

## Charity and Violence

### Abstract

This research project investigates how theological belief norms of charity and almsgiving are implicated in justifying violence, and provides resources for a reparative theology of almsgiving that might address the abuse of charitable giving in the promotion and support of religion-related violence. The historical focus of this project will be the logic and practice of almsgiving as it is displayed in biblical, patristic, and medieval theology and practice. My intention for this research is not simply to argue for the relevance of almsgiving as a theological locus for thinking about the institutional context of religion-related violence, but also to offer a reparative theology of almsgiving that addresses certain systemic factors of religion-related violence (inequality, social exclusion) in religiously sensitive ways.

### Why Charity *and* Violence?

This research project investigates how theological belief norms of charity are implicated in justifying violence and how this might provide resources for a reparative theology of almsgiving that could address the abuse of charitable giving in the promotion and support of religion-related violence. The worn-out phrase “corruption of the best is the worst” (*Corruptio optimi pessima*) often implies some exceptional case, as illustrated, for instance, by the fall of Satan in Dante’s and Milton’s poetic representations. But what if it holds true of that which regulatively defines religious devotees? What if religious *charity* – which can manifest love of God and love of neighbor in the world – is not simply an antidote to violence but, when corrupted, is itself part of the problem? This research will specify and analyze this dynamic within religious charity as well as propose how one might distinguish malignant forms of religious charity from those charitable activities that offer critical resources for reducing and preventing religion-related violence.

### Almsgiving as a Theological Locus

This research will investigate the logic and practice of almsgiving generated by a complex interrelationship between religious belief and economic practices in the Christian tradition. Though not exclusively, Christian almsgiving has been associated with the religious use of money since at least the fourth century. Questions regarding money’s translatability into

works of righteousness stood at the center of theological reflection and political contestation for much of the pre-modern Latin Christian tradition. But debates regarding the possibility and permissibility of indulgences do not exhaust the theological potential of reflecting on religious use of money. Through a theological reflection on money, we can also discern how money structures relationships and values in beneficial, neutral, and toxic ways. This manifests itself in religious communities today when charity is used as a means for building solidarity among its beneficiaries that in turn inadvertently creates systemic exclusion of those not part of the “club.” For the majority of religious communities, this exclusionary aspect of charity is small enough that it can be ignored. But for a small number of religious communities and organizations, the club-making effect of charity provides legitimacy and financial support for inter-group violence. The theological potential of addressing almsgiving thusly is that it could provide resources to repair the habit of action that employs charity as a means of social exclusion.

### **New Directions for Religion and Economics**

This research brings into conversation the sub-fields of “religion and economics” and “religion and conflict.” While overlapping in their engagements with the field of political theology, these two sub-fields have largely been separate and distinct. A *rapprochement* between the two would not only help to specify and analyze economic-specific features of religion-related violence in a theologically sensitive way; it would also focus socially and morally enriched reflections in religion and economics on one of the most urgent social and moral questions of our day – the growth of religion-related violence around the world.

The cleavage between these two sub-fields is, in part, due to their diverse methods and objects of inquiry. On the whole, religion and conflict studies have attended more closely to historical, ethnographic, and political dimensions of intra- and inter-religious relations. Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies has been a global leader in the study of the causes of violent conflict and strategies for sustainable peace. By bringing into conversation the fields of anthropology, history, political science, psychology, sociology, and theology, the Kroc Institute helped to form the field of religion and conflict as an

irreducibly inter-disciplinary project. Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs has similarly shaped the conversation and field of religion and conflict. Recent work being done at the University of Virginia and University of Birmingham has opened up complementary research trajectories to the Kroc Institute and the Berkley Center. In these emergent centers of religion and conflict studies, the focus has turned toward pragmatic repair of the logics and practices within religious communities themselves (e.g., Nicholas Adams (2006 and 2008), Peter Ochs (2009)). This pragmatic approach can provide the sub-field of religion and economics not only with a fresh mode of inquiry, but also direct its energies toward analyzing how the economic aspects of religion-related violence interact with religious and doctrinal commitments.

The emergent sub-field of religion and economics has, however, generally focused on economic theory and the abstracted systems of “capitalism,” “socialism,” and “communism.” With the notable exception of Daniel Hardy (2001), theological investigations have mostly ignored or taken for granted the role of money (as has much economic theory). Hardy's reflections on money were generally well received, but as of yet they have not received much reception in theological or religious reflection. More recently Kathryn Tanner (2005 and 2016), Christina McRorie (2016), Jörg Dierken (2017), and Devin Singh (forthcoming 2018) have turned a theological spotlight on how economic ideas and practices have structured Christian thought and practice. For all three, there is a tight (and contestable) relationship between money and divine activity. The renewed interest in money, especially as exhibited by Dierken (2017) and Singh (2018) as a form of constructing meaning and relationships – both human-human and divine-human – is exciting for its potential to open up new conversations and directions within the field of religion and economics that would be fertile ground for a pragmatic inquiry into the complex relationship between religion, economics, and violence.

Bringing together my study and experience in the fields of economics and theology, this research project seeks to focus on questions of how the theological belief norm of charity simultaneously support and prevent inter-group conflict, and how greater attention to the subvertibility of charity can make us better equipped to intervene in conflict before the

shooting starts. In this research project, I plan to draw on Dierken (2017) and Singh (2018) to critique and extend a first-order engagement with the “club theory” of religious violence proposed by political economists (Berman, 2011; Skarbek, 2011; McCleary and van der Kuijp, 2008). A substantive engagement with the historical discourse on monetary almsgiving will exhibit how religious actors and organizations deploy theological discourse on money to build intra-group solidarity that can come at the expense of drawing clear inter-group divisions. Because a deeply religious logic and practice underwrite these divisions, it follows that the response to the promotion and material support of religious violence must also be deeply theological. In other words, the solution to this problem will require a reparative theology of charity, the first stage of which is a reparative historiography of the problem.

### **A Reparative Historiography of Almsgiving**

Augustine’s sermons on monetary almsgiving unleash an unwieldy discourse on money, both clarifying certain ambiguities with the biblical tradition and anticipating ways in which some medieval political authorities subvert the good intentions of charity. Drawing on the rich historical data from these sources, as well as recent economic sociology, I focus on how the rhetoric of almsgiving was used to establish political and social mandates that extend well beyond caring for the poor and sick. On the one hand, this requires that we probe some foundational Biblical passages that shaped Augustine's Scriptural imagination of money (e.g., Deut 15 and 26, Prov 10, Tob 4, Matt 6, 19, and 25), revisiting some of Augustine's interpretive decisions. On the other hand, this requires that we trace the social effect of these interpretive decisions and doctrinal articulations in subsequent centuries as Christianity becomes an imperial regime on Continental Europe. By looking at Gregory the Great's preaching against the counterfeiters, Charlemagne's monetary reforms, and Pope Urban II's call for the first crusade, I aim to demonstrate a variety of ways that Augustine's preaching on almsgiving was interpreted. The last episode – Pope Urban II's call for the first crusade – will occupy more attention, for it is not only one of the seminal events in religion-related violence but also lays bear the inner-logic of almsgiving that needs to be repaired. By analyzing the twinned social effects of exclusion and embrace in almsgiving, this historical investigation seeks to extend the work of Gary Anderson (2009 and 2013), Peter Brown

(2012 and 2015), and Christopher Tyerman (2011 and 2017).

### **Pragmatic ‘Club theory’ of Religion-related Violence**

While the historical focus is on the Latin Christian tradition between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the constructive contribution of this project resides in the reparative function of analyzing the social effects or habits of actions that are derived from tradition-specific forms of scriptural interpretation. What we learn from this theological genealogy that traces the interpretation of biblical passages on almsgiving and charity from their scriptural context to their use within religio-political justifications for violence in the promotion of the first crusade (1096-1099) is the specific historical context of almsgiving’s twinned-movements of social inclusion and exclusion as it has been deployed within the justification of religious violence. This provides us with a set of context-specific cases that display the presence of *indices* that serve as guideposts for the regulative use of scripture in political contexts. The repair that needs to occur is not a prohibition on the political use of scripture – for all interpretation of scripture inescapably occurs within specific socio-political contexts – but rather an explicit attentiveness to the way in which almsgiving discourse gains its referential purchase from the purpose to which it is being put in a particular socio-political context.

This pragmatic reading of the promotion of almsgiving will therefore provide us with a model for specifying a precise correlation between religious belief, economic action, and political violence. Through this precisely correlated set of features, the economic “club theory” of religious violence can be substantially refined to distinguish between those “clubs” whose primary purpose is social inclusion and those whose is social exclusion. This added data would make two significant contributions. First, they would provide a way of distinguishing between religious economic activity that is (a) socially beneficial, (b) socially benign, and (c) socially destructive and possibly supportive of violence. And second, they would provide a form of analysis that can relate the religious and economic variables of religion-related violence in a non-reductive way. Both of these contributions would add to our ability to distinguish malignant forms of religious charity from those are actually a critical part of reducing and preventing religion-related violence.

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