

Chapter 15: ‘Doctor’ of the Church: Mapping the Religious Threads in Paul Farmer’s Writings

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Place your whole human heart before the reality of a crucified world.

Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría¹

The late Paul Farmer, famous for his work as a physician, medical anthropologist, and founder of the non-profit Partners in Health (PIH), is not primarily known as a religious thinker. The purpose of this review essay is to overturn that view. Reading his works with a religious eye reveals a man who lived religiously in its deepest sense. According to John Caputo, a religious ethicist Farmer cites approvingly, “religion” (*re-ligare*) means binding ourselves to something other than—greater than—ourselves.² Farmer indeed lived a life of deep commitment: bound to justice, to his patients, to the poor, to Haiti, and to his students, friends, and co-laborers.

This review essay provides an annotated bibliography of Farmer’s corpus for readers more familiar with ecclesiology than ethambutol. As other authors in this volume describe in more depth, Farmer was a social medicine physician who spent his career between the poorest places of the work and Harvard, creating a substantive corpus of written work. Most of

¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, “Discurso de graduación en la Universidad de Santa Clara,” *Escritos Universitarios* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1999), 226.

² John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 31. Farmer cites Caputo in an epigraph to a chapter critiquing mainstream (bio)ethics: Paul Farmer, “The New Malaise: Medical Ethics and Social Rights in the Global Era,” in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 [2003]), 197.

his writing focused on medicine, global health, or medical anthropology, the 'ore' from which this essay tries to concentrate his theological 'gold.' Until roughly the last decade of his life, Farmer did not speak or write much about his relationship with faith or his religious tradition. Before then, when he did, he spoke of it askance—either in relatively out-of-the-way publications where he spoke more personally, or as the intellectual fire behind his medical and public health writing. But his theological motivations have been there since the beginning, as even his secular biographers notice.³ Because Farmer was often reluctant to lead with explicitly religious language to mainstream audiences, especially early in his life, the task of situating him theologically—via his various influences and reoccurring themes—becomes all the more important.

As a US medical student whose vocational trajectory, personal religiosity, life choices, and decision to pursue a graduate degree in theology were all deeply influenced by my discovery of Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, I have long been deeply interested in this topic. The methodology behind this chapter—reading his books in chronological order, finding the most important non-book publications, and speaking to religiously-literate members of his circle to make sure nothing was missed—was in its own way a formalized version of what I have been doing in an ad hoc way for years. In the following, I lay out a map of his writings in roughly reverse-chronological order, piece-by-piece, rather than thematically.⁴ A reverse-chronological structure allows us to begin where most people meet him, already doing his famous work and with a fully matured point of view, and follow these threads to his earlier days. Similarly, a piece-by-piece approach is chosen to help the reader get a sense

³ Mark Klempner, "A Conversation with Tracy Kidder About Mountains Beyond Mountains," *HuffPost*, March 17, 2008, www.huffpost.com/entry/a-conversation-with-tracy_b_91799: "His personal history vis-à-vis religion struck me as really important. It took me a while to realize that, and to begin to try to get at it."

⁴ In a forthcoming work, I hope to analyze Farmer's spirituality in more detail, as well as describing him and his work in the language of the church.

of the landscape and his development, and to find the appropriate Farmer texts for their own uses.

Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds: Ebola and the Ravages of History (2020)

While Farmer became less reticent about religious language and concepts in the last decade of his life, the main focus of his work from his first book to his last was medicine and the field now known as global health. His final book, *Fever, Feuds, and Diamonds: Ebola and the Ravages of History*, analyzes the 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa, its response by the local and global community, and the context in which it occurred.⁵ In his characteristic style, he shows that these communities—far from being a “clinical desert” in a poor and disconnected region that had missed the rising tide of global development—had been made vulnerable by the predations of outside interests. Worse, the very lives that were most at risk were written off as dispensable, meaning that the battle was both philosophical as well as material, moral as well as medical.

Foregrounding powerful patient narratives, its primary themes highlight the actual history of the relationship between West Africa and the colonizing world (illustrating one final time what we will see as Farmer’s signature emphasis on being “historically deep” and “geographically broad”). While the specific microbe may be a new one under Farmer’s sociopolitical microscope—his previous work focused primarily on tuberculosis and HIV—he details how the same forces of inequality, colonialism, and violence fuel the Ebola epidemic as well. Against any temptation towards “therapeutic nihilism” or the colonial “control-over-care” paradigm, Farmer’s emphasis on pragmatic solidarity means that he approaches Ebola no differently than other diseases: “we have to stop telling ... horror stories about an unstoppable mutant virus,

⁵ Paul Farmer, *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds: Ebola and the Ravages of History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

because those stories often legitimate our inaction.”⁶ The necessary changes, however, are only possible if those lives are considered worth saving.

Jennie Weiss Block notes that the Ebola period was a time of personal (and religious) intensity for him, and his sorrow and close retellings of the tragic stories contained in *Fever, Feuds, and Diamonds* reflect his intense attention and acute affective connection with their suffering.⁷ The threads of personal storytelling, historical contextualizing, solidarity, and fighting nihilism are ones which run throughout his scholarly career. Unlike many of his other works, he does not explicitly discuss liberation theology in this book, but emphases on structural violence and accompaniment pervade it.

In the Company of the Poor: Conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez (2013)

During his formative college years, Farmer discovered liberation theology through Gustavo Gutiérrez' 1971 *A Theology of Liberation*.⁸ The two most important books for those interested in Farmer's relationship with (liberation) theology were published in the last decade of his life.⁹ The only book not written by Farmer included in this review is Jennie Weiss Block, OP's exquisitely sensitive spiritual biography, *Paul Farmer: Servant to the Poor* (2018).¹⁰ Written by his chief advisor at PIH, his personal spiritual advisor—or as he liked to joke, his “interior decorator”¹¹—and a theologian in her own right, Block's book focuses directly on Farmer's spiritual life. Shorter than Tracy Kidder's biography, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*,¹²

⁶ Farmer, *Fever, Feuds, and Diamonds*, 442.

⁷ Jennie Weiss Block in discussion with the author, July 22, 2022.

⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988 [1971]).

⁹ A number of representative public lectures from this time are available on YouTube.

¹⁰ Jennie Weiss Block, *Paul Farmer: Servant to the Poor* (Collegetown, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2018).

¹¹ Block, *Servant to the Poor*, 8.

¹² Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (NY: Random House, 2003).

Paul Farmer: Servant to the Poor helpfully includes an abbreviated time line of the major events of his life and work, PIH's evolution, and his major publications. For a religiously-inclined audience, it is particularly valuable for its religious literacy and sensitivity: who else would note that at their first meeting, the book he had been reading was Meister Eckhart?¹³ The compelling writing and intimate point of view makes this book valuable even beyond its indispensable content.

The second book, based on a series of conversations at the University of Notre Dame and published in 2013, is *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*.¹⁴ Here we find Farmer at his most theologically explicit. Featuring transcripts of conversations between Farmer and Gutiérrez, repackaged versions of previous writings, and new essays where the two friends interact with each other's work, *In the Company of the Poor* is a rich trove of storytelling, friendship, and theological and sociopolitical analysis. The introduction by editors Jennie Weiss Block and Michael Griffin touches on a number of themes that begin to theologize Farmer's work in Gutiérrez's key. His lifetime of working with the poor for their liberation can be read as the work of the "kingdom of God";¹⁵ friendship with the poor despite the certainty of the "long defeat" (a line from J.R.R. Tolkien) is "accompaniment"; and shaking the gates of the world system involves standing as a "prophetic voice" in the public square. Farmer's theological debts and unique contribution are on display, as is Fr. Gutiérrez' full-throated theological affirmation of PIH's work as medically embodying

¹³ Block, *Servant to the Poor*, 8.

¹⁴ Paul Farmer and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Michael P. Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013).

¹⁵ Farmer and Gutiérrez, *In the Company of the Poor*; Block, *Servant to the Poor*, 10. Their overlap in interests is perhaps more fortuitous than expected; Fr. Gutiérrez studied medicine for some time before seeking ordination.

the meaning of liberation theology—and even more broadly “the message of the gospel.”¹⁶

These volumes are well-paired with a 2014 article in the progressive Christian magazine *Sojourners*, “Sacred Medicine: How Liberation Theology Can Inform Public Health.”¹⁷ Here, Farmer first offers homage to “two of my greatest teachers,” two “Latin American men, both ordained as Catholic priests” (Romero and Gutiérrez—though he slips in his enthusiasm for a third Latin American priest, the new Pope Francis). He describes how the “slender, frayed thread of my own faith, which I had believed cut, came back into view” through his Haitian hosts and Catholic activists both lay and religious (“most of the most inspiring activists were women”). He draws three crucial lessons from liberation theology that he finds applicable to public health: the preferential option for the poor (which diseases also make), structural violence (“structural sin”), and accompaniment. This article may be used as a short and accessible introduction to arguments made at greater length elsewhere.

To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation (2013)

Continuing in reverse-chronological order, in 2013 Farmer collected a number of public speeches into *To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*.¹⁸ Its title—*tikkun olam* in Hebrew—gestures to the essays’ religious texture. The most important address is entitled “Epiphany, Metanoia, and Praxis,” a graduation speech which

¹⁶ Farmer and Gutiérrez, *In the Company of the Poor*, 14–16. While Farmer’s use of liberation theology is fairly nuanced in its application in the world, he does not spend much time parsing the differences between writers or eras, but often amalgamates them into one voice. His use of liberation theology also almost exclusively uses the ‘classic’ Latin American authors and seldom cites the other (Black, feminist, queer, womanist, minjung, Indigenous, ecological) branches of the tradition.

¹⁷ Paul Farmer, “Sacred Medicine: How Liberation Theology Can Inform Public Health,” *Sojourners Magazine*, January 2014, sojo.net/magazine/january-2014/sacred-medicine.

¹⁸ Paul Farmer, *To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*, ed. Jonathan Weigel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

apologetically emphasizes “how important, how life changing, these three lousy Greek words can be.”¹⁹ To those interested in medical ethics, specifically formulations of professional identity, “Medicine as a Vocation” offers its self-explanatory emphasis via the traditional religious language of *vocatio*. Medicine is for service to the sick (which most often means the poor): “What’s it going to be,” he spars, “medicine as a force for good or just another business?”²⁰ The can’t-miss and conceptually inventive speech is “Accompaniment as Policy.”²¹ Here Farmer attempts to shift the development framework away from aid towards accompaniment both in its existential and practical meanings. Accompaniment is both abstract and immediate: it can include everything from theology (he cites Roberto Goizueta’s classic *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*²²), while exposing the pretenses of philanthrocapitalism and championing community health workers (*accompagneurs*) and a program for locally-made enriched peanut butter to fight malnutrition.²³ Touching on diverse topics, the book makes clear moral claims—he especially critiques those who comfortably minister from “safe enclosures.”²⁴

As a whole, *To Repair the World* exemplifies Farmer’s religious eye (and tongue). A speech in New Orleans references his apocalyptically-minded taxi driver who had been predicting a biblical flood for years, “John the prophet I’ll call him. St. John in a world-class, seer-sucker suit.”²⁵ To this Tulane class of 2008, he stresses with prophetic sensitivity the

¹⁹ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 22.

²⁰ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 91. Cf. Farmer, *Partner to the Poor*, 309n41, 323n44–5.

²¹ Paul Farmer, “Accompaniment as Policy,” in *To Repair the World*, 233–248.

²² Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

²³ Farmer, “Accompaniment as Policy,” 242. Though accompaniment is a well-known concept in liberation theology, Farmer remarks that he heard it first from Haitians who taught him the term. See *To Repair the World*, 235. Farmer had worked on a book project about accompaniment which was never finished.

²⁴ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 245.

²⁵ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 158.

meaning behind disasters; they have lived through “difficult times,” but they “must also be *revelatory* times.”²⁶ Continuing the prophetic vein, the scriptural triplet of the widow, orphan, and stranger (that Israel neglects to its detriment) is expanded to include the rest of medicine’s “natural constituency: the sick, the poor, the frail, the hungry, the homeless.”²⁷ Finally, his familiarity with religious themes is evident in his swords-into-plowshares 2004 pun about “Weapons of Mass Salvation,” as well as more numerous cultural-religious figures of speech than might be expected in a contemporary scholar-activist’s *oeuvre* (e.g., “Jeremiads,” “imprimatur,” references to Egypt-the Wilderness-the Promised land, or titling chapters “A Plague on All Our Houses”).

Reimagining Global Health: An Introduction (2013)

2013 also finds *Reimagining Global Health: An Introduction*, a co-authored global health textbook that attempts to move global health in the direction of social medicine.²⁸ Chapters treat such topics as the colonial history of global health, successful models of rural health care in Rwanda and Haiti, and the complex role of foreign aid. While addressing some similar topics as Farmer’s single-authored works, it does provide a broader analysis of global health as a whole and a more textbook-style survey of topics.

In *Reimagining Global Health*, Farmer traces the roots of imperial Christianity back to the Constantinian legacy, not merely to modern colonialism. The sections that specifically discuss religion and ethics, however, were not written by Farmer but were a repackaged piece by (Farmer’s mentor) Arthur Kleinman and Bridget Hanna.²⁹ They helpfully

²⁶ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 158–159.

²⁷ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 159.

²⁸ Paul Farmer, Jim Yong Kim, Arthur Kleinman, and Matthew Basilio, *Reimagining Global Health: An Introduction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

²⁹ This chapter originally appeared as Arthur Kleinman and Bridget Hanna, “Religious Values and Global Health,” in *Ecologies of Human Flourishing*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Susan Lloyd McGarry (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

review the “mixed legacy” of missionary and humanitarian movements, succinctly naming the high points connecting Christianity and global health, while never forgetting the “atrocities perpetrated in the name of God” and “links between Christianity and state [and] imperial power ... during the colonial and postcolonial eras.”³⁰

“Personal Efficacy and Moral Engagement in Global Health” (2011)

To the original version of what became Kleinman and Hanna’s chapter in *Reimagining Global Health* mentioned above, Farmer wrote a beautiful, personal—and otherwise overlooked—response. Both pieces are found in the edited volume *Ecologies of Human Flourishing*.³¹ Entitled “Personal Efficacy and Moral Engagement in Global Health,” this essay offers one of the clearest and most self-reflective encapsulations of his relationship with faith and how it has influenced his work. With respect to the corporal works of mercy, after which PIH’s activities were almost directly modeled, he writes:

Although I am not always proud to have a Catholic background, there are times when Christian theology brings me helpful clarity....I find the corporal works of mercy among the most compelling Catholic social teachings. Most of the seven corporal works of mercy are intuitive: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so on. Two, however, became clear to me only later in life: visiting the prisoners and burying the dead. “Visit the prisoners” led me again and again into prisons around the world, in Haiti, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and, most recently, in Rwanda.³²

³⁰ Paul Farmer, Jim Yong Kim, Arthur Kleinman, and Matthew Basilio, *Reimagining Global Health*, 279.

³¹ Paul Farmer, “Personal Efficacy and Moral Engagement in Global Health,” in *Ecologies of Human Flourishing*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Susan Lloyd McGarry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 91–99.

³² Farmer, “Personal Efficacy and Moral Engagement in Global Health,” 94.

It was in these prisons where PIH began to address the Multidrug Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR-TB). And it was in Guatemala that he learned about the need to bury the dead. In Guatemala, community health workers led efforts to disinter the mass graves and properly rebury the victims of (para)military violence: "Why? Because the victims had been 'buried with their eyes wide open.' And neither they nor their kin would know peace until they were buried properly. 'So that their eyes may close,'" explained their leader.³³

In this short chapter, Farmer addresses his own reticence in talking about faith and how his knowledge of the dynamics of Christian history emerged through his work in Haiti.

Let me say a few words about my own timidity in writing about religion. First, the Enlightenment tradition of critique bars religion from medical schools and elsewhere in the academy because it appears neither scientific nor rational. In college, my mentors in anthropology were stoutly anti-religious....I myself had at least a mild hostility to Catholicism as an undergraduate fascinated by the intersection of medicine and social science. However, as a doctoral student in anthropology, specializing in Haiti, I was expected to learn everything about the cosmology of my [very religious] hosts. Haiti made me start thinking more deeply about Catholicism vis-a-vis voodoo and liberation theology. My reservations about religious roots also rise from ambivalence about Christianity's connection to state power, especially imperial power, starting in the fourth century and continuing since Yet radical undercurrents always resist and enliven religious orthodoxies. Dogma begets internal critique. For example, liberation theology illuminates the unnecessary suffering and structural violence that grew out of Catholicism's co-infection with doctrinal orthodoxy and secular ambition.³⁴

³³ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

³⁴ Farmer, "Personal Efficacy and Moral Engagement in Global Health," 95–96. It is interesting to note that Farmer indicates the crucial moment taking place during his time in Haiti, not during college (with Sr. Julianna de Wolf and the murder of Romero).

This brief chapter also exemplifies Farmer's seamless ability to switch registers, connecting one of Jesus's most pointed parables to the deadly subtleties of international finance.

The radical posing of that question in four short words—"Who is my neighbor?"—expresses the imperative of engaging with others, especially with those who are unfamiliar and different. The scripture commands us to return to first principles, which is difficult for people of privilege. For example, it takes great courage for First World Catholics to subject the reigning system of global trade—one that is fundamentally unjust and perpetuates the suffering of billions in the developing world—to scrutiny and critique because they derive daily benefits from these very arrangements.³⁵

Of course, this implies an active seeking of the neighbor, for "my neighbor [is] the one I must go out to look for, on the highways and byways," according to Gustavo Gutiérrez; neighbor love also reveals that "the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order."³⁶

Haiti After the Earthquake (2011)

In January 2010, a catastrophic 7.0 Mw earthquake devastated the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, obliterating its infrastructure, killing an estimated 316,000 people, and drawing the attention of the world. A year later, Farmer published *Haiti after the Earthquake*.³⁷ After recounting the

³⁵ Farmer, "Personal Efficacy and Moral Engagement in Global Health," 92–93.

³⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 44–45, and cited in the epigraph to Farmer, "Health, Healing, and Social Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology," in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 139.

³⁷ Paul Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, ed. Abbey M. Gardner and Cassia van der Hoof Holstein (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

pre-earthquake history of Haiti, the rest of the book itself is a close recounting of the events of the earthquake and the sleepless days and months of the aftermath. The substantial last section of the book is made up of twelve reflections and stories by Haitian and international collaborators.

While not featuring theology heavily in the content of the book, this book is notable for its humanism and inclusion of the other voices. However, there are moments of where his religious imagination breaks through: the epigraph to the book as a whole comes from Matthew 27, where Jesus breaths his last and the earth quakes. Farmer also insists on accompaniment, which he writes about as “the only way to create durable and transformative change.”³⁸ Furthermore, in the introduction (entitled “Writing about Suffering”), he speaks of a “truncated project”—an unfinished book entitled “*Swords of Sorrow*, from a Gospel line (Luke 2:35): Mary learns that her soul will be pierced by a ‘sword of sorrow’ because she is willing to be a vessel of grace.”³⁹

Yet, as is often the case, Farmer’s stories in *Haiti After the Earthquake* reveal his proximity to religious life and churches. Checking in on Fr. Fritz Lafontant, an Episcopal priest who had first invited the young Farmer to Cange thirty years earlier, and his wife Mamito after the earthquake, Farmer writes that “the entire church had become a post-op ward...from lintel to altar lay row upon row of mattresses. Above the altar, a black Christ (a beautiful batik from Uganda) presided over a scene of expert

³⁸ Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, 249.

³⁹ Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, 1. The book was going to be based on his remarks from his 2004 Lewis Henry Morgan lectures at the University of Rochester, “Swords of Sorrow: On Violence and Modernity.” While the full transcripts are unavailable, the titles of his talks at least point to their content: “Structural Violence and Human Rights,” “Witnessing Health Care,” and “Making Medicine Matter: Rethinking Health and Human Rights.” A transcript of the first is available, where Farmer remarks that just like Mary was pierced with sorrow, “so are all those who seek to understand and combat violence, including the violence born of poverty and disease in the modern world.” Special thanks to Donna Mero at the University of Rochester for supplying the text.

mercy.”⁴⁰ Redolent with Haitian religiosity, Farmer’s account also highlights the ways that religious ritual punctuate their work—the burials conducted by Fr. Eddy Eustache (PIH/Zanmi Lasante mental health leader and a Catholic priest) after the earthquake, the benediction of the new PIH academic hospital, and more.⁴¹ He mentions that his famous refrain, “Tout Moun Se Moun” (every person is a person) was the “earliest motto” of the revered priest-politician Fr. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, as well as, of course, being “the favored motto of the poor.”⁴² These references to mercy, religious (re)burials by NGO employees (either in Haiti or Honduras), and the Black Christ are not exactly *au courant* in the medical or development literature; they lift the corner of the rug to indicate the religious imagination which motivates him and through which he reads the world.

Partner to the Poor: A Paul Farmer Reader (2010)

The 2010 *Partner to the Poor: A Paul Farmer Reader* compiles works stretching back to his earliest anthropological writing in 1988, brought together by his first-week-of-college friend and longtime editor Haun Saussy.⁴³ It offers a broad selection of the themes of his work and displays the landscape of his interests. The book is divided into four sections, each of which focuses thematically on political economy and history, anthropology, structural violence, human rights, and medical ethics. Yet his interest is never merely descriptive or academic, and thus the book ‘lands’ with a political and ethical program centered around (especially economic and social) rights—the rights to the very requirements of life and the material prerequisite for civil and political rights. Farmer critiques

⁴⁰ Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, 107.

⁴¹ Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, 108, 186. The hospital, built with generous donor contributions after the earthquake, is called Hôpital Universitaire de Mirebalais/Mirebalais University Hospital (HUM).

⁴² Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, 136. This is often expanded into Farmer’s refrain that “the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world.”

⁴³ Paul Farmer, *Partner to the Poor: A Paul Farmer Reader* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 577.

medical ethics for not making this topic (and poverty) central; as Saussy writes in the introduction, “The right to claim rights, it seems, is what ‘structural violence’ denies the poor.”⁴⁴

Most relevant for our purposes are his writings on structural violence. This concept, “an abiding interest³³ (possibly an obsession ...)” of his, refers to “the ways in which epic poverty and inequality, with their deep histories, become *embodied* and experienced as violence.”⁴⁵ This nexus of interests—the ways in which social, political, environmental, and even religious meanings are incarnated in suffering bodies—resonates distinctly with the prophetic tradition and incarnational theology. Farmer always cites the conceptual coinage of structural violence in the works of Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung and the Latin liberation theologians in the 1960’s.⁴⁶ Here, they appear in an important chapter entitled “Structural Violence and Clinical Medicine.” Accessible to even nonmedical readers, this chapter demonstrates how Farmer uses the concept of structural violence, liberation theology as an analytic tool, and the rich tradition of social medicine to address ‘real world’ medical problems. Social medicine, an underdog in mainstream American medical history but with strong followings in Latin America and Europe, emphasizes how structural and social factors determine the majority of human health—a perspective it shares with public health—but trades public health’s affiliation with industry and the state for a radical obligation to the oppressed and a critical view towards the status quo. With Farmer, it holds that analyses must be ‘historically deep and geographically broad’: the “press for *comprehensiveness* is the task of social medicine.”⁴⁷ While a full history of social medicine is beyond the scope of this essay, it is a tradition that stretches back to Rudolf Virchow in the nineteenth

⁴⁴ Haun Saussy, “Introduction: The Right to Claim Rights,” in *Partner to the Poor: A Paul Farmer Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 20.

⁴⁵ Farmer, *Partner to the Poor*, 293, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.

⁴⁷ Farmer, *To Repair the World*, 70, emphasis altered.

century and one which Farmer has helped to revive as a vital discipline in the twentieth and twenty-first.⁴⁸

Readers may also note in *Partner to the Poor* Farmer's subtle appreciation of the importance of emotions. Certainly, empathy pervades his writings, but he forwards

other sentiments, too: solidarity (perhaps the noblest of human sentiments); commitment; pity and mercy (sentiments not to be scorned in this age); curiosity...; the desire to be effective as a clinician and teacher (or student); and even love (of learning, of using the tools that science gives us, of others).⁴⁹

One might add anger, too, and sorrow. The chapter "Never Again? Reflections on Human Values and Human Rights" is guided by Levinas's ethics and "cast[s] light on ways of generating empathy [and] the salutary aspects of humble service to the poor."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Farmer does not display the depth of his own feeling here: "The one thing that scarcely appears in this book is the deep emotion that accompanies the work of solidarity." But reflecting both his deep love and his chosen trauma, his daughter notices his "sorrow bordering on obsession"—and its mirror, holy anger—after the 2011 earthquake, chafing at the way it takes over their holiday dinners.⁵¹

Global Health in Times of Violence (2009)

The co-edited 2009 volume *Global Health in Times of Violence* emerged from a scholarly seminar and attempts to bring anthropology to bear on

⁴⁸ Leon Eisenberg, "Rudolf Ludwig Karl Virchow, Where Are You Now That We Need You?," *The American Journal of Medicine* 77, no. 3 (1984): 524–532, doi.org/10.1016/0002-9343(84)90114-1.

⁴⁹ Farmer, *Partner to the Poor*, 431, cf. 492.

⁵⁰ Farmer, *Partner to the Poor*, 432.

⁵¹ Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake*, 207.

questions of violence.⁵² Attempting to counter the social tendencies towards silence on such questions, this book is essentially an in-depth anthropological roundtable about the intersection of violence and health. Attempting to better theorize this intersection in order to fight said violence, contributors wrote on topics such as medicine in the Holocaust, refugees and reproductive rights, and landmines and amputations.

Farmer's contribution is important for tracking his emphasis on the "anthropology of structural violence."⁵³ Farmer's work attempts to go beyond "event violence" towards its roots, seeing in a story of two boys picking up a landmine a whole history of arms sales and structural adjustment programs, and attempting to describe the ways that macro violence is written on micro bodies. We also learn much about Farmer from H.K. Heggenhougen's fascinating chapter; Farmer certainly would share Heggenhougen sentiment that anthropology must engage beyond its studied neutrality for the purposes of justice and human rights.⁵⁴ Heggenhougen focuses on a martyred Guatemalan community health worker (CHW), Francisco Currachiche, a figure Farmer encouraged him to "resurrect."⁵⁵ This chapter describes this liberation theology-inspired CHW and the Berhorst Health Program's CHW program in Chimaltenango, Guatemala.⁵⁶ These and other liberation-inspired

⁵² Barbara Rylko-Bauer, Linda M. Whiteford, and Paul Farmer, eds., *Global Health in Times of Violence* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2009).

⁵³ See, for example, Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 28.

⁵⁴ H.K. Heggenhougen, "Planting 'Seeds of Health' in the Fields of Structural Violence: The Life and Death of Francisco Curruchiche," in *Global Health in Times of Violence*, ed. Barbara Rylko-Bauer, Linda M. Whiteford, and Paul Farmer (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2009), 181–200.

⁵⁵ Heggenhougen, "Planting 'Seeds of Health' in the Fields of Structural Violence," 197.

⁵⁶ This program was featured in a World Council of Churches (WCC) documentary, *Seeds of Health* (1981), produced for World Health Organization's (WHO) important 1978 Primary Health Care Conference in Alma Ata. Dr. Carroll Berhorst was a Lutheran medical missionary. In the WCC documentary, Francisco says to his fellow villagers: "Wherever people cease to accept their miserable situation, there is resurrection. Wherever they struggle with hope, there is resurrection. Wherever unity is achieved for the good of our neighbor and people

movements for health and justice form some of the background and context for PIH's work, especially in Latin America.

Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor (2004)

If a reader is looking to acquire only one do-it-all book by Farmer, it is *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*—the best tour through his intellectual project as a whole, and a powerful and “plaintive book ... [which] issues complaints and sides with the plaintiffs.”⁵⁷ Opening with an introduction by development theorist Amartya Sen, it also includes in the acknowledgements a martyrological list of fallen social medicine comrades.⁵⁸ Here, Farmer at his most fiery and passionate—raging against the “terrorism of money” or “US genocide in...officially blessed slaughter” on one page and confessing his “complicity,” “indignation ... humility and penitence”⁵⁹ on the next—though the fire never quite outpaces the analytical rigor.

As it is his most comprehensive work, I review *Pathologies of Power* in more detail than his other works. Chapter 1, “On Suffering and Structural Violence: Social and Economic Rights in the Global Era,” presents the basic themes of the book and provides a key example of his powerful combination of anthropology, medicine, and narrative. He argues that the social determinants of health also are the social determinants of the assaults on human dignity. Equity, in his view, is the “central challenge” for the future of medicine and public health, especially in light of the “outcome gap” between rich and poor which grows with each new advance in medical technology. To protect the dignity of the poor, economic and social rights will need rehabilitation, and they are vindicated at higher

have the courage to crucify prestige thinking and individualism, there will be resurrection.” Heggenhougen, “Planting ‘Seeds of Health’ in the Field of Structural Violence,” 181.

⁵⁷Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 255.

⁵⁸ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, xxxv-xxxvi. The devastating litany of losses on pp. 254–255 is one of the most personally grieved and powerful passages of the book.

⁵⁹ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 4, 11, 157, 258.

levels—certainly transnational, perhaps divine—than the borders of the nation state. Moreover, this chapter is wonderful for its anthropological storytelling, telling the death-stories of Acéphié and Chouchou—whom I discuss further below—due to a combination of violences.

In Chapter 3, “Lessons from Chiapas,” Farmer introduces readers to the fascinating tumult of left politics, religion, and indigenous resistance in Mesoamerica, specifically after the Zapatista rebellion and the ongoing struggle for independence, health, and the end of violence (including neoliberalism and neocolonialism). Chapter 5, “Health, Healing, and Social Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology,” is perhaps the most important chapter for religious readers. It charts Farmer’s own relationship with liberation theology, gleans from it analytic tools that are applicable to medicine, and compares three common approaches (charity, development, and social justice) to remedying global inequality, landing firmly on the latter. This chapter calls health care workers and academics to “adopt a moral stance that would seek to expose and prevent pathologies of power.”⁶⁰

Chapter 6, “Listening for Prophetic Voices,” contrasts the market-commodity ethos of health care delivery with a rights-focused ethos, warning that justice for the poor is impossible if their basic needs are left to the open market. It also bemoans conventional medical ethics for its focus on the “quandary ethics of the individual” (mostly due to its practitioners’ social location) which myopically neglects the more pressing ethical problems of the world. Chapters 8 and 9, “New Malaise: Medical Ethics and Social Rights in the Global Era” and “Rethinking Health and Human Rights: Time for a Paradigm Shift,” further criticize the blind spots of medical ethics for its neglect of the structural violence which continues to reap its “grim harvest.” These chapters draw on Brazilian Marcio Fabri dos Anjos’s pioneering liberation theology critique of

⁶⁰ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 21.

mainstream medical ethics from the mid-1990s.⁶¹ “Rethinking Health and Human Rights” is a helpful programmatic essay for those who wish to follow where he believed the field should head. All three are helpful for reiterating his insistence upon “pragmatic solidarity” as the ultimate goal of ethical reflection and the aim of one’s efforts: “If solidarity is among the most noble of human sentiments, then surely its more tangible forms are better still.”⁶²

The afterward is unmatched in its poignancy. It depicts Farmer wrestling with his scholarly engagement, for in Haiti, “I will never be asked to write [or] reflect overmuch on what is described in these pages ... [here,] I am asked to do only one thing: to be a doctor, to serve the destitute sick.” He ends the book, I believe, like Jacob, wounded and wrestling with God:

Most of these essays were written in Boston, on planes, or in hotels; it is hard to write here in Haiti. But I wanted to finish it here, with the sound of bamboo scratching on a tin roof, in order to ask a question. Is it really useless to complain? For my own amusement, perhaps, I ask the question out loud. The bamboo gives no answer. I hear only the faint sound of someone singing; a hoe striking the stony earth; a finch ... I contemplate my own loss of innocence with resentful, sometimes even tearful, silence. From whom can I demand it back? ... Everybody knows that things that go away never return.⁶³

Beyond the excellent individual chapters, readers will find Farmer’s key themes. Shedding anthropology’s cultural relativism, he begins to articulate an “anthropology of structural violence” and calls for a locally-unique but universal real social category: the poor. If the analytical category of “the poor”—not merely euphemisms like the “socioeconomically disadvantaged,” “the marginalized,” “resource-poor,”

⁶¹ Marcio Fabri Dos Anjos, “Medical Ethics in the Developing World: A Liberation Theology Perspective,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 21, no. 6 (1996): 629–637. See Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 308, n. 37.

⁶² Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 230.

⁶³ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 255–256.

or the “Majority World,” let alone “the developing world”⁶⁴—is not robustly retained, politeness or nefarious politics, hiding behind relativism or a kumbaya universalism, can continue to protect deadly oppression.⁶⁵ Our epistemology follows our ethical commitments.⁶⁶

Throughout *Pathologies of Power*, we find a second key theme: that while civil and political rights (CPR) are important and deeply linked to economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR), the former are only possible when the latter are met.⁶⁷ This explains the wariness of much of the world’s poor when they hear rights-language in the mouths of the powerful, and underlies Farmer’s discomfort with mainstream liberalism.⁶⁸ Indeed, emerging from what I call his liberationist “realism of the poor,” the Church is a frequent target of Farmer’s critique when it interferes with the uplift of the oppressed, and the language of rights, despite its rhetoric of protecting the vulnerable, must be taken to task if its acceptance does not guarantee the protection of the poor.

Other themes include proximity (to the poor, to the work), which is essential for accurate epistemology—hence his “persistent struggle against the ‘immodest claims of causality’” that doom the sick by misrepresenting the source of their suffering.⁶⁹ Frequent, too, is his insistence that there are not two disconnected worlds of rich and poor (implying the need for

⁶⁴ Cf. Farmer, *Partner to the Poor*, 267.

⁶⁵ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 12–13, 15, 20, 27. Cf. *Infections and Inequalities*: “Perhaps as a point of order, I’d like to respond to the question, Who are ‘the poor’? The objectification of the poor is, of course, a risk run by anyone who employs some sort of class analysis. ... At the same time, I’m not skittish about using the term: striving to understand a commonality of constraint is hardly tantamount to deny the salience of personal experience. I’ve been impressed, in my work in Haiti and Peru, at how often people use the label ‘the poor’ to describe themselves” (xli).

⁶⁶ Farmer, *Partner to the Poor*, 489: “It was the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who observed—and I’m just paraphrasing here—that ethics precedes epistemology. Our responsibility to each other precedes and grounds our duty to discover the truth.”

⁶⁷ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, especially Chapters 1 and 9. In addition to the Haitians, he learns this from liberation theologians like the Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (see p. 49).

⁶⁸ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 261n12.

⁶⁹ Saussy, “Introduction,” 3.

charity or development, tossed over the wall) but one world—in fact, the wealth of the rich is dependent upon the poverty of the poor (implying the need for justice).⁷⁰ While oppression is analyzed via intersectional lenses, he does maintain a place of privilege for poverty.

In *Pathologies of Power*, religious themes abound. Liberation theology is used throughout “both to explain and to deplore human suffering”⁷¹—to use a phrase he picked up from a review of an E.P. Thompson book to describe his own writerly aspirations, it seems that for Farmer liberation theology (and the medicine it inspires) is indeed where “the tygers of wrath fraternize with the horses of instruction.”⁷² He speaks of “Bearing Witness” (a section heading), “solidarity” and “compassion.” The whole book is his “effort to ‘explain the presence of pain, affliction, and evil,’ [and thus] remains an exercise in theodicy.”⁷³ In asking the *why* of such unfair suffering, his opprobrium is reserved not so much for God as for the lords of the earth, though he is equally as angry with those who by ignorance or malevolence hide the true causes of the suffering of the poor.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 50. To back up his one-world claim, Farmer uses world systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein and theologian Pablo Richard, who warns after the fall of the Berlin Wall that “a wall between the rich and poor is being built, so that poverty does not annoy the powerful.”

⁷¹ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 41.

⁷² Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 2nd ed. (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2003), 6. “It is just this sort of mixture that someone who has worked among the Haitian poor—the poor who will never read this book—might strive to concoct. It is the mixture of one who is grateful for victories, but more accustomed to defeats.”

⁷³ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 28.

⁷⁴ In addition to the aforementioned writers in this piece, there is a whole thicket of religious figures peeking out among the pages: Wendell Berry, Bartolomé de las Casas, Oscar Romero, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Paulo Freire, Annie Dillard, Bryan Stevenson, Frei Betto, Jon Sobrino, Pablo Richard, Juan Segundo, Rebecca Chopp, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Dostoyevsky, and Cornel West. These are joined by an enormous range of cultural figures which help to intellectually situate him: Sen, Virchow, Pierre Bourdieu, Chomsky, Susan Sontag, Eduardo Galeano, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Immanuel Wallerstein, and (Subcomandante) Marcos are all found here; as are artists like Graham Greene, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov, Bertolt Brecht, and Wisława Szymborska. I claim less familiarity with those he reads in anthropology and poetry.

***Via Crucis: The Way of the Cross* (written 2003, published 2013)**

At the same time as he was working on the magisterial *Pathologies of Power*, Farmer was also crafting a contribution to a small book *Via Crucis: The Way of the Cross*.⁷⁵ Written during 2003, though only released in 2013 due to publication difficulties, this beautiful, meditative, hand-stitched letterpress book centers artist Paul-Henri Bourignon's spare and "haunting" depiction of the traditional twelve steps of Christ's road to the cross, accompanied by poetry by Edward Lense.⁷⁶

Farmer's three-page contribution was written from his adopted Haitian hometown Cange.⁷⁷ Here he reflects on the theological theme of "theodicy, [which] arises with the crumbling of meaning or loss of faith in order and justice." From his vantage point witnessing human suffering at inhuman scale, "Golgothas stretch as far as the ... eye can see." One is left only to ask "How long is the way of the cross?," knowing how strong is the temptation to turn our faces away. He finds meagre comfort: "Here in Haiti, where the *Via Crucis* stretches as far as the eye can see, the sorrowful dimensions of the 'good news' and Christ's example seem more compelling than do the joyful ones."

This out-of-the-way publication from a midpoint of his career—and a crucial one, for this is from the era of Tracy Kidder's *New Yorker* profile and subsequent biography *Mountains Beyond Mountains* that catapulted him to the limelight—shows that he is already interpreting his work in a theological and spiritual key, though perhaps one that is markedly somber

⁷⁵ Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

⁷⁶ The publication delay was due to lack of interest from mainstream publishers (Erica Bourignon, "Re: Tomorrow!," e-mail message to Paul Farmer and Jane Hoffelt, August 11, 2013). The book also features a foreword by Farmer's mentor Arthur Kleinman. Enormous thanks are due to Jane Hoffelt, executor of the Bourignon estate, for making available a copy of this volume and supplying scans of the personal correspondence between Farmer and Erica Bourignon.

⁷⁷ Paul Farmer, "Paul-Henri Bourignon's Way of the Cross" in *Via Crucis* (Worthington, OH: Igloo Letterpress: Worthington, OH, 2013), n.p.

and Lenten in tone. Meditating and reflecting on all these images during Holy Week, he finds it best to sit with Mary, “pierced with sorrow”—only to follow Jon Sobrino in suggesting that the Crucified people must be taken down from the cross. Deeply wounded by the world, he leans on a rich religious vocabulary as the only language sturdy and murky enough to hold all the pain.

Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues (1999)

His preceding publication—*Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues* (1999)—was another work of medical anthropology, but more importantly “an exercise in social medicine.”⁷⁸ This book moves from anthropological story-telling about AIDS and tuberculosis in Haiti into a broader historical and social analysis of the forces which drive these epidemics, telling patient stories and puncturing myths along the way. One hears familiar themes about “immodest claims of causality,” the importance of practice,⁷⁹ the brutality of (racial, unrestrained) capitalism,⁸⁰ and the refusal to accept claims of “limited resources” or the soulless logic of cost-effectiveness.⁸¹ Similarly, he voices his fear of being one of the “academic Cassandras who prophesy the coming plagues, but do little to avert them.”⁸²

Here he also articulates a life-long thesis, that it is more accurate to speak of the agency of structures than of the agency of microbes; “thus do *fundamentally social forces and processes come to be embodied as biological events*,” a process to which medicine, with its biological reductionism and class position, is too often blind.⁸³ He situates himself in the social

⁷⁸ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, xlii. See also p. 5 for how he conceptualizes the book: it is both “a protest” and an attempt, via multiple biosocial tools, to reach a level of analysis described as the ‘Holy Grail’ of epidemiology.

⁷⁹ Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities*, 10, cf. 235–240 as well as Chapter 1, “The Vitality of Practice.”

⁸⁰ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 250.

⁸¹ Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities*, xxiii–xxviii.

⁸² Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities*, xxviii.

⁸³ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 13–14, cf. 182–183. Emphasis in the original.

medicine tradition via his use of Virchow, Thomas McKeown, and Michael Marmot, and builds upon the development and economic critiques of Amartya Sen, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Richard Wilkinson.⁸⁴ His familiarity with the Christian radical peace tradition is shown by his use of Daniel Berrigan in an epigraph on his most autobiographical chapter (Ch. 1, “The Vitality of Practice: On Personal Trajectories”). Prominent in this reflection are the traditional categories of vocation and praxis, but here the fire of intensity comes from the immediacy of needs and the resulting vitality of the practice attempting to meet them.⁸⁵ Chapter 2 presents the thesis that inequality itself is the pathogenic force. The final chapter, “The Persistent Plagues: Biological Expressions of Social Inequalities,” is a warning and plea against entrenching inequality amidst new diseases and new technologies. After running through many chapters about different examples of AIDS and (recrudescing and resistant) tuberculosis, he draws parallels from the early days of social medicine amidst the typhoid epidemic of Upper Silesia: “Again, where are the Virchows of global public health?”⁸⁶

The book is, again, replete with theological language, such as the “misery and miracles” that fill Haiti,⁸⁷ describing a section as a prolegomenon,⁸⁸ or wrestling with the claim that “the poor will always be with you.”⁸⁹ He insists on telling multiple patient stories, based on anthropology as well as a religious concern to hear the forgotten voices of the world, a trait that runs through his entire career. He offhandedly remarks that the name of the “placid young man” whose job is to greet

⁸⁴ McKeown and Marmot are social epidemiologists whose population-scale studies show the immense power of social forces on health outcomes. Sen, Wallerstein, and Wilkinson are figures whose work focuses on the consequences of inequality, conceptualizing the “world system” and its power relations, and a criticism of mainstream development economics.

⁸⁵ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 24.

⁸⁶ Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities*, 267. To learn more about Virchow, see Eisenberg, “Rudolf Ludwig Karl Virchow, Where Are You Now That We Need You?”

⁸⁷ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 151, cf. 28.

⁸⁸ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 53.

⁸⁹ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 282.

patients at the Clinique Bon Sauveur “fittingly ... is Seraphim,”⁹⁰ an appropriate figure to welcome the patients who for him represented the face of God.

Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Structural Violence (1996)

We have arrived at the earliest stratum of his writings.⁹¹ 1996 saw the publication of *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Structural Violence*.⁹² This scholarly collaborative volume is primarily focused on the titular themes, attempting to explicate their intersectionality through chapters on critical appraisals of the medical and social science literature, the mechanisms that make women and the poor increasingly vulnerable to AIDS, and the necessity of solidarity in response. Though his is not the primary voice in this text, it provides a good example of his anthropology in combination with the theses he develops in *Infections and Inequalities*. Again, this “openly partisan yet rigorous” work aims to combat the false

⁹⁰ Farmer, *Infections and Inequality*, 26.

⁹¹ Between 1991 and 2003, Farmer also published a series of articles in the Jesuit magazine *America*. Some of these evolved into chapters in his later publications. These essays provide accessible introductions to his work: “The Power of the Poor in Haiti,” (1991); Paul Farmer, “Greene in Haiti,” (1993); “Medicine and Social Justice,” (July 15, 1995), www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/medicine-and-social-justice; “Listening for Prophetic Voices in Medicine,” (1997); “A Visit to Chiapas,” (1998); and “Haitian Refugees, Sovereignty and Globalization,” (2003). These essays articulate themes that will continue across his career: that poverty (not diseases) has agency; that good analysis leads to joining the poor and sick in solidarity; that rhetoric is just posturing if not for “pragmatic interventions”; and that real change can only really come from small communities of the poor (and their accomplices). “The Power of the Poor in Haiti” gives detailed attention to Haitian church history and court intrigue amidst dictators and social uprisings; the status of the church was a burning question at the time due to the rise of one of Farmer’s favorite figures, a young liberationist priest Fr. Jean-Bertrand Aristide leading the Lavalas social and political movement, who was elected as president in a landslide only to be subsequently deposed by the US. In part due to his support for Aristide, Farmer himself was at times a *persona non grata* to Haitian regimes and was unable to return to his work.

⁹² Paul Farmer, Margaret Connors, and Janie Simmons, eds., *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs, and Structural Violence* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1996).

“myths and mystifications” that prevent doctors (and others) from making common cause with the poor and sick—even momentarily “telling the truth is a victory” in a world of lies.⁹³ His intended audience is health care professionals, activists, and scholars (and those who would combine these roles).⁹⁴ He also continues to center stories of his patients, tying together the global and local as he narrates them. This era of work is marked by its discussion of the “New World Order,” which is the neoliberal political and financial system which draws all of life into the orbit of the West’s post-Cold War economic hegemony, including international financial institutions, with all its constitutive violence towards the vulnerable.⁹⁵

The Uses of Haiti (1994)

In 1994, Farmer published his second book-length monograph, *The Uses of Haiti*.⁹⁶ Introduced by Noam Chomsky, this book is best read as a retelling of history to clear Haiti’s good name, to expose those who erect a “wall of disinformation,” and to call out those who have found many ways to “use” Haiti over the centuries—for profit, exploitation, negative example, and so on. Far from being an isolated and unfortunate island, Farmer narrates in painful detail how Haiti (and its poverty) is deeply tied to the rest of the world.⁹⁷

Though he focuses mostly on Haiti, he also introduces theological themes, such as: liberationists as the accurate interpreters of history, the

⁹³ Farmer, Connors, and Simmons, eds., *Women, Poverty, and AIDS*, xvii–xviii, 28–29, 33, 38.

⁹⁴ Farmer, Connors, and Simmons, eds., *Women, Poverty, and AIDS*, xvii–xviii.

⁹⁵ Farmer, Connors, and Simmons, eds., *Women, Poverty, and AIDS*, xx. This connects with Jim Kim’s work at the time and the book *Dying for Growth*. Jim Yong Kim, John Gershman, Alec Irwin, Joyce V. Millen, eds., *Dying for Growth: Global Inequality and the Health of the Poor* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2002). Kim—whose mother was theologically trained at Union in New York City during their famous mid-century era—would go on to later have an ambivalent presidency at the World Bank.

⁹⁶ Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 2nd ed. (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2003).

⁹⁷ Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, cf. 50, 52, 78. A good example of debunking a narrative is pp. 285–286.

importance of truth-telling and listening to the voices of the poor, and liberation theology/base ecclesial communities as true hope.⁹⁸ Here we already see him reading Haiti biblically, using words like calvary, metanoia, and the via crucis.⁹⁹ He places his hope in faith and collective action, penitence and the solidarity it engenders, and the “irruption of the poor.”¹⁰⁰ The current enemy of these is the “New World Order”—an amalgamation of neoliberal economics, neocolonialism, and continued exploitation of the poor. Its pages contain an interesting insider-outsider view of the events surrounding Aristide during this tumultuous period, with a generally positive reception of him and the movement. Finally, his citations of left intellectuals—E.P. Thompson, Chomsky, C.L.R. James, Scott James, Louis Althusser, Jean Baudrillard, and Antonio Gramsci—hint at his reading interests and the theorists that he brings into conversation with justice-oriented theologians like Gutiérrez, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Diedrich Bonhoeffer, and Pablo Richard.

AIDS and Accusations: Haiti and the Geography of Blame (1992)

We conclude with his first book, *AIDS and Accusations: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*, adapted from his PhD dissertation and published in 1992.¹⁰¹ “This book,” he writes “is an attempt to constitute an interpretive anthropology of affliction based on complementary ethnographic, historical, epidemiologic, and political-economic analysis.”¹⁰² Contextually focused on Haiti, the emergence of HIV/AIDS, and the narratives of attribution for this new disease, it is one of his first demonstrations of an analysis that is “geographically broad and historically deep,” while also giving the flavor and narrative texture of the suffering society around

⁹⁸ Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 110, 292.

⁹⁹ Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 253, 304, 336.

¹⁰⁰ Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 307, 343, 346.

¹⁰¹ Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*, Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁰² Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 13.

him—an analysis that is global and local simultaneously. As discussed previously, he also sets himself the enormous task of refuting false accusations—those “immodest claims of causality”—which swirl around Haiti during the beginning the global HIV pandemic (for one, the myth that Haitians represent an HIV threat to Americans, showing that in fact Americans spread the disease to Haiti). This is the beginning of the debunking thread of his career. Of particular note in this volume is his close attention to the lives of his patients, patients whose narratives will otherwise be forgotten (or silenced) beyond their immediate community. These threads already present in his first book—of patient narratives and debunking false claims about a disease and who is to blame—continue all the way through his last book, *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds*.

The poignant stories found herein are an important aspect of this book—for example, those of Acéphie and Chouchou. In a sign of their power in his own life and scholarship, their narratives continue to resurface in Farmer’s books for the next two decades. The anthropologist’s eye is also helpful for describing the history of his chosen town of Cange (“Kay”), a dusty village of transplants in the hills around the Peligre dam that displaced them from their old home in that fertile valley. By weaving in the history of the town, the country, and the international financial institutions that created the dam and its refugees, one is able to see Farmer’s analytical comprehensiveness that is his social medicine goal.

Finally, of particular note is the description of Fr. Fritz Lafontant (“Jacques Alexis”)—the Episcopal priest who first connected Farmer with Cange—as well as the origins of the clinic there. The ‘catalyst’ Fr. Lafontant, with “great disdain for those ... *diseurs de messe*” (‘Mass sayers’) who do not implement the philosophies they preach (as well as with the Protestants who buy converts with food and schools), energetically organizes social programs: “medical care, community organizing, small-scale agricultural projects, and above all, school.”¹⁰³ Chapters 4 and 5

¹⁰³ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 34. This focus on education-as-justice would run throughout his life, eventually culminating in the University of Global Health Equity in

beautifully explain the origins and early days of Clinique Bon Sauveur (“Clinique Saint-André”) and PIH/Zanmi Lasante (ZL) in Cange. With funds from a sister Episcopal diocese in South Carolina, and local vocational training in construction led by Lafontant, a church, teacher dormitory, bakery, clinic, laboratory, lunchroom, daycare and nutrition center, guesthouse, and pigsties spring up; unsurprisingly, this “efflorescence of new services drew many new families to the area.”¹⁰⁴ The community starts to become a livable home for these water refugees, and in the village a nucleus emerges: while there has been “no village center or ‘square,’ ... the school-church-clinic complex may be taking on this function.”¹⁰⁵ Through this, and through the activation of the people, winds of new hope seem to be brewing in this dusty corner of the Central Plateau.

Conclusion: Where “the Tygers of Wrath Fraternize with the Horses of Instruction”

This completes a narrative review of Farmer’s written work, with special attention to the threads of religion, theology, and spirituality through a body of work that was primarily medical. Hopefully, this review has introduced new readers to Farmer’s written corpus, helped contextualize his religious influences, and provided a map of the territory enabling future readers to better read this subtle writer. While he was always quick to point out that he was not a theologian—true in the sense that he did not formally study theology nor write on most of the traditional theological *loci*—his thinking and writing manifest a deeply theological imagination and understanding of the world. His legacy is one of both religiously inspired work (both scholarly and in praxis) and an example of life lived

Rwanda, departments and programs at Harvard and the Brigham and Women’s Hospital, and the Mirebalais University Hospital which is operating successfully as a teaching hospital. When asked about the name, given that there was no university there, Farmer would retort “Yet!”

¹⁰⁴ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 36.

religiously in its broadest sense. Indeed, the final role of theology and religious language in Farmer's life should be seen in light of liberation theologians' focus and definition of *praxis*—action, and reflection on action.

Besides the analytical tools and fire he derived from liberation theology, he makes recourse to religious language in his writing at its margins, too, when the received language of the mainstream moral imagination is not able to shoulder the load. Thus, concepts like structural violence, accompaniment, and the preferential option for the poor are touchstones throughout his written work. They are accompanied, too, by the methodological choices (like unfailingly narrating in-depth patient stories) that reflect both his theological and anthropological influences, and the numerous religious thinkers which appear in the text.

Engaged *praxis* is the engine of any truly vital scholarship that wishes not just to describe the world but to change it. Beyond his medical expertise, theology motivated his action, as reflected in PIH's motto of "the preferential option for the poor in health care," and was also part of his reflection on the action, such when the failures of the TB program were assessed using principles derived from Base Ecclesial Communities (described in other contributions to this volume). Similarly, the activities PIH engaged in were drawn from the works of mercy. As other forthcoming work will show, the practice of accompaniment itself was also a driver for Farmer's own personal spiritual development.

In any case, Farmer's work holds together a powerful practical *use* of theology throughout his writing with an increasingly explicit voice on the subject itself in the last decade of his life. His theological categories for self-understanding, religious imagination, and theologizing about the work itself are future directions for scholars and practitioners to explore; even beyond the writings analyzed here, the wonderful chapters in this volume elucidate multiple perspectives on the religious dimensions of his work and the theological vitality of his practice. Just like the origin of the hospital in fourth century Asia Minor (co-located in St. Basil the Great's 'new city')

with a church, monastery, school, and bakery),¹⁰⁶ Paul Farmer's work at PIH continues to teach lessons about the evergreen power of religiously-inspired work in medicine in a way that transcends borders, class, and generations. Yet, we are also familiar with the terrible abuses of religion and medicine; his perpetual admonishment that we must make a preferential option for the poor in a spirit of accompaniment perhaps serves both as guardrail and inspiration. For me, they confirm that the oldest insights are the freshest and ever-applicable, too. Despite all of the world's obfuscations, some help us to have "eyes to see."



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¹⁰⁶ Robert Louis Wilken, "The Sick, the Aged, and the Poor: The Birth of Hospitals," in *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).