

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HOLY AND THE POOR: MODELS FROM EARLY SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

SUSAN ASHBROOK HARVEY

To Jesus, radical discipleship—dispossessing oneself for the sake of the poor—took various forms in early Christianity. In early Syriac Christianity there were paradigmatic expressions of this asceticism in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the solitary ascetic, and the “holy fool.” These expressions of personal efforts to imitate Christ are remarkable for their social effectiveness in stimulating care for the poor. Rabbula, bishop of Edessa, and Simeon the Stylite are paradigms of action whose highly visible withdrawals from the world paradoxically stimulated others to develop institutions and activities to benefit the vulnerable of their day. The anonymous “holy fool” or “man of God” was a paradigm whose extreme asceticism identified him not only with Christ but with the homeless, faceless, nameless poor. The bishop and Simeon imitated the ministry of Christ in feeding, clothing, healing, and caring for the destitute; the “holy fool” reminded others that Christ abased himself to dwell in the midst of the anonymous poor.

Recent scholarship has shown great interest in the problem of poverty for the Christian world of Late Antiquity, both in terms of what poverty meant and in terms of how Christianity responded to it.<sup>1</sup> The period is one marked by important social shifts with regard to the meaning of poverty and wealth in this culture. The reduction of the Roman Empire's social structure into two basic classes, the *honestiores* and the *humiliores*—the elite and the humble—solidified a distinction not only of economics but also of legal identity and rights; these distinctions lent a starkness to the

<sup>1</sup>By far the most important study is the seminal work of Evelyne Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e-7e siècle* (Paris: Mouton, 1977). See also Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1968); Dimitris Kyrtatas, *The Social Structure of the Early Christian Communities* (London: Verso, 1987), and L. William Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire: Contradictions and Accommodations* (New York: Mellen, 1980). Other material for important classic Christian views and background will be found in the Bibliography of this volume.

Source: Hanawalt + Lindberg (eds)

Through the Eye of a Needle:

Judeo-Christian Roots of Social

Welfare

Kirkville MO: Trus. Jefferson Univ. Press,

1994

