

The earliest charitable foundations were probably temples caring for the sick in ancient Egypt. King Pandukabhaya of Sri Lanka, in the fourth century BC, set up early hospitals, as did King Ashoka in India in the third century BC. But our exploration of wealth and giving begins with the Ancient Greeks, from whom we derived the word philanthropy.

Prometheus, the immortal who stole fire from the Gods, for which he was cruelly punished by Zeus, said he acted because of his philanthropos for mankind. But ancient Greek philanthropy was not necessarily targeted at the needs of the poor. Most philanthropy worked through the performance of liturgies (leitourgia) such as sending a sports team to a tournament or funding a chorus, activities that would not be unfamiliar to many of today's philanthropists. This type of giving was intended for the benefit of the public as a whole, not the poor. According to the philosopher Aristotle (384BC-322BC), paying for public events was the way that the rich should serve the state and earn 'honour', in the form of political allegiance.

Given that the performance of liturgies was seen as an obligation and some of these were in areas that today are reserved for the state, such as buying ships for the navy, one could look on these as a form of taxation. Indeed, if taxation is defined as something that is evaded, it is certainly the case that the wealthy of Athens did take to concealing wealth when the demands of the City became too great. But taxation is also a binding obligation of citizens, whereas the Athenians had lot of discretion about the type and scale of liturgies that they perform. It was also understood that by offering your service to the state in this way, the state should reward you; according to the writer Thucydides, for example, a certain Alkibiades who sponsored a successful chariot team at the Olympic Games of 416BC was unashamed in demanding some recognition, political or otherwise for his civic contribution.

Another important parallel between the performance of liturgies and some modern philanthropy is snobbery. The established rich could also get rather sniffy about arrivistes muscling in on the performance of liturgies. One writer, Lysias, complained about profiteers from recent wars on the grounds that "...we have got to the point where men who formerly in peacetime could not even maintain themselves are now paying you special tax-levies, performing choregiai [choruses], and living in large houses." You never get snob value out of paying more tax than someone else.

In Ancient Rome, generosity was personified by the goddess Liberalitas. Gaius Maecenas (70-8 BC) is the most celebrated Roman donor because of his support for the poets Virgil and Horace, so that his name is now synonymous with patronage of the arts (literally so in French where mecene is the word for donor or sponsor). Maecenas was a political associate of Caesar Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome, and saw the value of art and literature in guiding public opinion through this political transition from Republic to Empire.

While Maecenas guarded the state and created a legacy for himself through patronage of the arts, another ally of Caesar Augustus, the general Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, went for a more populist approach which may have echoes in some of today's philanthropy. As Cullen Murphy notes in his 2007 book, *Are We Rome?*: "...in a single year [he] repaired many of the public buildings in Rome, put statues in the public baths, distributed salt and olive oil to the masses, paid barbers to give everyone haircuts, and after cleaning out Rome's great sewers sailed a small boat through their main channel, the Cloaca Maxima, and out into the Tiber."

Giving, for the Romans like the Greeks, may have been based on an implicit understanding that the donor would receive appropriate recognition and some public power in return. But there was a lively debate about how to give. In the first century BC, the orator Cicero argued that donors should be divided between those who pay for feasts and games to flaunt their wealth and win popularity (the 'prodigal'), from those who ransom captives, pay debts and so on (the 'generous'). He also cautioned against the escalation of competitive giving, which could impoverish the donor.

At its root the Roman idea of philanthropy, like the Greek, was about civic responsibility - giving was an obligation of noble status rather than a duty of common humanity. Christianity shook up this Greco-Roman civic view of philanthropy, basing its worldview instead on a universal value of 'love' or 'charity' (agape in Greek), as set out in St Paul's letter to the Corinthians: a Christian was obliged to provide help to any person in need, not just another citizen. Philanthropy was evolving from munificence to beneficence.

The charitable obligations of Christians were later codified by St Thomas Aquinas as seven 'good works': vestio (clothe), potio (to give water), cibo (feed), redimo (redeem from prison), tecto (shelter), colligo (nurse), condo (bury). Aquinas, writing in the 13th century, has had a decisive influence on modern Christian thought because he brought together the Christian tradition with the works of Aristotle, which were lost for centuries to western Europe but had recently been rediscovered from the Islamic world. How could giving be virtuous if it was self-interested through reciprocity, as Aristotle argues? Isn't that just cupidity? Aquinas tried to avoid this trap by redefining charity as an act of friendship to God, which happens to be directed through love for our fellow men.

This had never been an issue in Judaism where there is a clear emphasis on doing good deeds and tzedakah (which is usually translated as charity but is rooted in the idea of justice). There are clear instructions in the Torah about the obligations of those who have to the poor and to strangers. Leviticus 19, for example, says: "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 not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger." Giving is also an integral part of some Jewish festivals.

These obligations were categorised in the twelfth century by the theologian and jurist Maimonides, in Mishneh Torah, a guide to the laws of Judaism. Here he set out 'eight degrees of charity', where the least meritorious is giving grudgingly and the highest level of generosity is to give someone a job or help in some other way to make them self-supporting. Maimonides also encouraged anonymous giving.

In Islam, too, charity is an integral part of piety, captured by the term zakat, which translates literally as to increase or to purify. Like tzedakah, zakat is an obligation, whereas additional voluntary charity is called sadaqah. There are clear rules on how much zakat should be paid, depending on one's means. There are eight forms of beneficiaries of zakat: those without means to support themselves (faqr); those with insufficient means (miskin); collectors and distributors of zakat (amil); converts to Islam (muallafathul quloob); slaves (riqab); debtors (gharmin); those responsible for jihad (fisabilillah); those stranded on a journey (ibnus sabil).

Giving is also encouraged within Hinduism, within the framework of Dharma, which conveys obligations, not rights. These obligations are not universal but vary over time (through the traditional 4 stages of life: student, householder, forest dweller, ascetic) and also depend on caste obligations. In Buddhism, giving is an essential step on the path to enlightenment.

Confucianism explicitly rejects the idea of universal love on the basis that love must be gradated to reflect special obligations, for example to one's family. As the historian Theodore Zeldin describes in his 1994 blockbuster *An Intimate History of Humanity* "Confucius (551-479 BC) drew a series of circles of compassion around the individual, of diminishing intensity, suggesting that one should love one's father most warmly, and then one's family, then others in lesser degree according to their distance from the core." Hence Confucian philanthropy tends to be particular and directed towards specific individuals, rather than anonymous and directed at the public good (which is the responsibility of 'benevolent government').

Medieval philanthropy

In the twelfth century, a minstrel called Rahere fell sick on a pilgrimage to Rome and saw a vision of St Bartholomew. This event inspired him to establish what is now London's oldest hospital, named after the saint. The source of wealth for this project was Richard Melmeis, the Bishop of London, and ultimately the King, Henry I, who made a grant of land for the hospital.

The story of the founding of St Bartholomew's Hospital typifies an era where the main provision of social care was through the Church, funded by the tithe, with support from the Crown in the form of one-off gifts. As early as the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, called by the Emperor Constantine at the time that the Roman empire adopted Christianity, the Church agreed that bishops should take responsibility for running hospitals in every cathedral city of the Empire. The Council of Orleans in 511 went further and named bishops as 'fathers of the poor' who were to devote one quarter of revenues to the poor.

The effectiveness of this medieval welfare state should not be exaggerated. According to the Polish historian Bronislaw Geremek in his 1994 study *Poverty: A History*, by the turn of the 13th/14 centuries the abbey of Saint-Denis, near Paris was spending only 3% of its budget on the poor - barely a tenth of that mandated by the Council of Orleans.

Gifts to the church by the rich in this period were usually bequests to pay for prayers for the deceased, clearly motivated by a spiritual self interest. A study by Joel T. Rosenthal of English late medieval philanthropy found that only 1 in 3 wills included money for alms for the poor. Some donors made provision in their funeral arrangements for a 'dole' to be paid to those who turned up (maybe to swell the numbers) in the form of a meal, clothes or a small sum of money. Thomas Beaufort, for example, gave 1 penny to the torchbearers at his funeral for each year of his life (he died at 36, making them 3 shillings apiece). Looking for strategic philanthropy in the medieval era is therefore anachronistic. According to Rosenthal, "Philanthropy directed toward social reform was singularly absent from the late medieval world, both in theory and in practice."

The myth of the venison-munching, arrow-shooting, outlaw and friend of the poor from Sherwood Forest, incarnated at different times as Errol Flynn and Kevin Costner, dates from the latter half of the 13th century. There are various inconclusive claims to have identified the historical character, but his mission to 'rob from the rich and give to the poor' lives on to this day, inspiring the rich to be generous and the poor to be rebellious. Medieval sources of the myth, however, make no reference to Robin's egalitarian mission and, in some accounts, he is little more than a rogue. The romantic hero and fighter for justice is a modern invention.

In defining the ends of philanthropy, rather than impose a means test, the church was more interested in a morality test: Saint Augustine, for example, argued that no alms should be given to practitioners of vile professions, such as actors, prostitutes and gladiators. Overall this clerical safety net seems to have been pretty ineffective. But that may be no surprise, says Geremek, since "The Christian doctrine of poverty had little to do with social reality; poverty was treated as a purely spiritual value."

It would be a mistake, however, to see the Church as monolithically uninterested in poverty. The myth of St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) may be greater than the man, but his mission to serve the poor, marked by the foundation of the Franciscan order of friars, does reflect a wider 'evangelical awakening' in the church in 12th and 13th centuries, which coincides with the foundation of many of the medieval hospitals and almshouses in Paris and Southern France. Later, in 1311 Pope Clement V issued the papal bull *Quia contingit* requiring bishops to examine the affairs of all hospitals to ensure that revenues were not being diverted from charitable purposes.

There were even bigger changes coming in the new cities. In these centres of economic activity money and trade were the source of wealth rather than land and a new merchant class was beginning to dominate. As well as an urban rich, there was also an urban poor - outside the old clerical and feudal safety nets and harder to control. And with these economic and social changes came new ideas - the Renaissance. The first modern golden age of philanthropy was dawning.