COMMENT

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0272-3>

OPEN

Religion and poverty

Gottfried Schweiger¹

ABSTRACT

Religion and poverty are two of the world's most enduring social and cultural phenomena. They have a long and eventful history, and are not separate from one another, but closely interrelated: on the one hand, there is a long tradition of religiously motivated poverty; on the other hand, giving to the poor is often seen as a religious duty. In recent years, faith-based organisations have been recognised in research as an important factor in global poverty reduction. This comment surveys some of the key areas of enquiry and debate focused on exploring the connection between religion and poverty.

¹University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to G.S. (email: gottfried.schweiger@sbg.ac.at)

Introduction

Religion and poverty are two of the world's most enduring social and cultural phenomena. They have a long and eventful history, and are closely interrelated: for instance, on the one hand, there is a long tradition of religiously motivated poverty; on the other hand, giving to the poor is often seen as a religious duty. At least three lines of research can be distinguished in order to understand the connection between religion and poverty:

- What role does religion and religious affiliation play in the socio-economic status of populations, and what are the reasons for any influences?
- What role do religion and faith play in the daily lives of people in overcoming their poverty and in how they view themselves and society?
- What role do religious and faith-based organisations play in fighting poverty and engaging with the poor?

In recent years diverging trends in the relationship between religion and society have emerged. While in some parts of the world secular and post-secular thinking now shape and supplant the role and place of religion in the public sphere and in social life, in other areas, religious and faith-based norms and practices are still prominent. A case in point concerns religious-based conflicts over social status and access to resources and the differentiation of socio-economic inequalities along religious lines, an example being the experiences of Islamic minorities in some Western European countries, which are traditionally Christian.

Against such a background, religion is seen often both as the target of criticism for legitimising inequalities and injustices such as poverty, as well as a driver for potential change and empowerment.

Religion and the lives of the poor

A number of important questions are worth exploring¹. First, to what extent are religion and poverty connected at the demographic level (Keister, 2011; Thorat, 2010; Hoverd et al., 2013)? Are members of certain religions more affected by poverty than others? In which social and geographical areas is this the case and why? What historical developments, which combine religious affiliation and poverty, have become entrenched at the social level? Are there other socio-economic characteristics that connect religion and poverty (for instance, that certain religions are mainly lived by migrants)? Is the link between religion and poverty consequently due to other socio-economic factors, and is religious belonging a random characteristic? In exploring such questions it is important that *lived* religious practice be distinguished from the mere belonging to a religion, and in both cases local characteristics have to be taken into account in each case. After all, religions, especially the 'great world religions', are extremely diverse in themselves and the composition of their adherents is inevitably heterogeneous. A case in point concerns the relationship between religious affiliation and beliefs about the actual causes of poverty. A study conducted in the United States (Hunt, 2002) showed that "religious factors" have a significant influence on the assumed causes of poverty and whether this is explained as "individualistic", "structuralist" or "fatalistic".

Questions also arise about the role of religion in the lives of poor people (Sullivan, 2011; Yurdakul and Atik, 2016; Puffer et al., 2012; Dillen and Van Hoof, 2016; Rogers and Konieczny, 2018). First, it seems trivial to note that religions (which can be understood as complex cultural practices and belief systems) can sometimes play an important role in the lives of poor people to help them understand themselves and interpret the world around them, their social and economic position, and their immediate

society. For example a recent study (Hoverd and Sibley, 2013) examining a representative sample in New Zealand showed that religious people living in deprived neighbourhoods have higher subjective well-being than their non-religious neighbours living in the same area. Under impoverished conditions, the difference in well-being between religious and non-religious people is evident, while in affluent neighbourhoods, subjective well-being was high regardless of religiousness.

All religions have something to say about poverty, and other issues related to social inequality, and offer implicit and explicit interpretative templates (Beyers, 2014). Religions can relieve and burden, they can stand against poverty and legitimise resistance, but they can also justify inequalities, poverty and exploitation. It is the case that religious belief systems can frequently be understood in different ways and that they can produce texts, discourses and practices that can be interpreted multifariously. For researchers, and especially for those people and institutions that are engaged in poverty alleviation, the potential impact of religions—whether positive or negative—is clearly of importance and interest.

Religion and the alleviation of poverty

In recent years extensive research has been undertaken to explore the extent to which religions can contribute to poverty reduction. At the micro level, this may be related to the role of religion in the everyday lives of those in poverty, and the formation of norms and practices—for example, when it turns out that religiosity, or even belonging to a particular religion, has the potential to alleviate poverty, such as by acting on it at the motivational level and encouraging people to try to break out of poverty rather than submit to it. However, the focus of most research tends to be on those who *fight* poverty—through philanthropic activities, in faith-based organisations (FBO) and via other outlets. Here, too, a distinction can be made between different levels (e.g., a local soup kitchen, versus, a global confederation of relief, development and social service, such as Caritas), practices and social and geographical areas of action.

Individuals' motivations to work with poor communities—in whatever form, be it charitable, professional or political—can be founded on and inspired by religious beliefs. In many religions, helping poor and marginalised people has a long tradition as a form of lived faith. Giving alms to those in need, for example, often becomes part of a believing Muslim character and one of the five pillars of the Islamic way of life (Ali and Hatta, 2014; Raimi et al., 2014). Zakat is considered a compulsory alms, which means that it is a duty for all who have received their belongings from God to help the needy members of the community. In Christianity, the support of the poor by wealthy individuals, monasteries and the church is widespread and can be traced back to the faith's origins (Holman, 2009). The relationship between the help offered by an individual or at the level of 'the church', on the one hand, and the establishment of state support programmes and social rights, on the other hand, is interpreted inconsistently and differently in religious traditions. At the level of organisations and institutions, commitment to poverty alleviation can be bundled, channelled and institutionalised, thereby becoming more than the sum of any individual parts.

Religious and faith-based social organisations, as well as churches and congregations, are engaged in a variety of ways in poverty reduction and the provision of social and health services and assistance (Furness and Gilligan, 2012; Thornton et al. 2012; Tomalin, 2012; Göçmen, 2013). They do this both in the developed countries of the global North and in the developing

countries of the global South, where different forms of organisation and degrees of institutionalisation and internationalisation can be found. For example, a study involving case studies in Indonesia, Fiji and Samoa (Thornton, Sakai, and Hassall, 2012) showed that the contribution of religious groups in providing disaster relief and welfare services to their members and advocacy for the poor is often present but not always comprehensive or positive. The influence of religious groups in the public sphere and as institutions can also exacerbate unresolved tensions between different ethnic and secular groups. However, given the impact of limited state capacity, natural disasters and climate change, there is a clear need for effective partnerships between governments and religious groups to ensure the efficient and sustainable delivery of social services and to bring about social change for the benefit of those in poverty. Among other things, FBOs differ greatly in their size and level of professionalisation. Some are well connected global players with highly professional structures and many resources, while others are local initiatives and smaller bodies (e.g., churches) with little infrastructure. In any case, FBOs have established themselves as important actors in the field of poverty alleviation on a global scale and became important partners for other NGOs and government institutions.

The role of religion in the fight against poverty is by no means uncontroversial and conflict-free (whether within organisations or among their religious sponsors) as well as in the theological discourses within these religions. To what extent religion should be socially active and how this can be justified within religion and theology continues to be a subject of vibrant debate (Clarke, 2011; Togarasei, 2011; Noble, 2014; Rajkumar, 2016).

Received: 15 May 2019 Accepted: 23 May 2019

Published online: 11 June 2019

Notes

- 1 See the research collection related to this article on 'Poverty and Religion': <https://www.nature.com/collections/dxkjhtslmk>

References

- Ali I, Hatta ZA (2014) *Zakat* as a poverty reduction mechanism among the Muslim community: case study of Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. *Asian Soc Work Policy Rev* 8(1):59–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aswp.12025>
- Beyers J (2014) The effect of religion on poverty. *HTS Theol Stud* 70:01–10
- Clarke M (2011) *Development and religion: theology and practice*, 1st edn. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham/Northampton, MA
- Dillen A, Van Hoof E (2016) People living in poverty and their relationship to local church communities: an exploratory qualitative study in Mechelen, Belgium. *HTS Teol Stud* 72(4):6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3435>
- Furness S, Gilligan P (2012) Faith-based organisations and UK welfare services: exploring some ongoing dilemmas. *Soc Policy Soc* 11(4):601–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746412000243>
- Göçmen İ (2013) The role of faith-based organizations in social welfare systems: a comparison of France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. *Nonprofit Volunt Sect Q* 42(3):495–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764013482046>
- Holman SR (2009) *God knows there's need: christian responses to poverty*. Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York

- Hoverd WJ, Bulbulia J, Sibley CG (2013) Does poverty predict religion? *Relig Brain Behav* 3(3):185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2012.762937>
- Hoverd WJ, Sibley CG (2013) Religion, deprivation and subjective wellbeing: testing a religious buffering hypothesis. *Int J Wellbeing* 3(2):182–96. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v3i2.5>
- Hunt MO (2002) Religion, race/ethnicity, and beliefs about poverty. *Soc Sci Q* 83(3):810–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6237.00116>
- Keister LA (2011) *Faith and money: how religion contributes to wealth and poverty*, 1st edn. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY
- Noble T (2014) *The poor in liberation theology: pathway to god or ideological construct?*, 1st edn. Routledge, Abingdon. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728704>
- Puffer ES, Watt MH, Sikkema KJ, Ogwang-Odhiambo RA, Broverman SA (2012) The protective role of religious coping in adolescents' responses to poverty and sexual decision-making in rural Kenya. *J Res Adolesc* 22(1):1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2011.00760.x>
- Raimi L, Patel A, Adelopo I (2014) Corporate social responsibility, waqf system and zakat system as faith-based model for poverty reduction. *World J Entrep Manag Sustain Dev* 10(3):228–42. <https://doi.org/10.1108/WJEMSD-09-2013-0052>
- Rajkumar P (2016) *Dalit theology and dalit liberation: problems, paradigms and possibilities*, 1st edn. Routledge, Abingdon. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315575803>
- Rogers M, Konieczny ME (2018) Does religion always help the poor? Variations in religion and social class in the west and societies in the global south. *Pal Commun* 4(1):73. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0135-3>
- Sullivan SC (2011) *Living faith: everyday religion and mothers in poverty*, 1st edn. Morality and society series. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Thorat A (2010) Ethnicity, caste and religion: implications for poverty outcomes. *Econ Political Wkly* 45(51):47–53
- Thornton A, Sakai M, Hassall G (2012) Givers and governance: the potential of faith-based development in the Asia Pacific. *Dev Pract* 22(5–6):779–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.685864>
- Togarasei L (2011) The pentecostal gospel of prosperity in African contexts of poverty: an appraisal. *Exchange* 40(4):336–50. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157254311X600744>
- Tomalin E (2012) Thinking about faith-based organisations in development: where have we got to and what next? *Dev Pract* 22(5–6):689–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.686600>
- Yurdakul D, Atik D (2016) Coping with poverty through internalization and resistance: the role of religion. *J Macromarketing* 36(3):321–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146715609658>

Additional information

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Reprints and permission information is available online at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

Publisher's note: Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2019