

Hanna Kaarina TERVANOTKO

Poverty Suits Her Well:

A Meditation on Modern Poverty, Empire and Christians

Mihaela is 30. She lives in a village in the eastern part of Romania, together with her five children and her elderly sick mother. She is a cleaning woman. She wakes up at five in the morning to go to the neighbouring town to work. She cleans hospitals and sometimes private houses. Now and then she has to stay in town until very late in order to finish everything. Then her body gets very tired and aches. Other times she leaves earlier and spends the rest of the day working on a little piece of land, where she cultivates potatoes and carrots for the family's use. In the evening she returns home to take care of the family. Mihaela earns about 130 EUR each month, and with that money and her mother's tiny pension she feeds her children whose father has left the family. Sometimes the money is just not enough to cover all the expenses of the family: food, clothes, medicine. Mihaela is very skinny—she weighs only 42 kilos. She dreams about being able to raise her children in dignity and having a decent quality of life.

Anna is 34. She lives alone in a beautiful newly renovated flat in London. She holds a master's degree in international law and speaks four languages. Anna works in a big law firm. In the weekends she flees the city to spend time in the countryside with her parents or flies to some European capital with her friends. Anna has everything one could desire from life: education, money, family, friends, work—but yet she feels empty and lonely and has suicidal tendencies. Anna is also hungry. Usually she does not eat anything during the day, but after work she tortures her body in the gym for hours. Sometimes she is forced to eat in a restaurant with her clients or colleagues. She does not like to and she does everything she can to avoid it. She can spend 150 EUR for a meal that she will throw up afterwards in a bathroom. Anna also weighs 42 kilos, and she wants desperately to get thinner.

Both women are hungry and dissatisfied with their lives. One aches for food,

the other for healing to be a complete person. Mihaela's hunger is concrete and she could be fed, but how can Anna find the food she needs?

The two persons are fictitious but the plot could be true. Both Anna and Mihaela are victims of our time—the time that keeps on dividing the world and creating empires. The time that gives to poverty new faces. The empire sets the prices and determines who makes the profits. This system looks down on those who are already in difficulty and makes their lives even more difficult. It creates a fake image that real life exists only in some metropolis: the jobs, education, culture, access to information and the important people. If one is not part of this culture, one is nobody.

Falsely the empire also nourishes the image of a modern successful person who is energetic, cosmopolitan, international, highly cultivated, beautiful and thin. Women and men are captivated by the image of beauty that the empire has created. Slimness is beautiful, but only when it is dressed in expensive brands and looks sexy. Being skinny for real hunger is not attractive for anyone.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE—RESISTANCE

It is true that some Biblical passages, for example the Sermon on the Mount, anticipate that ultimate justice will happen only in the life after death.

“God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted, too” (Matthew 5:10–12).

One should not think that Christians can avoid responsibility for the current state of the world and should not engage with social ethics. Postponing justice to the life everafter cannot offer any solution for the growing injustice

where everyone is part of the system and therefore responsible. The impact of a conscious person remains very superficial unless Christians reflect more on what our task could be in this society in the light of our holy book. What kinds of societies are we encouraged to build? The slogan of the anti-globalisation movement says *“Another world is possible,”* but what is that “another world” we can envision? The Bible is a book that has influenced the whole western world, but what does it say about social ethics?

One Biblical premise is formulated in the message of the Old Testament prophets, who cried for justice and condemned those seeking profit by using those who are less fortunate. This can be found especially in the book of Amos (e.g. chapter 8), but the same message is present also in the book of Isaiah (chapter 5) as well as in various commandments concerning the Sabbath (Exodus 23,12; Deut 5,13–14) and the jubilee year (Deut 24,19–22, 15,4). The prophets, whose task was to deliver the divine messages, did not have a practical resolution on how to eliminate poverty as such. Therefore they concentrated on forwarding the message about how as many people as possible could live a life of dignity. Their answer was the concept of the common good, which should be the interest of everyone. If the focus on profit-making would be shifted to the common good, it would also eventually bring peace to the communities. Short-sighted individualism and self-interested empire building have no ground in the message of the prophets.

“I am creating something new. There it is! Do you see it? I have put roads in deserts, streams in thirsty lands” (Isaiah 43,19).

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Suggested Reading

BECKFORD Robert. *Find the Power. Reading the Bible.* London, 2006.

CORBELIUS Klas, *I mammons tid.* Visby, 2005.

COLLINS John, *The Biblical Vision of the Common Good. Encounters with Biblical Theology.* Minneapolis, 2005.

DUCHROW Ulrich – HINKELAMMERT Franz Josef, *Property for People, Not for Profit. Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital.* Geneva, 2004.

GNANADASON Aruna, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* Geneva, 2005.

Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/agape-new.pdf>

Hanna K. TERVANOTKO is a minister of the Lutheran Church of Finland. She studied theology, semitic languages and European studies in Finland and philosophy in Italy. Her main interests are Biblical exegesis, inter-testamental literature and feminist theology. Since 2004 she has been working as the regional secretary of WSCF Europe in Budapest. Her email is regionaloffice@wscf-europe.org.

