

The Concept Of Charity As Practiced In Three Of The World's Major Religions

By

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Tsedakah, Zakàt and Charity

First, the usual disclaimers: unless you were prepared to listen for several hours to a detailed lecture on this subject, it would not be possible to go into every facet of this theme, or even sometimes do more than gloss over some of the details. Hence the following essay necessarily includes numerous generalizations, and I apologize in advance for the many short-cuts I have had to introduce in this paper.

One of the problems of speaking several languages that are somehow related, such as French and English, is that one can find oneself using the same word to mean different concepts. For instance, if I say: "If you drive west on Virginia Route 123, you will eventually get to Lorton", the word "eventually" means that I will certainly, at some point in time, reach Lorton. But "éventuellement" in French means almost the opposite, as it implies that one might, or might not reach Lorton. In French, it is just a possibility.

Similarly, in English there can be several alternatives, while, in French, there can only be one alternative.

Hence, when I started considering preparing a paper on the subject of Charity, I began wondering whether that English word had the same meaning in Hebrew, Arabic and now, English.

Also, while ruminating about the concept of "Charity" as understood in American Masonry, I was struck by the fact that U.S. Masonic literature considers Charity as a purpose of Masonry, while European Masonry considers Charity as a by-product of the self-improvement that every dedicated

Mason will undergo. That is, at least in my mind, a major difference.

Not so long ago, I was driving down from Virginia to the District. After the Roosevelt bridge, my beggar was waiting at the traffic light, holding in one hand a plastic cup and, in the other, a piece of cardboard that read: "I will work for food, God bless".

Later, as I was paying \$7 to park my car, I reflected on the 50 cents alms I had earlier given the poor devil.

- Should I have given more? If so, how much more?
- And what if he were a con artist?
- Why did I give him something anyway?

After all, between my federal taxes, state taxes, sales taxes and social security contributions, almost 50% of my income already disappears in levies of various kinds. With Social Security, food stamps and all the other entitlement programs, why doesn't the Welfare State take care of this beggar?

Ever since then, the vision of that mendicant, waiting patiently for someone to come by, for something to happen, has led me to re-visit my understanding of the whole concept of charity.

- **What is charity?** Indeed, for those of us who practice charity, do we do so:
 - to feel good about ourselves, or
 - because we want to help someone, irrespective of any religious concern, or
 - to please God, or
 - for what other purpose?

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- Also, is charity a universal moral value?
- Is charity an innate virtue? or is it something we learned from our parents?
- And, finally, what if charity was not a good thing?

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In today's language, *charity* and *philanthropy* are almost synonymous but, in the past, charity would have meant taking care of a particular person, whereas philanthropy would indicate being involved in the general good. As an example of philanthropy, several kings of the Ptolemy dynasty in Ancient Egypt created, and then supported the great library of Alexandria. Similarly, during the 20th Century, philanthropists such as John Rockefeller and Henry Ford have donated fortunes to charitable organizations.

In Ancient Greece, charity meant self-less love and concern for the Other. The Greek word *charis* (*Χαρις*) meant a gift inspired by the goddesses known as the Three Graces (the Charites). The Greeks performed good deeds for the sake of goodness. Aristotle favored "*the conferring of a benefit when a return is not sought*". In ancient and medieval literature and art, the seven cardinal virtues were: faith, hope, prudence, temperance, chastity, fortitude, and charity.

Clearly, we are born egotists, and the need to survive drives us to keep for ourselves everything we possibly can. Maslow's theory of needs places at the bottom of the ladder the following needs: eat, sleep, find and keep a shelter, find and keep a mate, etc. As you noticed, charity is not on that list. Hence it is upbringing, social and/or religious, that teaches us to share with the Other. But religious teachings and social customs vary depending on place and time. So, again, what is charity?

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First, let us look at **Judaism**. The word "charity" does not actually appear once in the Old Testament. In the Hebrew text, the word generally used to mean charity is **Tsedakah**. But in fact *Tsedakah* means

"righteousness", in the sense of being perceived righteous by God. The root Tz-D-K is also found in *tsadik*, a righteous person, and in *tsodek* which can be translated as meaning "correct".

In Judaism a *Mitzvah* is a commandment, an order from God. The Talmud tells us (Bava Bathra 9a) that *Tsedakah* is equal to all the other *Mitzvoth* taken together, and in the Book of Proverbs, we are told that:

"Treasures of wickedness profit nothing; but righteousness delivereth from death" (Prov. 10:2)

and also that

"To do righteousness is more acceptable to the Lord than a sacrifice" (Prov. 21:3).

The concept of righteousness in Judaism includes primarily charity, but also extends to justice, kindness, humility, and honesty. The great 12th Century Rabbi Maïmonides devoted much time to the study of *Tsedakah*, and suggested that it would be appropriate to devote 10% of one's income to *Tsedakah*. Doing *Tsedakah* is a religious imperative, a duty toward God, and although Maimonides recommended to give cheerfully and to take care that the recipient not be humiliated in the process, what really counts is that the gift be made rather than the spirit in which it is given. *Tsedakah* is an activity, a behavior that causes the giver to become a better Man. The Jew performs *Tsedakah* because is a *mitzvah*, a commandment from God, because it is the appropriate action to take. Because, as the Psalmist says:

"The world belongs to God" (Psalms 24:1);

and not, as we nowadays seem to think, to Man. Thus, in doing *Tsedakah*, Man only redistributes what is God's property, a concept somewhat similar to that of Islam, as we shall see a little later. In Deuteronomy, we read that:

"There will always be poor people, and that is why I tell you: open your hand to your brother, to the poor, to the needy" (Deuteronomy 15:11)

Hence Man has no choice, God **orders** him to be charitable. How often? Let me quote from the Jewish Encyclopedia of Moral and Ethical Issues:

“It is preferable to give little amounts of *tsedakah* each day than one large sum occasionally, even if the total amounts are the same. The reason is that each act of *tsedakah* is a separate *mitzvah*. [...] Each *mitzvah* and sin is sent up ahead of him or her in the world to come. And [...] every time a person gives *tsedakah*, the Divine Presence rests upon that individual.”ⁱ

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Secondly, let us look at the **Muslim**'s concept of charity. In the Qur'an, the word used to mean "charity" is **Zakàt**, and in Arabic, there is even a specific word, "*fakhir*" to describe a poor man living on charity and resigned to God's will.

Zakàt literally means "sweetening". When used in the context of wealth, it means to legitimate, to justify. **Zakàt**, the third pillar of Islam, is not really charity as usually understood in the Western Worldⁱⁱ, but more a kind of tax collected by the state, a financial obligation, paid at the end of the year to help the poor, to support those who propagate the Muslim faith, and to take care of war prisoners. The **Zakàt** represents Man's participation in the affairs of his own local community, and reinforces the Muslim's feeling that his is a part of the Umma, the aggregate, the fraternity of all Muslims in the world.

For the Qur'an, the **Zakàt** is a loan, an advance made by Man to God, and which will be repaid many times. The Qur'an states:

“That which you give in charity, seeking Allah's Countenance, hath increase manifold” (Sura 30:39).

A financial obligation, it is also a religious one, a service one owes one's God. As the Prophet has said: *“God gives, I only distribute”*.

Everything belongs to God, He has given his creatures wealth, and they are required to return it to

the Community. Thus to return part of one's wealth (usually 1/40th) to the community is to worship one's God.

The Qur'an also insists that the motivation behind almsgiving must not be ostentation, but simply to follow God's will, and to please Him.

“Woe to those who observe the rituals of religion but are insensitive to the moral side of these rituals, and hence to the need of the most miserable for assistance (Sura 107:7)

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Thirdly, what about the **Christian** viewpoint? We often hear of "Christian love". The problem is that, in English the single word "love" is used as a translation for three different Greek words:

- "*philia*" (*Φιλία*) which implied a friendship type of attachment,
- "*erôs*" (*Ερωζ*), the love of beauty which usually implied the idea of desire or covetousness, and
- *agapê* (*Αγαπη*) which indicated the love of Man for his God, or the love of Man for Wisdom.

In the Greek version of the New Testament, the word used is always "*agapê*". Hence when Saint Jerome, during the IVth Century AD, embarked in translating the Septuagint version of the Bible from Greek into Latin, he had to avoid the use of the word "*amor*" which had been overused, and possibly degraded by the Pagans. For instance, to translate literally "God is Love" (a passage from 1 John 4-16), Jerome would have had to say: "*Deus amor est*" which could also have been understood as "Love is a God". Jerome therefore preferred to translate "God is love" by "*Deus caritas est*" ⇒ "*God is charity*". *Caritas* is the action of holding something dear, as in *chérir* in French. Incidentally, the word "charity" appears no less than 51 times in the Louis Segond French version, (mainly in Paul's writings) but only in 24 verses in the King James version. The reason for that discrepancy is that the King James version often translates the word "*agapê*" by "love" instead

of “charity”, which can be misleading, as we have just seen.

On the other hand, Philanthropy comes from *phile* which, as mentioned above, is a friendship type of attachment, and *anthropos* meaning mankind. The concept of philanthropy is thus the inclination to increase the well-being of humankind because of one’s love for Man.

So, what is the Christian concept of charity? The subject is refined at length both in the Fourth Gospel and in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, and would take several evenings to be developed here. We can possibly try to summarize it by remembering the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29). Let us keep in mind that, in those days, Samaritans were rejected by the Jews and in fact at one point, the antagonistic Pharisees, bent on maligning Jesus, asked him:

“Say we not well that thou are a Samaritan, and hast a devil?” (John 8:48)

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a beaten-up Jew --attacked by bandits and left half-dead on the side of the road-- is carefully avoided by both a Priest and a Levite. Eventually, a Samaritan comes by who takes care of him. The point of the parable is that it is the Samaritan who, by behaving charitably, becomes the wounded Jew’s neighbor. The real question is thus no longer: “Who is my neighbor ?” but “What can *I do* to become someone else’s neighbor?”

Until the 16th Century, the Catholic Church postulated that Man had to perform “Good Works” as a propitiation gesture toward God. In so doing, Man would amass indulgences to counterbalance his sins, and thus work toward reducing the time he would have to spend in Purgatory, prior to entering Paradise.

Among the “good works”, Charity was prominent and was thus perceived as one of the acts leading to some reward in the afterlife. According to the New Testament, Jesus said that: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God*” (Matthew 19:24).

In the light of that teaching, many practicing Catholics feel somewhat guilty about being rich whereas, for the practicing Muslim however, the pursuit of amassing wealth is a normal one, and he who practices *Zakât* need not entertain any such guilt feelings.

Under Martin Luther and John Calvin’s leadership, the Reformation rediscovered the principles of God’s Election, or Predestination, already present in the Old Testament, and amplified by Saint Paul and Saint Augustine. Here a subset of Humanity was chosen by God to receive His grace, and those chosen people had no alternative but to perform Good Deeds. Charity thus became the result, the by-product and the visible proof of God’s election.

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Finally, let us have a quick look at our own modern world. Of interest should be the relatively recent concept that charity may *not* be a good thing. Indeed, **Social Darwinism**ⁱⁱⁱ teaches us that to give something to the poor or the weak would enable him to survive, thus weakening the species. Hence, well-intentioned food programs may lead to dangerous population increases and corresponding escalation of misery. The classical argument offered by the Darwinists is the one known as the “Lifeboat Problem”: a lifeboat with a capacity for 60 people is already loaded with 50 persons. There are another 100 castaways swimming toward that lifeboat. If we accept the 100, the boat will sink: a perfect example of total equality leading to total disaster. If, on the other hand, out of the 100, we only accept 10 in order not to go beyond our maximum capacity, on what criteria do we base our rejection of the unlucky 90? Even if the above argument is repulsive to many of us, we have to recognize it as philosophically valid, and the United Nations’ present attitude is that, as the Earth resources are finite, underdeveloped countries should curb their birthrate. Incidentally, this position of the United Nations is totally unacceptable to both Islam and the Catholic Church, both of which essentially profess that God will provide for His children.

Nowadays, charity has taken a somewhat disappointing turn. Indeed, modern charity, by and large, is no longer a person-to-person affair, but has become the province of charitable organizations. When we give money to such an organization, we essentially trade money for time, i.e., we decide that we do not have the time, that we have better things to do than to visit and help the poor, and we prefer instead to support an organization which becomes our surrogate.

Assuming that an average of 75% of the money we pay to those organizations (Red Cross, United Way, etc.) is spent on what is referred to as “operational and administrative costs”, and that but only a small percentage goes to the poor, the sick or the disadvantaged, is it still worth it? The sad truth is that most people no longer care for the individual approach, and that their contributions would be considerably diminished if it were not for the incentive of tax deductibility.

“Urbane” comes from *urbanus*, i.e., “from the city” and means “polite, refined” as opposed to the peasant who, supposedly, was “unrefined”. Yet, when we study life in small communities, we usually find cohesion, mutual care and help, whereas and rather ironically, it is Modern Man, Urban Man, the Man who lives in the City, who has become so narrowly focused on his own problems that he no longer cares about his neighbor. Our Urban Man has become so self-centered that he is no longer concerned about who may be his neighbor down the street --unless it could affect the value of his home-- and much less does he worry about his neighbor’s needs. How often do we extend our hand, giving quality time and offering real sympathy to our neighbors?

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Let me go back, for just a moment, to the three forms of charity *Tsedakah*, *Zakàt* and *Charity*. Many people believe that Christianity was the first religion to promulgate the love of one’s neighbor. Indeed, “The Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association” devoted to the subject of Charity, states that:

“...before Christ these words were never spoken: *Love one another; for that is the whole law*”.

Not only is this kind of statement insulting to non-Christian Masons, but it is also grossly misleading, as the same exhortation “*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*” already appears in Leviticus (19:18).

In fact, working on this paper has led me to appreciate that, in spite of the marked differences in the approaches followed by Islam, Judaism and Christianity, the message “*Love one another*” is present, and forcefully so, in these three major religions. Certainly, emphasis differs as to the motivation for, and the practice of charitable behavior, but it remains that the practical outcome is very much the same: the faithful is encouraged to practice charity because, in the final analysis, each of us carries within himself a particle of Deity. And, interestingly, in all cases the major benefit of giving goes to the *Giver*!

Thus, in the process of practicing charity, we intuitively acknowledge that we are parts of a larger whole, as we recognize and honor the supremacy of the Great Architect of the Universe.

To bring this paper to a close, let me quote, from Mary Davis Reed, a few verses that summarize quite well my own concept of charity:

If I had but one year to live;
One year to help; one year to give;
One year to love; one year to bless;
One year of better things to stress;
One year to sing; one year to smile;
To brighten earth a little while;
I think that I would spend each day,
In just the very same-self way
That I do now. For from afar
The call may come to cross the bar
At any time, and I must be
Prepared to meet Eternity.
So if I have a year to live,
Or just a day in which to give
A pleasant smile, a helping hand,
A mind that tries to understand
A fellow-creature when in need,

It's one with me, -I take no heed;
But try to live each day He sends
To serve my gracious Master's ends.

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End Notes:

ⁱ The Jewish Encyclopedia of Moral and Ethical Issues, p. 302

ⁱⁱ Islam, a Primer, p.19

ⁱⁱⁱ Herbert Spencer, *Progress, Its Laws and Causes*