Winston Churchill, a fountainhead of famous if sometimes maladroit quotations, noted in an address delivered on February 22, 1931, a time when he was out of office, that he was appalled to see that the Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, had recently met with the Mahatma, Mohandas Gandhi. Lord Irwin had done so in the hope of resolving a national campaign of civil disobedience in India. “It is alarming and also nauseating,” Churchill thundered, “to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle temple lawyer of the type well-known in the East, now posing as a fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor.” Gandhi was, in fact, a lawyer trained in London’s Inner Temple, not the Middle Temple. To call him a fakir—deliberately mispronounced by Churchill as “faker”—confused
identification of a poor Muslim ascetic (a faqir) with a type of Hindu ascetic, the naked or nearly naked male devotee of Shiva called a sadhu. Churchill did not always check out his facts with a historian of religion. Hindus and Buddhists in Asia have known the institution of freely embraced poverty: the sanmyasi in the Hindu tradition and the bhikku for Buddhists. Jews and Christians and Muslims have also known religious holy men and women who have chosen to live in poverty, sometimes very dramatically.

Freely chosen poverty, however, is very different from the abject poverty in which many people throughout the world have to live their daily lives, whether they want to or not. The World Bank estimated four years ago that 14.5% of the world’s population lived on less than $1.25 a day. At the same time in sub-Saharan Africa, 46.8% of the population was surviving at that low level. Of the three countries most affected by Ebola over the past 12 months, it was estimated a few years before the epidemic broke out that 83.6% of Liberians, 56.6% of Sierra Leoneans, and 40.9% of Guineans were eking out a living on that small amount. I will return to those three countries and the connection between abject poverty and the Ebola epidemic at the conclusion of this lecture. My topic this evening, however, is both types of poverty—poverty as a curse and poverty as a blessing—and their interrelated history and meaning, especially in the faith traditions of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

I.

IN VOLUNTARY AND VOLUNTARY POVERTY IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

The curse of poverty—genuine penury—did not play a visible role in the written history of Israel before the era of the monarchy in the first millennium BCE. The Hebrew Bible, however, may be giving us a
somewhat idealized portrait of the economic realities of the era long before, the centuries of the second millennium between Abraham and Samuel. Note that Abram, according to the Book of Genesis, “was very rich in cattle, silver and gold” (Gen 13:2). When Abram wanted to come to the rescue of his nephew Lot, taken prisoner in battle, he could muster in that cause “retainers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen” (Gen 14:14). These retainers were probably slaves, unable to refuse Abram’s recruitment. We do not know enough historically about Abram/Abraham and his retainers in the second millennium to be able to comment extensively on their economic situation, but there are more than a few hints of economic and social inequality, even in that era.

Genuine poverty became an issue in Israel only in the first millennium under the monarchy, first united and then divided, probably because the monarchy built itself up by crushing people with forced labor and taxation. It was precisely the continuation of these repressive policies by Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, that split the united kingdom bequeathed to Solomon by David (1 Kgs 12:1-17). Under their respective rulers both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom became polarized societies, each dominated by a small, rich ruling class lording it over a vast poorer class of the ruled, indeed, the oppressed. The seer Samuel had warned Israel about the exploitative nature of kingship when the people demanded it: “The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the Lord will not answer you on that day” (1 Sam 8:18).

The prophets of the eighth century protested on God’s behalf the economic disparities that had developed in both Kingdoms. Typical of such prophets was Amos, a native of the Southern Kingdom, who took on the elite of the Northern Kingdom in his prophetic critique of the way they exploited the poor. “Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying ‘If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the Sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using an ephah that is too small and a shekel that is too big, tilting
a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals’” (Am 8: 4-6). Two of the Hebrew words used for the indigent in that passage from Amos—‘ани and ‘еbyon—are frequently translated as “the poor and the needy.” These same paired words have had a long history in the Hebrew Bible as ways of denoting those who are truly the wretched of the earth, especially in biblical texts emanating from Deuteronomy and such seventh- and six-century prophets as Jeremiah and Ezekiel: “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers” (Deut 24:14); “[Josiah] judged the cause of the poor and the needy; then it was well” (Jer 22;16); “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom; she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy” (Ezek 16:49). Similar themes were developed by the writers of the Wisdom literature. The mother of King Lemuel— both of them hard to place historically—contributes to Proverbs sage advice she gave her royal son: “Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy” (Prov 31:8). Among the many virtues of the wife praised at the end of Proverbs is the fact that “[s]he opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.” Job, a full-time man of sorrows, complains to God and to anyone else who would listen that “the murderer rises at dusk to kill the poor and the needy” (Job 24:14). The identification of “the poor and the needy” with the upright becomes more explicit in some parts of the Wisdom literature: “The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and the needy, to kill those who walk uprightly” (Ps 37:14). Perhaps because the rich in ancient Israel felt less than the poor the necessity to rely on God for their day-to-day sustenance, the poor and the needy in the era just before the Babylonian Exile came to be identified as more devout than the rich: “Seek the Lord,/ All you humble [‘ани] of the land/ Who have fulfilled His law;/ Seek righteousness,/ Seek humility [‘anah]./Perhaps you will find shelter/ On the day of the Lord’s anger” (Zeph 2:3). This late prophetic motif identifying the poor and the needy with uprightness, combined
with similar sentiments expressed in the Psalms and Wisdom literature, hints at the gradual transition from poverty as a curse to poverty as a blessing, from literal penury to a certain spiritual freedom of those poor and needy persons who can rejoice in their situation. Their reliance on God begets in such poor and needy people a sentiment not entirely unlike that expressed in a famous song made popular by Janis Joplin in a recording released only after her tragic death: “Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.” The plural of ‘ani—either ‘aniyyim or, more frequently, ‘anawim—gradually comes to designate in the late biblical era “a cultic community,” the poor but upright people who address God collectively.

In the post-biblical era, and especially after the Roman deportation of Jews from Jerusalem and later from Judea, literal poverty proved to be the lot of many Jews in the Diaspora. Pirke Avot, a tractate of the Mishnah probably dating in literary form from the late third century CE but based on much earlier oral sources, urges generosity to the poor, quoting many rabbis to that effect: “Yose ben Yohannan of Jerusalem says: Let your house be open wide. And seat the poor at your table” (I.5). A later passage in Pirke Avot defines wealth in almost Stoic terms, justified by a quotation from the Psalms: “Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has, as it is said, When you eat the labor of your hands, happy will you be, and it will go well with you [Ps 128:2]” (IV.1). Both wealth and poverty can contribute to piety and impiety: “Rabbi Jonathan says: Whoever keeps the Torah when poor will in the end keep it in wealth. And whoever treats the Torah as nothing when he is wealthy in the end will treat it as nothing in poverty” (IV. 9). The possibility is even suggested that study of the Torah might provide one with a major part of one’s income: “Rabbi Meir says: Keep your business to a minimum and make your business Torah. And be humble before everybody. And if you treat the Torah as nothing, you will have many treating you as nothing. And if you have labored in Torah, [the Torah] has a great reward to give you” (IV. 10). But even the constant student of Torah had to confront the fact that Torah study did not
always prove profitable: “Rabbi Yannai says: We do not have in hand [an explanation] either for the prosperity of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous” (IV.15). 8

If, as it seems, Pirke Avot represents rabbinical wisdom of the last centuries before the Common Era and the first centuries of the Common Era within the geographical confines of Israel, the Babylonian Talmud as a whole, more or less complete by the sixth century, reflects a new and even poorer situation when the people of Israel had returned to their first place of exile, the Mesopotamian Valley. “Ten kabs [measures] of poverty descended to the world: nine were taken by Babylon and one by the rest of the world.” 9 Landless in much of their Diaspora history, not only in Babylonia but also in Europe, Jews were forced to rent land from Gentile landowners. Many Jews pursued not only a scholarly life of Torah and Talmud study but also, for the sake of survival, a mercantile or banking or technical vocation. Professor Jerry Z. Muller, in his entertaining study entitled Capitalism and the Jews, traces the origin of Jewish involvement in commerce to the frequent landlessness of Jews in much of Europe, a situation that made Jews—as well as such diverse exilic communities as Armenians, Parsees, Huguenots and Quakers—into what Muller characterizes as “diasporic merchant minorities, social networks [that] induced trust across wide distances.” 10

Not every diaspora Jew has been able to make a go of it in such mercantile settings. There have been Jews reduced to penury by sheer bad luck, managerial incompetence or economic downturns beyond their control, a phenomenon known as well in every other human community. In an anthropological reconstruction of the lives of Jews living in the shtetls of Russia and eastern Europe more than a century ago, it is suggested that Jews in such a setting felt disdain for those reduced to begging—schnorrers—even if those reduced to such an extremity almost seemed to have a function in society: “[The beggar] is by definition an opportunity for good deeds, and as such helps the members of the community to amass credits in heaven.” 11
Some very devout Jewish scholars have been reduced to abject poverty precisely because they have not been able or willing to combine their life of Torah and Talmud study with gainful employment. In a 2012 editorial for the weekly English-language version of what used to be called The Jewish Daily Forward, the writer or writers noted that the United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York had just discovered that “New York’s Jews are more numerous, less educated, more religious and poorer that they were a decade ago.” The editorial goes on to say that “among the Haredim—that is, those ultra-Orthodox Jews who belong to Hasidic communities . . . large families are prized and, indeed, demanded, leaving women with little opportunity to work outside the home.” For men in such circles, “the highest duty is not to earn a living but to study Jewish texts.” The editorial venting on this topic reminds me a bit of the critics of liberal education currently running national and state education departments. “At least 15% of Jewish households,” the editorial continues, “receive some form of public assistance; as many as 11% receive food stamps.” As the editorial winds down, it reluctantly admits the need “to support those who study Torah and Talmud,” but at the same time insists that it is “even more essential for the community to care for the elderly, disabled and others who are poor, but because of unfortunate circumstances.”

I can understand the irritation evidenced in this editorial, but the absolute dedication to the study of God’s Law by these impoverished scholars fascinates me. Psalm 119, the long praise of God’s Law, always brings them to mind: “Rightly do I love Your commandments more than gold, even fine gold” (Ps 119:127). It was such devout but often indigent scholars who preserved the Hebrew Scriptures for us, at least since the era of the Babylonian Exile. I cannot but be grateful for the long history of their piety and devotion, combined with poverty. The Wisdom tradition recognizes in such people that it is “[b]etter to be humble among the lowly [’anawin]/Than to share spoils with the proud” (Prov 16:19).
II.
IN VOLUN TARY AND VOL UN TA RY PO VERTY
IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The ‘anawim—both the literal poor and needy as well as the lowly of heart, no matter what their economic status—play major roles in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition. Even if Jesus and his original disciples came from relatively poor villages in rural Galilee, from at least the time when Saul of Tarsus—Saint Paul—received his call to discipleship, the early Church became more and more focused on Jews of the diaspora and their Gentile neighbors living in Greek-speaking urban centers in what are now Syria, Turkey and Greece. The urban and at least relatively prosperous situations of some of these Greek-speaking church communities in which Paul labored prompted him to call on them to “remember the poor” (Gal 2:10), the famine-struck members of the Mother Church in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4). Thus Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to contribute towards this relief fund, mindful of “the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Paul not only raised funds for the impoverished Jerusalem Church but also protested the distinctions that had arisen between the rich and the poor at the communal banquets in the Corinthian community. “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Cor 11:20-22).

One of the earlier written documents in the New Testament, dateable just after the letters of Paul, is the Letter of James, an exhortation composed originally in a Palestinian Jewish-Christian setting. The authority behind the Letter was probably James, the close relative of Jesus (his “brother”: Mk 6:3) who had presided over the Jerusalem Christian community (Gal 1:19; Acts 15:13-21). In his letter, James afflicts the
comfortable and comforts the afflicted. “Has not God chosen the poor in
the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has
promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it
not the rich who oppress you?” (Jas 2:5-6) James tolerates no excuses for
neglect of the poor: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,
and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’
and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”
(Jas 2: 15-16). He begins the final section of his exhortation with words
that might empty the pews in many a prosperous parish today: “Come
now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to
you” (Jas 5:1). 16

The two volumes of Luke, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles,
demand of their readers what has been called in modern theological
language a “preferential option for the poor.” This phrase, originating
in the work of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, has since
then penetrated official Catholic Church social teaching. The preferential
option for the poor demands of Christians that they give priority over
their own needs to the needs of “the hungry, the needy, the homeless,
those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better
future.” 18 That preferential option for the poor comes out most vividly
in Luke’s account of the beatitudes and woes with which Jesus opened
his Sermon on the Plain: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the
kingdom of God. … But woe to you who are rich, for you have received
your consolation” (Lk 6:20, 24). The Lucan scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J.,
notes that no other New Testament writer “save perhaps the author of the
Epistle of James … speaks out as emphatically as does Luke about the
Christian’s use of material possessions, wealth, and money.” 19 Fitzmyer,
moresover, does not think that it was Luke who created this theme: “There
is no reason to think,” he writes, “that it is not rooted in the preaching of
the historical Jesus.” 20 It is what Luke emphasizes and doesn’t emphasize
that differentiates his portrait of Jesus as a friend of the poor from
the work of the other evangelists. In Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the
Apostles, the author also makes much of the shared economic equality of the first Jerusalem Christian community: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

The beatitudes and woes of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain probably adhere more closely to the original words of Jesus than do the beatitudes that begin Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, and especially Matthew’s spiritualized first beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). Furthermore, Matthew’s Gospel features no parallel to the woes uttered against the rich in Luke. Note, however, that the last parable before Matthew’s account of the passion and death of Jesus memorably describes how the Son of Man at the judgment will “separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Mt 25:32). This parable, unique to Matthew, makes it very clear that the eschatological division of the flocks will be based on how well we did or did not recognize the Son of Man and serve him in the poor: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. … I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink” (Mt 25:35, 42). For Matthew, the blessing experienced by the poor in spirit must motivate them to reach out to help the genuinely poor.

Economic equality, however, was by no means the general rule in the earliest Christian communities after the New Testament era. Before the time of Constantine, and even more so into that period, the Christian Church in Rome gradually became more and more identified with the haves in society rather than with the have-nots. W. H. C. Frend notes that “[the catacomb] on the Via Latina, whose maximum use seems to span the period 250–350, shows a comparatively rich community, descending from Greek-speaking freedmen, but now thoroughly Romanized and distinctive only by their adherence to Christianity. Their relative wealth contrasts with the obvious poverty of parts of the Jewish community [in Rome] at the same period.”
In the aftermath of Constantine’s fourth-century legalization and even privileging of the Christian Church in the Roman Empire, Christians could be found in every social and economic class. According to the historian of late antiquity Peter Brown, Christians gradually transformed the Greco-Roman category of the public benefactor (*euergetes* in Greek), a civic-minded donor of facilities such as public fountains, making that benefactor over into a lover of the poor (*philoptochos*). Whereas the Greco-Roman *euergetes* benefited a particular city and its citizens, but not its non-citizens, Christian lovers of the poor exercised their charity for all, including poor immigrants living on the margins of the society, mostly non-citizens. Pre-Christian Greco-Roman society, Brown writes, “looked out on society and saw, above all, cities and citizens, while Jews and Christians had come to see, rather, rich and poor.” Saint Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier in fourth-century Gaul, came to recognize Jesus in one of the beggars who gathered outside the gates of every town and city in the Roman Empire at that time. Having divided his military cloak with that beggar by day, he recognized in a dream that night that the beggar wrapped in that half cloak was Jesus. Later in his life, Martin provided one of the greatest models of the bishop as a spokesman for the poor, presenting the needs of the vulnerable in society to the wielders of civil authority. “All over the empire,” Brown continues, “Christian bishops, clergymen and monks fostered a nonclassical image of society by the simple process of speaking as if society were, indeed, divided primarily between the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, according to a Biblical, Near Eastern model.”

Human nature being what it is, the triumph of Christianity in the declining Roman Empire and the eventual prestige of Christianity (not without struggle) in the barbarian successor kingdoms of Europe sometimes led to the enrichment of the bishops, clergymen and monks who had once championed the cause of the poor. Later champions of the poor arose, however, especially among the laity. Giovanni di Pietro Bernardone, a thirteenth-century Umbrian youth whose father traveled
frequently to France in the silk trade, was known as a result by the nickname ‘Francesco’ for his love of all things French. After a short period as a prisoner of war in a border dispute between Umbrian cities, this young man began to see life differently. On a pilgrimage to Rome, he exchanged his clothes with a beggar and spent time begging for alms, discovering simultaneously both the curse of poverty and its blessing. Disowned for his profligate love of the poor by his merchant father—whose wealth Francesco had squandered (in the father’s opinion) on lepers—the hitherto carefree youth came upon an image of the crucified Christ in a broken-down chapel near his home town. Christ seemed to speak to this young man in transition, addressing him by the nickname his father had once given him. Francesco, va’, ripara la mia casa che, come vedi, è tutta in rovina (“Go, Francesco, repair my house which, as you can see, is completely collapsing.”) Gradually young Giovanni ‘Francesco’ di Pietro Bernardone—better known to us today as Francis of Assisi—came to see that his poor and crucified Lord had not the chapel of San Damiano in mind but the Church in a much larger sense, a Church in a state of collapse because it had lost Christ’s orientation to the realities of the poor.29

For Francis, poverty was eventually imagined as his spouse, Lady Poverty.30 Voluntary poverty spread like wildfire among lay people throughout the medieval European church of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, inspiring many Christians to embrace the vision of Francis. Among the first of these lay followers was Chiara Offreduccio, a young noblewoman of Assisi, who, under the inspiration of Francis, became the first nun in the Franciscan tradition, Saint Clare of Assisi (1194-1253). Lay people not feeling called to communal and celibate religious life also embraced the vision of Francis in the movement that came to be called the Third Order of Saint Francis. Even when Franciscan men were ordained to the priesthood, they did not take on clerical titles like Don (from dominus, lord) but preferred the humbler title Fra in Italian, a short vocative for Frate or Fratello (Brother or Friar). They
shared this humble title with the members of other mendicant orders, communities without fixed revenues who lived by begging, most notably the Dominicans. Franciscans eventually introduced to communal religious life the formal vow of poverty, even if the spirit of poverty had pervaded monastic communities tracing their origin to the first Christian millennium as well as other medieval mendicant orders. Controversy about how literally and strictly Franciscan poverty was to be interpreted bedeviled the history of the Franciscan movement within a few years of the death of Saint Francis, and it has been a constant source of fracturing within that movement ever since.

Women of means throughout Europe, inspired by the charism shared by Francis and Clare, followed in their footsteps over the next few centuries. Saint Agnes of Prague (1211–1282), with whom Saint Clare had engaged in extensive correspondence, brought the Franciscan charism to Bohemia. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, also known as Elizabeth of Thuringia (1207–1231), died at the age of 24 in the service of the poor, but managed posthumously to inspire her grandniece, Saint Elizabeth of Portugal (1271–1336), to do the same. All these noble women continued the tradition of voluntary poverty precisely through their service of the abject poor and those rejected by society, like lepers. In embracing voluntary poverty, these formerly wealthy women achieved a remarkable independence from male domination, whether that domination was expressed in the bonds of marriage or in the hierarchy of the Church.

In our time and in this city, one of the greatest exemplars of lay voluntary poverty in the Christian tradition was Dorothy Day (1897–1980), along with her many companions in the Catholic Worker movement. Reflecting on her life with the poor in an autobiography written in mid-life, Day spoke with the same Franciscan spirit that fired those medieval women to give up everything to serve the poor: “The most significant thing about The Catholic Worker is poverty, some say. The most significant thing is community, others say. We are not alone any more. But the final word is love.” In the year 2000, shortly before his own death, Cardinal
John O’Connor of New York began the process for the possible future canonization of the Servant of God, Dorothy Day. A no-nonsense woman, Dorothy Day would have had reservations about such honors: “Don’t trivialize me,” she once said, “by trying to make me a saint.”

III.
INVolUNTARY and VoLUNTARY POVERTY IN THE MUSLIM TRADITION

Very different from any of the Jewish and Christian settings of poverty and wealth described above was the socioeconomic setting of Muhammad’s lifetime and his prophetic career. Although Muslims trace the origins of their faith tradition at least to the era of Abraham or even to the moment of creation, the details of Muhammad’s life loom large in any understanding of Islam. As in all things Muslim, we must begin with what we can find out about Muhammad’s life from the word of God experienced by Muhammad between the years 610 and 632 CE and eventually written down as the Qur’an. From the Qur’an and from the memories of Muhammad’s words and deeds recorded in the body of Tradition (hadith), we can gain much insight into the early seventh-century Meccan and other Arab market settings of Muhammad and his first companions.

The life situation of Muhammad (b. ca. 570), starting with his childhood, confronted him with many problems that would affect his later career. His father died before his birth and his mother died when he was about six years of age. Although Muhammad was raised until he was eight by his grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muttalib, and later by his father’s brother, Abu Talib, there was no escaping the reality that Muhammad was an orphan (yatim) in a society in which lineage and inheritance were of paramount importance. One of the earliest-revealed portions of the Qur’an dwells in part on God’s providence for Muhammad as an orphan: “Did [God] not come on you an orphan and extend help to you? Did [God] not come on you a wanderer and give you guidance? Did [God] not come upon you
destitute and give you sustenance?” (Qur’an 93:6-8). All these personal examples of divine providence experienced by Muhammad are meant to motivate him to become the instrument of divine providence for orphans and for the poor: “Wherefore the orphan do not subjugate,/ Wherefore the beggar do not drive away/ Wherefore let your story concern the graciousness of your Lord” (Qur’an 93:9-11).

His uncle Abu Talib extended social protection to Muhammad even as an adult, when Muhammad’s financial situation had stabilized, partly because of his marriage to the prosperous widow Khadija, whose business interests Muhammad had ably managed. Social protection from Abu Talib as well as the comfort afforded by his wife proved especially valuable when Muhammad began to experience divine revelation and to attempt to share that revelation with his Meccan contemporaries. Many Meccans resented the religious and economic implications of that revelation, especially the critique of polytheism and the championing of the downtrodden poor. Did not such critiques of Meccan religion and wealth threaten the pilgrimage trade that drew merchants from every quarter of the Arabian Peninsula to Mecca to venerate the many gods enshrined in the Ka’ba and to engage in lucrative trade? If, as Muhammad preached, there is only one God, what would happen to this great polytheistic shrine in a monotheistic Muslim future? God assured Muhammad and his hearers that the pilgrimage to the Ka’ba, the central shrine of Mecca, and the prosperous trade associated with that pilgrimage, would continue, even if that polytheistic shrine had to be purified of its idols. The brief Sura of the Quraysh alludes to this abiding importance of the Ka’ba, even after the monotheistic reform it would have to undergo. “For securing the situation of the Quraysh,/ for securing their situation during their summer and winter trade missions:/ Let them worship the Lord of this House/ Who has provisioned them against hunger/ and extended protection to them against fear” (Qur’an 106: 1-5).
Abu Talib’s protection of Muhammad continued right up to Abu Talib’s own death in 619 or 620, by which time Muhammad was nearly 50. Another uncle of Muhammad then took the headship of the clan, an uncle remembered by the name Abu Lahab, “the father of the flame,” possibly not a real name at all but an allusion to his deserving the flames of hell, along with his wife. For this power couple of seventh-century Mecca, Muhammad’s preaching about monotheism and economic justice threatened to disrupt business as usual, and especially business as usual for the Banu Hashim, the clan to which Muhammad and Abu Lahab both belonged. The brief but sharp Sura of the Palm Fibre takes on Abu Lahab and his wife. “Cursed be the power of Abu Lahab, cursed be he!/ No profit will accrue to him from his wealth or what he has earned./ He will be burned in fire, a fire of raging flame/ along with his wife, who will carry the kindling/tied around her neck with a palm-fibre rope” (Qur’an 111:1-5).

Some sense for the critique of mercantile excess found in the Qur’an, as well as the exhortation to generosity towards the poor, can be found in the Sura of the [Sacred] Ground: “We have created you in affliction/ Do you calculate that there is no Superior Power at all?/ You say: ‘Look at the wealth I have squandered.’/ Do you think there is no One to see this?/ Did We not give you two eyes?/ a tongue and two lips?/ Did We not guide you to the place where two paths diverge?/ Yet you do not embark boldly on the steep ascent./ What can explain to you what the steep ascent is?/ Freeing a slave,/ feeding at a time of want /an orphan from among your kin/ or some poor beggar reduced to penury” (Qur’an 90:4-16). The parallelism in this passage between a slave (raqaba), an orphan (yatim) and a poor beggar (miskin) sum up the abject poor in Meccan society when Muhammad was first receiving revelation.

The institution of zakat, eventually considered one of the five pillars of Islam, aimed at taxing the wealth of the prosperous in society and sharing it with the poor. Quite literally, zakat means purification and in the later Muslim tradition was distinguished from free-will almsgiving (sadaqa),
although the distinction between the two concepts is not entirely settled in the text of the Qur’an. Collected ultimately by a central authority in any Muslim society and fixed usually at 2.5% of profits made in a particular year, zakat funds are not entirely different from the Church taxes paid in certain European countries, even in modern times, funds that are used by the churches for charitable purposes. Most of the references to zakat in the Qur’an are paired with mentions of the ritual worship (salat) and can be found in passages revealed in Medina after the Prophet and his companions migrated there in the year 622. That this systematization of almsgiving should have developed in Medina after that year is not surprising, since it was only there that the Prophet had to face up to pressing new realities like widows and orphans of those slain in battles with hostile Mecca. A late portion of the Qur’an, the Sura of Repentance, makes no distinction between zakat and sadaqa, but it does specify a list of suitable beneficiaries for such levies: “Alms are for the needy and the poor beggar, for those who work [to collect tax], for securing [converts’] hearts, for freeing slaves and debtors, for [those who struggle] on the path of God, for the traveler on a journey: this is a command from God. God knows best and is all-wise” (Qur’an 9:60).

The distinction in that last-cited passage between the needy (fuqara’) and poor beggars (masakin) foreshadows the eventual growth in Islamic history of a class of the poor in spirit (fuqara’ in the plural, faqir in the singular), the people with whom Churchill confused Gandhi. Although the Qur’an normally uses forms of the root F-Q-R to designate actual poverty, there are a few hints in the Qur’an that words from this root may also designate those whose need is more spiritual, a deep longing for God or for God’s gifts. Moses in the desert of Midian prays that God might direct him to a suitable wife: “Lord, of whatever good you send down to me I stand in need (faqirun)” (Qur’an 28:24). In the Sura of the Angels, God describes the difference between the human situation and the greatness of God: “O humankind, you are the needy ones (fuqara’) in relation to God and God is wealthy, worthy of all praise” (Qur’an 35:15).
Very early in the history of Islam, there developed ascetical and mystical traditions that can in some sense trace themselves back to the Prophet himself and his first companions. Muhammad’s example encouraged simplicity of life among those who had gone into exile with him in Medina. Some of these fellow migrants had no relatives or allies there, becoming more or less totally dependent on Muhammad. They lived, according to tradition, in a covered portico of the Prophet’s mosque in Medina, where they slept on benches. Thus they were called the Ahl al-Suffa, “the people of the bench.” Mystics in the Muslim tradition sometimes cite these poor disciples of Muhammad as their spiritual ancestors. To Muhammad himself as the model of holy poverty the later mystics attribute a two-word pun in Arabic: Faqri fakhri (“My poverty is my glory!”). The mystical tradition of Islam developed more fully after the year 800, especially when the reforming energies of the ‘Abbasid caliphate had declined and worldliness seeped into the lives of the elite, a worldliness not that very different from that of the preceding Umayyad caliphate. The unworldliness of mystics, epitomized in their rough cloaks of wool (in Arabic, suf), differentiated Sufis from their wealthy contemporaries who tended to bedeck themselves in linen and even silk. Handbooks of mystical piety gradually developed in parts of the Muslim world, many of them detailing stages of the devotee’s development in the spiritual life. The first major description of the stages of mystical growth came from the pen of a tenth-century Iranian writer named Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988). In his Kitab al-Luma’ (“The Book of Shafts of Light”), al-Sarraj details seven stages (maqamat) in mystical development: repentance, watchfulness, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust, acceptance [of God’s grace]. Poverty seems to be the central stage, greater than renunciation (zuhd) but less than patient waiting (sabr) for God’s Self-manifestation. Al-Sarraj begins his treatment of poverty with a taxonomy of the mystical poor: “The first rank includes those who do not own anything, who do not seek anything from anyone, outwardly or inwardly, who do not expect
anything from anybody, and who, if they are offered anything, refuse it.”

This seems fairly advanced until one comes to the second rank of those who profess spiritual poverty: “The second rank consists of those who do not own anything, who do not ask of anyone, who do not make requests, who do not busy themselves about anything, who do not make hints, but who, if they are given something without asking, accept it.” The second rank’s non-refusal of freely given donations puts them on a higher rank than the first rank’s refusal of gifts, something that could appear arrogant. “The third rank consists of those who do not own anything. If one of them is in need, he opens himself to a brother that he knows will rejoice in his confidence in him. The atonement gift for a request is the free gift.” By a curious irony, the third and highest rank of the poor may actually beg but do so with supreme confidence in God and in those who donate to them.

Of the Muslim mystics I have known over the years, members of the Tijaniyya mystical confraternity in Accra, the one who was closest to the ideal of poverty sketched by al-Sarraj was my old friend, the late Malam Baba. I use the nickname by which he was best known 35 years ago (‘Papa Teacher’); his real name was Musa ibn Muhammad. Earlier in his life he had prayed professionally for politicians and business entrepreneurs that God would bless their pursuits. As a result, he lived in a modest house a bit more substantial than many of the others in Nima, the largely Muslim central section of Accra. But with the years, especially as his sight deteriorated because of a brain tumor, Malam Baba became more interior, concentrating on his deepest poverty, his neediness for God. When I first sought out Malam Baba, I wanted to learn more about the history of the Tijaniyya among the Hausa-speakers in Accra. I soon found out that Malam Baba had no interest in discussing such mundane matters. He wanted to talk about God, about Jesus, about Muhammad.

In all the time I knew Malam Baba, his radical detachment amazed me. His only interest was God, and he wanted to know about my experience of God. I finally stopped taking any notes on our conversations: We had
become brothers in our poverty, in our need to seek enrichment from God alone. About a year after I first started to visit Malam Baba regularly, I went on sabbatical to the United States. While I was away, some of Malam Baba’s disciples came by taxi to my house on the campus of the University of Ghana. Malam Baba’s brain tumor had worsened and he was dying. Alas, I was far away, not able to be with him at the end, to be with that man who shared his poverty with me, who shared with me the radical nature of his need for God, and the enrichment he had experienced from God alone. Al-baqa’ l’illahi: Only God is everlasting. Inna l’illahi wa inna’ ilayhi raji’un: Truly we belong to God and to God alone we will return (Qur’an 2:156). Rahimahu Allah: May God grant him mercy.

IV.

THE NEW POWERELLO: POPE FRANCIS ON POVERTY

In May 2014, just after Pope Francis had prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, he turned to his two Argentinian friends and fellow pilgrims, Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Imam Omar Abboud. Instinctively the three embraced, and embraced in such a way that photographers could not for a moment catch their faces on camera. I keep that photograph in my office: It’s all about God, not about the three of them. Those three Argentinians, whose faces we cannot see, are people who have seen God in the faces of their fellow human beings, and especially in the faces of the poor.

In the book that Cardinal Bergoglio and Rabbi Skorka published together in 2010, three years before the conclave that detained Bergoglio in Rome, the rabbi and the cardinal discussed many topics of mutual concern. One of them was poverty. Rabbi Skorka drew attention to the importance of what the Hebrew Bible calls tsedekah, helping the poor, and what the Talmud calls gemilut hasidim, acts of loving kindness. “Every act of tsedekah,” Rabbi Skorka continued, “must be performed with mercy.” Bergoglio replied that “the concept of gemilut hasidim made me think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, when Jesus asks who acted as a true neighbor and the people respond: ‘He who was merciful. He who took
In another context Imam Abboud has expressed his wonderment about the way he and Bergoglio have been able over the years to engage each other on the subject of mercy. Abboud, a younger man than either Pope Francis or Rabbi Skorka, noted how much he learned from Bergoglio: “How can a Muslim learn from a Catholic priest? … I learned the dynamic of Islamic mercy through his words. … From Bergoglio it was a whole lesson in the exercise of mercy, in improving your view of the other by putting yourself in their shoes.”

It is not for nothing that Pope Francis chose as his papal motto three words from a Latin homily of Saint Bede on the call of the tax-collector Matthew to join the company of his disciples: *miserando atque eligendo* (“Taking pity on him and choosing him”). The famous painting of Caravaggio illuminates that moment perfectly, with Jesus looking beyond the others in the tax-collector’s office and pointing to the man he wants, Matthew, asking him to renounce all and follow him. The mercy and pity of God and the mystery of divine election to voluntary poverty combine in this image and in those words of Bede, both so important for understanding the present Pope.

In his November 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangellii gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), the first major document of his papacy, Pope Francis raised some hackles in the Wall Street community when he asked questions like the following: “How can it be that it is not news when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?” (53). He cut even closer to the bone when he mentioned how “some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized working of the prevailing economic system” (54).
Pope Francis is stirring up a hornet’s nest, and I think quite deliberately. Some Catholics on Wall Street were offended by the Pope’s critique of capitalism, and especially his critique of what George H. W. Bush originally called “voodoo economics.” It was the senior Bush, campaigning against Ronald Reagan for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, who first coined that expression. By “voodoo economics” Bush meant the “trickle-down” theories eventually promoted in the Reagan era, with Bush as an enthusiastic later convert, now as Vice President and later as President, to that form of voodoo.

The claim has been made that the internationalization of the free market has increased the wealth and well-being of peoples around the world. I have not found this to be true in Africa over the past 50 years. More than 10,000 people have died of the Ebola virus in the past year, especially in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone—the three countries whose percentages of people earning less than $1.25 a day I cited at the beginning of this lecture. It is a little known fact that the Ebola virus takes its name from the Ebola River Valley in the northeastern corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo (once Zaire) where this terrible plague first broke out in 1976. After 1976, very little research money went into developing a cure for Ebola, because—unlike AIDS—Ebola afflicted only poor black people in what my Irish relatives would call the back of beyond. All sufferers from AIDS in Africa can be glad that it also afflicted white people in the United States and Western Europe. This led to well-funded research and the development of anti-retrovirals.

The College of Cardinals may not have realized, on March 13, 2013, that they were electing a different sort of Pope. By now, some of them may even be suffering from buyer’s remorse. One of the participants in that 2013 Conclave, the Brazilian Franciscan Cardinal Claudio Hummes, a long-term friend of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, whispered to the newly elected pope: “Don’t forget the poor people.” Pope Francis later said that immediately he remembered Saint Francis of Assisi and “the name Francis came into my heart.” Il poverello, the poor man of Assisi, has moved to Rome. Like the
original *poverello*, he eschews fancy dress and has taken much interest in homeless beggars, abandoned refugees, the victims of war. I don't think the new *poverello* will leave Rome unchanged. At least I hope so.
NOTES


2 For these statistics, see http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/region/SSA

3 With one exception noted below, all quotations from the Hebrew Bible come from the translation of the Jewish Publication Society, Hebrew-English TANAKH (Philadelphia: JPS, 5759/1999).

4 The word used for these retainers, hanikh, is unique in the Bible, according to Nahum M. Sarna, author of the commentary in The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 5749/1989), 108. The statement that they were “born into his household” seems to mean that they were slaves born of slaves. “Such were regarded as being more reliable than purchased slaves” (ibid.). The great collection of aggadic midrash on Genesis, Bereshit Rabbah, a work composed in stages by rabbis throughout the first few centuries of the Common Era, suggests that these retainers were not entirely happy with their mobilization. It also suggests that they were adopted by Abram, since they bore his name, but that would not be inconsistent with the practice of slave-owners in many times and places. One particular rabbi quoted in this work of midrash even suggests that “three hundred and eighteen” really refer to just one retainer, Eliezer, the patriarch’s plenipotentiary (Gen 15:2, 24:2), the numerical value of whose name equals 318. See Midrash Rabbah, tr. and ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1939), I:352-53 (=Lech lecha, XJIII, 2).

5 I have used the NRSV translation of the passages here cited because they are consistent (unlike the JPS) in translating the paired Hebrew words, ‘ani and ‘ebyon as ‘poor’ and ‘needy.’

6 The song, “Me & Bobby McGee,” originally written by Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster, was first performed in 1969 by Roger Miller.


8 All these quotations derive from Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Avot, tr. and ed. Jacob Neusner (Dallas, TX: Rossel Books, 1984).


15 This James, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, was put to death at the instigation of the High Priest during an interregnum between two Roman procurators of Judea around 62 CE. See *Antiquities of the Jews* XX.9.1, available online at www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/Ant-20.htm.


20 Ibid., 248.


24 Ibid., 9.

25 Ibid., 12.


30 See Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, Chapter 25: “Looking upon poverty as especially dear to the Son of God, though it was spurned throughout the whole world, [Francis] sought to espouse it in perpetual charity . . . Thereafter he gathered her to himself with chaste embraces and not even for an hour did he allow himself not to be her husband.”


34 See Cardinal John O’Connor, “Dorothy Day’s Sainthood Cause Begins,” *Catholic New York* (Column of March 16, 2000) as copied in the online resources of The Catholic Worker Movement: www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/canonizationtext.cfm?Number=82. Cardinal O’Connor in his column seemed more interested in the canonization of Dorothy Day because of her repentance for the abortion she had once procured: “To be sure,” he wrote, “her life is a model for all in the third millennium, but especially for women who have had or are considering abortions.”

35 Wilfred Cantwell Smith justly noted that “[t]o the Muslim . . . Islam is the religion of God. This means a great many things; among others, that it began not in the seventh century . . . but at least on the day of creation, if not before.” See *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957, rpt. 1977), 10.

36 See E. Chaumont and R. Shaham, “YATIM,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition*, ed. P. J. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), XI: 299a-300b. All further references to this work will refer to it simply as EI 2, with the author(s), article, volume and pages noted.

37 All translations from the Qur’an in this text are my own.


40 Similarly, the Sura of Muhammad (Qur’an 47:38) declares that “God is wealthy and you are needy.”


44 This translation of the work’s title is suggested by P. Lory in “AL-SARRADJ, ABU NASR ‘ABD ALLAH B. ‘ALI,” *EI* 2 IX: 65b-66b.


46 Ibid., 205.

47 Ibid.


50 The full sentence in Latin comes from a homily of Saint Bede the Venerable on the call of Matthew (Mt 9:9): *Vidit ergo Jesus publicanum, et quia miserando atque eligendo vidit, ait illi, Sequere me* (“Jesus therefore saw the tax collector and—because he was taking pity on him and choosing him—said to him, ‘Follow me’”). An excerpt from that homily of Saint Bede is read in the Office of Readings of the Divine Office in the Roman Rite for the Feast of Saint Matthew every September 21st. The Latin original can be found as Homily 21 (22?) of Saint Bede in *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum* 122: 149-51, or as Homily XXX in *The Complete Works of Venerable Bede*, ed. and tr. John Allen Giles (London: Whitaker and Co., 1843) V [Homilies], 221. The latter edition is available as a Google E-Book. In a 2013 interview the Pope detailed why he chose this motto from Saint Bede, based on an experience he had of sacramental confession on the Feast of Saint Matthew in 1953 when he was 17 years old. See A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis, ed. Antonio Spadaro, S.J. (San Francisco: Harper One, 2013), 8.

51 For the text of this Apostolic Exhortation, see www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium. The quotations that follow are identified in the text by the paragraph numbering of the English version.
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