



Philanthropy – just giving?

01.11.2020 | Paul Valley*

The super-rich give billions of pounds every year to the poor. But the bond of mutual respect between giver and receiver has been lost. The author of a new book argues that philanthropy without partnership demeans and diminishes both donor and recipient.

Christian charity is more than simple philanthropy, Pope Francis said in an Angelus address last month by way of a prelude to saying that Christian charity involves “looking at others through the eyes of Jesus himself” – and, at the same time, “seeing Jesus in the face of the poor”. But what exactly did the Pope mean by “simple philanthropy”?

In truth, there is nothing simple about it. Today, philanthropy is commonly taken to mean a rich person giving a large amount of money to a good cause. But over the past two thousand years and more it has been, variously, a matter of honour, a religious injunction, a mechanism of political control, a vehicle for moral activism, an expression of enlightened self-interest, a manifestation of public good, of personal fulfilment and of plutocratic manipulation.

Among the ancient Greeks, who coined the word as a compound of two roots – *philos*, which meant something cherished, and *ánthropos*, a human being – philanthropy was seen primarily as a device to strengthen social relationships. The Romans saw it in part as a political investment to buy the favour of the people. Those who gave money – for temples, public baths, roads or aqueducts – often erected a stone with the inscription *DSPF* or *de sua pecunia fecit*, meaning Done With His Own Money. More elevated thinkers, such as Aristotle, insisted that its purpose was to improve the moral character of the giver, though he suggested that it must also consider the needs of the recipient.

What changed the Graeco-Roman template was the arrival of monotheism. Judaism constituted a radical democratisation of the cultures of the ancients. That was summed up in the first book of the Hebrew Bible where Adam and Eve, the Everyman and Everywoman, are seen as created in the image of God. Giving was no longer simply about social relationships, it was a human echo of God’s generosity towards humankind. To give is to imitate God. It is perhaps no coincidence that throughout the history of philanthropy Jews have been consistently generous givers.

Christianity fashioned its philanthropic inheritance from a fusion of the thinking of the Greeks, the Romans and the Jews. For Christians, giving became bound up in the idea that helping those in need was helping Christ himself: “What you do for the least of these, you do for me.” This Christological perspective was central to the medieval understanding of what it was to be Catholic. The early Church insisted that those who possess wealth also acquire a duty to use it for the benefit of others. Social as well as theological influences were brought to bear on this, since most of the first Christians were from the lower strata of society. The community ate together in shared meals and held their funds in a common treasury as they waited for the return of Christ, which they assumed was imminent. The community context inherited from Judaism was intensified.

The status of the poor was also transformed. In Rome the poor had been a group to be exploited and placated. The Jews had seen them as unfortunates in need of assistance. But Christians saw the poor as a reflection of God’s incarnation. Early Church Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, began to speak of “the pious poor and the wicked rich”. Bishops became the Church’s official philanthropists, responsible for institutionalising the Christian system of

almsgiving. It was a countercultural innovation which broke the Greek and Roman link between giving and patronage.

One of the great exemplars of this new style of bishop, Basil of Caesarea, insisted that giving was no longer merely a matter of honour, status, civic duty or emulation of God's generosity. It was a matter of justice. Almsgiving, decreed Ambrose, the fourth-century Bishop of Milan, could be redemptive. All this was to lay the groundwork for a millennium of Catholic charity.

The philosophy of philanthropy developed over the long period between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. The economy boomed and in the twelfth century renaissance, thinkers had to find ways to reconcile the radical simplicity of early Christianity with a rapidly changing social and political economy.

Many of the issues they raised are still current in debates on philanthropy today. Around 1140, Gratian, a monk from Bologna, created a great systematisation of the Christian inheritance. It brought together the teachings of Clement, Basil, Ambrose and other Church Fathers with the canons of the great church councils and the decrees of popes. This was significant for the history of philanthropy in two ways. First, it laid the groundwork for the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, which was to become a major theme in the history of philanthropy. And secondly, it developed what medieval theologians called the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, which held that all believers – whether rich or poor – were connected in some cosmic way to God and to one another in a spiritual body with Christ at its head.

This meant that, for all the obvious material shortcomings of feudal society for ordinary people, giving was not simply the donation of money or material goods from the wealthy to the poor. It reinforced a relationship between donor and recipient which was spiritual, reciprocal, communal and inclusive. Charity did not simply assist the donor towards personal salvation; it also nurtured social harmony, social cohesion, peace and order.

Islam and Judaism in this period came near to this same insight. Muslim thinkers declared that "generosity is not just giving money from excess, but rather sharing with the poor". The great medieval Jewish thinker, Maimonides, created a hierarchy of Eight Levels of Giving, the highest of which was helping others towards self-sufficiency, similarly creating a relationship between those who give and those who receive in a way which builds the self-esteem of the marginalised. For Christians, the widow was seen as "the altar of God". There was in this medieval tradition an appreciation of mutually respectful relationships. It established an intimacy between giver and receiver which has been lost in much philanthropy today.

In my book, *Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg*, I trace the development of two parallel traditions in giving. One centres on philanthropy as a mechanism for control. That thread goes from Roman patronage, through the Elizabethan Poor Laws and Victorian charitable moralising, to surface today in the "philanthrocapitalism" in which the super-rich want to impose business-orientated top-down solutions on what they see as social problems.

The other tradition grows out of the Hebrew monotheist sense of community, and passes through medieval Christian charity, Enlightenment altruism, agitator philanthropists such as William Wilberforce and chocolate-making Quaker idealists such as George Cadbury and Joseph Rowntree, who insisted their business methods should be modified by their philanthropy rather than the other way round. It surfaces today with those modern philanthropists who seek genuine partnerships with those to whom they give.

These two traditions, it was generally supposed, parted ways in the sixteenth century. All the major histories of philanthropy until now have uncritically repeated the spin with which Protestant propagandists sought to traduce a thousand years of Christian philanthropy – claiming that

medieval charity was haphazard and self-serving because Catholics only gave to the poor to get time off in Purgatory. Everything changed, they averred, with the Reformation, which led to philanthropy becoming efficient, scientific and modern.

That's not true. Redemptive almsgiving – the idea that giving can expunge sin – which entered into Jewish thinking around the second century AD and is evident in Christian theology from the fourth century onwards, was not some medieval Purgatory-inspired Catholic corruption as Protestant Reformers claimed. In fact, medieval theologians insisted that alms were not a way of buying salvation on the cheap, but rather, following Aristotle, a way of transforming the very character of the sinner.

Perhaps more significantly, I show that the big shift in the model of giving came a hundred years before the Reformation, triggered by the social and economic changes that followed the Black Death. Many of the reforms by which the laity took over control of charity from the clergy were in place in European towns long before Martin Luther affixed his theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg – and continued apace in Catholic and Protestant towns alike in the decades which followed. It was mercantilism, urbanisation and the early stirrings of capitalism – which fostered the idea that people were wealthy or poor because they deserved to be – that decisively began to change attitudes among the rich towards the poor. And this was to lead to the development of a skewed relationship between donor and recipient in Anglo-Saxon philanthropy thereafter.

Philanthropy needs to rediscover something of the spiritual bond between giver and receiver which characterised a thousand years of medieval charity – and treat poor people not just with greater respect, but as partners and agents of their own destiny. Philanthro-capitalists such as Bill Gates, schooled in the need for hyper-efficiency, proudly proclaim their giving as “strategic philanthropy”. But that needs to be married with what I call “reciprocal philanthropy”, if Big Giving is to play its part in shaping our post-pandemic world.

Pope Francis says something similar in *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he speaks of the need for us to assert human values in the face of a market system which has become an “economy of exclusion and inequality”. For him – as for Pope John Paul II when he speaks of solidarity (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*) or Benedict XVI when he points out that “love will always prove necessary, even in the most just society” (*Deus caritas est*) – philanthropy must be a humanising force in which the giver acknowledges the full humanity of the recipient in a way that neither the impersonal bureaucracy of the state nor the unforgiving efficiency of the market can do.

When giving to a beggar, Pope Francis once told a Milan street magazine, “it is not a good thing just to throw a few coins” without even looking at the person. “Gesture is important (...) looking them in the eyes and touching their hands. Tossing the money without looking in the eyes, that is not the gesture of a Christian. Charity is not about offloading one’s own sense of guilt, but it is touching, looking at our inner poverty.” The Pope is here using religious language to express the same insight embodied in more inclusive secular language in reciprocal philanthropy – the understanding that every gift should bind the donor and recipient together in a relationship which also involves the whole of the community.

Elsewhere Francis has demonstrated he understands full well that there is nothing simple about philanthropy. Launching a Vatican conference entitled “Impact Investing for the Poor” in 2014, the Pope said that the idea that philanthropists and charitable foundations can invest in a project which does good for society and also returns them a profit “acknowledges the ultimate connection between profit and solidarity, the virtuous circle existing between profit and gift”.

He went further, adding: “Christians are called to rediscover, experience and proclaim to all, this

precious and primordial unity between profit and solidarity.” Through social investment Catholics can help with promoting the economic and social development necessary to satisfy basic needs in agriculture, access to clean water, housing, primary healthcare and educational services. Social impact investments by Catholic institutions now total around \$1 billion. It is a classic example of how strategic and reciprocal philanthropy can be married to make the world a better place.

* **Paul Vallely** is a writer and consultant on religion, international development and business ethics. His book *Philanthropy : From Aristotle to Zuckerberg* has been published by Bloomsbury Continuum in September 2020.

Source : [The Tablet](#) 19 September 2020. Used with permission.