ON HELPING ONE'S NEIGHBOR

Exploring what he calls "the moral horror that is severe poverty," Bharat Ranganathan develops a demanding account of the obligations that affluent people have to assist severely impoverished people. He argues that this is an immediate ethical as much as a social or structural imperative. Noting that developmental economists and moral and political philosophers have focused on wealth inequalities in increasingly sophisticated ways, Ranganathan observes that – within religious ethics – normative issues around severe poverty have nevertheless received insufficient attention. Bringing together general moral, religious, and philosophical principles with particular economic, social, and political realities, and engaging constructively with the writings of John Rawls and Peter Singer, this passionately argued book boldly challenges deleterious trends within ethics by unpacking, in a much more systematic way than hitherto, the pressing dilemmas around acute impoverishment. It will find an eager readership among scholars of religion, ethics, developmental studies, and theology.

BHARAT RANGANATHAN is the Rabbi Sidney and Jane Brooks Assistant Professor of Social Justice and Religion in the Religious Studies Program at the University of Nebraska Omaha. His teaching and research interests include religious ethics, philosophy of religion, and theology. *On Helping One's Neighbor* is his first book.

"The topic is often raised by religious ethicists but has rarely been treated with this amount of depth or focus. Bharat Ranganathan has produced an outstanding book on the subject, one of great importance that will provoke further conversations on the moral obligations of the affluent to those living in extreme poverty."

—Nichole M. Flores, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia

"Bharat Ranganathan's well-written and carefully argued book is the most sustained discussion yet published of the pressing topic of severe poverty which draws on religious ethics. It represents an important (though increasingly less prominent) tradition of joining Christian ethics and religious philosophy."

—Eric S. Gregory, Professor of Religion, Princeton University

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On Helping One's Neighbor

Severe Poverty and the Religious Ethics of Obligation

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In memory of Garrett, George, Josh, Peter, and Scott: "Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this." – Eccl. 7:10

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Preface

In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, journalist Katherine Boo narrates the stories of the people who live in Annawadi, a shantytown that exists on land belonging to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai. Now surrounded by high-rise condominiums and office towers, India's second busiest airport is a beacon to both domestic and international financiers and politicians that signals India's continuing economic ascendance. When repair work on the airport's runway began in 1991, the previously uninhabited area on which Annawadi now exists was settled by migrant workers from Tamil Nadu. After these repairs were completed, the workers remained and were joined by migrants from elsewhere in India and Pakistan. Boo's story thus far tells about industrious people taking what was uninhabited and putting it to productive use.[1] But the reality for those who live in Annawadi is grim. "Everything around us is roses," Mirchi, an Annawadian youth says. "And we're the shit in between."[2]

Living in makeshift and ramshackle abodes, Annawadians are under constant duress. Since they live next to a sewage lake, Annawadians are subject to disease, hunger, and strife. While the Indian government doesn't classify anyone living in Annawadi as poor, "only six of the slum's three thousand

[1] Cf. Gen. 1:26–28. [2] Quoted in Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, xii.

residents had permanent jobs."[3] Furthermore, because they live on land that belongs to the airport authority, Annawadians have the ever-present fear that their homes, whether made from aluminum and reject bricks or held together by duct tape and rope, will be razed. In juxtaposing the glittering Mumbai airport, on the one side, and the depressing Annawadi, on the other side, Boo indicts the severe economic, religious, and social inequalities that characterize India and the contemporary Global South. While the bustling international airport brings commerce and tourism, the people who toil in the airport's shadows see few (if any) benefits from it. And while Mumbai is known as a leader in the film, finance, information technology, and textile industries, over a million people in the bursting metropolis live in utter destitution. For those of us who live in the affluent Global North, the day-to-day lives of Annawadians are unimaginable.

Consider, for example, the story of Abdul Hakim Husain, a teenager who lives along with his family in Annawadi. Whereas most American teenagers spend their days in school, chase after their crushes, or argue with their parents about the car, Abdul is a second-generation garbage picker – "the stigmatized position he'd been born to" – and his family's breadwinner.[4] Whereas most American teenagers think about the promise of college, India makes a person know his place, "and wishing things different struck Abdul as a childish pastime."[5] And whereas most American teenagers aspire to the American dream, Abdul longs to have regular access to basic human necessities. Toiling day after day,

> He had made a profit of five hundred rupees, or eleven dollars a day … With this take, added to savings from the previous year, his parents would now make their first deposit on a twelve-hundred-square-foot plot of land in a quiet community in Vasai,

[3] Ibid., 6. [4] Ibid., 15. [5] Ibid.

> just outside the city, where Muslim recyclers predominated. If life and global markets kept going their way, they would soon be landowners, not squatters, in a place where Abdul was sure no one would call him garbage.[6]

In Boo's telling, Abdul's understanding of himself reveals the deeply entrenched socioeconomic stratification that characterizes India. "There were too many people in Mumbai for everyone to have a job, so why wouldn't Kunbi-caste Hindus from Maharashtra hire other Kunbis from Maharashtra," Abdul himself reflects, "instead of hiring a Muslim of garbage-related provenance?"[7] Boo's narrative gives us insight into the lives of Mumbai's underclass; it also highlights, dramatically and painfully, deeper and more pressing issues.

In the popular, philosophical, and religious imaginations, to be called garbage is degrading and inhumane. Such an evaluation – whether of ourselves or others – is inconsistent with the ethical, political, and religious norms that inform the contemporary practice and theory of human rights. For example, it is inconsistent with the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes that the "inherent dignity" and the "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Calling Abdul, a teenager, garbage is also inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "Every child deprived of liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, and in a manner which takes into account the needs of persons of his or her age" (Art. 37). And it is inconsistent with religious ethics, for example, Catholic Social Teaching: "Human

[6] Ibid., 15–16. [7] Ibid., 13–14.

persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are."[8]

There is a striking dissonance between Annawadians' lives and the norms articulated in these and other ethical, political, and religious doctrines. More specifically, these doctrines state, in abstract and general terms, that humans possess dignity. To be sure, our dignity is something inherent to us: It is neither something we achieve nor something that others can take away. In other words, dignity is something we possess simply by virtue of being human; neither our identities nor our empirical statuses, for example, rich or poor, male or female, abled or disabled, religious or non-religious, affect our status as bearers of dignity. Simply by virtue of our common humanity, then, we all possess dignity and are all equal members of the human family. To borrow from the philosopher Stephen Darwall's distinction, we should *recognize* rather than *appraise* ourselves and others as bearers of this status.[9] That is to say, whereas appraisal establishes our worth based upon particular characteristics or excellences, recognition attaches to our status simply by virtue of our common humanity.

But Annawadi tells us another story. When we view someone as garbage, we don't recognize them as members of the human family; rather, we appraise them in a negative way, undercutting their inherent dignity and failing to acknowledge them as our equals. The socioeconomic stratification that obtains within India and between the Global South and Global North exacerbates these matters. Recognition and appraisal, however, aren't limited to relationships between ourselves and

[8] John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, §11. Cf. Gen. 1:27: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."
[9] See Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect."

others; they can and often do inform our relationship with ourselves. Comparing his circumstances as a trash-picker and slum-dweller with the affluent lifestyles and upward mobility of other Indians, Abdul doesn't recognize himself as a bearer of human dignity. Like other Annawadians, Abdul *knows* that his place has been more or less determined – economics, religion, and society inform and enforce this vision.

The reality that Abdul and other Annawadians endure is neither isolated nor unique. For billions of people throughout the Global South – all bearers of human dignity, all members of the human family – daily life is degrading and dehumanizing. According to recent data from the United Nations Development Programme, for example, there are 1.3 billion people, predominantly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, who suffer from multidimensional poverty and consequently lack healthcare, sanitation, and water. But at the same time, we witness the continuing construction of condominiums, hotels, and office towers such as those that surround the Mumbai airport; we are told that global affluence is increasing and that a rising tide will lift all boats. For Annawadians and others who live in the Global South, however, global affluence and development don't correspond to the morally horrific reality that they face. And what is this reality? It is one where severe material inequality precludes and weakens; it is one where hundreds of millions of children are uneducated; it is one where adults are chronically under- or unemployed; it is one where disease and hunger arbitrarily and prematurely terminate lives; and it is one where unlucky Global Southerners have no other option – how could they? – but to worry about what suffering tomorrow will bring.[10]

[10] See the United Nations Development Programme's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). which focuses on three interrelated categories: health (esp. nutrition and child mortality), education (esp. years of schooling and

Preface

Annawadi and elsewhere in the Global South present one vision of reality. But is there another one?

* * *

According to the biblical narrative, God is one with the poor and oppressed.

> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm … and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut. 26:6–9)

And God enjoins us: "Speak up for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Prov. 31:8–9). Taken together, to love God is to love the neighbor, to love the neighbor is to love God: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him" (Prov. 14:31). But in a world of striking hostility, oppression, and suffering – a world in which there is so much severe poverty – what does God demand?

We should respond to the moral horror that is severe poverty. For our present reality isn't the one God created. "God saw all that he had made, and indeed, it was very

school attendance), and living standards (esp. cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, and assets). On the development of MPI, see Sabina Alkire and Selim Jahan, "The New Global MPI 2018: Aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals." 2018 UNDP Human Development Report Office (HDRO) Occasional Paper. The 2018 MPI dataset is available at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/table_6_2018_mpi.xlsx. Since its development, MPI has replaced the Human Development Index (HDI) previously used by the United Nations Development Programme to measure severe poverty.

good" (Gen. 1:31). In our condition of sinfulness and the fallenness of the world, in our immoral relationships and our unjust institutions, however, we don't mirror the goodness of God's creation. In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis thus observes:

> [W]e should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights.[11]

God commands us to love our neighbor. And even in our sinfulness and fallenness, we are to show mercy for those who suffer corporally: to feed the hungry; slake the thirsty; clothe the naked; welcome the stranger; tend to the sick; and visit the imprisoned. To love God and to love the neighbor demands as much.

For religious ethicists, the task is to make sense of these commands in light of the extreme and widespread suffering to which severe poverty gives rise. For ours is a world where there is both economic development and nondevelopment; both equal rights and unequal treatment; both equal opportunity and substantive exclusion; and both political representation and misrepresentation. In each of these pairs, we find immoral and unjust divisions, asymmetries between

[11] Francis, *Laudato si'*, §90. In his most recent encyclical, Francis indicts what he calls our "throwaway culture," according to which some people "can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others worthy of a carefree existence," *Fratelli tutti*, §18.

the self and the other, between us and our neighbors. And these are inconsistent with the vision of community among humans in relation to God: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). Following this vision, responding to severe poverty isn't merely a technical problem, one to be mechanically theorized; rather, it is a moral, political, and religious one, requiring us to reflect on what it means to recognize others as our neighbors and to prove ourselves neighbor.

How should we respond to the moral horror that is severe poverty? How should we prove ourselves neighbor? And what contributions can religious ethics make? These questions – humanistic and philosophical, moral and religious – are my concern.

* * *

How will I approach these concerns? I am trained in religious ethics and moral and political philosophy. More specifically, I trained in how religious thought intersects with ethics and politics, initially in Protestant social ethics and later in Catholic Social Teaching. Furthermore, I did my graduate and postgraduate training in institutional settings where the study of religious thought is in conversation with a cognate discipline. I view religious ethics and moral and political philosophy as natural conversation partners for one another. While there will inevitably be disagreements with one another – about basic assumptions, about substantive conclusions, about whether one is superior to the other – religious ethicists and moral and political philosophers are concerned with how we should think about right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice. To be sure, some religious ethicists and theologians are suspicious about the possibilities that such conversations may afford; similarly, some moral and political philosophers

are suspicious toward (if not derisive of) religious thought. I will not be concerned to dispel these suspicions.[12]

And to whom am I speaking? I am convinced that severe poverty is *the* moral horror facing our globalized and interconnected world. Severe poverty subjects billions of people to dehumanizing conditions and takes millions of lives prematurely. Furthermore, various other moral, political, and social problems – for example, political disenfranchisement, land displacement, environmental racism, and gender violence – variously find their roots in severe poverty. Moreover, I believe that affluent people are implicated, morally and politically, in perpetuating severe poverty. Given these convictions, I will draw from religious ethics and moral and political philosophy to develop an account of the obligations that affluent people have to assist severely poor people. In developing this account, I don't presuppose that we share the same religious (or non-religious) commitments. But I do presuppose that we both take severe poverty as morally horrific and believe that both religious ethics and moral and political philosophy have important insights to offer for how we should respond to this problem.

***

I conclude with some comments about how I practice religious ethics and in turn will examine and develop arguments about our obligations to assist severely poor people. First, I will delimit religious ethics to resources drawn from contemporary Christian ethics and moral theology. In doing so, I intend neither to homologize the diversity that Christianity

[12] In my estimation, these suspicions are sometimes warranted and other times unwarranted. For some reflections on the relationship between religious ethics, especially Christian ethics, and moral and political philosophy, see my review of Per Sundman's *Egalitarian Liberalism Revisited*. See also Paul Weithman, "Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*: An Introduction," 179.

names nor gainsay or deny the moral and religious convictions and insights of other non-Christian traditions.[13] Second, I will limit myself for the most part to thinkers and texts in religious ethics and moral and political philosophy that I believe serve as fundamental benchmarks for thinking about our obligations to others in general and severely poor people in particular.[14] In doing so, I intend neither to ignore nor downplay new developments in religious ethics or moral and political philosophy; rather, I wish to emphasize and engage with thinkers and texts that have proved durable and will enable me to develop an account about our obligations to assist severely poor people.[15] Third, these fundamental benchmarks and the scriptural sources upon which I draw will consistently inform my argument, even if I don't make explicit mention or use of them. I aim to constructively draw from *both* religious ethics and moral and political philosophy, rather than constantly show the superiorities and deficiencies of one or the other. And fourth, I intend my argument to be analytic and normative rather than comparative and descriptive. I aim to offer an analytic and normative argument about our obligations to assist severely poor people rather than compare what different thinkers and traditions have said about such obligations or describe through ethnographic methodologies how different religious communities have responded to severe poverty.

[13] For an exposition and defense of this approach, see Bharat Ranganathan and Derek Woodard-Lehman, "Normative Dimensions in Christian Ethics."

[14] I take the term "fundamental benchmarks" from Stanley Hauerwas, "Between Christian Ethics and Religious Ethics," 407.

[15] Cf. Paul Griffiths, *Christian Flesh*, xii, for his distinction between exegetical and grammatical approaches to theological argument. On his view, excessive reliance on exegetical and historical methodologies may obscure speculative arguments and turn into commentary about commentaries.

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I have been working on the ideas in this book for a long time, during which I have received attention and support, both professional and personal, from many individuals and institutions. In many ways, my colleagues and friends *willed* this book to happen. Anything that I say here will be far from adequate from in conveying my appreciation and what they have (often supererogatorily) done for me. But I will try anyways.

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"Ethics and Public Policy," "Global Poverty," "Political and Social Philosophy," "Religion and Human Rights," and "Religion, Global Health, and Human Rights."

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Abbreviations

John Rawls

References to John Rawls's work will appear using the following standard abbreviations. For both *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* I will refer only to the most recent editions.

JF	*Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
LP	*The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
PL	*Political Liberalism*, exp. ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
TJ	*A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Peter Singer

FAM	"Famine, Affluence, & Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1.3: (1972): 229–243.
OW	*One World: The Ethics of Globalization*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
PE	*Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

List of Abbreviations

Human Rights Instruments

I list here principal international human rights instruments referred to, including the dates on which they entered into force.

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981)
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990)
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008)
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976)
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976)
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

All references to the Bible, unless I am quoting someone else or explicitly note otherwise, are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (NRSV). This translation contains the books included in the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant canons.