

Part 1

A Life

as a

Theological Text

Part 1: A Life as a Theological Text

As noted in the introduction, a key, but largely untapped, source for the work of theological ethics is the lives and witnesses of Christian exemplars—real people who boldly lived the gospel in creative faithfulness, most often among the poorest and most marginalized of God’s people. This section asks: how does Farmer’s life and witness serve as a theological text? In probing this question, the contributors to Part 1, “A Life as a Theological Text,” raise an even more provocative question: who are we called to be as theologians? Eschatologists? *Anargyroi*? Organic intellectuals? Those who transgress received hierarchies of power/knowledge? As with other chapters in this volume, these essays challenge the regnant model of the theologian in the US, in both Catholic and broadly Christian contexts. They also raise initial questions about what we might call the intellectual infrastructure of theology and theological ethics: Farmer drew heavily on the natural and social sciences but also used theology to critique them, developing a methodology that he described as “geographically broad and historically deep.” How is the work of theology informed by disciplines outside of theology and the traditional uses of philosophy—sociology, anthropology, economics, history, the natural sciences? And how do we come into a meaningful conversation with these disparate sources, all of which have the potential to add insight and depth to our thinking and inform our search for wisdom and truth?

We begin with the last things: eschatology. In Chapter One, “Toward a Realized Eschatology: Paul Farmer as Good Samaritan,” Jennie Weiss Block argues that Farmer’s entire corpus of writing and his life’s work among the destitute were directed towards a realized eschatology, that is, the bringing about of the Kingdom of God in the here and now. This eschatology was rooted for him in the parable of the Good Samaritan coupled with Matthew 25’s presentation of the corporal works of mercy. She suggests his interpretation of these seminal passages forms “the hermeneutical keys to understanding Paul Farmer’s religious imagination,

the day-in, day-out expression of his moral life, and in turn, the unceasing demands he freely placed on himself.” They also created in him an eschatological orientation, enabling him to serve as an “antidote to despair” for those who were suffering or losing hope. She sees him as “an eschatologist, a hope-giver to everyone he met—from destitute peasant farmers to heads of state.” Paul understood that “‘Christian hope’s statement of promise ... must stand in contradiction to the reality which can at present be experienced’ ... [and that] everywhere in the New Testament, Christian hope is directed towards what is not visible.” Rooted in scripture, centered on the kenotic Crucified One, Farmer’s lived witness challenges theological ethics to engage more centrally the eschatological future to which the Risen Christ beckons us.

Farmer stands in a long line of physicians and others who accompanied the poor in healing. Building on Block’s insights about the centrality of the Good Samaritan and Matthew 25 for Farmer, in Chapter Two, “Paul the Anargyros: History, God-Talk, and Ecumenism in the Theological Praxis of Dr. Paul Farmer,” Susan R. Holman traces the line further back, beyond twentieth century Haiti to Christian antiquity, placing Farmer in the long Christian tradition of the *anargyroi*, those inexplicable and often idiosyncratic religious physicians who refused money for their medical services. As our cover artist, Fr. Cristóbal Torres, OP, also notes in his artist’s statement, the word *anargyroi* (singular *anargyros*) is from the Greek, meaning those who provided health care assistance “without silver,” that is, for free. Thus, these health care providers have also long been called “unmercenary saints.” Holman insightfully juxtaposes Farmer’s witness with that of the sixth century *anargyros* Paul of Antioch, suggesting how his life and theological ethics may offer us an exemplar of a modern *anargyros*. We see how in antiquity much of caring for the sick involved attention to what we now call “the social determinants of health,” also a key focus for Farmer but lost on most of contemporary health care, especially in the global north. She also draws out other key themes—the role of the corporal works of mercy for health equity; ecumenicity, or non-judgmental engagement with religious diversity as well as methodological

diversity; and attention to the importance of historical voices that may not otherwise be heard.

In Chapter Three, “Paul Farmer: A Model for the Theologian,” we fast forward from the sixth century to the twentieth century, where Jorge Jose Ferrer, SJ, finds another possible analogue of Farmer’s witness—Antonio Gramsci’s notion of an “organic intellectual.” For Gramsci, the organic intellectual was characterized by a two-fold methodology—one that is simultaneously analytical and praxical—actively engaged in the construction of a new society. As such, Ferrer proposes that Farmer—though not a theologian himself—challenges those who practice theology, calling us to likewise live into our vocations as organic intellectuals. Analytically, Farmer’s use of social analysis to uncover the structural causes of impoverishment and exclusion provides a model for the analysis that theological ethicists are called to articulate in an acutely divided and unfair world. Yet Farmer undertook his intellectual work and social analysis within the broader context of an existential commitment to social transformation and justice as a companion to the poor. Thus, his analytical methodology is coupled to a praxical modeling: a life committed to service, advocacy, and activism at the service of the impoverished. As Ferrer notes, “Neutrality is not an option for someone who aspires to a life of authenticity in the footsteps of Jesus.”

Alison Lutz closes this section, in Chapter Four, “Living Witnesses and Moral Agency.” Here she says the quiet part out loud: most global health professionals—and theologians—live on the privileged side of global hierarchies of social power. Motivated by solidarity, the preferential option for the poor, and other key Christian convictions, many seek to cross the lines of social power to partner with those who suffer. But can we do so “without reproducing hierarchies of identity, knowledge, and power that have always exposed most people to danger and death in order to protect and promote the wellbeing of a small minority of others?” This is fraught terrain. To do so requires, she suggests, a moral praxis that centers people who cross the lines of power to relieve suffering from the other direction, “people from communities that have been historically and

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systematically dispossessed.” It is here that she proposes that Farmer’s life and work “provide a model for theologically-informed moral agency that transgresses the roles established by current hierarchies of being, knowledge, and power in order to relieve suffering without reproducing the iniquitous circulation of power and resources.”