status gave the natural right to categorise the impecunious'.

6 An important example of the phenomenon I am referring to as 'asymmetrical moralization' is analysed in Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015) – namely, the disproportionate interrogation, by both media and law enforcement authorities, of the character and behaviour of Black victims of police violence (among them Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride and Michael Brown). As Douglas demonstrates, Christian theology plays a significant role in the origins and maintenance of this pattern of asymmetrical moralization – including through theological justifications of race-based chattel slavery that relied on claims of a divinely-established racial hierarchy.

the role of the authoritative judges (the 'you', the holders of the 'right to categorize') as a concomitant of the stigmatisation of the 'categorized' group; and the importance of how Jesus is identified, and identified *with*, in processes of moral judgement and categorisation.

1 The 'Un/Deserving Poor' Distinction: Sources and Uses

Among recent and contemporary studies emphasizing the long-lived influence of the un/deserving poor on welfare systems and attitudes to poverty, Ruth Lister offers a particularly clear and revealing account:

> … the bifurcation of 'the poor' into 'deserving' and 'undeserving', each with their associated stereotypes, has had a profound impact on their treatment … The label of 'undeserving' poor has been negatively charged by the process of stigmatization, which, historically and today, has had implications for how society sees 'the poor', how they see themselves and how they are treated by welfare institutions.[7]

Lister's account makes clear the close relationships between, firstly, the moralization of poverty – represented here by the use of the terms 'deserving' and 'undeserving'; secondly, symbolic violence in terms of how 'the poor' are represented; and, thirdly, the material conditions of people's lives ('how they are treated by welfare institutions'). Crucially, through the reference to stigmatization, her account also hints that the problem begins with the *'bifurcation' itself* – that all 'the poor' suffer as a result of the exposure to moralized categorization, however they are individually categorized.[8] Furthermore, Lister acknowledges the deep historical roots of the un/deserving poor – and hence opens up a space, beyond her account, for broader investigations of its cultural sources and implications.

In the historical literature, there are surprisingly wide disagreements, and surprisingly little conclusive evidence, about when this bifurcation appeared in English-language discussions of poverty. Attempts to pin it down range from the claim that it was already well established in the seventeenth century

7 Ruth Lister, *Poverty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 102.

8 For the origins of the contemporary use of 'stigmatization', see Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963). For an illustrative example of its recent theological use, see Denise Ackermann, 'Engaging Stigma: An Embodied Theological Response to HIV and AIDS', *Scriptura* 89 (2005), 385–95.

through restrictions on begging and vagrancy, to its frequent association with Victorian charitable and legislative activity, to an argument that it mostly relates to the *fin de siècle* popular press.[9] For my purposes, and particularly because I am using the bifurcation as a metonym for a broader 'right to categorize' it is not particularly important to pin down the origin of the terminology.

More significant is that stories of the un/deserving poor suggest that successive versions of the bifurcation, in both its theory and its practice, were not only ecclesially, but also theologically framed – from its early origins in canon law,[10] to the careful accounts produced in the late nineteenth century of how Jesus' life and practice justifies the modification of charity by judgements about desert and character.[11] In the history of the un/deserving poor the question of 'desert' has been variously answered, for example, in relation to work or the lack of work – following (interpretations of) 2 Thessalonians 3:10;[12] in rela-

9 For examples across the full range, see Steve Hindle 'Dependency, Shame and Belonging: Badging the Deserving Poor, c.1550–1750', *Cultural and Social History* 1:1 (2004), 6–35; *ibid.*, 'Civility, Honesty and the Identification of the Deserving Poor in Seventeenth-century England', in Henry French and Jonathan Barry, eds., *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.38–59; Patricia Y. C. E. Lin, 'Citizenship, Military Families, and the Creation of a New Definition of "Deserving Poor" in Britain, 1793–1815', *Social Politics* 2000, 5–46; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*, (New York: Knopf, 1991); Peter Middleton and Sue Golding, *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Brian Pullan, 'Religion and the Rise of Poor Relief', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 4:3–4 (2000), 442–6; M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Samantha A. Shave, 'The Impact of Sturgis Bourne's Poor Law Reforms in Rural England', *The Historical Journal* 56/2 (2013), 399–429.

10 Brian Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959); see the discussion in Pullan, 'Religion and the Rise of Poor Relief', p. 444.

11 A good example is Samuel Barnett, 'Christianity and the Charitable Organization Society', *The Economic Review*, 4/2 (1894), 189–94. It is also important to note a persistent discomfort with the bifurcation that was itself rooted in theological commitments. Christians of various confessions and various classes had recurrent habits of, and encouragements to, *indiscriminate* and undiscriminating charity (separating questions of need or poverty from questions of desert); and there were also some, less prominent but not insignificant, moves to institutionalize wider reciprocal moral accountability and hence to take some of the sting – both symbolic and material – out of the 'right to categorize' directed at the poor. See the accounts in Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in Official Print Culture, 1800–1850: A New Reading of the Poor Inquiry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 84–5; Roberts, *Making English Morals*, pp. 150–2.

12 On the particularly complex political history of which, see Joseph M. Bartlett, 'Bourgeois Right and the Limits of First Phase Communism in the Rhetoric of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15', *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 8/2 (2012), 36–56, here 36–7.

tion to self-sacrifice for the common good;[13] in relation to the display of specific virtues, including various manifestations of humility;[14] or, as I now move to discuss, in relation to the successful practice of 'providence' as a response to divine providence.

2 'The Poor You Have Always with You': Making Poverty Providential

Matthew 26:11 (and parallels), itself a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11 – 'you always have the poor with you' – was inscribed on the foundation stone of a London workhouse in the nineteenth century and cited as the basis for a Texan governor's economic policy in the twenty-first century.[15] Both the text and an approach to reading it – reading it, that is, as an invitation to provide theological rationales for the persistence of poverty and for particular approaches to its management – comes to the fore in the context of the radical social changes of the mid-1800s, especially but not only in Britain. It remains – as the Perry example shows – as a component of ideological justifications for approaches to poverty that naturalize the economic divisions of capitalist 'wealth creation'.

At this particular point in the history of its social and political interpretation, the text is pulled out of context – which, on the face of it, is also what happens between Deuteronomy 15:11 and Matthew 26:11. While in Deuteronomy

13 As identified by Patricia Lin with the shifts in the concept of the 'deserving poor' in Britain in the context of the development of a scheme of welfare for military families – Lin, 'Citizenship, Military Families'.

14 The shifting expectations around shame and gratitude in relation to the deserving poor – specifically, the move from a premodern/early-modern expectation that the truly deserving poor would hide their poverty out of shame, to the condemnation of those who refused to accept a visible marker of dependency – are traced in Hindle, 'Dependency, Shame and Belonging'. For an intriguing contemporary example connecting 'deservingness' with displaying the correct emotions in public – in this case, the expectation that street sellers appear happy, friendly and welcoming – see Jessica Gerrard, 'The Economy of Smiles: Affect, Labour and the Contemporary Deserving Poor', *British Journal of Sociology*, 2018.

15 London Metropolitan Archives, 'St Nicholas' Hospital, Plumstead' (no date). Available at http://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA_OPAC/web_detail/REFD+H20~2FNIC?SESSIONSEARCH. [Accessed 28th January 2021]; P. Drucker, 'Rick Perry, hungry for redemption, says he's a substantially different candidate', *Washington Post*, 9th December 2014. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rick-perry-hungry-for-redemption-says-hes-a-substantially-different-candidate/2014/12/09/3c9c6052a-7f20-11e4-81fd-8c4814dfa9d7_story.html?utm_term=.c731fcb7eed1. [Accessed 28th January 2021]. For further discussion of the issues in this section, see Rachel Muers, '"The Poor Will Never Cease": Theological-Textual Configurations of Time, Responsibility and Justice', *Metodo* 5/2 (2017).

the observation that there will always be poor people in the land is framed in a legal context (specifically, instructions for the periodic remission of debt) and gives rise to an imperative[16] – I *therefore* command you, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour – in the New Testament passages it stands alone as a puzzling indicative statement, given additional weight by being directly affirmed by Jesus. A rather less obvious point is that the quotation out of context removes Deuteronomy's emphasis on a shared situation of need and vulnerability, a situation in which the needy neighbour and the open-hearted giver, 'the poor' and 'you', have intertwined lives and a shared fate marked by the emphatic repeated use of familial language, and by the framework of shared observance of the land and shared responsibility for the land. Moreover, the context in Deuteronomy 15 includes the claim that 'there will be no one in need among you' (15:4) – which, at the very least, calls into question the validity of an enduring class distinction.[17] The New Testament quotation, taken on its own, highlights not the bonds of shared responsibility and shared vulnerability nor the vision of a society without wealth-based class distinctions, but rather an indefinitely established distinction between the 'you' of the text on the one hand and 'the poor' on the other.

Of course, contemporary commentators point out – rightly – that the presumed audience of the quotation on Jesus' lips – either in the setting envisaged, or in the first communities that read the gospels – would be perfectly capable of making the connection back to Deuteronomy, and hence taking it (at least) as an injunction to generous giving.[18] The double risk remains, however, of taking the text as a simple affirmation of the divinely-established eternal way of things, and of deliberately or accidentally allowing its grammar to establish a pattern in which readers and interpreters of the Bible talk *about* 'the poor'.[19] The text – at least in the hands of a readership who are not defining themselves as poor – allows readers to envision a poor *class* who are the objects rather than the subjects of theological and moral reflection, and to project this class division as a providential ordering of the world. This in turn sets the stage for the poor to become the objects of moral classification, the un/deserving poor.

The history of interpretation reveals several attempts to respond to Matthew 26:11 by talking about the poor – including, for developing theological

16 See on this Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 210.

17 On the question of the identification of 'the poor' as a class in Deuteronomy 15, see Walter Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*, (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 179–85.

18 Ibid.

19 See R. S. Sugirtharajah, '"For You Always Have The Poor With You": An example of hermeneutics of suspicion', *Asia Journal of Theology* 4.1 (1990), 102–7.

rationales for the continued existence, not only of poverty, but of a distinct and persistent group of 'the poor'. This becomes particularly clear, for example, in the mid-nineteenth-century debates over the reform of the poor laws, with the repeated claim that poverty is an inevitable feature of society – against which, if they were properly educated, the poor would not 'murmur'. The theological framing of key texts on political economy – most notably, of Malthus' work – was, as numerous scholars have noted, far from incidental. Poverty, in the Malthusian schema, was not only a necessary, but also a providentially-ordered, concomitant of human progress. In the face of widespread hunger and disease, and the moral panic over the increase of 'vice' (particularly of illegitimate children), political economy framed itself as theodicy and as a moralized theological anthropology. As theodicy, political economy provides theological-ideological justification for the persistence of 'the poor' and for the economic system that makes this inevitable; as moralized theological anthropology, it provides the basis for evaluating the responses of the poor to their (inevitable or inescapable) poverty.[20]

The idea that 'the poor are always with you' proved to be closely connected with the moral judgement of 'the poor' – as the proper virtues of the 'deserving' poor and the vices of the 'undeserving' poor were defined with reference to the providential scheme through which poverty is interpreted. Political economists, welfare reformers and ecclesial elites located the un/deserving poor as more or less docile components of the providential systems according to which both macro- and micro-level practices were being shaped. Thus, for example, in a sermon for the opening of a new poorhouse in New Hampshire in 1834 the audience's attention was drawn on the one hand to the 'wise and gracious providence of God' that ordained poverty as an 'unavoidable evil', and on the other hand to the 'shameful indolence' of those impoverished people who failed to recognise poverty as a spur to virtue and piety.[21]

For the Malthusians, relatedly, the supreme virtue of the deserving poor was to be 'provident'. 'Man should be a provident animal', wrote one enthusiastic critic of a proposed system of poor relief in England in 1842, following it up for good measure with the claim that 'the very precariousness of human things was evidently designed as a school for the acquirement of vigour and virtue'.[22]

20 See A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798–1833*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Edmund N. Santurri, 'Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus' Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43/2 (1982), 315–30; John Pullen, 'Variables and Constants in the Theology of T. R. Malthus', *History of Economics Review*, 63:1 (2016), 21–32.

21 Quoted in Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, p. 6.

22 George Croly, *Blackwood's Magazine*, 51 (April 1842), 520.

The 'improvidence' of the undeserving poor threatened to disrupt the theological system of political economy, within which providence was supposed to order the operations of the market towards the adequate material support of an appropriately-sized population, the development of individual virtue and the advance of civilization.[23] The specific gendered and sexual dimension of 'improvidence', and its implications for the gendering of the un/deserving poor, provided a further rationale for the sexual double standard, for the ideology of feminine purity and domesticity, and hence for the specific vulnerability of poor women to scrutiny and judgement.[24]

The key point to note from all this is not, for my purposes, the specific virtues and vices that shaped an account of the un/deserving poor, but the fact that the poor were being categorized at all. The theodicy of poverty developed *inter alia* in response to the puzzle of Matthew 26:11 not only positioned poverty as a feature of the providential order; it also implicitly positioned the observer, policy-maker or reformer as one who could theorise the goodness and justice of the providential scheme, and judge the adequacy of responses to it on the part of 'the poor'. It provides theological reinforcement, not only for unequal social and economic relationships, but for unequal *moral* relationships – what I have referred to, in the introduction to this article, as asymmetrical moralization. In what follows, I address the wider problem of asymmetrical moralization by recontextualizing Matthew 26:11 (and parallels) in its story – and in a longer history of interpretation. My overall proposal is that the *dis*harmony of the 'woman with the jar of ointment' texts in the gospels – both in relation to each other and in relation to certain key intertexts – works to dis-locate the reader from a secure position of moral judgement.[25] It does this by disturbing the identifications and separations (of 'the poor', Jesus,

23 David Lloyd, 'The Political Economy of the Potato', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 29 (2007), 311–35.

24 See Lisa Foman Cody, 'The Politics of Illegitimacy in an Age of Reform: Women, reproduction and political economy in England's New Poor Law of 1834', *Journal of Women's History*, 11/4 (2000), 131–56.

25 I take the idea of a 'disharmony of the Gospels' from Nicholas Adams, 'A Disharmony of the Gospels' in Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers, and Simeon Zahl, eds, *The Vocation of Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford* (Wipf & Stock/ Cascade, 2013), pp. 92–107. Adams argues, in a comparison of Augustine's and Calvin's readings of the different genealogies of Jesus, for an approach to reading that takes differences and discrepancies not as problems to be ironed out, but as occasions for creative (even in Augustine's case 'bizarre') theological thought that *preserves* difference. I pick up Adams' suggestion that 'disharmony' should provoke rereading and reinterpretation, but in this particular case (with these particular texts) the rereading is less in the service of creative improvisation and more in the service of the suspension and relocation of judgement.

the woman and the onlookers) that establish that position; and by engaging the imagination in ways that prevent dis-embodied judgement.[26] It should be noted in what follows that I am not claiming to offer a full history of the interpretation of the text, nor a full account of the issues it raises; I focus on commentators, historical and contemporary, who draw attention to the question of moral judgement and categorization.

3 'Who Said to One Another': Giving Some the Right to Categorise

> While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. **4** But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? **5** For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. **6** But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. **7** For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. **8** She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. **9** Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'
>
> Mk 14:3–9[27]

In the story of the woman with the jar of ointment the onlookers – the disciples, in Matthew's text – appear, as Chrysostom noted, to be models of ethical reasoning. They are 'raised up above the world, and forward in almsgiving', specialists in judgement. As followers of Jesus they have taken his teaching and practice to heart and applied it: 'They used to hear their Master saying, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice … and discoursing much on the mount concerning almsgiving'.[28] Their comments mirror the injunction to the rich young ruler to sell all he has and give to the poor. Modern commentators echo this praise for the onlookers: their 'social concern is admirable, and would be

26 I am taking the four Gospel accounts of Jesus being anointed by a woman at a feast to be, at the very least, closely related. My argument does not depend on any particular conclusion about their relationships of origin.

27 All biblical quotations are from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

28 Chrysostom, homily 80 on Matthew, *NPNF* 1 10, p. 481.

shared by many today'.[29] So, on the face of it, Jesus' rebuke to these model students apparently calls into question their entire process of making a judgement in theological ethics. The rebuke placed in the mouth of Jesus forces the interpretive tradition to pause at the point of the woman's exposure to judgement – and to ask, at least momentarily, why and in what terms and by whom she is being judged. At this point Chrysostom, for all his desire to praise the disciples' ethical reasoning, realises that they need – at the very least – further training in pastoral sensitivity, which, on Chrysostom's reading, Jesus duly provides.

Throughout the commentary tradition, however, interpretations implicitly read Jesus' response to the disciples/bystanders' judgement, and his statements about the women's action, as a much better, but structurally similar, judgement.[30] Everyone including Jesus is looking at the woman and trying to work out what is going on: Jesus, however, has privileged access to information about what she is doing and why. Thus, for example, 'the disciples judge by appearances; Jesus judges by motives'.[31] In all of this the woman, of course, never has the opportunity to speak for herself; and many of the commentators' rationalizations of her action, based on the text, are explicitly stated to be beyond her knowledge (she does not know, says Hurtado, that her action 'means' Jesus' burial).[32] She is an ethical exemplar – good or bad, deserving or undeserving – within somebody else's system of ethics. The readers of the New Testament and of the commentaries are assumed to stand in the position of the relatively powerful and well-informed disciples alongside an educated elite who are responsible for scrutinizing and directing the actions of others.

The readers are, then, still placed in the position of the disciples – in a commentary for which the primary audience is an educated elite – but both the disciples and the readers are reminded that people's individual circumstances and emotions matter. Sincere novices in faith, like the woman, must be praised for their demonstration of piety, however ill-directed. At least one contemporary commentator, adopting a more egalitarian model of church life and hence a more exalted view of the woman's status, similarly takes the story as an indication of the need to take individual circumstances into account – and to focus

29 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2002), p. 553.

30 See for a contemporary example France, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 553: 'It must be a quite exceptional cause which justifies such expenditure … the onlookers, unlike the woman, cannot perceive such a cause in the presence of Jesus. It is on this lack of insight that Jesus will have to correct them'.

31 James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 415; note that Edwards, like the premodern commentators, assimilates the narratives of Mark and Matthew and assumes that the onlookers are disciples.

32 Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1989/2011), p. 229.

on the intentions of the act. Noting the parallel with the story of the 'widow's mite', Edwards draws the general conclusion – that is, each must, sincerely, *do what she is able to do*, and both this woman and the widow are exemplary disciples because they give what they are able.[33]

Moreover, commentaries premodern and modern alike – concerned, with good reason, about the potential implications of the statement 'the poor are always with you' – are at pains to clarify that Jesus' approbation of the woman's action in no way establishes a law. This is exactly the right action at the right time, and as such it does not recur.[34] An emphasis on the one-off character of the woman's action, fitted into a framework within which the key issue is a correct evaluation or categorization of what she is doing, can easily play into an individualistic and basically apolitical approach to theological ethics – in which intention or motive is all that counts, each does what he or she can in the given situation, and the wider social or political repercussions are secondary.

However, even before we consider the full implications of Jesus' statement, the 'disharmony' of the gospel texts around the identity of the onlookers tends to call this evaluative move into question. John's focus on Judas as the one who accuses Mary of Bethany gives rise to the suggestion in several interpreters that Jesus' rebuke is directed specifically at Judas and not at those disciples who are 'exemplars of moral reasoning'. The author of the 'first commentary on Mark' is among those who argue, for example, that Matthew's reference to the disciples is a figure of speech, and only Judas is meant.[35]

Now, this characterization of Judas as the offender makes it possible, on the one hand, to identify an unequivocal villain of the piece and leaven the main body of the disciples in place – which move in turn, of course, plays into the Christian scapegoating of the Jews.[36] On the other hand, however, the back-

33 Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 415.

34 See for example Calvin's pneumatological reading (John Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, commentary on Matthew 26:10). The one-off character of the woman's action, as Janice Capel Anderson notes, can be used to make it – and its proponent – rather *less* threatening to the disciples and their status. Anderson, 'Matthew, Gender and Reading', in Amy-Jill Levine, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 25–51, here pp. 40–1.

35 Michael Cahill ed. and trans., *The First Commentary on Mark: An annotated translation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 101. The commentary on 'some were indignant' explains that this is 'synecdoche, when one is taken for many and many for one', and from context the 'one' (referred to as the 'one who wasted salvation') is Judas. See also Augustine's harmony of the gospels, on Matthew 26:6–13 – which sets up at least two options: that 'the disciples' means only Judas, or that Judas expresses the thought that the others also had.

36 Thus Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. D. H. Williams (Catholic University of America Press, 2012), p. 268, in the context of an allegorical reading of the

and-forth movement between onlookers-disciples-Judas makes the position of judgement adopted by the disciples (and by the reader insofar as she identifies herself with those who take Jesus' words as instructions in judgement) distinctly shaky; at least one of the experts in the room is judging on the basis of self-interest. Origen's interpretation brings this out when he takes Judas, not as a figure of the scapegoated other, but as a sign of the risk to anyone who claims, from a position of power, to speak for the poor:

> If, then, anyone in our time who has the money box of the church speaks like Judas as if speaking for the poor, but steals what is placed there, let him be assigned the same portion along with Judas.[37]

Origen hints here at a deeper sense in which this text is risky *for the powerful reader* – that is, the person who 'has the money box of the church' (or a funded research position). The risk is not just that I might have to work extra hard to ensure that the text comes out with the right ethical answer; the risk is that I might end up 'speak[ing] as if speaking for the poor' while taking advantage for myself. I might start talking about the poor, or about the proper use of wealth, only when it is convenient for the purpose of reinforcing my own position as judge by passing judgement on somebody else. The capacity of the onlookers, and by implication the readers, to make categorizing judgements for, about or on behalf of the poor is called into question, not only by their relative lack of knowledge (which might be remedied by closer attention to Jesus' teaching or better interpretation of the text), but also by the onlooker/interpreter's complex implication in the situation – which might not be fully apparent even to herself.

4 'In Memory of Her': Categorizing Bodies

The story of the woman with the jar of ointment brings into focus the 'stage-setting' of Christian judgements about poverty. On one reading, it invites readers and interpreters to make and refine judgements, with the words of Jesus and hence from a position of security (epistemic and ecclesial) on the rightness of a woman's actions and on her status as a 'sinner'; but it also subverts that invitation. We have seen that it does so by calling into question the position of the observer/interpreter; it also does so by the presence of four

various figures in the text: 'in emulation of the person of Judas, Israel has been impiously influenced by all his hatred, and incited to destroy the name of the Lord'.

37 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 11:9 (trans. John Patrick, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol 9).

similar-and-dissimilar accounts that render the woman herself both vulnerable and resistant to categorization. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza famously demonstrated, the promise, fulfilled in the scriptural text itself, that the story of the woman's action will be told 'in memory of her' wherever the gospel is preached, leaves open many ways of 'remembering' – several of which in practice deprive the woman of her story.[38]

Given the focus of my discussion, it should first be noted that the woman in the story is not obviously poor; for some commentators, in fact, she is obviously not poor. The jar and the ointment that she brings are 'luxury' items, worth as much as a year's wages for a man or two years' wages for a woman.[39] Many point to the contrast, marked out by parallel vocabulary, with the poor widow in Mark 12:41–44, who donates two small copper coins to the temple treasury; George Aichele, for example, discusses the position of the 'poor woman' in the Temple on the one hand, in contrast to that of the 'rich man and the rich woman' (the young ruler in Mark 10, and the woman with the jar of ointment) on the other.[40]

Whether or not this assumption is accurate, it does not make her story irrelevant to the question of the un/deserving poor. First, we should note that the woman's display of wealth – specifically her possession, however temporarily, of a luxury item – does not appear to convey social benefit or protection. Indeed, it draws *un*favourable attention to her; she becomes the target of anger, described in words that teeter on the edge of violence. Wealth in her hands is misplaced – as misplaced as the infamous flatscreen television in the house of a benefit claimant.[41] Indeed, the wording of the onlookers' criticism is focused entirely on the wealth (the jar and its price) – as if the woman herself has no particular claim to it. Precisely *un*like the young ruler in Mark 10, her wealth is never ascribed to her and forms no part of her description; the New Testament does not call her a wealthy woman.[42] Wealth gives her no identifiable social position of power and no claim to recognition. Aichele's description of her as a 'rich woman' is, to this extent at least, misleading. If she is materially wealthy, her wealth does not make her respectable – quite the reverse. Indeed, the intertextual connections with Luke 7:36–50, in which a 'woman who was a

38 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

39 Thus Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), p. 641.

40 George Aichele, *The Phantom Messiah: Postmodern Fantasy and the Gospel of Mark*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 177.

41 On which contemporary symbol of the 'undeserving poor' see McKenzie, *Getting By*, p. 110.

42 The man is described as 'possessing much wealth' (Mk 10:22).

sinner' anoints Jesus' feet, raise a particularly acute set of issues by creating the disturbing (at least for some) possibility that Jesus receives a luxury massage from a sex worker, and/or benefits from the proceeds of sex work.[43]

Acknowledging the resonances between the different versions of the text not only calls into question the 'status' of the woman – her exposure to categorization according to her sexual behaviour, and the instability of these apparently fixed categories; it also calls into question the process, discussed in my introduction, by which the 'right to categorize' relies on the dis-embodiment of the theologizing and categorizing subject. It is, in fact, striking how few contemporary commentators engage with the aesthetic and erotic aspects of the narrative – despite the way in which the text itself appears to invite imaginative engagement with the scene by the evocation of scent ('the whole room was filled with the smell of the perfume'), and despite the multiple connotations of Jesus' commendation of the woman's action – *kalon ergon*, a 'beautiful work' as well as a 'good service'. The interpreters, like the onlookers, if they are not reacting in shock (as in the Luke text) seem to be determinedly ignoring the scent, as well as the intimacy of the interaction – and not surprisingly, because it all has the potential to be rather embarrassing.[44]

It is often, perhaps not surprisingly, the premodern commentators on the gospel narrative who are most able to recognise the erotic character of the woman's action – as a beautiful work as well as a good deed – and to reflect on it. In the ears of several interpreters the text echoes the Song of Songs, and both this woman and the bride of the Song of Songs become the church as the

43 The sex workers who discuss these texts in Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 120–165, assume on the basis of their experience that all the 'anointings' in the gospel texts *are* sex work and offer a range of possible readings on that basis. I am grateful to Marika Rose for discussions of Ipsen's work. See also the reconstruction/harmonization of the four narratives in J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970), pp. 266–75 – which, although rarely followed in later scholarship, indirectly supports the view of Ipsen's informants by introducing sex work into the Matthew/Mark narratives.

44 A full harmonization of the four texts, in which one ex-prostitute anoints Jesus' head *and* his feet, does draw attention to everything in between (and the author of the 'first commentary on Mark' explicitly acknowledges it: 'she went up from the feet to the head, and down from the head to the feet by faith' that is, to Christ and His members': Cahill trans., p. 101). Curiously, Derrett insists – and repeats (*Law*, p. 267) – that there is 'no doubt' on the basis of the text that the woman (whom Derrett, drawing the narratives together, represents as a prostitute or ex-prostitute) anointed 'a part of Jesus' body without his permission'. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the woman did not have Jesus' permission to anoint him, and we can only assume that the interpreter wants to rid us of any suspicion that Jesus might have enjoyed the experience.

bride of Christ; this is a nuptial scene as well as a funereal scene.[45] The failure of the onlookers to recognise it as a nuptial scene means that they do not realise what behaviour is appropriate, at this particular time, from the friends of the bridegroom.[46] Moreover, in the commentary tradition, the woman caring for Jesus' body represents the community that continues to exercise this care; the woman 'lavished meticulous care upon [Jesus'] body', writes Hilary of Poitiers, as a sign of the good works of the church.[47] The ointment, as a luxury item, represents excessive, meticulous, love that exceeds necessity.[48] Of course this line of interpretation also incorporates the *readers* into the figure of woman who anoints Jesus – and hence also the one who experiences the judging gaze, as well as the one who makes a decision about the 'beautiful work' to be done at this particular time.

I suggest that this recognition in the commentary tradition – even if it is attenuated – of the excessive and non-repeatable beauty of the woman's action, and the way in which it draws in the reader/interpreter, points towards an exercise of judgement that avoids the 'right to categorize'. Even the reference to Jesus' burial suggests a logic in which beautiful deeds or good works are not strictly repeatable: each particular body will only have one day of burial but they can still be reasoned about, recognized as beautiful or fitting, and encountered in ways that extend the imaginative capacity.[49] It may not be possible (this reading suggests) to make full sense of the action of the woman who anoints Jesus without having been there; but it is certainly going to be

45 As again most clearly in 'pseudo-Jerome' – Cahill ed. and trans. *First Commentary on Mark*, p. 100.

46 See Collins, *Mark*, p. 642. This is one of the few contemporary commentators to discuss the nuptial imagery.

47 Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. D. H. Williams (Catholic University of America Press, 2012), pp. 268–9.

48 Jerome, Homily 84 on Mark (*The Homilies of St Jerome* vol 2, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald (Catholic University of America Press 1966), p. 190).

49 None of this discussion sets the incident *outside the law*. There is a strand in Christian commentary that locates Jesus and the woman, in this incident, above and beyond the law – and then uses this to set up a binary opposition between the 'legalistic' Jewish onlookers and the Christian community represented by the woman. Over against this strand of interpretation we should set Jesus' explicit invocation of a legal text – as well as the suggestion that the woman's action is itself an instance of halakhic reasoning, and that 'beautiful thing'/'good work' may be technical terminology (on which see Derrett, *Law*, pp. 266–86). Focusing interpretation on the opposition of law and non-law tends to obscure questions of class, power and status; the binary opposition of law and non-law, or law and spirit, can be structured into another set of exclusive categories applied by an elite. It is easy – as the Rick Perry example suggests, again – to dismiss demands for justice as overly legalistic, or as detracting from the unique beauty of individual spontaneous charity.

impossible to make any sense of it without entering imaginatively into the scene, without some sense not only of moral and social implication (as in the previous section) but also of aesthetic and imaginative 'implication' in setting the scene for judgement. The readers/interpreters/onlookers have made prior decisions about where to look, what to recognise as appropriate or decent or beautiful, and whose bodies and desires to subject to moral categorisation; and the texts both ask why just *these* bodies are subject to judgement, and invite ethical reflection that can attend to the particular beauty of bodies. Judgements about the 'improvidence' of the desire of the un/deserving poor for unnecessary luxury or pleasure, and the actions that they take based on that desire, are called into question by the praise given to the unknown woman's 'excessive care'.

5 'Let Her Alone'/'You Will Not Always Have Me': Jesus and the Disruption of Categories

I turn, finally, to what might appear to most readers to be the central concern of the texts under consideration – the position of Jesus, both as the newly-anointed one (a key focus of Schüssler Fiorenza's reading) and as the one whose words are used by successive generations of readers to configure spaces of moral judgement around the woman with the jar of ointment and other potentially un/deserving characters. My proposal, as has already been suggested in preceding sections, is that the body and words of Jesus in these texts disrupt the asymmetrical and naturalised 'right to categorize'; call readers to recognize their implication in embodied and lived relationships of power and privilege, and the ways in which these relationships can distort judgement; and hold out the promise of re-formed or transformed capacities for discernment and judgement in relation to the body of Jesus.

Consider, first, the injunction to 'let her alone'. Jesus in the texts under consideration is structurally *not* part of the judging group. The onlookers or disciples, talking amongst themselves, rebuke the woman harshly; Jesus from outside their conversation tells them, not merely that their judgement is wrong and needs to be corrected, but that they need to stop bothering her, leave her alone, get off her back.[50] He calls into question not only the specific conclusions reached but the whole configuration of the ethical/moral space – in which the woman is subject to scrutiny and the onlookers are immune. The interpretive tradition, and especially the use of the 'proof-text' discussed above, tends to take the words of Jesus as coming from a position of even more

50 See France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 553 on the translation of Matthew 26:10.

detached, universalizable and unassailable authority than those of the judges; he is like them only more so (take for example Chrysostom's reading, in which Jesus is the senior pastor training his successors). This pulls him further and further away from the woman: she is, admittedly, un/deserving, but is also the person touching him.

Jesus in this text, then, redirects perception and judgement without joining the group of judges. It is helpful in this regard to reread the text through the hypothesis of Jesus' involuntary poverty – the possibility, at least, that he *is* one of the poor whose lives are being talked about here, one of the un/deserving upon whom the 'right to categorize' is exercised.[51] He is not merely playing at taking sides with the woman (in order to be kind); he is speaking from the need for occasional luxury, extravagant care, beauty, shared delight, amid the weariness of having to live for a long time with very little.[52] On this reading the contrast between Jesus and 'the poor' – you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me – is not about setting Jesus over against the poor, but rather about questioning how the categorization of the poor and the generalizations about human nature and human history that it implies or requires – is being used to cut off or short-circuit attention to the specificities of the particular encounter, to the person who 'will not always' be here.

In this regard it is worth noting that Jesus' words honour the 'beautiful thing' or the 'good work' that is done *for him*. The onlookers are called on to stop counting (transferable, expendable) coins and thinking about 'the poor' in general, and to appreciate the bodies and lives that are brought into new forms of relationship by this unnecessarily beautiful action. Jesus' words focus evaluations of the incident on a particular relationship of care, within which he figures as a committed participant and recipient, and which also affects and touches (possibly despite themselves) those who attempt to keep their distance: the whole room is filled with the smell of the ointment. The subsequent call to let the woman alone – to leave her out of the categorisation process, to free her from being un/deserving – is not a call to ignore her; her action is to be *remembered* and her story told. As we have seen, moreover, the process of remembering and representing her seems repeatedly to pull her into new categorization exercises – while at the same time taking these exercises of categorization apart. The disharmony of the gospel texts, I suggest, performs the injunction to let the woman alone while still allowing her story to be told.

51 See for example Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2014).

52 On which see McKenzie, *Getting By*, pp. 103–7.

6 Conclusion: Challenging the Right to Categorize the Poor

In this article, by a repeated recontextualization one of the proof-texts used in moralising talk about 'the poor', I have set out the basis for a theological critique of such moralizing talk. I have suggested how the relatively privileged readers – those who are liable to claim or exercise the right to categorize in relation to the 'poor' or to any other group, and to justify it by reference to Jesus – can learn to see how they are implicated in the story. They are, variously, challenged as to their motives and their location, compelled to fix attention on the lives and experience of the categorised, and called on to see and remember differently – paying particular attention to what appears to be 'improvident' or resistant to the categorizing move, to whatever challenges asymmetrical moralization.

The very durable social phenomenon of the un/deserving poor – the subjection of the whole group of 'the poor' to categorising judgement – has been supported by Christian narratives of divine providence, and associated mobilizations of specific biblical texts, that naturalise the separation of the moral categorizers and the morally categorized – the development of asymmetrical moralization. An effective response to it from Christian ethics requires a challenge, not only to specific claims about the *un*deserving poor or to specific criteria for their identification, but also to the configuration of the space of moral reasoning, and indeed policy-making, that subjects 'the poor' to the bifurcation. Taking this challenge seriously will, I suggest, require critical attention to the 'voice' and assumed class position of Christian ethics itself, asking whether and with what consequences the ethicist takes the position of the onlooker who speaks *about* the questionably moral or provident other – and how that 'other' is defined. Who are the assumed subjects, and who the assumed objects, of moral deliberation and debate? Who enters the room as a suspect and who as a judge – and what characteristics of class, race or gender (for example) affect that initial characterisation? The point of these questions, and of the discussion in this article, is not to disable all practices of moral judgement, but rather to draw attention to how these practices are themselves implicated in and shaped by unjust social structures and relationships. Theology can provide ideological reinforcement for those structures, within as well as beyond ethics; but it can also offer the critical resources with which to challenge them.