RELIGION AND POVERTY

Monotheistic Responses Around the Globe

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

The Response of Monotheistic Religions to the Problem of Poverty

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How do we begin to bring together the two widespread global phenomena of religion and poverty? This book attempts to do just that, offering a social science overview of how religion and poverty intersect. In 2015, 84% of the world's population was affiliated with a religious tradition. Christianity (31.2%) and Islam (24.1%) were the largest religions in the world population, which include the unaffiliated (16%) (Hackett and McClendon 2017). Recent data collection was slowed due to the pandemic, but projected estimates placed Christianity at 31% and Islam at 25%, with the unaffiliated at 16% in 2020. By 2050, Christianity and Islam are projected to be about even (31.4% Christianity and 29.7% Islam), with the unaffiliated projected to decline to 13.2% of the world's population (Pew Research Center 2015). Although religious affiliation and practice has declined in the United States in recent years, about 71% of the population is religiously affiliated as of 2021, with Christianity as the largest number of adherents at 63% of the U.S. population (Smith 2021). At the same time, large numbers of people live in poverty. While difficulties abound in defining poverty, the official poverty rate in the United States in 2022 was 11.5%, with 37.9 million people in poverty (Shrider and Creamer 2023). Meanwhile, the 2021 global poverty rate as defined by the World Bank (in extreme poverty living on less than $1.90 per day) was 9.3% or 696 million people (Aguilar et al. 2021).

With such large numbers of people both religiously affiliated and living in poverty, we seek to examine the intersection of religion and poverty. Granted, this is a large task, and by necessity some questions will be left unexplored in this short book. However, by the time you finish reading this, you will have a good understanding of a social scientific perspective on poverty and religion, with primary emphasis on the world's two largest religious traditions of

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Christianity and Islam. Where is religion empowering and where is it disempowering? How and why should members of civil society consider religious organizations, both local and transnational, as partners in poverty alleviation? What are the dangers? What are the possibilities? What role, if any, should religion provide in a pluralistic society?

A note is in order before we begin: what does it mean when social scientists study religion? Social scientists explore religion as an institution in society. This means that social scientists are not expressly concerned with theology – that is, delving into the nuances of theological debates or arguing the validity of any particular theological view. Instead, social scientists look at religion as an institution which exists in a social context – and both shapes and is shaped by that social context. With regard to poverty, social scientists examine how religious beliefs play out in actions – both on a micro level and on a larger level. A social science perspective of religion provides one perspective. It can attempt to describe and catalog religious practices and reported beliefs, albeit imperfectly (for example, social science surveys seeking data about frequency of prayer or service attendance). It can look at religious institutions serving people in poverty. It can study how people living in poverty themselves experience the meaning of their personal faith and religious practices. However, it is wise to remember that there are different perspectives from which to study religion, and social scientific perspectives differ from theological or religious studies perspectives. This book is written by social scientists (two of us are sociologists of religion and the other is a scholar in the interdisciplinary social science field of philanthropic studies), and we will be drawing from and synthesizing a wide body of social science research.

We also need to talk about definitions … of both poverty and religion. As noted earlier, defining poverty is a difficult task, and much has been written trying to define it. Here we first provide some official definitions, but the multifaceted and complex issue of poverty cannot be boiled down to these constructs. In the United States, the official poverty line stems from a measure developed in the 1960s based on three times the cost of basic food expenses adjusted for different family sizes and indexed for inflation. This measure looks at pre-tax income and does not include government benefits (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). In 2022, the official poverty line was $27, 750 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2023). The U.S. Census Bureau has also published a Supplemental Poverty Measure since 2011, which takes into account government benefits to people living in poverty like programs and tax benefits (Shrider and Creamer 2023). Globally, an international poverty line of $1.90 per day marks extreme poverty, a measure developed by the World Bank (World Bank 2022).

However, there are many dimensions to poverty. The notions of relative and absolute poverty, for example, take into account the deprivation people may feel, their perception of poverty, or their lack of access to stable housing,

food, health care, and education, independent of whether they fall "below the line" of absolute poverty. Economist Amartya Sen's influential "capability approach" – that people's capabilities need to define poverty, not just a dollar figure cutoff – impacted the development of the UN Human Development Index (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2009). The UN Development Programme (UNDP) uses a summary index of average attainment in three key areas of human development – life expectancy at birth; years of schooling, and standard of living (United Nations 2022). Viewing poverty through the lens of whether one is excluded or included from the workings of one's society, "social exclusion" versus "social inclusion" is a related way to think about what it means to be poor (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2016). The United Nations has attempted to operationalize all of these concepts in the creation of the Millennium Development Goals (pursued from 2000 to 2015 and can be found here: https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) and the Sustainable Development Goals (to be pursued from 2015 to 2030 and can be found here: https://sdgs.un.org/goals). The UN's 17 current Sustainable Development Goals include eliminating hunger, providing clean water and sanitation, generating affordable and clean energy, and reducing gender inequality. The full list of goals is indicative of the complexities of poverty, both definitionally and practically.

More definitional difficulties arise when we turn to religion, with definitions of religion having been long debated by scholars. French sociologist Emile Durkheim provided one definition in his 1912 classic *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1995 [1912]:44). For Durkheim, the communal aspect of religion was of paramount importance, as he believed that "religion must be an eminently collective thing" (Durkheim 1995 [1912]:44). Sociologists today, in addition to expanding the description of communal religion beyond "church," also study religious or spiritual practices that people engage in privately, such as prayer or reading sacred texts. Without wading into the scholarly debates of "religious versus spiritual," we will look at various forms of religious and spiritual practice when we talk about "religion" in this text. In fact, we focus squarely on practices – both communal and personal – in considering how religion operates in society and in the lives of individuals with regard to the issue of poverty. With this volume's focus on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, we will consider practices for example, like prayer and almsgiving, as they relate to poverty. We will provide examples of actions motivated by religious beliefs, whether in a larger sense (like a congregation providing a food bank or a religiously affiliated non-profit organization providing social services) or at an

individual level (someone donating money, or having views on poverty tied to religious beliefs). We will also consider how religious practices and beliefs operate in the lives of people living in poverty.

This volume begins its exploration of religion and poverty with a focus on the United States in Chapter 2, and then in subsequent chapters it moves to transnational religion and religion and poverty in the global South for the rest of the book. Throughout the volume, it is important to stay attuned to a key question, stated simply, does religion help or hurt the poor? Or both? Karl Marx famously described religion as "the opium of the masses." In this view, religion keeps people in poverty focused on an afterlife and blind to the unjust conditions leading to their suffering. Religion thus keeps the poor pacified and from engaging in actions aimed at upending a social order that keeps them in poverty. Another religious ideology that can result in harm to the poor is what German social theorist Max Weber described in 1905 as "the Protestant ethic." The Protestant ethic highlighted the importance of hard work and disdained idleness. The Protestant Reformation theologian John Calvin (1509–1564) believed that people were called to their occupations by God and that they pleased God by working diligently in these occupations. Calvin believed that success in one's calling demonstrated God's favor. The Protestant ethic continues to impact attitudes toward poverty. For example, in the context of the United States, those who both support and disagree with the major changes to the U.S. social safety net in the 1990s acknowledge the impact of the Protestant work ethic on those changes, albeit now in a secularized form that permeates American culture (Cohen 2002; Hayes 2003; Hudson and Coukos 2005; Olasky 1992, Sullivan 2011). These ideologies can result in punitive programs toward people in poverty, who are perceived to be idle or lazy. They can also be internalized by people in poverty in negative ways; if success is a sign of God's favor, then conversely poverty could be interpreted as failure and divine disfavor. There are other ways in which religion can contribute negatively in the case of poverty. Religions may discourage women from working outside of the home, which could contribute to impoverishment in their families. Similarly, certain conservative religions in the United States discourage women's pursuit of higher education leading to lower attainment of wealth (Keister 2008, 2011). Some churches make poor individuals feel judged or unwanted. Prosperity gospel teachings link people's donating money to religious organizations with divine favor leading to financial wellbeing. This can contribute both to poverty as well as a sense of guilt, being in divine disfavor, and failure.

No discussion of religion's negative effects is complete without reference to its role in fomenting violent conflict. Wars driven at least in part by religion litter human history and remain prevalent today. Numerous conflicts in the Middle East, including those between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza and between the Houthi movement and a Saudi Arabian led coalition in Yemen, are inspired in

part by religion and create immiserating poverty. Conflict between Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria is sharp and leads to loss of life and property. Both Muslims and Christians are persecuted minorities in India. As a result, their freedoms, earning power, and general human flourishing suffer. Religious undertones are present in the Russia/Ukraine war, in various conflicts in Sudan and the horn of Africa, in Myanmar and in other places in Asia. In sum, all of the monotheistic religions are involved in conflict in different places around the world; people of faith are often perpetrators of such violence *and* people of faith in marginalized communities suffer acutely because of such conflicts.

However, we also consider where religion may help. In this volume, we discuss examples of faith-based social service provision, faith-based community organizing, and how religion can pattern behavior in ways that can lead to human flourishing. Faith-based organizations provide myriad types of social services and engage in a wide variety of human empowerment efforts. Faith-based hospital systems operate around the world, as do community public health centers, micro enterprise incubators, water-sanitation initiatives, and schools and other education programs. Many such faith-based initiatives operate in the world's poorest and most violent places, including in Myanmar, northern Nigeria, South Sudan, Ukraine, and Yemen. It is faith that often motivates the personnel who work in such contexts to take on low paying jobs in high-risk contexts.

Religion also often plays a vital role in social movements and community organizing. Marx's view of religion does not take into account the empirical reality that disadvantaged people often can (and do) draw on resources of faith communities to help confront injustice. The U.S. Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th century is one example. Christian leaders such as Baptist minister Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and Muslim leaders, such as Malcolm X, helped to spearhead different parts of the efforts to achieve racial justice during this time (Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Rogers and Konieczny 2018). In the late 20th century, the prominent role of faith in sustaining social movements could be seen around the world, including in Iran, Poland, South Africa, and multiple Latin American countries (Smith 1996). In many such places, religious actors and institutions fought to protect the vulnerable against state violence and oppression.

Finally, religious adherents often follow a code of behavior that increases their scores on socio-economic indicators. Scholars of Christianity note the similarities between the contemporary Global South Pentecostal movement and 17th-century Calvinism. Global South Pentecostalism is largely an ascetic religion in that it prohibits philandering and overindulgence in alcohol, and it encourages adherents to attend church multiple times a week. Women are often first attracted to the faith, many of whom then encourage the men in their lives to accompany them to church. When men convert, they begin to redirect their modest income away from vices and toward their children's education and other elements of home life. This has a long-term, positive impact (Brusco 1986). There is also an entrepreneurial orientation to Pentecostalism

that is characterized by increased frugality and personal motivation (Berger 1991). Emilio Willems, one of the earliest scholars of the movement in Latin America, described poor Pentecostals' economic activity as "penny capitalism" (Willems 1967), which was perhaps not that different from what today is referred to as micro savings and micro enterprise. David Martin (1990, 2002) argued that the economic gains that poor Pentecostals experience from such activities create "a raft" that takes them to a slightly better economic status. Asceticism and entrepreneurialism are core traits of Weber's Protestant ethic. They help to create the dynamics that prompted one poor Venezuelan to tell scholar David Smilde that the "economic and spiritual fruits [of evangelicalism] were better" (2007:7) than staying in mainstream society.

There is, however, a ceiling to how much human flourishing can occur if structural causes of poverty are not addressed. Global South Pentecostalism does not typically undertake the political engagement necessary to effect structural change. That is partially because effective political engagement is never easy for poor people in poor communities. It becomes even more challenging in weak states, or where authoritarian leaders use the state to oppress its own citizens. This was often the context in late 20th-century Latin America, when David Smilde (1998: 288) summed up the literature on Latin American Pentecostalism and political involvement in the following way:

> …new identities, expectations, and social formations are distanced from overt political action, argue these scholars, not because of some inherent incompatibility (between Pentecostalism and politics), but because of Pentecostals' social marginalization (Burdick 1993), the practical impossibility of success (Ireland 1993; Levine and Stoll 1997), and the danger of political action in Latin America (Martin 1990; Stoll 1990).

Democracy has retreated even further on the global stage since then. Correspondingly, the number of countries that are controlled by authoritarian regimes has increased, facilitating a rise in cases of religious persecution around the globe. It is thus extremely difficult in many Asian, African, Eastern European, and Latin American countries for faith communities of humble origins to create structural change.

These realities notwithstanding, global evangelicalism and global Pentecostalism (two strongly overlapping religious movements) miss opportunities to impact structural causes of poverty. It may be difficult to imagine a poor Pentecostal church in a remote village having the clout to effect national structural change, but it is plausible to think that a coordinated, transnational effort at political advocacy by a robust global religious movement might find success, at least in some contexts. But such evangelical and Pentecostal efforts are not often forthcoming (although there are some exceptions) because the

movements' origins, historical development, and basic assumptions about the world make political advocacy and community mobilization on most poverty-related issues feel foreign (Offutt et al. 2016). The consequences for people who experience greater levels of oppression and scarcity as a result of such inaction may be significant.

Theologies and Poverty

Although social scientists are not theologians, if we are going to look at how religious beliefs play out in actions vis-a-vis poverty, then we need to provide at least an overview of those religious beliefs. These sketches we provide here are by necessity simplified. Within all of the monotheistic religions addressed in this volume (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), there are many different groups of adherents – denominations, sects, branches, movements – whose theologies sometimes significantly differ from one another. Here we discuss some broad basic tenets and sources informing religious traditions' ethics with regard to poverty.

Starting with the largest world religion, Christianity, Scripture in both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament speaks frequently about the poor. These scripture writings highlight the importance of justice and concern for the poor: for example "Open your mouth in behalf of the mute, and for the rights of the destitute. Open your mouth, judge justly, defend the needy and the poor!" (New American Bible-Revised Edition, Proverbs 31:8–9). Old Testament prophets repeatedly call for justice in their societies, advocating for the widow, the orphan, and the poor: "Learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow" (New American Bible-Revised Edition, Isaiah 1:17). Jesus, when he is embarking on his public ministry, reads from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (New American Bible-Revised Edition, Luke 4:18; Massaro 2016). Later, Jesus exhorts his followers to care for those in need: "'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'… whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me'" (New American Bible-Revised Edition, Matthew 25:35–40). Most Christian congregations provide charity or contribute toward charities aimed at meeting people's basic needs such as food and clothing.

Over the centuries Christians have had differing responses to the issue of poverty – how in following Jesus, should they be responding to those in need? Some responses center an individual's responsibility, judging between

the "deserving poor" and "the undeserving poor." For example, some Christians in the United States have embraced a more individualistic approach to poverty, believing it an issue to be addressed by increased "personal responsibility" and hard work by the poor themselves, as well as charitable donations from religious individuals and congregations. However, other Christian responses, in the United States and elsewhere, center justice and call for structural changes in societies and government responsibility to the poor, in addition to charity. There are also Christian movements and religious orders which embrace voluntary poverty and the living of simple lifestyles, in addition to caring for the needs of the destitute.

Mainline Protestant churches, including denominations such as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Lutheran have embraced early 20th-century theologian Walter Rauschenbusch's "social gospel," which decries poverty and economic inequality. These types of Protestant denominations are heavily represented in organizations like the National Council of Churches (United States) or the World Council of Churches, ecumenical organizations that promote anti-poverty and other social justice work. A National Council of Churches statement reads "At the core of Christian faith is a commitment to work on behalf of and with those marginalized by our society; the hungry, sick, poor, prisoners, strangers and powerless people (Matt 25:44)" (National Council of Churches 2023). The World Council of Churches calls for sustainable development that requires redistribution of resources to advance a "people-centered" economy that views poverty as a "lack of justice and a violation of human rights" (World Council of Churches 2004).

In the context of the United States, while many evangelical Christian churches are not likely (as opposed to their Mainline Protestant counterparts), to call for increased government support for the poor, they are involved in aiding people living in poverty. And as we discuss further in Chapter 2, many evangelicals and Pentecostals are themselves poor – in the southern and Appalachian regions of the United States, as well as exploding numbers of conversions in the global South. Evangelicals still draw upon the theology of church fathers like 18th-century British clergyman John Wesley, founder of Methodism, whose 1872 sermon "On Visiting the Sick" calls for Christian believers to live out their faith through serving the poor and sick: "One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers" (Wesley n.d.). Ronald Sider, an influential American evangelical, founded Evangelicals for Social Action in the late 1970s (recently renamed Christians for Social Action) to more deeply engage evangelicals in anti-poverty and social justice work, standing in contrast to conservative evangelical movements such as the Moral Majority prominent in 1980s U.S. politics (Christians for Social Action 2020). Another influential American evangelical is Jim Wallis,

founder of Sojourners magazine and community. Sojourners' "Call to Renewal" has worked to focus churches on poverty and poverty alleviation (Sojourners 2022). Evangelical support for the poor exists through their donations to faith-based nonprofit organizations, some of which engage in substantial anti-poverty relief work. At the same time, white evangelicals are the largest supporters of U.S. former president Donald Trump and allies, whose views and policy positions with regard to poverty differ from social-justice-oriented evangelicals like Sider and Wallis.

Evangelical theologies of poverty can look different in international contexts. Jayakumar Christian is an Indian theologian and practitioner of poverty alleviation, having served as the head of World Vision India for many years. Christian argues that a biblical response to poverty requires looking at how power structures work in the lives of the poor through the theological lens of the Kingdom of God. Christian points to various spheres in which the poor can be trapped by power structures, and notes that even community development workers can develop "god complexes of the non-poor," where they seek to determine what happens in poor communities. God complexes of the non-poor (not just those of community development workers) create systems of exclusion and exploitation that reinforce poverty cycles. Effective poverty alleviation efforts, Christian argues, must take such spiritual and relational dynamics into account (Christian 1999). Christian's writings have impacted theories of change and programming strategies in World Vision and other evangelical relief and development organizations around the world.

Catholic social teaching focuses its response to poverty in the notions of the dignity of the human person, the common good, and participation. Catholic social teaching is a body of official doctrine that motivates and is embedded within a larger Catholic social tradition. Official papal and other documents on issues like worker justice, war and peace, the gap between the rich and the poor, and the environment promote key themes that taken together highlight the Church's concern for the poor. Catholic social teaching believes that in a good society, everyone should be able to participate in economic and social life (Massaro 2016; Sullivan and Pagnucco 2014). Catholic social teaching speaks against individualism, promoting a vision of solidarity – that we are independent, not isolated individuals. Catholic social teaching embraces the principle of subsidiarity in addressing poverty, believing that "some tasks and goals should be accomplished on the local levels and others that are more appropriate for larger entities, such as national governments" (Massaro 2016:89). In this manner it takes a "both and" approach to the question of justice and charity. Catholic social teaching has an explicit option for the poor and vulnerable: "A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31–46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable

first" (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2023). In his 2015 encyclical on the environment, Pope Francis states that the poorest and most vulnerable people suffer the worst consequences of environmental degradation and calls for a solidarity that hears "both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (Pope Francis 2015:49). While many Catholics lack knowledge of Catholic Social Teaching (Sullins 2015), it provides a theological framework that motivates anti-poverty actions by the Church and some of its members.

Also in the Catholic context, liberation theology arose in the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on the poor. In 1971, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, calling for a "preferential option for the poor" that centers the experience and voices of the poorest and most marginalized. In liberation theology, poverty results from structural injustices that must be opposed (Dear 2011). In the 1980s, the Vatican criticized liberation theology for being too aligned with Marxism and censured theologians, and Pope Francis (as Jorge Bergoglio) strongly opposed liberation theology in 1970s Argentina. In recent years, gestures such as Pope Francis canonizing Salvadoran martyr Archbishop Oscar Romero or concelebrating Mass with Gustavo Gutiérrez show a different approach – and although Francis does not embrace liberation theology as a whole, he shares its emphasis on the poor (Løland 2021).

Catholic congregations and non-profit organizations provide support to the poor around the world. Catholic Charities USA is the largest provider of social services in the United States after the federal government, in 2019 serving over 12 million people in 2600 locations across the country (Gehring 2020). These human services are provided regardless of recipients' religious backgrounds, serving people from all religious traditions and none (Catholic Charities USA 2023). Catholic Relief Services operates from a framework of "integral human development" to serve over 130 million people in poverty in over 100 countries (Catholic Relief Services 2023).

Turning to the next-largest world religion, Islam, we start with the fact that poverty is a central theme within Islamic theology and the practice of Islamic charity. Its importance is signified by the inclusion of charity (zakat) as one of the five pillars of Islam. The five pillars of Islam include: belief in oneness of God, zakat (charity), praying five times a day; fasting during Ramadan and doing the pilgrimage in Mecca (Hajj) if one is able at least once in their life. God is considered the sole provider of all things in this world to humans. This includes what constitutes wealth (Rahaman 2019). Therefore, Muslims believe that by instituting zakat as a central pillar of Islam, God is ordaining poverty alleviation through redistribution of wealth. Rahaman (2019) argues that charity in Islam favors the poor. Therefore, understanding Muslim approaches to poverty alleviation must be through an examination of charity in Islam.

Our examination of Islamic charity begins with one of the five pillars of Islam – zakat. Zakat signifies purification of wealth in the Quran (Singer 2008).

The Quran lays out eight general but inclusive categories for those who are to receive zakat: the destitute and needy, those who work in zakat administration, those who are preaching Islam, those who are releasing slaves, those who are getting out of debt, those who are traveling in the name of God, and those who are in need of assistance. Singer says that the concept of zakat is misinterpreted as charity, since it is neither voluntary nor altruistic, but mandatory. She doesn't accept, however, that there is scant evidence showing that premodern governments collected or distributed zakat through separating it from taxes raised by states to fund their own operations (Singer 2018). The potential importance of zakat in contemporary times as a tool to combat poverty is evident by recent attempts by United Nations, non-Muslim INGO's, and states attempting to establish zakat programs to help their poverty alleviation efforts in Muslim majority contexts. For example, the UNHCR, UNRWA, and UNICEF all have Islamic fatwas (legal rulings) that allow them to raise zakat funds for their poverty alleviation programs (Mian 2021). The role of zakat in poverty alleviation has resulted in an important conversation of whether the state or civil society should collect zakat in Indonesia (Latief 2022). The semi-government agency, BAZNAS, has adopted both a centralized and a grassroots model of zakat collection and distribution.

While some academics, such as Singer (Singer 2018) and Ingrid Mattson (Mattson 2010), deny that zakat is charity, the general agreement among Muslims is that, within Islam, zakat is an established form of philanthropy (Ba-Yunus and Kone 2006). Few countries with a majority Muslim population ever bother to collect zakat (Kuran 2003). For example, in Pakistan (which does collect zakat), there are many institutions that rely upon Islamic philanthropy (including zakat) and refuse funding from government like madrasa's (Wasif and Prakash 2017). The inability of the state to institutionalize zakat and the resulting lack of trust inside the state have been blamed by some for an uneven and less strategic use of zakat in contemporary society. According to Kuran, there has never been agreement on how zakat should be paid or collected.

Scholars have noted that, whereas historically Muslims might have been punished for not paying zakat, today the vast majority of Muslims do not contribute their zakat to the government in this way and instead utilize the money to support their own charitable causes (McChesney 1995). Abraham contends that Muslims have always considered zakat as a personal deed that goes hand in hand with formal prayer (see Abraham 2018). According to Rashid et al. (2017), every Muslim is obliged to pay zakat and devise a method for dispersing this tax. There is a significant gap between how scholars explain the theology of zakat and how ordinary Muslims actually apply it. Giving zakat can be done on a personal or communal level. Zakat is mandatory, but it is unsettled as to how much is given and to whom. In addition to being both a part of worship (ibadat) and a kind deed, zakat straddles the boundary between religious obligation and social transaction.

Sadaqah is a second type and broader form of Islamic charity. In contrast to the mandatory zakat, sadaqah is a voluntary charitable offering (Singer 2018) and is thought to include all forms of Muslim generosity (including zakat). Sadaqah (similar to zakat) can be given to needy family members. Muslims who do not pay nonobligatory sadaqah do not commit a sin. They are, however, promised huge religious rewards if they participate in this voluntary conduct. In this domain, even a smile, intended to do good with the goal of showing devotion to God, is considered charity. Reportedly, the Prophet Muhammad said that "smiling in the face of your brother is an act of charity" (sadaqah), and is a typical refrain used to encourage Muslim youngsters to smile. Zakat likely constitutes the most powerful tool to alleviate poverty as it allows any action (or inaction) intended to serve God by doing good.

Waqf, or religious endowment, is a third type of charity (Lev 2005). The tradition of waqf can be traced back to a hadith recounting Umar ibn al-Khattab's inquiry to the Prophet about whether or not he should donate a piece of property he had recently purchased to charity (Adam 2020; Sanjuán 2007). When asked for advice, the Prophet said, "Encumber the things themselves and devote its fruits to holy ends." Umar stipulated that the property not be sold and that the proceeds may be given to charity. As such, a waqf is a method of giving that continues to benefit the community even after the initial gift has been made. The modern philanthropic endowment and foundations are ideas that Muslims have taken from Sasanian traditions and given to the rest of the world (Adam 2020).

In Islam, a donor's motive plays a significant role in charitable giving. Giving is judged not just on its results, but also on the giver's motives; therefore, we shift our attention to donors' intentions. One instance from the Prophet's life serves as an illustration. A Sunnah of the Prophet about a man who wished to donate charity shows the Prophet's advocacy for charitable giving (Sahiḥ al-Bukhārī 1355, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1022). The man approached the Prophet and pleaded with him to show him the way to heaven. The Prophet advised the individual to perform acts of charity in order to gain emancipation in the hereafter. The first day, the man gave some of his charity to an unworthy recipient. The realization that he had helped a thief spurred him to continue his kind acts in the name of God, yet he ended up helping an undeserving rich man instead. Upon realizing his mistake yet again, he attempted to rectify his blunder by helping a woman whom he considered needy! However, he unknowingly helped a prostitute. When he discovered the truth about her, he was ravaged. In anguish, he went to the Prophet and revealed his concerns. The Prophet, who was healer of souls, gave the man solace and advised him not to worry as his donations had been accepted by the Creator because the intention to do good was more important than the eventual success of the charitable act. The Prophet emphasized that, through the man's help, the robber may have been motivated to stop doing bad deeds,

and his help may have encouraged the prostitute to stop selling her body, all while teaching the rich man to give charity.

The intent to do good deeds is an approach to gaining God's favor. To be a true Muslim is to actively want to do good. This could take the form of financial contributions, time commitments, advocacy for social justice, or abstinence from harmful behavior. "*Spending money on Allah's cause is like a grain of wheat, which produces seven ears and contains one hundred grains in each*" (Ali 2018 II:261). In the eyes of Muslims, charity is not a selfless act, and givers are entitled to the fruits of their generosity. The ultimate motivation behind the donation, however, is not to gain notoriety or prestige or tax advantages, but rather God's favor. There is a wealth of evidence indicating that generosity has many positive outcomes, including but not limited to greater physical health (Heng, Hamid, and Khan 2020), improved mental health, strengthened personal relationships, and elevated social status. "*There are some miserly people among you, yet behold, ye are those urged to spend in the service of Allah. But miserliness is an act of suicide for the soul. Although God appreciates and rewards acts of compassion, the contrary has negative consequences for the individual*" (Ali, 2018 XLVII:38). Charity in Islam is a joint effort between the giver and God, with an emphasis on the consequences of one's own choices (both good and bad), and a suggestion that doing good is ultimately in one's own self-interest.

According to the Prophet, "The best of charity is that which is given after one is satisfied," which is why many countries with a majority of Muslims also report high levels of informal giving (Siddiqui 2010). Helping out financially strapped relatives is included in this type of informal Muslim charity. The best charity, according to Muslim thought, is the kind that is given at the right moment, for the right purpose (love of God), and to the right cause (doing good). It is for this reason that the Prophet says, "There is no envy save in two things: a person whom Allah has given riches and he spends it, everything, in the appropriate way, and a person whom Allah has given intelligence and he uses it in judgment and teaches it" (Siddiqui 2010).

One way to earn God's favor in the eyes of Muslims is by anonymous charitable giving. "*The best thing you can do for yourself and to wash away some of your sins is to keep your acts of kindness a secret and donate them to the poor. According to the Muslim understanding of generosity, one's motivation is more crucial than the actual act itself because Allah knows all about it*" (Ali 2018 II:271). The spiritual significance of a gift is nullified if the giver's only goal is recognition or gain of money. The ultimate goal is to earn God's approval by helping others. God urges Muslims to do things that create good for others, which is demonstrated by the fact that they do so and reap rewards.

Modern ideas about Muslim philanthropy have evolved greatly from their earliest forms. These days, helping others means giving money or giving one's

time. Classical Muslim understanding of compassion is broader than our contemporary understanding. Forgiving someone for wrongdoing is seen as an act of charity in Islam; the verse reads: "But forgive them and overlook their misdeeds: for Allah loveth those who are kind" (Ali 2018 V:13). When it comes to giving to charity, Muslims don't put a dollar amount on it.

All Muslims are obligated to make charitable contributions, as the Prophet put it: "O Messenger of Allah, they questioned, what about a person who has nothing to offer? He advised that he should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity. When asked whether once was incapable of doing so, the Prophet responded that he should assist someone who is eager to receive assistance. And if he could not accomplish that, they asked? He responded that in that case he should perform good deeds and avoid from evil; this is charity for him" (Siddiqui 2010). Thus, all Muslims can gain from charitable giving. Others who can afford to may donate their wealth, while those who have nothing and cannot contribute anything may donate by refraining from committing evil deeds. Therefore, Muslim conceptions of charity also encompass voluntary *inaction* for the common good. Modern Western notions of charity emphasize time and financial contributions. Muslim conceptions of charity include minimizing or avoiding harm.

It is critical to examine (as we will further in this book) specific Muslim approaches to poverty alleviation through charity. However, the Islamic social good economy begins with intention. The intention to love God by performing charity, doing good and preventing harm. All of these intentions should ultimately favor the poor and alleviate poverty.

Judaism

Providing for the poor is important in the Jewish religious tradition (Gardner 2015). The Hebrew Bible has many examples of calls to aid the poor as well as prophetic cries for justice. "… I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land" (The Jewish Bible-JPS TANAKH Deut 15:11). The Hebrew Bible prophets call for justice in their societies, with care shown for the poor. "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate (The Jewish Bible-JPS TANAKH Amos 5:15). Early rabbinic writings called for support for basic material needs such as shelter and food. Gardner (2015) describes the early rabbinic texts' emphasis on the "harvest gifts" – that is, providing the poor with food shared from one's harvest called for in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Gardner 2015). "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God" (Lev 23:22). The early rabbis wrote about two types of charitable institutions: soup kitchens (open to all, for short-term hunger needs) and a charity fund (open only to residents of the fund's town,

and providing longer-term care for the town's poor) (Gardner 2015:17–18). Individual almsgiving (providing material assistance to people begging, which often occurred outside of temples and other religious spaces) was another way to support the poor, according to early writings. (Gardner 2015:18–19).

Poverty alleviation in the Jewish tradition is considered a *mitzvah* or commandment from God (Zohar 2010). The duty to assist the poor is known as *tzedakah*, and there are different ways to help the poor, both at the community level and personal or individual level (Zohar 2010). Later medieval rabbis wrote instructions regarding how people and communities should care for the poor, in terms of food distribution, a *tzedakah* fund, and individual giving. In the writings of Maimonides (1138–1204), he lays out eight levels of *tzedakah*, with the highest levels affording dignity to the poor via anonymous giving or helping people find work and the lowest levels being people who give to the poor ungenerously – either less than needed or "with a frowning countenance" (Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor:14, cited in Zohar 2010:214). Today, Jewish organizations continue to provide for the poor, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Looking Ahead

The rest of this book will consider how the intersections of religion and poverty are lived out. Religious congregations donate money to the poor. Religious congregations provide direct services to the poor, like food or shelter. Some religious congregations are composed of the poor. Religiously based non-profit organizations (which are larger organizations different from congregations) provide extensive services. Looking abroad, we see examples of religiously-based philanthropy and social assistance. We also see religious beliefs driving conflicts that lead to poverty, such as when refugees need to flee due to religious conflicts.

While our earlier section on theologies focused on doctrine and faith-based organizations, lived religion is an important part of the relationship between religion and poverty. Religion and poverty intersect at the personal level too. People living in poverty might lean on their religious faith to help provide hope or to sustain them in unimaginable hardships. Or people might hold religious beliefs that increase their likelihood of living in poverty, for example, if religious beliefs limit educational attainment. People living in poverty can find personal support, in addition to material aid, through their congregations. On the other hand, televangelists and others proffering the "prosperity gospel" can prey on people in poverty, which can cause increased economic hardship, religious guilt, psychological distress, or all of the above. Religion can intersect with poverty in both positive and negative ways.

Chapter 2 in this book discusses Christianity, Judaism, and Islam with regard to responses to poverty in the United States. It will discuss the relevant

public policy issues which have played a role in poverty alleviation discourse in recent decades, considering what religious practices and organizations can provide and not provide, as well as the debates about the propriety and effectiveness of partnerships with government in service provision. It will also discuss different religious approaches to poverty alleviation, such as the provision of charity versus faith-based community organizing focused on activism and advocacy. We will also examine "lived religion" perspectives of people living in poverty. Our aim is for readers to consider questions of where religion is empowering and where it is disempowering, both in the lives of religious believers and in ways that religion has been used in policy debates.

Chapter 3 begins our more global look at religion and poverty. It focuses on the transnational religious connections that are woven into the lives of migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people, particularly for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities. After laying out some conceptual tools and historical background, the chapter examines the "lived religion" and impoverished lives of refugees who have fled armed conflicts in Ethiopia. In highlighting transnational religious communities, the chapter shows the relevance to, and important connections between, U.S.-based poverty and poverty in other parts of the world.

Chapter 4 turns to Christianity and poverty in the Global South and East. It first provides an historical sketch of how and where Christianity spread. Second, it examines the diverging trajectories of global Christianity and global wealth. As in the previous two chapters, Chapter 4 uses a 'lived religion' approach. It brings to life the ways in which congregations help to pattern impoverished lifestyles and how spirituality, including interactions with angels, demons, miracles, and witchcraft, shapes the way that many impoverished people make sense of the contexts in which they live.

Chapter 5 then turns to Islam and poverty in the Global South, first looking at how Islam maps onto the global population. While there is a significant focus on the Arab world, most Muslims live in Asia with Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India being the largest population centers. This will be followed by an examination of how religious institutions and the Islamic faith shape the lives of the poor. The chapter showcases examples on how different religious institutions have drawn upon theology to help the poor. Muslim institutions play an important role in helping the poor. Whether it is the madrasah system that has become critical to the education of poor in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan; or the Mohamadiyah Society in Indonesia that is among the largest religious institution that has built hospitals, schools, and universities to cater to the poor; the Grameen Bank's role in micro-financing; or the countless NGOs like Islamic Relief that provide immediate and development aid; Muslims draw upon faith to

develop an institutional response to poverty. Finally, we will also examine how zakat is collected and distributed in different parts of the world. While the vast majority of Muslims rely upon informal means of alleviating poverty through zakat, we can see a growing number of governments seeking to leverage zakat to alleviate poverty. Islam is not a monolithic religion and the practice of zakat greatly varies depending upon public policy, local tradition and culture.

Finally, Chapter 6 pulls the volume together in the conclusion, highlighting key themes across chapters and bringing up questions still unexplored. What *is* the role of religion in a pluralistic society? Should government and religious organizations work together in poverty alleviation? How does religion help? Where can religion harm?

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces the book and lays out the main themes that will be explored with regard to poverty and religion in the monotheistic religions. It provides various definitions of poverty and well as religion, and explains why these terms are difficult to define and quantify. The chapter provides statistics that demonstrate that both poverty and religion are experienced by large numbers of people in the world, making their intersection a topic worthy of deeper exploration. Then it turns to explaining some of the main theological concepts regarding poverty for Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. We see that all of these religions have theological teachings and a long history of ethical questions and practical action on who is responsible for helping alleviate poverty. Finally, this introductory chapter lays out what to expect in the rest of the book.

At the beginning of the chapter, we discuss the difference of a social science approach to studying religion, as opposed to a theological approach. This is a volume written by social scientists: two sociologists of religion and one scholar of philanthropy. Social scientists study religion as a societal institution and are concerned with what religion does in society, both in a micro sense (in the lives of adherents) and a macro sense (the larger society). Social scientists do not argue particular theological views, rather they are concerned with what people and religious organizations do with their theologies. For social scientists, religion is always considered within its social context, which it both influences and is influenced by. So in analyzing the intersection of poverty and religion, the chapters in this volume briefly present some of each religion's theology with regard to poverty but will primarily be concerned with how those theologies play out in actions. We note that effects can be both positive and negative.

Defining poverty is difficult, because poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. The chapter provides some typically used numerical definitions

of poverty: the official poverty line was $27, 750 for a family of four in the United States in 2022; internationally, according to the World Bank living on $1.90 per day or below marks extreme poverty. However, other definitions of poverty discussed in the chapter reflect the need to think about poverty more holistically, not just as above or below a numerical cutoff. Economist Amartya Sen's "capability approach" influenced development of a United Nations poverty measure that focuses on human development; other scholars ask us to think about social exclusion in defining poverty.

Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all teach about poverty and obligations toward people living in poverty. Among these religions are a multiplicity of denominations, branches and sects, and discussions of poverty and theology are broad in this chapter. Christians take guidance from the teachings of Jesus and the exhortations of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) to care for the poor. Mainline Protestants and evangelical Protestants sometimes interpret this in different ways, but all believe it is important to try to help those in need. Catholic theology also encompasses Catholic Social Teaching, which frames its teachings about poverty in the context of the dignity of the human person, the common good, and participation. Christian congregations provide charity or contribute to charity aimed at meeting people's basic needs, and some Christian-based non-profit organizations do so on a large scale. Some Christian organizations also work toward structural changes that could lessen economic inequality and decrease poverty.

Poverty is a key theme in Islamic theology, and the practice of charity (zakat) is one of the five pillars of Islam. The Quran provides categories of who should receive zakat. Muslims are obliged to pay zakat, but most do not do this through the government but through their own charitable contributions. In general, there is a gap between scholarly writings on the theology of zakat and how ordinary Muslims actually apply this theology. Zakat is mandatory though the exact amounts are not settled; zakat can be given on a personal or communal level. Another type of Muslim charity is sadaqah, which is voluntary unlike zakat which is mandatory and includes all forms of Muslim generosity. charitable offering (Singer 2018) and is thought to include all forms of Muslim generosity (including zakat). Religious endowments, or waqf, are another important part of Muslim charity, forming the basis of Muslim foundations and philanthropy.

In Judaism, the Hebrew Bible has many examples of calls for aiding the poor as well as cries for justice from the books of the Hebrew prophets. Early rabbinical writings emphasized supporting people's basic needs, for example, for food. Poverty alleviation is a commandment from God (a *mitzvah*), with the duty to aid people in poverty called *tzedakah*. Jewish organizations continue to care for people living in poverty today.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it difficult to define poverty? Which of the definitions provided seem most viable or usable? What might they leave out?
2. Why is it difficult to define religion? Why is it important to struggle with defining religion before embarking on a study of it?
3. What prior ideas about the intersection of religion and poverty do you bring to the reading of this volume? Where do those ideas come from?
4. What similarities do you see between theologies related to poverty between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam? What differences do you see?

Further Reading

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This monograph first looks at the poor and poverty in Islam and how it has addressed the issues of responding to the needs of the poor and vulnerable in society. It also explores some of the most prevalent thinking on social change and social justice within Islam.

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Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action explains the history, sources and methods, key themes and documents, and current applications of Catholic Social Teaching.

Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. "Divine Duty: Islam and Social Justice" (https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/divine-duty-islam-and-social-justice).

This article provides an introduction to, and overview of, the Islamic faith for Canadian social workers counseling Muslim clients with special focus on contemporary challenges facing the Canadian Muslim community.

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