



Charity

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*This entry considers charity as an 'etic' term that facilitates comparison between different traditions. Theoretical foundations were laid by two great anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century: Marcel Mauss, whose *The gift* has elicited a wealth of varied interpretations on the theme of exchange and reciprocity; and Edvard Westermarck, behind whose dated assumptions about a hierarchy of 'races' we may discern some lasting insights into the relationship between charity and religion. The simple view that all charitable giving is merely a down payment on benefits to be received later (in this world or in the hereafter) has to be qualified by evidence of 'mutuality' as an aspect of human coexistence complementary to reciprocity.*

*Towards the end of the twentieth century, some anthropologists turned a critical eye on the work of Western aid agencies. But it was largely left to historians to reflect on charity *per se*. After the cooling of anthropological interest in charity, it was first the dharmic religions of the Indian subcontinent and then Islam that reignited it and stimulated the process of 'deprovincialising' the common assumption that charity is a monopoly of the Euro-American tradition. Though social anthropologists have studied many other manifestations of charity, detailed attention is given here to the Qur'anic prescriptions relating to good works and to the ways in which they have empowered the formation of organised Islamic charities, whose practical and potential efficacy has been thwarted by an arguably excessive political reaction since the 11th September 2001 attacks on the United States.*

*Anthropologists have contributed to the critique of humanitarianism as an ideology, and examples are given here of productive field-based research projects that have drawn on this critique. Finally, a holistic methodological aid is summarised which may be helpful in structuring research on charity, and it is recalled that the problematic nature of charity which anthropologists try to resolve today was noticed by the author of the *Bhagavad Gita* some centuries before the contemporary era.*

Introduction

The word 'charity' in English refers to almsgiving and freewill offerings, but it also has connotations of spiritual love, the highest Christian virtue. It was used in some Bibles to translate, via the Latin *caritas*, the Greek New Testament word *agapē*. Some Christian apologists, for instance in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, conflate the two senses of the word. In Elizabethan England, 'charity' also acquired a restrictive legal definition that is still an essential part of British and American law. A distinction is often made in European languages between 'charity' and 'philanthropy'. For the ancient Greeks, 'philanthropy' was 'love of the principle of humanity'. But it became fused, during the century of the Enlightenment, with the idea of public benefactions shorn of religious connotations, and today it has come to be associated particularly with the munificence of the rich, and patronage of high culture (also more recently with the promise of funding for development in much of the Global South).

All attempts so far to study our subject comparatively have dispensed with the charity/philanthropy distinction, one good reason being that it has no parallels in major non-European languages such as Arabic

or Hindi. Another widely used term, 'humanitarian action', is problematic because the word 'humanitarian' can be taken colloquially to encompass all forms of philanthropic or altruistic action; but [humanitarianism](#) as a movement can be defined as an ideology traceable back to the nineteenth century (Davies 2012). (More tightly, International Humanitarian Law is the body of measures intended to limit the effects of armed conflict, and is outside the scope of this entry). If we look for a comparative, i.e. '[etic](#)' term, as opposed to the above culturally embedded or '[emic](#)' categories, then 'good works' is as serviceable as any; but in this entry, the term 'charity' will be used in an inclusive sense.

Theoretical foundations

Two giants of anthropology laid the foundations, at the beginning of the twentieth century, for our discipline's theoretical understanding of charity. Foremost has been Marcel Mauss's essay on reciprocity and social solidarity, *The gift* (2016 [1925]). Mauss's claim that the principle of exchange penetrates every aspect of social life, in the 'atmosphere of the gift ..., of obligation and of liberty mixed together' (2016: 177), has stimulated productive but sometimes confusing debate (Testart 1998; Guyer 2016). The other pioneer, though less widely remembered in this field, was Edvard Westermarck. He adhered to Victorian assumptions about a hierarchy of savage and civilised '[races](#)', but his global comparison of charitable traditions (1909), still impressive today, explains how mutual aid is commonly influenced by egoistic motives, and, more arrestingly, how charity in all the 'higher religions' has been associated with sacrifice.

It may be asked why social-cultural anthropology failed to build on Mauss's and Westermarck's insights on charity until the last quarter of the century. The explanation may be that most anthropologists positioned themselves politically on a spectrum between a social reformism that disparaged charity as addressing symptoms rather than causes, legitimating the privileges of the rich, and strict Marxism, firmly opposed to charity as a brake on the inevitable proletarian [revolution](#). But the consequence of rejecting private charity is to place all power in the hands of the state. Out-and-out hostility to charity, as an adjunct to entitlements paid for by [taxation](#), is much less frequently expressed by social researchers today, especially because of the prevalence of partnership arrangements between charitable organizations and governments. Moreover, a frequent theme in recent research literature is the role of private charity in compensating for the retreat of the welfare state, most damagingly in former communist countries such as Russia (Caldwell 2016).

Jonathan Parry's commentary on Mauss's *The gift* (1986) sparked three decades of academic debate about this text. Parry's somewhat provocative argument was that the pure or free [gift](#), associated with salvation religions – a voluntary surrender of resources without expectation of return – is a kind of dialectical complement to the commodification of goods that dominates Western industrial societies. Shortly afterwards, Mary Douglas (1990), making no reference to Parry in her introduction to an English translation of *The gift*, deprecated the very notion of a free gift. For our present purpose, we may extract two linked suggestions from Mauss's essay.

First, when a gift cannot be reciprocated, moral credit accrues to the donor but the recipient suffers a wound. Hence the reputation for 'coldness' that organised charity in Europe has often acquired since the nineteenth century, especially when it evacuates face-to-face relationships between donors and recipients. Social reformers sought to replace it with the welfare state. Some Indian [ethnography](#) reveals an interpretation of charitable giving as especially sinister: unreciprocated gifts made to priests and renouncers can bring misfortune that migrates from donor to recipient unless careful precautions are taken.

Second, a 'free' gift cannot admit any dimension of reciprocity. When I make a gift, I must do so in such a way as to deny to others - and indeed, to myself - that it has a transactional aspect or that I will be rewarded, whether in this world or in the 'celestial economy' of the hereafter. Though this paradox is salient in all the three Abrahamic religions, it is in India that it is worked through with most sophistication. The *Bhagavad Gita* (17.20-22, see also Bornstein 2009: 624-5, 644) distinguishes 'charity in the mode of goodness' (given with no expectation of reward) from 'charity in the mode of passion' (with intent of recompense, or given grudgingly) and 'charity in the mode of darkness' (given at the wrong place or time, to an unworthy recipient, or with disrespect). James Laidlaw describes how in the Shvetambar ('white-clad') sect of Indian Jainism, when itinerant celibate renouncers collect food in alms bowls from lay families, they show 'surly indifference' rather than showing thanks or appreciation - their aim being not to create social [relations](#) but to achieve a timeless spiritual perfection (Laidlaw 2000: 632). According to Hilal Alkan-Zeybek (2012), Islamic volunteering by middle and upper class women to assist poor people in a city in central Anatolia aims at exactly the opposite: enhancing solidarity through bodily contact, and 'ethical transformation' of the giver, so that class hierarchies are mitigated. Erica Bornstein's monograph based on fieldwork in Delhi shows how the beliefs and practices aggregated as modern 'Hinduism' interact with [Buddhist](#), [Islamic](#), Christian and [secular](#) traditions to form a diversified charitable landscape, both international and intra-Indian (Bornstein 2012).

Interpretations of Mauss are complicated by the fact that he saw all gifts as metaphorically entailing sacrifice: when I make a gift, I give a part of myself. Westermarck stressed that in both Jewish and Christian teaching, almsgiving came to replace sacrificial offerings to God. Charity in general is habitually either praised as an expression of empathy or else depreciated as appeasing the conscience of donors and maintaining the status quo, but Westermarck suggests a third way of conceiving it: as an act of devotion. The prayers offered by beneficiaries are, in the Abrahamic traditions, one way in which they can offer a return - the obverse being curses uttered by those who are unjustly treated. Ilana Silber has argued that subtle 'echoes' of sacrificial ideologies and practices still reverberate across long stretches of time, as in the Christian injunction that charitable giving is one way for the faithful to emulate God's free gift of Jesus's self-sacrifice (Silber 305, 310). She argues for the need to distinguish three kinds of religious giving in the Hebrew Testament: gifts to the gods, to religious officials, and to the needy. The Christian doctrine

of *diakonía* or service, however, insists that anything done to benefit the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick or imprisoned is equivalent to performing the same service for God (Matthew 25: 31-46). Amira Mittermaier, in an article on Islamic voluntarism in Egypt (2014) following Fassin (2012), strongly associates the Christian and post-Christian tradition of charity with compassion, as opposed to religious dutifulness such as she observed in the practice of some of her Cairene Muslim interlocutors. But the history of charitable institutions across all Christian denominations and institutions is so varied that there is a danger here of over-generalization about their motivations, which include renunciation, self-denial and expiation, as well as compassion.

In keeping with a general trend in the social sciences towards recognising the porosity of the distinction between the religious and the ‘secular’, a ‘quasi-religious’ character may be attributed to some of the most successful secular [humanitarian](#) and development agencies (Barnett & Stein 2012), inasmuch as they are empowered by strongly internalised moral principles, reverence for charismatic founders, and an engagement with the world as a whole. Philip Fountain, stimulated by his ethnographic research with the Mennonite Central Committee, a North American Christian development agency, has pursued this conceptual problem, starting from the reflection that maybe ‘all development, whether labelled religious or otherwise, is incurably proselytizing’ in that it sets out to rework the social practices of others (Fountain 2015).

Reciprocity versus mutuality

Some [ethnographic](#) studies suggest that analysis of charity confined to equations of offerings and rewards may be too one-dimensional; and they point us to unresolved anthropological debates about the relationship between reciprocity and mutuality, and the nature of altruism.

Mittermaier, in another article (2013), draws a contrast, based on her fieldwork in Egypt in 2011-12, between an economy of blessing (*baraka*), which stresses generosity, and an economy of recompense (*thawāb*) aimed at securing a place in paradise: the latter model, according to her, has been accentuated by the march of capitalism in Arab societies. Emanuel Schaeublin, in his study of almsgiving in Nablus in the Palestinian West Bank (2016), argues, following a rich but elusive article by Paul Dresch (1998: 114-16), that for his Muslim interlocutors wealth is an expression of abundant divine provision (in Arabic, *rizq*), and with God there can be no reciprocity. Both Mittermaier and Schaeublin in their fine-grained ethnographies refer us to Islamic theology and abstain from ‘etic’ comparison. But in arguing for the primacy of giving they point us to a nexus of concepts that may be thought of as like a countersubject in music, complementary to the theme of reciprocity. Julian Pitt-Rivers (1992) proposed the concept of grace not only as fundamental to Christianity but also as an ‘etic’ term associated with the idea of charity: ‘Grace is always something extra, over and above “what counts”, what is obligatory or predictable’.

Meyer Fortes argued ([1969] 2004, 231-2) that kinship is rooted in a principle of 'amity' or 'prescriptive altruism', which is extended outside the family into wider domains. For James Woodburn (1998), an authority on hunter-gatherer societies, reciprocity is not universal to all human groups: the Hadza of Tanzania would not understand the concept of generosity or charity, being profoundly and assertively committed to [egalitarian](#) sharing. David Maybury-Lewis quotes from an elder of the Gabra people, pastoral nomads in northern Kenya: 'Even the milk from our own animals does not belong to us. We must give to those who need it, for a poor man shames us all' (Maybury-Lewis 1992: 85, based on fieldwork by Aneesa Kassam).

Social anthropologists are concerned with [values](#) or principles conduced to altruism. Biologists, by contrast, categorise behaviour as altruistic insofar as it decreases the reproductive success of organism A while increasing that of organism B. The paradox of altruism, one of evolution's greatest riddles, was first articulated by Darwin in his reflections on the existence of sterile insects, and has elicited a vast scientific literature – largely bypassed by social anthropologists. Marshall Sahlins, however, drawing on the work of the developmental and comparative psychologist Michael Tomasello, deduces that 'shared intentionality' or intersubjectivity is a uniquely human capacity for mutuality, not discernable among non-human primates (Sahlins 2011, Tomasello 2009). Inasmuch as post-Darwinian [science](#) has dethroned almost every other presumed indicator of stark human uniqueness, the debate should be assumed to be still open. The biography of an eccentric genius, George R. Price (1922-75, a colleague of the more famous sociobiologist W. D. Hamilton), explains how he set out to prove mathematically that ostensibly altruistic behaviour actually conforms to a precisely calibrated scale of self-interest depending on the benefactor's degree of relatedness to the beneficiary (Harman 2010). For the primatologist Frans de Waal, however, human altruism is not a theoretical problem. *Pace* Tomasello, he sees it as having evolved when female mammals began to nurture their young. Empathy is associated with the release of the hormone oxytocin: de Waal and his co-workers have even postulated that biological mechanisms for consolation behaviour are conserved between prairie voles and humans (Burkett *et al.* 2016). Because oxytocin makes us feel good, the sharp line between [care](#) for others and self-love, according to this view, falls away.

Research on charity pre-2000

During the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – an unsatisfactory term which has nonetheless stuck – gradually provoked a spate of research projects in which anthropologists played a significant role. Barbara Harrell-Bond's *Imposing aid* (1986) was a landmark: an iconoclastic monograph on the work of international aid agencies, based on her fieldwork with Ugandan refugees in southern Sudan. Western institutions were increasingly dependent on government funding and pressured to comply with government foreign policies; their high charitable ideals had largely immunised them from criticism. She faulted them specially for failing to make the effort to empower 'victims' to take control of

their own lives. Equally hard-hitting was Alex de Waal's criticism (1989) of relief organizations' response to famine in the Horn of Africa, which avoided dialogue with the rural poor whom they were supposed to serve; a few years later he attacked the self-reproducing complacency of what he called the 'Humanitarian International'. Among other influential books by anthropologists published at about the same time was James Ferguson's *The anti-politics machine* (1990), which exposed the failure of aid bureaucracies to deliver real benefits to the supposed beneficiaries of 'development'.

Some publications focussed on the element of marketing in the work of overseas aid agencies, and on the process whereby disasters are 'constructed' as consumables via an oligopoly of media organizations for the purpose of campaigning and charitable fundraising, so that the flow of representations of suffering from the global periphery is continuously reciprocated by aid flows (e.g. Benthall 1993, Lidchi 1999). But reflection on charity per se was largely absent from the burgeoning research literature on development and disaster relief. Historians made up for this gap: Paul Veyne on munificence by private individuals in the Greco-Roman period from c. 300 BC ([1976] 1990); Frank Prochaska on the 'philanthropy of the poor to the poor' in Britain, and the 'royal bounty' that enables the modern British monarchy to remain credible (1988); many of the contributors to the first collection of comparative essays on charity to be published (Ilchman *et al.*, 1998), with not a single anthropologist among its twenty-two authors.

It appears that the stimulus for anthropologists to reflect on charity came from non-Christian traditions, before they began to turn to its Christian and [secular](#) manifestations. This would be in keeping with anthropology's more general tardiness in studying Christianity, except in Africa (as argued by Cannell 2006: 1-14). Among the few exceptions to be found before the end of the last century is an essay by Claudia Fonseca (1986) based on her fieldwork in a small charitable centre in Paris that distributed free clothing to down-and-outs. She describes the 'implicit pact' of goodwill and politeness established between some of the lady volunteers and their 'clients', and the transition between the older Christian aspiration of gaining a path to paradise through charity and the more modern aim of reinserting poor people into the workforce. Erica Bornstein's study of transnational Protestant NGOs in Zimbabwe made up quickly for lost ground, and she was the first researcher on charities to follow through the 'traffic in meaning' arising at cross purposes between the expectations of an individual transnational donor and the reactions of eventual recipients - in this case through World Vision's global child sponsorship programme (Bornstein 2005).

Decentring of charity via Islam

Jonathan Parry's aforementioned reflections on the 'free gift' were inspired by the dharmic religions of the Indian subcontinent; and Katherine A. Bowie published an early article on [Buddhist](#) charity in northern Thailand, qualifying the prevailing paradigm of Buddhist merit-making with her stress on class stratification (1998). But the main impetus towards deprovincialising 'Western' assumptions about charity as a Euro-American monopoly came from studying the Muslim world and its abundant legacy of religious

injunctions to generosity, as well as actual charitable institutions. Again, historians have been well to the fore (Arjomand 1998, Kozlowski 1998, Weiss (ed.) 2002, Bonner *et al.* 2003, Singer 2008, Fauzia 2013).

One historian of early [Islam](#), Christian Décobert, had the originality to make a connection between the key Qur'anic term *zakat* – mandatory almsgiving, like the Hebraic tithe, and one of the five 'pillars' of Islam – and Mary Douglas's theorising on purity (her early *Purity and danger* (1966) rather than her later work on the Bible). For *zakat* has common origins with the Hebrew-Aramaic *zakut*, which had connotations of purity, rectitude and thriving, but not of almsgiving (Décobert 1991: 198ff). There is also a clear semantic overlap between the idea of alms and that of rectitude via the word *sadaqa* (voluntary almsgiving). Décobert also drew inferences (1991: 196) about the self-representation and kinship systems of early Muslim societies from the rules laid down in the Qur'an about the distribution of *zakat*, with their eight categories of eligible beneficiaries (Qur'an 9.60), and he proposed a link with the agricultural tradition of offering firstfruits to God, thus opening up opportunities for comparative study which have yet to be fully explored (Bentall 1999, Bentall & Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 19-25).

The connection between giving to God and giving to the needy has never slackened throughout the Muslim world, in many parts whereof [animal](#) sacrifice is still routinely practised, with the meat given to the poor (though in industrialised countries it is as likely today to be canned meat imported commercially from New Zealand sheep farms). In the Qur'an, the major sacrifices of camels and cattle that were retained in Islam are represented as not only ceremonies but also a practical means of feeding the needy. Both sacrifice and *zakat* are associated with prayer and with affirming the oneness of God and Islam. The practice of *zakat* has undergone many variations during the history of Islam – ranging between, on the one hand, complete control by governments, and, on the other, informal [gifts](#) through private connections during the holy month of Ramadan, with many intermediate cases. But the discursive field to which it belongs remains a reality for devout Muslims.

Studying Islamic charitable traditions is of particular interest for two reasons. First, in almost all countries there are either Muslim donors or Muslim recipients or both – revealing as much variety of religious practices as may be found within Christendom. This is of practical importance for aid and development policies.

The second reason is more intellectual, calling into question European claims to secular universalism. Other traditions of charity and [humanitarianism](#) were generally disregarded. All religious traditions embody injunctions to 'good works', and we may think of the essence of charity as a bodily act, such as reaching out with a hand like the Good Samaritan to a traveller in distress, or, in the Islamic tradition, even smiling at a neighbour. But there are subtle differences. Christian charity, with its association with *agapē*, does not overlap exactly with the Islamic lexical field, which includes *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf* (the Islamic charitable foundation). The rules for the distribution of *zakat* have been given much attention by Islamic

scholars, and may be seen historically as having set out the principles of a proto-state treasury. They have, for instance, been interpreted as authorising [finance](#) for military *jihad*. But support for the poor is usually today regarded as *zakat*'s primary or even exclusive purpose, and it has been turned into a highly effective fundraising tool by contemporary Islamic charities, especially in actualising the Qur'an's insistence on the rights of orphaned children.

The authors of a remarkably thorough retrospective analysis of a famine and the inadequate global response to it, *Famine in Somalia: competing imperatives, collective failures, 2011-12*, conclude:

'Since the late 1990s, it has become fashionable in the Western humanitarian aid community to promote rights, and to dismiss charity as paternalistic and demeaning. Non-Western actors - particularly Islamic actors - put the issues of charity and of voluntary action squarely back in the centre of humanitarian action, at least in terms of intentions' (Maxwell & Majid 2016: 196).

These authors were impressed by their observation of Islamic aid workers' 'solidarity with the affected community'. Anthropologists may well concur that it is no more than a rhetorical trope to expect those suffering from famine to rely on their rights when they have no juridical entitlements.

[Ethnographically](#) grounded research on Sunni Islamic charity has accelerated in recent years. As well as studies on Arab societies by Mittermaier and Schaeublin - to which may be added Harmsen 2008, Roy 2011, Atia 2013, Challand 2014, and Juul Petersen 2015 - a body of work on West Africa has emerged (Kaag 2007, de Bruijn & van Dijk 2009, LeBlanc & Gosselin 2016). Research interest has reflected the growth of Islamic NGOs, which took off in the 1980s partly in line with the growth of NGOs in general, and partly as a result of the 'Islamic resurgence' - the worldwide endeavour to re-establish Islamic values and practices. One topic with practical implications is the question of 'cultural proximity': to what extent can an international faith-based organization improve its effectiveness through privileged access to aid recipients who share the same religious tradition (de Cordier 2009, Palmer 2011)? The answer to the question is mainly positive when we consider the work of Christian aid agencies among Christian populations in Africa and [Latin America](#). But what could otherwise have been a steady increase in the acceptance and influence of Islamic charities worldwide has been seriously compromised by a shadow hanging over it: persistent allegations of implication in 'terrorist' activities. Some limited culpability on the part of Gulf-based charities in the years leading up to 11th September 2001 cannot be denied, but one root of the problem goes back to the determination of the Western powers to back the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, when humanitarian aid was blatantly mixed with military support by the USA through Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (Bentall 2010: 115-8). The outcome is that many Islamic NGOs have been blacklisted by the US Government with its global reach, or forced to close down, and even those with an impeccable record have had to face legal and financial obstacles. The dominance of 'counter-terrorist' experts in the USA remains strong despite the publication of contrary views, and often seems (as argued by Schaeublin 2008,

James 2010-11, de Goede 2012, Bentall 2016) to assume the worst of Muslim charitable donors. Adverse presumptions are also disseminated about all 'Muslims out of place', volunteers expressing transnational Muslim solidarity who travel in distant and troubled regions (Li 2010, Kassem 2010-11).

By contrast, in the United Kingdom a government regulator sympathetic to diaspora charities of all kinds, the Charity Commission, has encouraged the growth of an Islamic charity sector that has established fruitful cooperative [relations](#) with the mainstream aid establishment - especially by embracing the principle of non-discrimination with regard to religion. The only other country where Islamic charities can be said to flourish vigorously with relatively little political intervention is Indonesia, which has a long tradition of faith-based welfare institutions (Latief 2012, Fauzia 2013). A major Islamic organization, the Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912 in Yogyakarta, came to adopt explicitly the principle of non-discrimination in its charitable works. But it became more religiously exclusive during the period of liberation from Dutch rule, and the commitment to inclusivity has not yet been formally reaffirmed (Fauzia 2017).

In his many-faceted ethnography of Hui Muslims in China, Matthew S. Erie explores how traditional Islamic principles of charitable giving are negotiated in a kind of 'value competition' with mainstream Han Chinese gift practices and with the security anxieties of the officially atheist Party-State (Erie 2016). The term for Muslim voluntary giving, *nietie*, is derived from the Qur'anic term *niyyah*, intent or motivation, without distinction in Chinese between the thing given and the act of giving. In conformity with Daoist practice, but contrary to the Qur'anic injunction that charitable giving gains extra merit when it is given discreetly, individual and family donations of *nietie* are posted on walls in mosques by name. Collections of *nietie* are organised for government-sponsored relief aid after earthquakes (Erie 2016: 276-9).

Debate within the Islamic world about the ethics of charitable giving has focused especially on the rules of *zakat*. The traditional view of most *ulama* was that only Muslims could be beneficiaries. When released from this restriction, Islamic charities have found common cause with the mainstream of secular and Christian NGOs. This and other differences on how to interpret the *zakat* rules - such as to what extent they authorise proselytism - may be seen as encapsulating concepts that go to the heart of wider current debates within Islam today (Bentall 2016: 18). They also have a bearing on anthropological reflection about charity in general, in that Islam, with its missionary and expansionary history, presents an alternative universalism to the often taken-for-granted universalism of Christianity and its legatee, post-Enlightenment secular universalism.

The critique of humanitarianism

Research by social anthropologists on charity all over the world has expanded in recent years. They are not all interested in the same questions. For instance, C. Julia Huang's monograph on the international Tzu Chi

social welfare movement – founded by an unassuming Taiwanese Buddhist nun, the Venerable Cheng Yen (b. 1937) and now numbering millions of supporters – is primarily concerned with the Weberian theme of charisma and its [bureaucratization](#) (Huang 2009). This model may be specially applicable to charitable institutions of every kind as they expand, in that they are empowered by strongly held [moral](#) values while also obliged to compete as corporate bodies. The specific centuries-old commitment of Christian charities to the [care](#) and healing of leprosy sufferers – and latterly to opposing their stigmatization – has attracted attention (Gussow 1989, Staples 2007). But these approaches seem marginal to the current trend in the analysis of humanitarian agencies.

Practitioners in relief and development – sometimes mocked as [citizens](#) of ‘aidland’ – habitually deny that what they are doing has anything to do with charity. This may be an instance of *déformation professionnelle*. Ambitious multinational initiatives have called for the humanitarian enterprise to change from one driven by charity to one driven by the imperative of ‘global solidarity’ (World Humanitarian Summit 2016: 13). But this high-minded concept is at odds with the actual evidence of gross global inequalities, never more than slightly mitigated by humanitarian action, and it lacks the underpinning of any vernacular tradition. Recent work by anthropologists and others has turned to holding the ideology of [humanitarianism](#) up to the light (e.g. Bornstein & Redfield (eds) 2010).

Didier Fassin’s concept of ‘humanitarian reason’ has been widely influential (Fassin 2011). By this he means a globally pervasive, morally untouchable *idéologique*, in confronting which he seeks to straddle the two normally contradictory senses of ideology: on the one hand, an insidious veil obscuring brutal economic interests (as in the works of Karl Marx), and, on the other hand, a cultural system that makes sense of social relations (as in the works of Clifford Geertz). Complemented by careful ethnography – he was trained as a physician and served as a vice-president of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, aka Doctors Without Borders) – his contention that humanitarianism is a form of Western governance, dependent on the fantasy that an ‘international community’ exists, seems an application of social science at its best. Without doubt – and this follows on from the much older critique of ‘charity’ – humanitarianism has markedly conservative aspects and can even dehumanise, reducing survivors to the ‘bare life’ diagnosed by Agamben (1995) as in many refugee camps (Agier 2014). An impressive ethnography, Peter Redfield’s monograph on MSF, draws on the Agamben-Fassin critique while also recognising and detailing this agency’s unique achievements as one of the most effective and most self-critical NGOs (Redfield 2013), though he has incidentally questioned MSF’s eccentric contention that it is not a ‘charity’ despite its famous successes in public fundraising (Redfield 2012: 454-7).

In the hands of armchair social scientists, an approach dwelling on Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’ – the subjugation of bodies and control of populations – can be overdone, especially when the brutality of many non-Western as well as Western regimes is underestimated. But the critique of ‘humanitarian governance’ has animated many recent ethnographically grounded publications bearing on charity. The occupants of

refugee camps - estimated at about six million persons in 2014, and fast growing in numbers since then - may be seen as objects of charity (even when the administrators are state or interstate agencies) in that their rights of [citizenship](#) are suspended in spaces that are 'off limits' and governed by special regulations (Agier 2014). Edward Simpson provides a searing, if impressionistic, study of the aftermath of a major earthquake in Gujarat, India, in 2001: a degradation of the social fabric in which philanthropic organizations of all kinds connived - the worst case being a school for boy orphans set up by a British paedophile. Simpson breaks new ground by including coverage of local Indian organizations and Gujarati diasporas, so that the charities that he criticises are not only those of Western origin (Simpson 2013). Maurizio Albahari went to press with his comprehensive book on the Mediterranean migrant crisis (2015) just before it reached boiling point. Though Albahari is sensitive to all other aspects of the crisis after a decade of research, it is his voluntary work in 2005 at a reception centre for asylum seekers in a small coastal town on the heel of Italy that gives his book a first-hand authority. Albahari shows how a myriad of religious and [secular](#) charities, nominally independent, assumed a *de facto* policing role. His monograph supports the contention that the most searching critiques of charitable endeavours are still today those that are fortified by participant observation, as in the earlier work of Harrell-Bond and Alex de Waal. Liisa H. Malkki (2015) diagnoses a 'neediness' among Finnish Red Cross professional staff who have served abroad: they are frustrated by the routines of middle-class life, made less bearable by the long winters, and look for a kind of personal fulfilment unobtainable at home. Anthropologists from the Global North may recognise the feeling.

A holistic template

The German-Dutch school of anthropology contributes a methodological template into which research on charitable initiatives may be inserted. The template relies on an expanded concept of social security, described by Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckman as 'the dimension of social organization dealing with the provision of security not considered to be an exclusive matter of individual responsibility' (Thelan *et al.* 2009). One merit of this methodological démarche is that it pays full attention to the viewpoints of the recipients of charity and to the question of evaluating efficacy. Five 'layers' of description are identified: ideological and cultural notions of risk and caring; institutional provision, based on clearly defined rights; actual social relationships between providers and recipients; concrete actions such as person-to-person assistance, and the transfer of resources; and finally the consequences of interventions for both providers and recipients. Carolin Leutloff-Grandits (2009) applies this method in an article on changing charitable responses in the face of the breakdown of state structures in former Yugoslavia. In the [ethnically](#) mixed Croatian town of Knin in 2001 during the aftermath of the Croat-Serb war, the local branch of the Catholic Caritas organization launched an emotive charity campaign for 'hungry Croats' in the town, adopting what Leutloff-Grandits calls a 'war policy of ethnic engineering' by other means. Preference was shown to Croatian settlers from Bosnia, causing resentment among both the Catholic Croat and the Orthodox Serb

returnees. From the few full-length published studies that do justice to all the 'layers' of analysis specified by the von Benda-Beckmans (though independently of their suggestions), we may single out Maxwell and Majid's *Famine in Somalia* (2016) and Albahari's *Crimes of peace* (2015), both mentioned above.

Conclusion: progress in charity?

During the mid-twentieth century hiatus, noted above, between Mauss's and Westermarck's writings and the innovative contributions by Harrell-Bond, Alex de Waal, and Parry, one anthropologist was exceptional in taking a sustained interest in the theme of charity: R. R. Marett. He wrote: 'real progress is progress in charity, all other advance being secondary thereto' (Marett 1935: 40). He saw maternal nurturing as the fountainhead of charity (Marett 1939: 141, 147). Though his phrasing will strike readers today as sentimental, it might be seen as adumbrating Fortes on amity and Frans de Waal on oxytocin. Yet no reflection on charity can ignore the lurking presence of reciprocity, which always threatens the purity of the free [gift](#). The *Bhagavad Gita* recognised the moral dilemma over two millennia ago.

Marett's dictum about progress has resonance today, and it prompts questions as to what should be recognised as progress. Since the 1960s, an amorphous movement known as Corporate Social Responsibility may be seen as one modern variant of charity, and [ethnographic](#) attention has been given to its manifestations, for instance in South Africa (Rajak 2011) and Saudi Arabia (Derbal 2014: 146-53). Among more recent innovations deserving of study is the formation of commercial consultancy firms to advise young people who have inherited wealth on how best to become philanthropic donors.

In any case, what used to be condescended to as 'applied anthropology' seems to be gathering some strength within the discipline. There are many opportunities for anthropologists to build on previous work relating to charity in ways that are practically useful as well as theoretically sophisticated, at a time of unprecedented demands on voluntary giving and volunteering.

Notes

This entry makes some use of material already published by the author in three other overview articles: 'Charity' in Fassin, D. (ed.) 2012. *A companion to moral anthropology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell); 'Religion and humanitarianism', in MacGinty, R. & J.H. Peterson (eds) 2015. *The Routledge companion to humanitarian action* (London: Routledge); 'Humanitarianism as ideology and practice' in Callan H. (ed.) forthcoming. *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of anthropology*. Gratitude is due to all these editors for the opportunities they have given for reflection. The present article owes much to Felix Stein as commissioning editor, and to two anonymous referees. Expert copy-editing was provided by Rebecca Tishler.

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