

## Is Charity Bad? Is Philanthropy Better?

### Part 1 of a 2-Part Series

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Charitable giving in the United States continues to rise. The most recent research from [Giving USA](#) calculated charitable giving in 2015 at an all-time high of \$373 billion dollars. The numbers seem to illustrate the generosity of Americans, and demonstrate the unique vibrancy of the nonprofit sector within the United States. Despite doomsday reports of declining religious affiliation and attendance, along with the shuttering of congregations and demise of denominations, giving to religious organizations continues to hold its own. These reports all seem to assert good news, so why are so many seemingly throwing cold water on Americans' penchant for charity?

Leaders within the philanthropic sector have mostly succeeded in drawing a stark contrast between *charity* and *philanthropy*. The former head of the Council on Foundations, Steve Gunderson, described much of his job as moving people from charity to philanthropy. If charity was "just the immediate emotional response to a need," then "philanthropy was a strategic approach to long-term problem solving." Vartan Gregorian, President of the Carnegie Corporation, agreed, claiming, "Philanthropy is not charity," but rather, "works to do away with the causes that necessitate charity."<sup>1</sup> As the title of the recent history of the Rockefeller Foundation makes clear, leading philanthropies have seen part of their work as moving [Beyond Charity](#).

The new generation of leading philanthropists, the likes of Buffett, Gates, and Bono, follow a similar trajectory, and are enthusiastically pushing others to follow, but this charity/philanthropy distinction has rarely been so clear. In fact, we can track its history back to the rise of rationalized, scientific philanthropy at the beginning of the twentieth century. In contrast to charity, the new philanthropists rising out of the Gilded Age, like the Carnegies and Rockefellers (along with the professionalization of social work and other fields), optimistically began to seek to tackle challenges like poverty. They began to use terms like *charity* almost pejoratively. Charity wasted resources, perhaps salving consciences, but avoiding questions of structures and systems while even undermining strategic efforts to solve social problems. This seemingly hierarchical relationship, with philanthropy trumping charity, continues today.

Of course, both terms have an even longer history. For those in religious communities, one cannot forget charity's root in the Judeo-Christian tradition and its ties to both love and justice. Philanthropy itself is defined as the "love of humanity." The two concepts have traditionally been much more intertwined. While we leave a deeper exploration for a future *Insights* article, within many religious traditions, giving itself is a meritorious good, a duty, or a responsibility of individuals in community. Practicing charity itself is a spiritual activity, and the focus is less on the structural solutions to poverty but rather the "spiritual damage done to the giver by hard-heartedness or the erosion of sympathy by the forces of centralization and bureaucratization."<sup>2</sup> If giving is an essential part of faith, the worry rather might be with philanthropy. In contrast to

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charity, some see philanthropy as too hands-off, outsourcing individual agency and the necessity of personal relationship to impersonal macro programs and evaluation measures.

The Catholic tradition may be the most vocal in their efforts to maintain the language of charity against what some might see as the push toward philanthropy. Former Pope Benedict XVI addressed the issue in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est* (“God is love”)<sup>3</sup>, and current Pope Francis has followed the charge. This past May, Pope Francis addressed several religious congregations and admonished them to stay alert, “keeping watch so that faith does not become an ideology and charity is not reduced to philanthropy.” If the Buffetts and Gates are pushing us to move from charity to philanthropy, Pope Francis’ presents the opposite impulse. Charity is the higher order, and he cautions the faithful to remain vigilant “so that the church doesn’t end up becoming an NGO.”<sup>4</sup>

So, are we left at an impasse between two clear contrasting approaches: charity and philanthropy? No – like most issues, the constructive space is somewhere in between. While some religious voices like Pope Francis serve as an important reminder as to how philanthropy often can overlook or reframe the giving traditions and giving practices of religious communities, other voices from within faith-based organizations serve as a reminder that too often our frameworks of religious charity are underdeveloped.

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For instance, Bob Lupton has made a name for himself in cautioning Christians to reflect on their giving and volunteering. As a front-line voice for community change in urban neighborhoods for decades, through his Atlanta-based nonprofit Focused Community Strategies (FCS) and his engagement in organizations such as Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), Lupton is well suited to challenge Christian leaders to reconsider how a massive industry of charitable compassion often hurts the people it was designed to help. Since publishing [Toxic Charity](#) in 2011, Lupton, along with books such as Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert’s [When Helping Hurts](#), have made inroads into Christian communities. In challenging many faith-based nonprofits, Lupton is forcing many within the industry of charitable compassion to remember that our approaches to charity and philanthropy have most often focused on the giver and volunteer – without extending that same attention to the impact on the recipient, or even more so, the often complex relationship between giver and receiver. Lupton would claim that our motives are noble, but our practices are actually leading to more harm than good, and ultimately perpetuate the cycle of need that we seek to solve.



There is much to learn in reflecting on the meaning behind the terms we use and the context in which we use them. In so doing, we gain perspective on the histories and traditions that shape us and make space to consider our own current practice. We might also discover that our contrasts between categories, such as charity and philanthropy, should not be drawn so sharply. While important differences remain, perhaps they push us to consider unanswered theological, ethical, and vocational questions. What makes up the good life, how much is enough, or how do notions of justice serve to motivate beyond profit maximization or a charitable tax deduction? If by its very nature, giving forms a relationship that changes both giver and receiver, then how do we understand models of charity and philanthropy, and how do these practices challenge us to live in the world?

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Benjamin Soskis, “Both More and No More: The Historical Split between Charity and Philanthropy,” October 2014, Hudson Institute. [Online](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> George Wiegel, “The Blessings of Charity,” *Philanthropy Magazine* March/April 2006. [Online](#).

<sup>4</sup> Junno Arocho Esteves, “Don’t turn faith into ideology, charity into philanthropy, pope says,” May 2016, Catholic News Service. [Online](#).



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