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Item Type	Article
Authors	Weber, Edmund
Publisher	Frankfurt University
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Download date	2026-11-13 14:00:42
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/191217

Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber

in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad

Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik

Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber

No. 46 (2001)

Charity in Inter-religious Perspective[1]

By

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Charity has a long tradition in the Christian religion. From the early beginning there was some organized charity. In the Acts of the Apostles we read about so-called *diakonoi* being responsible for the needy Christians. During the whole church history there was the rule that 1/3 of the tithe, the *decima pars*, the religious tax, had to be spend for the poor people of a parish. Of course, there was much misuse of that portion; the tithe became private and the new owners of the tax mostly living far away were not interested in supporting the poor people. Yet, the Christian people organized additional charity. It is very important to see that religious mentality was very helpful for that.

The theology developed the doctrine of merit and alms: giving alms was not only seen as an act of Christian love that enjoyed the love for the needy brethren and sisters. Alms giving was a meritorious act which means: every Christian who gives without any necessity something of his own property or income to another one particularly to the poor people gets an appropriate transcendent reward. With the help of those good deeds the Christian could balance his personal karmic account. Every sin producing a deficit could be compensated by *satisfactio operis*, satisfactory acts. A rich man having beaten a servant too much had to compensate that irregular and unjust behavior. Dying before he had given the commensurate satisfaction he had to suffer in the purgatory for some time. The Christians of the West were convinced for centuries that alms giving was an appropriate *remedium animae*, a remedy for the soul, burning the bad karma during life time.

[1] The article is based on a paper which was presented during an Indo-German seminar on 'Charity and Religion' at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, 23.-24.3.2001, New Delhi, India.

For centuries the societies in the West faced diseases which they couldn't cure: e.g. the leprosy. All over Old Europe we can find leprosaria, hospitals for lepers. Those hospitals were well organized and well equipped. We can read from the documents how many donations were given to these institutions and how strictly the local governments controlled and supervised them.

However, according to the official ethics everybody lost the right to get alms when he became able to take care of himself and or got his own livelihood from private income.

Through internalization the feudal *karma* religion safeguarded a vast and effective charitable system lasting for more than thousand years.

St Francis (1182-1226), the servant of Lady Poverty, radicalized the doctrine of charity by declaring the alms as property of the poor people, property which Jesus Christ had earned once and then bequeathed to the needy ones. Therefore, by giving alms the so-called donators gives only back to the poor people what they had got as testamentary trustees from Jesus Christ. The alms are given to the rich people for safekeeping only. More than that: The religious devaluation of charity had its reason in *St. Francis'* favoring the poverty. If poverty is the best form of life the uplifting of poor people by giving them charity doesn't make any sense. His charity only means to give the needy ones what they need as necessary food for one day; nothing more. Therefore, *St. Francis'* charity isn't religiously useful for the rich and materially not attractive for the poor.[2]

However, the moral consequence of that position was very dangerous for the religious basis of the feudal charity system: if the alms weren't given voluntarily and weren't part of the property of the donator: How could he have a right to religious merits? He had only done his duty - and doing the duty produces no merit. Therefore, St. Francis' concept of alms never came into vogue. Yet, not only because of that.

There was another more powerful reason why the Christian societies systematically, extensively and intensively developed charity. This reason had nothing to

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[2] Cf., Edmund Weber: The Privileged Religion of St. Francis of Assisi. Internet *Journal of Religious Culture* No. 22, 1998; Franz von Assisi und die Diakonie [St. Francis and Charity], *THEION - Annual for Religious Culture*, vol. VII, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 179-196.

It is very important to note that St. Francis reduced his attachment to the world extremely so that he could enjoy the beauty of death: in his experience death wasn't the reward for sin but it was his own sister, a creature through whom the Most Highest One was praised, lovely embracing him in the moment of dying. Just that mentality shared with him his female disciple Mother Teresa. Their charity didn't consist in material uplifting of poor and needy people but in giving dying people the chance to experience death as lovely sister, dying with a smile on their face. Mother Teresa didn't practice that kind of death charity by chance near the Temple of Mother Kali. She is the Lady of Death and therefore she can take away the fear of death:. Shri Ramprasad Sen, the most famous devotee of Kali, expressed his confidence in his divine mother after having fought with her over years:

"Shri Rāmprasad says: When death / Grabs you by the hair, / Call out: Kālī, Kālī -/ Then what can he do?"

Or: "Rāmprasad says: Call the Mother, / She can handle Death."

Or: "All right, Death, / Here I am. / I've drawn a circle around me / With Kali's name. / The Great Death, Kali on his chest, / Has taken Her feet to His heart. / Remembering that Herr feet / Cancel all fear, / Who needs to fear Death?" (Grace and Mercy in Her wild Hair. Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess. Tr. by L. Nathan and C. Seely. Boulder 1882, p. 26; p. 20; p. 58).

Mother Teresa radicalized that Kali given freedom from fear into joy of death. Seeing the real religious streaming beneath the official religions we can notice that Mother Teresa has been a real daughter of Mother Kali; no doubt, the reason she ask the Kalighat temple management to deliver her a room for the dying people just near the house where Kali is staying.

do with alms as religious merits or as property of the poor people but only with the functional fundaments of the feudal societies.
From charity in a broader sense the maintenance of the traditional society depended basically. The steady development of material productivity was always threatening the basic structures and functions of the feudal society.
The agrarian feudal economy was extremely jeopardized when the urban system of production (i. e. specialization and division of labor, trade, market, communal politics) became an integral and irreversible part of the social system. The new urban classes directly organized the production by themselves. To get a chance of economic survival they were forced to get technical qualification and economical competence. They started something like a intra-feudal competition.
However, the traditional feudal classes didn't want any change of their anti-competitive system; particularly the ruling classes and orders were afraid of the plowing back of surplus into the productive economic activities. They manipulated the reinvestment of surplus. The urban craft guilds and merchants were not allowed to plow back the profits. Therefore, they spend their surplus for unproductive consumption: the construction of all the great urban cathedrals, churches, chapels, palaces, the development of schools, universities, the promotion of arts, and all the other foundations and non-productive investments. The absorption of the surplus had become the main question of the urbanized feudal system.
The urbanized society was indeed depending on charity. Therefore, they had not only to prevent the market explosion but also to prevent the majority of the people to get a productive job. Better a friar and a beggar than a surplus making manager and laborer. The religion supported that system calling the jobless people with the honorific name *pauperes Christi,* the poor people of Jesus Christ.
Poverty became a basic religious ideal because it protected the urbanized feudal system. Therefore, supporting the poor people will say the non-productive ones was a necessity for the maintenance of society. The Catholic law indirectly promoted that sacralised poverty by prohibiting those people who couldn't get one of the few full jobs to marry and produce children. The celibacy was not only a method of population control in general but primarily a socio-economic strategy to avoid the emergence of a labor market.
When the anti-productive society declined because the productive forces had undermined the socio-economic restrictions the questions of a new system of charity arose in the new productivity-centered economy.
The radical change of the old charity system we can observe on the religious symptoms first.
During the Middle Ages when the feudal system was flourishing Catholic religion successfully taught the people to take care of their post-mortal existence: what will happen to the soul when the body is vanishing away. The church taught that a Catholic soul normally has to suffer in the purgatory, the temporal hell, for a long time in order to atone for their bad deeds on earth, to consume the bad *karma*. The Catholic believers were so deeply convinced of the reality of the purgatory which could last 20 000 years and more that they were ready to

pay everything to shorten that gruel time. The remedy for the salvation of the soul was besides prayers mostly alms and foundations. Rich widows having no descendants made huge donations to the church for establishing hospitals or houses for fallen girls etc. All the beneficiaries of that donations had to do one thing: to pray i.e. to make religious merits in favor of the donator. The beneficiaries had to produce remedies for the salvation of the widow, i.e. to shorten her misery in the purgatory. The normal argument for charity was the donor's own post-secular wellness.

The Protestant reformation introduced a radical change in the motivation of making charity. The idea of shortening the purgatory became unimportant because the purgatory or better suffering was no more in contradiction to salvation. *"Leid, Leid ist des Christen Teil: Suffering, suffering is particularly essential for being a Christian."* A Christian shouldn't avoid suffering. Therefore, there was no need for shortening suffering anymore.

Did charity vanish with the Reformation? Not at all. Only the reason for charity changed: Now the Christians offered alms and donations to realize their Christianhood. Having got salvation by the unpaid grace of God the Christian couldn't use his energy and wealth for his salvation anymore; that would be absolutely useless. He should give his surplus to the needy ones in order to enjoy God in this way. These are the so-called free works, free from ego-centered salvation, done only to please God by loving the needy fellowmen in a practical and material form.

The practical consequence of that new religion consisted in the change of the sponsored deeds: Protestant charity in the time of reformation became secularized: no prayers or masses were asked for; only secular help for the needy people was demanded.

In Frankfurt there is till today the *Cronstett- and Hynspergian Protestant Foundation*. In her whole lifetime, a rich and noble lady, named *Justina Catharina Steffan von Cronstetten*, took care of poor orphans and women who couldn't look after themselves. With the help of her immense property she established the mentioned foundation which should give noble widows a home. Today that foundation is engaged in mobile support of old people and mobile child nursing, it is running an Old Peoples' home, etc. Today the foundation is getting its money mostly from rents of houses in the city of Frankfurt, an amount of 4, 5 Mio. DM = around 90 Million Rupies.[3]

The old Protestant religion of charity had its religious root in the experience of a God who gave his grace without any condition and let suffering be a godlike experience.

Being pleased about such a god the Protestant was greedy to please him with good secular deeds without any ego-centered heavenly interest, with so-called free love for the fellow-men.

That Protestant motivation underwent change in the 19th century during the rise and triumph of the Bourgeois society.

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[3] *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* 30. 1. 2001, p. 59

The new system of productive mass labor reinforced by the national and international markets and the development of transport and trade created a new poverty. The new poverty of the proletarian laborers in the new industrial areas and the underemployed people in the traditional villages couldn't be supported by the traditional charity system. The uncontrolled explosion of population and the increasing demands for jobs for maintaining the multiplied number of low standard families made the traditional charity system ineffective. On the other hand the readiness of giving alms was reduced by the new economic possibility to reinvest the surplus.

When the poverty crisis intensified in the 19th century and the politisation of the proletarian masses threatened the old and new ruling classes they started a double strategy to counter the crisis which was called the *Soziale Frage*, the basic social conflict.

The first one: the new or Bourgeois Christians started a vast private charity movement organizing thousands of charity associations e.g. for fallen girls in the new urban areas, public kitchens, old people houses, hospitals for mentally and physically ill people (*Bethel*), they helped the wandering workers (*Adolf Kolping*), hundreds of girls' schools were established, and so on. All the models and organizations of modern Bourgeois charity were created in the 19th century.

The religious motivation of that surprising Protestant and Catholic lay movement of helpers was very clear: the idea of heavenly merit had lost its motivating power.

The new charity ideology taught that a real Christian was a *sittliche Persönlichkeit*, a moral personality. A good Christian was someone who was doing good works. Good works meant worldly deeds useful for the society. The good deeds should culminate in material success. A rich man was not - as the traditional ideology taught - far from the kingdom of God; he was very close to it. He was able to fulfill the basic commandment of the Bible: loving the neighbor. This love was understood as help with material goods. The rich Christian, therefore, could become the best Christian because he was able to spend money for the needy people.

Therefore, the *Liberal Theology* was reduced to social ethics. The dogmatic theology, the doctrine of transcendental issues, lost her dominant position within the Bourgeois religion.

Voluntary material support of the needy ones had become the basic definition of a modern Christian.

The ideology of the Bourgeois Christians started in the end of the 18th c. when Protestant theologians and church officers attacked the feudal system criticising the feudal nobility as absolutely useless and unnecessary people. The main argument against that class was that they were only consumers and not productive workers. People who were only consuming couldn't be Christians; a real Christian worked very hard to earn his own livelihood, reinvesting the surplus into the business and giving the needy a certain portion of his profit.

The other side of that anti-feudal ideology of the Bourgeois Christians was very clear: Could the needy people or the proletarians become real and complete

Christians? They didn't have any surplus which they could transfer to other needy persons, they were consuming their whole income by themselves neither reinvesting nor spending something.
The liberal Christians thought that those people were lower and incomplete Christians who had to be brought up to the high moral standard of a successful Protestant personality.
The same liberal argument we know from the charity ideology which the missionaries propagated and propagate till now.
Albert Schweitzer, a typical Bourgeois Christian, went to Africa to help and educate what he called the *Primitives of the Jungle*.[4] They were targets of Bourgeois Christian love giving the helper the chance to fulfill his own desire for moral superiority.
All the private associations of the Bourgeois Christians couldn't solve the social question during the 19. c. Therefore, the imperial German government under the leadership of *Otto von Bismarck* introduced a system of public social security particularly to withdraw the *Social Democratic Party*. Politically it failed. The First World War destroyed the economic basis of the system and therefore the proletarians supported the left parties and the petite Bourgeoisie the right parties. Only after the Second World War the German society enjoyed a working charity system: in West Germany with the help of the *Marshall Plan* and in the East with the socialist system. Yet, the basic problem is now the question of motivation: the secular concept of solidarity can only continue as long as there is enough wealth in the country will say under the conditions of a high living standard.
In India the traditional system of individual, kinship, caste and community charity is still working; it is small charity. I don't know if there has been a systematic analysis of its value calculated in economic terms. It must be a gigantic amount which people give in different forms to the needy ones: as service, as money, as protection, as consolation. It is indeed a horrible falsification of history what happened to the Hindu and Muslim traditional charity. The propaganda of the colonial missionaries and churches didn't want to admit the vast charitable activities, customs and institutions of *Waqf* and *Seva*. They wanted to show that only their Christianity is able to do charitable work, following the rule of nara seva while the *Hindoos* - the Mulims were seldom mentioned - had only *Narayan Seva* in mind. This propaganda was very successful so that even Hindus educated in Christian schools and coming from less poor background believed that prejudice.
They didn't realise that the missionaries were coming from a rich country, rich because it exploited the crown jewel of the empire, India. The Western research has shown that the wealth of the Britishers was coming from the subcontinent. That exploitation was not only humiliating but disastrous: India was not only robbed of her wealth but also of her historical chance to develop. Therefore, it is

[4] Cf., Albert Schweitzer: Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen [Christianity and World Religions]. München 1950, p. 56.

indeed very cynical to impoverish a country and to keep down a people by force and then complaining poor conditions of the Hindu society and its alleged lack of interest to help the needy ones.

Although the traditional system of charity was under permanent pressure of the system of colonial exploitation it still worked.

However, the missionaries using indo-colonial surplus to organize their Western charity in India, could implant the prejudice in the heads of English educated Indians that there was no indigenous charity in India and that the Hindu religion was responsible for that lack of solidarity with the needy ones.

Nevertheless, the modernization of the Indian society is demanding a reorganization and an adaptation which the Western societies could start with the help of the Indian wealth one century ago.

The modern religious communities are indeed feeling the need of modernization and intensivation of such charity activities and the strong need for building up a general social conscience free from group barriers and to motivate people for social engagement. We see that not only the cult of *Ganesha* is increasing but that of *Hanuman* too. Hanuman is the epitome of a selfless social *Sevakar*.

The religious motivation for engaging in charitable activities or in helping by material goods is surprisingly similar to the moral ideology in the Western tradition. *Narayana Seva* is understood as *Nara Seva*.[5] or the same principle is called 'Serving Humanity is Serving God'.[6] Religion becomes now the motivation to do secular good deeds including charity. *Raghu Nandan Prasad Sharma* explains the Sewa Sutra as follows: "<Sewa> is the most essential virtue to make one's life meaningful i.e. the success of one's life lies in the service to others."[7] Service to the others is according to the Hindu Modernists "the essence of devotion and that too with full dedication."[8] The aim of all religious activities is the production of inner energy for an ecstatic engagement in very secular social welfare work.

The religious motivation is counterbalancing the materialistic vision in making surplus unlimitedly. In the logics of that secular motivation there isn't any argument to share with needy people. It is very irrational in this perspectives to do charity. However, the *Vernunft*, the wisdom, is ironically irrational enough, not to follow the logics of unlimited profit making.

The new Indian middle class is becoming more and more religious in a modern shape and in the time more and more charity concerned. The increasing self-consciousness of the Indian people looses more and more their inferiority complex and gives them a feeling for their co-nationals.

Religion is the social function to cultivate the inner richness, the simple awareness of the absolute, non-questionable value of one's own existence.

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[5] Cf., A.L. Sharma: Nara Seva Narayana Seva. Souvenir, 5th Euopean Hindu Conference. Frankfurt am Main 1992, p.149; Raghu N.P. Sharma: Nar Sewa Narayan Sewa. New Delhi: VHP Sankat Morcham Ashram, December 1995;

[6] Heading of a leaflet of the RSS run *Sewa International*, 515, New Rajindra Nagar, New Delhi-110060.

[7] Raghu N.P. Sharma: Sewa Sutra. Internet (http://www.vhp.org/... SewaSutra_7.htm)

[8] ibid.

Of course, the logics of profit is denying that fantastic idea; however, the logics of profit has no ultimate reason.

Under the everlasting condition of shortage of goods the religion has to motivate the new rich middle class to support the needy people particularly in the new urban areas and to motivate the new poverty to fight against useless oppression which is blocking their socially necessary upcoming. Charity as help for the helpless and charity as help for self-help.

However, the religious communities should not forget that their particular duty is not charity itself; it is the motivation for charity. The work of charity should be done by professional and engaged lay people. The religious gurus have to concentrate on the task of convincing the people to balance their own economic success and their duty of charity for the needy ones.

It is very easy to convince the masses particularly of the new lower middle class to qualify themselves for money making; but it is extremely difficult to convince the same people to support the needy ones by voluntary work, that means loss of economic time, money, and deficit of personal reinvestment.

No doubt, the Indian religions are able to do their social duty. The masses of voluntary Seva workers and the increase of private activities in the educational sector and the development area are symptoms of the new charity. Now, modern charity is becoming more and more a function of all religions.

The research of the vast charity culture of the non-Christian communities in East and West has been ignored by ideological reasons. It is a scientific must to study all systems of charitable practice, their specific spiritual motivations and their religious concepts. Then we can smooth the way for the mobilizing of the charitable sources of all religions. The increasing new global poverty needs the motivating help of all religions and religious communities: the *Nara Seva* of the Hindus, the secular compassion of the *Engaged Buddhism*, the *Charity* of the Christians, the *Zakah*, *Sadaqah* and *Waqf* of the Muslim and the social welfare work of all the other groups and individuals in the world. The abuse of charity for making converts should give way to an inter-religious and inter-cultural co-operation of all charity people.

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