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Response to John Coleby

Bruce W. Longenecker

It is heartening to hear from John Coleby's stimulating essay that in our twenty-first-century world, 'all the major religions place an emphasis on charitable giving.' The first-century Roman world seems to have been much different. In this short response, then, it might be interesting to give a brief (and, therefore, slightly simplistic) overview of how religious devotion was usually configured in that distant world in relation to the poverty which had engulfed the lives of so many (an issue I do not deal with in my paper on benefaction in early Christianity).

For many people in the world that Jesus-devotees began to infiltrate, honouring the deities probably had very little to do with rectifying moral failings or acting with benevolence toward others. Often honouring the deities was essentially an exercise in pragmatic self-advancement; people offered reverence to the deities in order enhance their prospects for success in this life. According to the Roman statesman and orator Cicero (106–43 BCE), 'Jupiter is called Best and Greatest not because he makes people just or sober or wise, but because he makes them safe, secure, wealthy, and opulent' (*On the Nature of the Gods* 3.87). This statement follows on from a question Cicero had asked, 'Did anyone ever give thanks to the deities because he was a good man?' Cicero's answer is negative; the deities are worshipped, he said, only because of what they can give to a supplicant. The Roman playwright Plautus (approximately 255–185 BCE) had one of his characters explain things in this way: 'The deities put money in the hands of a man to whom they are well disposed. So now I'll attend to the business of sacrificing to them. It's my intention to look out for myself' (*Curculio* 530–32). No doubt Plautus had his character speak in an exaggeratedly crass fashion for humorous effect, but even so, exaggeration is rhetorically effective to the extent that it has some true-sounding resonances with its audience.

There were exceptions, of course, and at times we get glimpses of people who connected the dots between their religious devotion to the Roman deities and generosity toward the needy. However, in the pre-Christian world, Judaism was the religion that stood out starkly from the rest for making strong, organic connections between its deity and generosity toward the needy. Arguably, those same distinctives were what occasionally attracted gentiles to adopt a form of devotion to the Jewish

deity without becoming Jewish themselves. (The author of Acts calls such people ‘God-fearers’; see especially in Acts 10.2.)

In this regard, one of the things we see in the rise of Christianity from the first century onwards is the taking of Judaism’s rich traditions of concern for the needy into the harsh Graeco-Roman world that could all too easily be characterized as intransigent towards the needy. Historically speaking, in the earliest forms of Jesus-devotion, we see a form of Judaism that included in its mission the concern to offset deep-rooted needs in the name of the deity of Israel and a single Galilean Jew, whose own ministry was marked by concern for the poor as one of its primary features.

I suspect that same Galilean Jew, whom the earliest Christians proclaimed as ‘Lord’, would have been heartened to hear that ‘all the major religions [of the twenty-first-century world] place an emphasis on charitable giving’. No doubt that same Galilean Jew would have kept up the pressure on those who call him ‘Lord’ today, ensuring that twenty-first-century followers imitated his initial followers in doing good to all (Gal. 6.10).