Medieval Poverty

In the early Middle Ages the condition of poverty, or being "poor" (\textit{pauperes}), was not necessarily defined in terms of economic destitution at all. In England and northern France of the 9th and 10th centuries the category \textit{pauperes} referred to free commoners: people who were neither nobles nor clergy. While they were certainly not well off economically, their most distinctive feature was that they did not bear arms. Thus, they stood in need of protection. This was the duty of the king and men at arms in France, while in England the king was bound to protect them against "knighthood violence".

Even as poverty became associated with economic hardship, it was not viewed as a social pathology. To the contrary, the poor formed an intrinsic part of an organic society, the three orders or estates of which—warriors, clergy, poor agricultural and other workers—were thought to reflect the order of heaven. Thus around the year 1000 people had a "mental image of a society one and triune like the divinity who had created and would ultimately judge it".

Given the divine origin of the social order, the poor were not held individually responsible for their condition. Prosperity and poverty alike were attributed to the grace of God, and all should accept their lot with humility. Nor were the poor stigmatized. If anything they were thought to be morally superior to the rich, particularly if they had voluntarily renounced secular wealth and power. Monks, nobles, and wealthy persons would wash the feet of the poor and invite them to dine. St. Louis, King of France in the 13th century, cut bread and poured drink himself for the paupers whom he fed at his own table. In a society that condemned this-worldly things, the poor represented a religious ideal. Moreover, they were downright useful to the rich and powerful as an outlet to atone for their sins through the Christian charity of alms-giving.

Matthew chapter 25 tells us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and take in the stranger.

Medieval hospitals did just that. They were charity in concrete form. While the modern hospital provides medical care, many medieval hospitals were founded simply for the poor. They provided a home for those too handicapped or elderly to work—people who might otherwise have to beg in the streets if their families could not care for them. Other hospitals took in the stranger. They were hostels for pilgrims and other wayfarers. The leper-houses [segregated] the leper from others.

The medieval hospital was more akin to an almshouse. The natural progression was to continue in that role, but modernizing over the centuries, leaving little clue to what a medieval hospital looked like. Yet to the delight of the historian, it is still possible to find a few of these houses of care that are little changed.

Moreover in the last decade there has been a spate of scholarly research and excavations, which together have brought life in the British medieval hospital into sharper focus.

The major source of charity in the Middle Ages was the Church. Churchmen building hospitals had a model ready to hand, since monastic houses dispensed charity as a bounden duty. They gave alms to the poor, often from a special almonry by the gate. They had guesthouses for travelers and infirmaries for their own sick. Most medieval hospitals were run by a community following a religious rule and headed by a prior or master.

The core elements were a chapel and an infirmary. The first infirmaries were open halls—like a hospital ward—with beds down either side. The chapel was central to medieval charity. Charity is linked with faith and hope as a Christian virtue. Hospitals cared for the soul as much as the body. Where suffering is constant and death close at hand, faith can be a powerful comfort.
The idea and the ideal of religious poverty exerted a powerful force throughout the Middle Ages. "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff," Christ had commanded his apostles. He had sternly warned, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God." And he had instructed one of the faithful, who had asked what he needed to do to live the most holy sort of life, "if you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Beginning with these biblical injunctions, voluntary poverty, the casting off of wealth and worldly goods for the sake of Christ, dominated much of medieval religious thought. The desire for a more perfect poverty impelled devout men and women to new heights of piety, while disgust with the material wealth of the church fueled reform movements and more radical heresies alike.

[...] The Christian ideal of poverty interacted powerfully with and helped to shape many major economic, social, and cultural trends in medieval Europe. As Lester Little demonstrated over two decades ago, for example, developing ideals of religious poverty were deeply intermeshed with the revitalizing European economy of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries and did much to shape the emerging urban spirituality of that period.

Ideals of voluntary poverty continued to interact with other social and cultural forces in the later Middle Ages as well, throughout the fourteenth century and particularly in the early fifteenth century. This form of poverty was, needless to say, a matter quite apart from the very real and entirely involuntary privation that beset so many people in medieval Europe. Yet, because of its powerful religious overtones, the idea of poverty was as powerful and compelling, in different ways, as its reality.

Sources

