

Tracing the Footsteps of Jesus

The origins of religiously motivated charity and an experience of encountering Christ

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“I would prefer the very worst of a Christian world to the best of a pagan world, because a Christian world accommodates those for whom there was never any room in a pagan world: the crippled, the sick, the aged and the weak. What is more, there has always been love for those who have appeared – and continue to appear – useless within a pagan and godless world.”⁵⁶ Despite his critical attitude towards the Church, Heinrich Böll, who had won a Nobel Prize for Literature, understood that Christians, and hence a society with a Christian focus, are imbued with a spirit of charitable service. It is, of course, true that Christian charity is one of the basic functions of the Church and that a spirit of charitable service forms part of its Christian identity. It can take the form of either spontaneous or organised charity, and it can be practised just as much through a permanent institution as through the provision of help in different, specific situations. It can be carried out professionally or on a voluntary basis, at the macro level or at the micro level, within or outside the Church and consciously or unconsciously. The emphasis can be on the individual or on the wider community, and its Christian motivation may be either overt or anonymous.⁵⁷ Yet although charity is undoubtedly part of Christianity, it would be wrong to hypothesise that religiously motivated good deeds only came into existence through Christianity. In this article we would like to start by showing that religiously motivated works of charity were already very much part of the Egyptian tradition, while they were of no significance in

⁵⁶ Böll, H., Eine Welt ohne Christus, in: Deschner, K., ed., Was halten Sie vom Christentum? 18 Antworten auf eine Umfrage, Munich 1958, 21-24, 23.

⁵⁷ Cf. Haslinger, H., Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit, Paderborn 2009, 20f.

pre-Christian Hellenistic⁵⁸ culture or indeed in pre-Christian Jewish culture^{59, 60} Next, we will show to what extent we can talk about religiously motivated charity in Jewish antiquity, which had a major impact on the life, mentality and work of Jesus the Jew, and to what extent charity in the spirit of Jesus can become a point of encounter with Christ and with God, as Benedict XVI recently explained in his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*.

Charity in ancient Egyptian culture

Religiously motivated pro-social behaviour was already practised in ancient Egypt. Instructions for Ma'at can be found on an epitaph, giving details of virtues which are equally central to Christian ethics: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, helping the shipwrecked, burying the dead (without relatives), giving a ship to the shipless (so that they can reach fertile fields), speaking favourably of people, listening impartially to all parties when enacting the law, and defending the lowly against the mighty.⁶¹ These virtues of charitable service – as a specific feature of the culture of the Nile – are also treated as part of a wider, religious context. This social ethos is associated with a religious conviction that all things and events are caused by a divine power.⁶² We would run into problems, however, if we tried to locate the origins of any pro-social, charitable activities in ancient Egypt, as is the case with Heinz Vonhoff, for example: “The history of compassion does, indeed, start in the land on the Nile.”⁶³ Nevertheless, this is probably the first written record in which helping the needy is placed in a religious framework, i.e. where it is motivated by religion, which leads Jan Assmann to conclude that Ma'at is “an eminently religious idea”.⁶⁴ One specific feature of this religious concept is that pro-social or charitable activities are viewed against an eschatological background. The link between a belief in an afterlife and a sense of

⁵⁸ Cf. Vellguth, K., *Kirche und Fundraising – Neue Wege einer zukunftsfähigen Kirchenfinanzierung*, Freiburg 2007, 42-45.

⁵⁹ Cf. Vellguth, K., *Kirche und Fundraising – Neue Wege einer zukunftsfähigen Kirchenfinanzierung*, Freiburg 2007, 54-47.

⁶⁰ Cf. Haslinger, H., *Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit*, Paderborn 2009, 26.

⁶¹ Cf. Assmann, J., *Ma'at. Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten*, Munich 2006, 101.

⁶² Cf. Haslinger, H., *Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit*, Paderborn 2009, 31.

⁶³ Vonhoff, H., *Geschichte der Barmherzigkeit – 5000 Jahre Nächstenliebe*, Stuttgart 1987, 14.

⁶⁴ Assmann, J., *Ma'at – Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten*, Munich 2006, 92.

justice or the anticipation of compensation led to an expectation that works of charity would be rewarded in the hereafter. “Positive acts towards people have the obvious purpose of avoiding accusations – e.g. in the court of judgement in the afterlife – and of leading a peaceful existence after one’s death.”⁶⁵ This is where we can clearly find the concept of *do ut des*, i.e. justification by works, the idea of a reward combined with reverence for the divine.⁶⁶ For instance, we find the following teachings in the *Insinger Papyrus*: “If a person gives food to the poor, God will count this as a million sacrifices. Alms are a [greater] delight to the heart of God (than) to the heart of the recipient.”⁶⁷ The concept of compensatory justice for pro-social action in respect of the needy is combined with the concept of a divinity that is also a rewarder, advocate and protector of the poor and someone who will give them a better destiny in the hereafter than he does to the rich.⁶⁸

Charity in pre-Christian Hellenistic culture

Hendrik Bolkestein, whose analysis of charity and relief for the poor in pre-Christian antiquity remains definitive up to the present day, found that classical Greece (up to the first century BC at least) contrasted starkly with Egypt⁶⁹ in terms of its clear appreciation of works of charity. This was reflected in its language, as it did not have a term for a propensity towards doing good, as expressed, for instance, by the German word *Wohltätigkeit* (acts of charity).⁷⁰ Neither the word *ἐλεημοσύνη* nor indeed *εὐεργερία*, *ἔργον καλόν* or *ἔργον ἀγαθόν* were used to describe acts of kindness to the poor.⁷¹ This semantic analysis

⁶⁵ Franke, D., *Arme und Geringe im Alten Reich Ägyptens*: “Ich gab Speise den Hungernden, Kleider den Nackten...”, in: *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 133 (2006) 104-120, 108.

⁶⁶ Cf. Brunner-Traut, E., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenfürsorge im Alten Ägypten*, in: Schäfer, G./Strohm, T., eds., *Diakonie – biblische Grundlagen und Orientierungen – Ein Arbeitsbuch zur theologischen Verständigung über den diakonischen Auftrag*, Heidelberg 23-43, 41.

⁶⁷ Quoted from: Brunner, H., *Altägyptische Weisheit – Lehren für das Leben – introduction, translation and explanatory notes* by Hellmut Brunner, Zurich/Munich 1988, 322.

⁶⁸ Cf. Haslinger, H., *Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit*, Paderborn 2009, 34.

⁶⁹ Cf. Bolkestein, H., entry: “Almosen – A. Nichtchristlich”, in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (vol. 1), edited by Theodor Klauser, Stuttgart 1950, 301.

⁷⁰ Cf. Staudinger, F., entry: *ἐλεημοσύνη*, in: *EWNT I*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne 1980, column 1044. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 101f.

⁷¹ Heiligenthal, R., *Werke der Barmherzigkeit oder Almosen? Zur Bedeutung von ἐλεημοσύνη*, in: *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1983) 293.

is matched by the fact that almsgiving was not expressly considered worthy of encouragement in the society of Greek antiquity.⁷² It is, of course, true that there was a tradition of begging and that there were a large number of terms to describe a beggar: πτωχός, δέκτης, προσαίτης, μεταίτης, έπαιτής, πτώσειν and αίτειν. However, the giving of arms was not really regarded as a personal merit or virtue on the part of the giver.⁷³ This is borne out by a comment we find in Seneca's writings: "*Beneficium est opera utilis, sed non omnis opera utilis beneficium est; quaedam enim tam exigua sunt, ut beneficium nomen non occupent. [...] Quis beneficium dixit quadram panis aut stipem aeris abiecti aut ignis accendendi factam potestatem?*"⁷⁴ Roman Heiligenhaus points out that Greek culture saw support for the poor as too insignificant to be classified as an act of virtue. He explains this by reference to the Greek attitude that "whenever an act of kindness is received, it must be reciprocated. As there was generally no expectation of a rewarding divinity or of any reward for good deeds in the afterlife, we can assume that classical Hellenism [...] did not have any utilitarian reasons or motives for acts of charity either."⁷⁵

Classical Greek morality did not specify a social obligation towards the poor. Social morality was reduced to responsibility for one's immediate social environment, i.e. parents, relations, friends, fellow-citizens, visiting strangers, fellow humans, the elderly, victims of injustice and the unfortunate.⁷⁶ Recipients of good deeds were usually fellow citizens, friends and relations. Bolkestein emphasises that social responsibility in Greek antiquity never referred to the economically poor in general.⁷⁷ Instead of a responsibility for the poor in the community and acts of charity on their behalf, there was the concept of good deeds within one's own social context.

⁷² Cf. Staudinger, F., entry: έλεημοσύνη, in: EWNT I, Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne 1980, column 1044.

⁷³ Heiligenthal, R., Werke der Barmherzigkeit oder Almosen? Zur Bedeutung von έλεημοσύνη, in: Novum Testamentum 25 (1983) 289-301, 293.

⁷⁴ Sen Ben 4,29,2. Quoted from: Heiligenthal, Roman, Werke der Barmherzigkeit oder Almosen? Zur Bedeutung von έλεημοσύνη, in: Novum Testamentum 25 (1983) 293.

⁷⁵ Heiligenthal, R., Werke der Barmherzigkeit oder Almosen? Zur Bedeutung von έλεημοσύνη, in: Novum Testamentum 25 (1983) 294.

⁷⁶ Cf. Bolkestein, H., Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum, Utrecht 1939, 114. Cf. Staudinger, Ferdinand, entry: έλεημοσύνη, in: EWNT I, Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne 1980, columns 1043-1045.

⁷⁷ Cf. Bolkestein, H., Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum, Utrecht 1939, 101.

One virtue that played a significant role in the Greek moral code was justice. Δικαιοσύνη in the sense of integrity in the individual and/or justice within the community was seen as a supreme virtue and it included one's duty to fellow humans, especially one's own people, but not a specific attitude towards the poor. The same connotation was absent from the term φιλανθρωπία. Bolkestein emphasises that it meant helping fellow humans but not looking after the poor.⁷⁸ "Where Greek social morality specifies rules for interaction between people, it generally only focuses on people's behaviour towards those around them; there is a natural feeling of goodwill between people, and this is the meaning of φιλανθρωπία. It is not about relationships between the rich and the powerful, on the one hand, and the poor and lowly, on the other. In particular, the rich are not duty bound to help the poor, and neither are the poor expected to behave submissively towards the rich."⁷⁹ Anyone who must be treated with an attitude of φιλανθρωπία or in the spirit of the δικαιοσύνη is always seen as a fellow human, although differences in social or economic positions between two individuals are not accorded any significance in the development of moral precepts.

Hendrik Bolkestein then explores in detail what might have prompted ancient Greeks to "do good" despite the lack of moral standards on this issue. He mentions the joy of giving⁸⁰, the desire for honour and prestige⁸¹, the expectation of a reward⁸² and political fear⁸³.

Charity in pre-Christian Roman culture

(Religiously motivated) acts of charity were equally unappreciated in pre-Christian Roman antiquity. The concept of almsgiving is not in

⁷⁸ Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 115.

⁷⁹ Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 149.

⁸⁰ Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 150ff.

⁸¹ Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 152ff.

⁸² Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 156ff.

⁸³ Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 170ff.

evidence during the time of the Roman Republic.⁸⁴ It was only after the collapse of the Republic that the word “stips” – which originally meant “loose change” – acquired the meaning of “alms”.⁸⁵ Whereas, in Greek culture, any analysis of the significance of almsgiving would centre around the key concepts of ἐλεημοσύνη, εὐεργερία, ἔργον καλόν and ἔργον ἀγαθόν, the special terms that must be looked at in Roman culture are *benefacere*, *beneficium* and *beneficentia*. Such good deeds, however, were not associated with the social concept of acts of charity to the poor but with the maxim of helping one’s fellow humans. This meant, in particular, friends and relations and also the state. Charitable acts were thought to include both practical personal help and financial support. Whether or not somebody should be a recipient of good deeds was “apparently not decided by any social criterion, but on moral grounds; there was no encouragement to do good to the poor, but to do good to the good: *bonus bonus benefecerit*”.⁸⁶

Cicero gave a whole catalogue of criteria specifying the conditions for *beneficentia*.⁸⁷ On the one hand, a *beneficentia* must not be of detriment to the recipient, as the benefactor would then no longer be a *beneficus* or *liberalis*, but a *perniciosus adsentator*. On the other hand, the benefactor’s own benevolent behaviour must not exceed his own potential. The reason given by Cicero is that any behaviour that goes beyond one’s own potential would lead to a situation in which future heirs are put at a disadvantage and the impoverished giver might be tempted to use illegitimate means to obtain the necessary commodities for his own living.

In his third criterion Cicero looks at the recipient of a good deed. He attaches no importance to the social or economic situation in which the potential recipient of an act of charity finds himself. Rather, what is decisive is the recipient’s level of morality, his attitude towards the benefactor, the level of relationship between the benefactor and the recipient and the acts of kindness which the potential recipient has

⁸⁴ Cf. Bolkestein, H., Art. “Almosen – A. Nichtchristlich”, in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (vol. 1), edited by Theodor Klauser, Stuttgart 1950, 302.

⁸⁵ Cf. Müller, O., *Vom Almosen zum Spendenmarkt – Sozialethische Aspekte christlicher Spendenkultur*, Freiburg 2005, 47.

⁸⁶ Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 289.

⁸⁷ Cf. Cicero, *De off.* I 42ff.

rendered to the benefactor in the past. The underlying understanding is apparently that of an exchange or counter trade, based on a *do ut des* mentality. Bolkestein summarises this by saying: “Good deeds are primarily required as rewards for good deeds already received.”⁸⁸ The Roman understanding of a good deed was thus clearly different from the Christian understanding, as Christianity always primarily focuses on the needs of the recipient as the highest criterion.

In Roman society the phenomenon of poverty was not considered under socio-political aspects, but exclusively in terms of individual ethics.⁸⁹ This is also why there was no awareness of the structural or social causes of poverty. Neither did Roman culture see a connection between everyday religiosity and altruistic acts of charity to the socially vulnerable. There were no religiously motivated social standards that might have encouraged good deeds of the wealthy to the poor in the community.⁹⁰

Nevertheless Roman society, too, had the concept of charitable acts to the poor. However, it is questionable whether such acts can be described as “good deeds”. Ultimately, the purpose of such gifts was twofold. On the one hand, the wealthy classes wanted to protect themselves against crime. On the other hand, gifts were also a socially accepted method to consolidate one’s own political power.⁹¹ Gifts were not primarily aimed at the poor, but at citizens and therefore voters. Regardless of a person’s financial situation, the Roman emperor therefore granted so-called *conciarges*. The recipients of such imperial acts of charity included both the rich and the poor strata of society. *Conciarges* made a considerable contribution to the lives of the poor (*pauperes* or *egentes*) in Rome. Yet such financial acts of charity were not an expression of social ethics in Roman culture but merely a sociopolitical tool to maintain one’s own power.⁹²

⁸⁸ Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 314.

⁸⁹ Lohmeyer, E., *Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum*, Leipzig 1921, 46.

⁹⁰ Cf. Thraede, *Soziales Verhalten und Wohlfahrtspflege in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, (späte Republik und frühe Kaiserzeit), in: Schäfer, G. K./Strohmann, T., eds., *Diakonie – biblische Grundlagen und Orientierungen*, Heidelberg 1990, 50f.

⁹¹ Cf. Müller, O., *Vom Almosen zum Spendenmarkt – Sozialethische Aspekte christlicher Spendenkultur*, Freiburg 2005, 47.

⁹² Cf. Bolkestein, H., *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939, 316. Lohmeyer, Ernst, *Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum*, Leipzig 1921, 44.

Charity in pre-Christian Judaism

Unlike ancient Egypt, pre-Christian Hellenistic culture had no concept of acts of charity, which were not seen as being worthy of encouragement within the community. Instead, the main emphasis was on justice. Social morality in pre-Christian Hellenistic culture related exclusively to one's immediate social environment. Pre-Christian Roman culture did not encourage almsgiving on a wider community scale either. Instead of almsgiving to the socially vulnerable, there was an emphasis on good deeds. However, the recipients of good deeds were not the poor, but the "good". Whenever charitable gifts were given to the poor in pre-Christian Roman culture, this was not done out of altruism. Rather, its purpose was to protect the wealthy against crime and to stabilise political power relations.

Jewish culture was greatly influenced by the Hellenistic world view and by its economic, cultural and social values. This is all the more remarkable because Judaism also sought to maintain its political and religious independence as far as possible.⁹³ In the Jewish worldview wealth was originally seen as a desirable goal and as a gift of God to the faithful (Deut. 8:13f and 17f, Zach. 14:14), while poverty was regarded as an evil.⁹⁴ The family was primarily seen as a social association in which members supported one another and kept each other from poverty. However, as tribal structures gradually lost their significance during the times of the Jewish kings and in subsequent periods, a growing social gap emerged between the rich and the poor. This led to growing impoverishment among broad sections of the population and at the same time to the distinct formation of a wealthy upper class.⁹⁵

This, again, was a development the prophets highlighted in their social critique (especially Isaiah, Micah and Amos) and in their condemnation of injustice and exploitation, which partly also focused on the practice of loans, interest and pledged chattels. In

⁹³ Lohmeyer sees this as a "duality of commercial adaptability and religious and national exclusiveness". Cf. Lohmeyer, E., *Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum*, Leipzig 1921, 21.

⁹⁴ Cf. Schwer, W., Art. "Almosen – B. Christlich", in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (vol. 1), edited by Theodor Klauser, Stuttgart 1950, p. 302f.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ebach, J., *Armenfürsorge – II Altes Testament*, in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Handbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Tübingen 1962, columns 755f.

the course of history – particularly under the influence of the Old Testament prophets – the values of wealth and poverty in Judaism began to change: poverty came to be seen as a sign of God's grace and wealth as an indication of God's distance and alienation from God. Care for the poor was regarded as a godly task (Ps 9:13-19, 12:6, 14:6, 22:25-27 and 35:10). This is reflected in late Old Testament writings where money is described in rather more hostile terms than in earlier scriptures (Coh. 5:9-11 and 10:19, Sir. 5:1-3, 11:10 and 31:8-11, Amos 2.6, Micah 3:11f, Zeph. 1.9). The shift in values, which Friedrich Nietzsche later described as the "slave revolt in morality", was particularly in evidence during the post-exilic period. Historically, this was probably due to the prevailing circumstances, as the Jews who were powerful and wealthy decided to stay in Babylon, whereas the Jewish middle and lower classes were determined to leave their Babylonian exile and move back to their own home country, where they could often do no more than eke out a meagre existence for themselves. During this period at least some sections of the Jewish population saw the rich as God's enemies and the poor as God's friends.⁹⁶ Among the poorer classes this view was reinforced above all by pressure from the ruling Roman and Hellenistic classes.

Judaism had a range of different measures to break the cycle of progressive impoverishment among sections of the less well-off and those in financial distress. First of all, there was the ban on interest. Jews were not permitted to charge other Jews interest on loans. Richer people were under a duty to help the poor among their compatriots through interest-free loans – a custom which arose at a time when loans were only granted to the poor to ensure their food supply. Interest would have meant an abuse of this loan system, as it would have increased the dependence of the poor even further.⁹⁷ Loans were seen as a mandatory form of assistance to fellow Jews, and it was believed that a loan provider would receive special blessings from the God of Israel as the God of justice. Different rules were applied outside these ethnic boundaries. It was perfectly legitimate to charge interest to foreigners (e.g. Phoenicians, Syrians, Philistines and Canaanites) (Deut. 23:31), partly also because

⁹⁶ Cf. Lohmeyer, E., *Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum*, Leipzig 1921, 61.

⁹⁷ In the New Testament Jesus reiterated the demand to support the poor willingly through loans (Mt. 5:42 and Lk. 6:35).

they, too, charged interest to Jews.⁹⁸ Giving a loan was seen as a blessing (Deut. 15:6-8f, Deut. 28:12, Ps. 37:26, Ps. 112:5), and being compelled to borrow from foreigners was regarded as a misfortune (Deut. 28:44, Ps. 37:21).⁹⁹

Moreover, there was the tradition of the Sabbatical Year. Remembering the time of Jewish slavery in Egypt, any slaves in Israel had to be released from their servitude every seven years and given back their freedom (Ex. 21:2 and Deut. 15:7-12). Also, every 50 years, creditors were expected to waive whatever repayments they were owed by fellow-Jews. The reasoning behind this Year of Jubilee was cultic, and the release from debt was practised in honour of Yahweh. The purpose of the custom was to break through the inexorable process of impoverishment among the poorest classes in society and to work towards an ideal community onto which Yahweh would pour out His full blessings. What we do not know is the extent to which the Year of Jubilee was actually kept and whether it had any practical impact on social developments.

A third major pillar in protecting and supporting impoverished sections of the community was the tradition of almsgiving. Whereas alms were not associated with any moral component in Roman or Hellenistic culture, the Old Testament and Jewish tradition taught that it had an eschatological dimension, as it would be rewarded in the afterlife (Tob. 4:9, Sir. 3:31 and 29:12, Ps. 9:5)¹⁰⁰. This religious/moral side was emphasized strongly particularly in wisdom literature where almsgiving had a function of penance (Prov. 11:4, Dan. 4:24). It had the same status as a regular sacrifice and could “compensate” for wrongdoing.¹⁰¹ Set against this understanding of almsgiving and

⁹⁸ Cf. Bogaert, R., *Geld (Geldwirtschaft)*, in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (vol. 9), edited by Theodor Klauser, Stuttgart 1976.

⁹⁹ As interest rates were extremely high in antiquity, we can easily understand how distressful it was if anyone had to borrow from a non-Jew. For instance, there is documentary evidence that outside of Israel, in the Jewish garrison of Elephantine (5th century BC), the interest rate was 60 per cent. It was found that loan agreements at that time included provisions on compound interest, pledged chattels and penalty clauses. Cf. Bogaert, R., *Geld (Geldwirtschaft)*, in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (vol. 9), edited by Theodor Klauser, Stuttgart 1976, columns 807f.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Giesen, H., keyword “Almosen”, in: *LThK* vol. 1, Freiburg 1993, column 423. Meggitt, J., *Armenfürsorge*. III. Judentum, in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Handbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Tübingen (date), columns 756f.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Staudinger, F., *ἔλεημοσύνη*, in: *EWNT I*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne 1980, column 1044.

penance, the idea arose that there was a “heavenly book of life” with a list of good and evil deeds, so that a person’s life would eventually be subject to a general performance assessment.¹⁰² This view of almsgiving as a sacrifice did, of course, signal an essential theological development, as it meant that a sacrifice was not simply seen as a cultic or ritual act, but that it also had an interpersonal and, particular, a social dimension.¹⁰³ This was expressly formulated in the book of Tobit, in which we read that the giving of alms saves a person from death and cleanses him from all sins (Tob. 12:9). As well as carrying a metaphysical and eschatological component, salvation from death also meant that a person was saved from an early, untimely death, which was seen as divine punishment in biblical times.¹⁰⁴ The cause-and-effect connection between almsgiving and the forgiveness of sins is also reflected in the book of Daniel, where King Nebuchadnezzar is advised: “[...] by upright actions break with your sins, break with your crimes by showing mercy to the poor, and so live long and peacefully” (Dan. 4:24).¹⁰⁵ Earlier writings, too, saw care for the poor in more than purely social and ethical terms, connecting it with theological reflections. Such care was defined quite widely and included feeding the poor, giving financial support to widows and orphans, ensuring that burials were funded by the community, paying ransoms for Jewish prisoners, redeeming Jewish slaves, housing the poor, providing clothes and a dowry for orphans wanting to marry, providing loans and granting debt relief.¹⁰⁶ Judaism saw acts of charity to the poor as the people’s mandatory response to Yahweh’s covenant promises and expected their response to produce blessings both for the giver and for the community (Deut. 15:6).¹⁰⁷ This religious and soteriological understanding explains why the duty of giving alms was not limited to

¹⁰² Cf. Berger, K., *Almosen für Israel*, in: NTS 23 (1976/77), 183f.

¹⁰³ What may have contributed to this shift, after the destruction of the Temple, may have been the impossibility of maintaining the cultic practice of sacrifices in the Diaspora.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Gross, H., *Tobit – Judith – Die Neue Echter Bibel: Kommentar zum Neuen Testament mit der Einheitsübersetzung*, Würzburg 1987, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Klaus Berger points out that, in the Septuagint, penance for sins through almsgiving was accompanied by a (seven-day) period of repentance, with prayers requesting forgiveness. Both were seen as ways in which the pagan king could obtain reconciliation with God. Cf. Berger, K., *Almosen für Israel*, in: NTS 23 (1976/77), 188.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Meggitt, J., *Armenfürsorge – III. Judentum*, in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Handbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Tübingen 1962. columns 756f.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Meggitt, J., *Armenfürsorge – III. Judentum*, in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Handbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Tübingen 1962. columns 756f.

the wealthy in Judaism but also included those of limited means.¹⁰⁸ In addition to this theological/soteriological aspect of almsgiving in Judaism, however, alms are also mentioned in the Old Testament without any reference to the soteriological dimension. This shows that the theological background of almsgiving gradually faded and that increasing significance attached to its social dimension, which was regarded as a separate issue.

It is worth noting that alms in Judaism were largely given to Jews, i.e. “the people of Israel”.¹⁰⁹ As the soteriological dimension became less prominent, the giving of alms to one’s fellow countrymen gained in importance. Alms were by no means distributed to the poor in random fashion, but only to one’s own countrymen.¹¹⁰ We read in Sir. 7:4, Tob. 1:3 and Tob. 4:7 that alms were only to be given to the “devout” or the “righteous”. Pagan authors mentioned that beggars were typically found around and within the synagogue, which clearly reflects the theological and social dimensions of almsgiving. After all, this is where Jews could expect to meet other Jews who, by giving alms, wished to express their shared ethnicity.¹¹¹ Yet even though the practice of almsgiving was only applied to one’s fellow countrymen, the enormous value that was attached to this devout practice in Judaism can be seen as the foundation from which the Early Church later derived its own endeavours to resolve social injustices.¹¹²

Christian charity

These detailed comments on the development of charity in antiquity are necessary for an understanding of the context in which Christians developed their idea of charity. After all, there is the temptation to look back and see deeds of charity as a purely Christian invention, as if the appearance of Jesus were a “zero hour” that heralded the arrival of religiously motivated Christian charity. However, there are two reasons why this is not possible. First of all,

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Gross, H., *Tobit – Judith – Die Neue Echter Bibel: Kommentar zum Neuen Testament mit der Einheitsübersetzung*, Würzburg 1987, 26.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Gross, H., *Tobit – Judith – Die Neue Echter Bibel: Kommentar zum Neuen Testament mit der Einheitsübersetzung*, Würzburg 1987, 26.

¹¹⁰ This distinction between Jews and non-Jews in almsgiving was matched by the distinction between fellow-countrymen and foreigners in the Jewish ban on interest.

¹¹¹ Cf. Berger, K., *Almosen für Israel*, in: NTS 23 (1976/77), 191f.

¹¹² Cf. Dibelius, M., *Der Hirt des Hermas*, HNT Ergänzungsband IV, Tübingen 1923, 556.

as we saw, religiously motivated pro-social behaviour was already very much part of (ancient Egypt and) Judaism. Secondly, people's charitable mindset at the time of Jesus can only be regarded as manifesting Christian charity to a limited extent. This is because "the Jesus movement was an 'internal Jewish renewal movement'; neither its social and socio-critical place nor its commitment to the needy can be firmly established as the initial starting point of Christian charity"¹¹³. Rather, as Herbert Haslinger points out, Christian charity is a phenomenon that occurred after Jesus and developed after Easter, when Christianity came into existence as a historical phenomenon.¹¹⁴ In fact, pro-social charitable behaviour was initially applied within the community, i.e. to members of the Christian church(es), thus clearly showing its roots in Jewish culture. Justin wrote, for instance: "We, however, help anyone who is in want and whenever we are able to, and we keep together. [...] On the day that is referred to as Sunday there is a meeting of everyone who lives in the town or in the country; [...] and when we have finished praying, bread, wine and water are fetched, the church leader prays and gives thanks with all his might, and the people agree by saying Amen. This is followed by a distribution in which everybody receives their share of the consecrated [bread and wine], and those who are absent receive the same through the deacons. Those who have the resources and the goodwill give at their discretion whatever they want to give, and the resulting offerings are then deposited with the church leader; he then uses these gifts to help widows and orphans, those who are in need due to sickness or any other reason, prisoners and strangers who are present among the church – in other words, he looks after everyone who is in town."¹¹⁵

Charity in the teachings of Jesus

From a New Testament perspective, charity is a – or perhaps even the – *nota ecclesiae*¹¹⁶, says Ulrich Luz in his comments on the biblical foundations of charity. Theologically, the focus on charity within Christianity was born out of an awareness that helping the

¹¹³ Cf. Haslinger, H., *Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit*, Paderborn 2009, 44.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Haslinger, H., *Lebensort für alle – Gemeinde neu verstehen*, Düsseldorf 2005, 122-126.

¹¹⁵ Justin, *Erste Apologie*, chapter 67, quoted from Krimm, H., ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Diakonie – I Altertum und Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1960, 45f.

¹¹⁶ Luz, U., *Biblische Grundlagen der Diakonie*, in: Ruddat, G./ Schäfer, G., *Diakonisches Kompendium*, Göttingen 2005, 17-35, 17.

poor is a service to Christ who meets people through the poor. And although it is problematic to ascribe the birth of charity – whether in theory or in practice – to Jesus Christ himself or to the Jewish Jesus movement, it is nevertheless possible to establish a connection between a charitable awareness in (early) Christianity, on the one hand, and the teachings and activities of Jesus as received through literature, on the other. This is also borne out by other articles in this volume.

What should be mentioned here as the foundation of an ethical system of charity is, first of all, the command to love one's neighbour (Mt. 22:34-40, Mk. 12:28-34, Lk. 10:25-28), a command that is so fundamental and so very clearly at the heart of Christianity that it is often regarded, and justifiably so, as the central doctrine or command of Jesus's teachings. "Moreover, love of one's neighbour has come to be regarded as synonymous with Christian charity, and there is a popular perception that acts of charity are largely the same as showing practical love to one's neighbour."¹¹⁷ What we can see here is the Jewish understanding that love of God implicitly involves keeping His commands and doing His will. Loving God is not exclusively an emotional dimension, but it also includes an action-focused, ethical dimension. Any attempts to separate the love of God and the love of one's neighbour therefore run contrary to the thoughts presented in the New Testament. We can see this in Mark's Gospel and even more clearly in Matthew's Gospel. The Gospel authors see this double command as summing up the teachings of Jesus, whose message on the Kingdom of God implies charitably loving one's fellow-humans in a way that is radical, liberating and brings healing.¹¹⁸

Another New Testament passage which is both central and fundamental to Jesus's understanding of acts of charity is the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30b-35), which initially formed a heritage of its own. It probably dates back to Jesus's teachings and was then combined by Luke, the Gospel writer, with the dual command to love God and one's neighbour. What is so essential in this passage is the person who serves as the object of this act of charity, as it reveals the Christian understanding of charity very clearly: It is obviously

¹¹⁷ Haslinger, H., *Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit*, Paderborn 2009, 238.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Merklein, H., *Die Gottesherrschaft als Handlungsprinzip – Untersuchung zur Ethik Jesu*, Würzburg 1984, 105.

not limited to one's own countrymen but transcends regional, ethnic, religious and denominational borders – so much so, in fact, that we are even encouraged, quite universally, to perform acts of charity towards an opponent or an enemy.¹¹⁹ This idea is also expressed in the encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*: “Until that time, the concept of ‘neighbour’ was understood as referring essentially to one’s countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel; in other words, to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour.”¹²⁰ This universalisation implies, firstly, that there is actually an encounter with a stranger and, secondly, that this encounter has a missionary quality and also a dimension of charity.¹²¹ What prompts such an act of charity is neither rational calculation nor any eschatologically motivated justification by works, but a strong emotional and existential involvement and compassion. This Greek concept can be aptly translated by the rather crass image “gut-wrenching”: the Samaritan was emotionally so deeply touched by the situation in which he found himself that it affected him at a “gut” level: it turned his guts, as it were.¹²² Where Christian charitable work is concerned, this implies first of all that the love of God can be realised and specifically experienced through charitably helping and caring for one’s neighbour¹²³ and, furthermore, that we must never lose sight of the individual misfortunes of men, women and children in need. This is particularly important where Christian charity is placed on a professional footing.

The third passage, mentioned by Herbert Haslinger as central to a New Testament understanding of charity, concerns Jesus’s teachings about the Day of Judgement: “Like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the third passage that is relevant in this context – Jesus’s

¹¹⁹ Cf. Hoppe, R., Von der Grenzenlosigkeit christlichen Helfens. Überlegungen zum Gleichnis vom barmherzigen Samariter (Lk 10,25-37), in: Haslbeck, B./Günther, J., Wer hilft, wird ein anderer. Zur Provokation christlichen Helfens, FS Isidor Baumgartner, Berlin 2006.

¹²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, No. 15.

¹²¹ Cf. Kiessling, K., Nicht aus sich selbst und nicht für sich selbst – Zum diakonischen Primat einer missionarischen Kirche, in: Kreidler, J./ Broch, T./ Steinfurt, D., Zeichen der heilsamen Nähe Gottes – Auf dem Weg zu einer missionarischen Kirche, FS Gebhard Fürst, Ostfildern 2008, 126-138, 130f.

¹²² Cf. also Grün, A., Heiliger Ort, heilige Zeit, in: *Christ in der Gegenwart* (2012) 30, 1.

¹²³ Cf. Harnisch, W., *Die Gleichniserzählungen Jesu. Eine hermeneutische Einführung*, Göttingen² 1990, 280f.

teachings about the Day of Judgement (Mt. 25:31-46) – developed into a theological classic on charity in the course of church history.”¹²⁴ Exegetically, the origin and tradition of this passage are highly controversial, and it is questionable whether the speech originated from Jesus himself or from an author within his environment. However, what matters here for our theology of charity is that the passage focuses on people’s specific existential distress and that the Greek text – unlike many current translations – uses the word *διακονέω* for help, thus emphasising that serving (i.e. charity) is at the very heart of the entire passage.¹²⁵ What is so specifically Christian about this pericope about the Day of Judgement is not the connection between charitable behaviour in the here-and-now and a compensatory award in the hereafter. This should have become sufficiently clear when we looked at the tradition of religiously motivated virtues of charity and pro-social action in ancient Egypt. Rather, under a theology of charity, the interesting aspect of this passage is the projection whereby Christ Himself should meet the helper through a person in need. “Jesus identifies with the needy, i.e. the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. ‘...in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me’ (Mt. 25:40). Love of God and love of one’s neighbour are merged into one. In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.”¹²⁶ It is a specific feature – perhaps even the specific feature – of Christian charity that pro-social behaviour and care for the needy without any selfish agenda thus becomes a mystical place where a person can meet Christ or God.

¹²⁴ Cf. Haslinger, H., *Diakonie – Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit*, Paderborn 2009, 268.

¹²⁵ Cf. Gnllka, J., *Das Matthäusevangelium – Zweiter Teil – Kommentar zu Kapitel 14,1-28,10 und Einleitungsfragen (HThK I/2)*, Freiburg 1988, 366.

¹²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, No. 15.