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INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS LANGUAGE

The cultures in which various forms of early Christianities and Christian texts took shape did not traditionally discuss human destitution using concepts of what is today called "human rights," but within quite a different framework. In this study I would like to consider the use of "entitlement" and "human rights" language in the context of three Cappadocian sermons titled "*Peri Philoptochias*," "On the love of the poor," two by Gregory of Nyssa and one by Gregory of Nazianzus. The sermons provide a historical model for how a culture's ideals may inform the evolution of religious language. They were written in a society where relief was wholly based on patronage, gift exchange, and social associations, where one's right to assistance was argued in terms of dependent affiliations. To best understand the Cappadocian context, it may be useful to the modern reader — especially the Christian reader, for whom these texts are an integral part of ongoing tradition — to begin by very clearly contrasting the difference between the perspective on human entitlement in the Roman world, in which these sermons were written, and modern assumptions about human rights in religious context, which may influence the way they are read today. Modern "human rights" are commonly understood as a person's intrinsic entitlements to tangible and intangible resources regardless of race, gender, national identity or individual personality.² The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, stated that

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.³

This language of human rights is especially strident in the area of hunger and famine-relief. In 1943, for example, philosopher Simone Weil wrote a preface for De-Gaulle's French social policy in which she said, "It is an eternal obligation toward the human being not to let him suffer

2. See for example John Kelsay and Sumner B. Twiss, eds., *Religion and Human Rights* (New York: The Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1994). Kelsay and Twiss readily admit that "International debate continues on which rights are to be accepted as universally normative and on the means of translating such acceptance into legal guarantees of human rights" (iv).

3. General Assembly of the United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25 (1), here cited from Omwale, "Politics and the Right to Food" in A. Eide, W.B. Eide, S. Gootatlake, J. Gussoow and Omawale, eds., *Food as a Human Right* (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1984), p. 3.

THE ENTITLED POOR

Human Rights Language in the Cappadocians'

Susan R. Holman

This study explores poverty relief and human rights language in the Cappadocian sermons, "On the love of the poor," by Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. These sermons appropriated classical patronage ideals into their biblical exegesis of philanthropy, an exegesis that has profoundly informed scholars, theologians, as well as those involved in modern public health policy where relief language is based in a presupposition of existential human "rights." While the Cappadocian texts on poverty relief may be relevant to modern relief efforts,

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1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented for discussion at a Roundtable session of the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1996, and at the Fourth Meeting of the International Society for the Classical Tradition (ISCT), at the University of Tübingen in 1998. The author would like to thank Sumner B. Twiss, Arvind Sharma and members of the AAR Consultation on Human Rights for first recommending this paper for the AAR discussion, and others who readily engaged in constructive critique and encouragement of various incarnations, especially David C. Aune, Johanna Dwyer, Wolfgang Haase, Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Ellen Messer, Tim Samuel Shah, Darryl M. Trimiew, Nicholas Wolterstorff, members of the Boston Area Patristics Group, and the editors of *Pro Ecclesia*.

While the Cappadocian texts on poverty relief may be relevant to modern relief efforts, they must first be understood in their original cultural and politico-religious context.

9 (2000): 476-89
Pro Ecclesia

