

Cultural and Religious Perspectives on Zakat and Poverty Alleviation: Christian Perspective

Maichiki¹, Isaac Peter²

¹Department of Christian Religious Studies School of Secondary Education,

²Arts and Social Science Programmes Kaduna State College of Education, Gidan-Waya

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cultural and religious perspectives on zakat and poverty alleviation through a comparative lens, specifically focusing on the Christian approach to economic justice and poverty reduction. While zakat in Islam is a formalized, mandatory almsgiving practice integral to financial equity, Christianity approaches poverty alleviation through voluntary giving, communal support, and advocacy for social justice. Drawing from biblical teachings, Christian traditions emphasize compassion, charity, and systemic transformation to reduce poverty and uplift the marginalized. Key themes include the moral duty of generosity, rooted in Jesus' teachings on caring for the poor, as well as church-led efforts in charity and social reform, which mirror the principles of zakat but are applied flexibly within Christian practice. The paper underscores that while both zakat and Christian charity aim at poverty alleviation, they differ in structure and approach, reflecting unique theological foundations yet converging on the shared objective of fostering social welfare and economic justice. Through examining these frameworks, the paper highlights how religious values shape attitudes and actions towards poverty, emphasizing a holistic approach to human dignity, economic sustainability, and community support.

Keywords: *Christianity, Zakat, Poverty Alleviation, Charity, Social Justice.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious traditions across the world have historically emphasized poverty alleviation as a fundamental moral and ethical responsibility. Each tradition, through its teachings and practices, promotes various forms of charitable actions aimed at addressing the socio-economic challenges of poverty. Christianity, for instance, places a significant emphasis on almsgiving and social justice. Biblical teachings encourage believers to act with compassion and service toward those less fortunate, as reflected in passages such as Matthew 25:35-40, which advocates feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and caring for the sick (Blomberg, 2021). Through institutions such as churches and faith-based organizations, Christian charity initiatives work to address poverty

by supporting education, healthcare, and other social welfare programs (Holland, 2020).

Similarly, in Islam, the practice of zakat, one of the Five Pillars, mandates financially able Muslims to give a portion of their wealth to aid those in need, thus creating a religious obligation to combat poverty and support societal welfare (Benthall, 2019). Islam also emphasizes sadaqah, or voluntary charity, which complements zakat in addressing immediate needs and fostering social equity (Abdullah, 2022). These practices aim to reduce economic disparity and contribute to a just and balanced society.

Hinduism, too, promotes charity as a means of attaining spiritual growth and societal harmony. Dana, the Hindu practice of giving, is considered a virtuous act that

brings blessings and good karma to the giver. By supporting the underprivileged, adherents are believed to purify their souls and work towards spiritual liberation (Dalrymple, 2020). Likewise, Buddhism advocates for generosity, or *dana*, as a core ethical principle, seeing it as a path to reduce suffering and build compassion. Many Buddhist charities focus on providing basic necessities, medical care, and education to the impoverished (Harvey, 2018). In these diverse approaches, religious teachings not only serve as a motivation for addressing poverty but also shape the ways in which charitable activities are structured and implemented, highlighting a universal commitment across faiths to uplift those in need.

Both zakat in Islam and charity in Christianity play crucial roles in the fight against poverty, aiming to foster social equity, alleviate suffering, and promote communal welfare. Zakat, a fundamental pillar of Islam, is not only a religious obligation but a social instrument designed to redistribute wealth and support the disadvantaged. Through zakat, financially capable Muslims are required to contribute a portion of their wealth to help those in need, thereby addressing poverty at its roots and fostering economic justice (Benthall, 2019). The regular practice of zakat serves as a safety net for impoverished individuals, enabling them to meet basic needs, reduce indebtedness, and create pathways to sustainable livelihoods (Abdullah, 2022). This systemic approach makes zakat a powerful tool for combating poverty, as it channels resources towards addressing the material and spiritual needs of society's most vulnerable.

Similarly, Christian charity emphasizes compassion, communal responsibility, and social justice, inspired by Biblical teachings that call on believers to care for the less fortunate. Verses such as James 2:14-17 underscore the importance of faith accompanied by action, encouraging Christians to actively engage in charitable

works to support those in poverty (Blomberg, 2021). Christian charities, often through church-based programs and non-profit organizations, provide essential services such as food aid, shelter, education, and healthcare. This form of charity not only addresses immediate needs but also empowers individuals through long-term support systems aimed at breaking cycles of poverty (Holland, 2020). By fostering a culture of generosity and empathy, Christian charity functions as a vehicle for social cohesion and a means of fulfilling spiritual values in practical ways.

Together, zakat and Christian charity embody the social consciousness embedded within these faiths, promoting an ethical approach to wealth distribution and a moral commitment to poverty alleviation. These practices encourage solidarity across socio-economic lines, reaffirming the shared human responsibility to care for one another in the pursuit of a just society (Marshall, 2019). This paper seeks to explore Christian perspectives on poverty alleviation and compare with zakat in Islam.

Zakat in Islam

Zakat, one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam, is an obligatory form of almsgiving aimed at wealth redistribution and poverty alleviation. Rooted in the Arabic term *zakat*, which means purification or growth, this practice is intended to purify wealth by redistributing a portion of it to those less fortunate, thereby fostering social equity (Esposito, 2018). The Quran emphasizes the importance of zakat alongside prayer, underscoring it as a duty that upholds social justice and community welfare. This approach to wealth distribution is a foundational element in Islamic socio-economic ethics, aiming to reduce socio-economic disparities by mandating wealthier Muslims to share a fixed portion of their income with those in need (Ahmed, 2021).

The collection and distribution of zakat are meticulously regulated within Islamic jurisprudence, requiring eligible Muslims to contribute 2.5% of their annual wealth, excluding basic needs and debts, to zakat beneficiaries (Obaidullah, 2016). The primary recipients include those in poverty, the indebted, and travelers in need, among others, as outlined in the Quran (Quran 9:60). This structured form of charity is not only a religious obligation but also a social and economic tool that seeks to address fundamental needs and empower individuals to improve their circumstances (Abdullah, 2022).

Furthermore, zakat has implications for both individual spirituality and broader societal cohesion. As Benthall (2019) explains, zakat encourages Muslims to develop empathy and solidarity with those who are less privileged, reinforcing the communal values central to Islam. By providing financial assistance directly to those who need it, zakat enhances social cohesion and offers a means of reducing income inequality within Muslim societies. Zakat's impact on community welfare is further amplified when managed through organized institutions, where zakat funds can be directed toward sustainable development projects, including healthcare, education, and small business support (Ali & Hatta, 2014).

In recent years, zakat institutions have increasingly modernized their approaches, employing digital platforms to streamline zakat payments and track funds. This innovation enhances transparency and ensures that zakat reaches those who need it most efficiently, reflecting a growing trend in Islamic finance toward accountability and social impact (Kasri, 2019). As a cornerstone of Islamic ethical economics, zakat remains a vital practice that balances individual wealth with collective responsibility, embodying the Islamic commitment to a fair and just society.

Christian Perspectives on Poverty Alleviation

Christian teachings on poverty and social justice emphasize compassion, communal responsibility, and the moral imperative to assist the disadvantaged. Rooted in Biblical principles, the Christian perspective on poverty alleviation is motivated by a belief that serving the needy is essential to fulfilling spiritual and ethical obligations. Scripture, particularly the teachings of Jesus, highlights this duty; passages like Matthew 25:35-40 underscore that acts of service towards the poor reflect one's devotion to God (Blomberg, 2021). Such teachings lay the foundation for Christian charity, promoting the idea that believers should address poverty and inequality through both individual and collective actions (Holland, 2020).

Early Christian communities demonstrated this commitment by pooling resources to care for vulnerable members, creating a model of shared economic responsibility and mutual support that remains influential in contemporary Christian social doctrine (Marshall, 2019). This communal approach to wealth and resources is supported by theological interpretations emphasizing stewardship, where material wealth is viewed as a resource entrusted by God to be used for the greater good (Schreiter, 2018). This theology of stewardship encourages Christians to use their resources not only for personal gain but also for social and charitable purposes, as echoed by Christian teachings on the virtues of generosity and humility (Biggar, 2019).

Various Christian denominations today implement these principles through church-based charities and non-profit organizations, focusing on both immediate aid and long-term poverty alleviation strategies. Christian charities, such as Caritas Internationalis and World Vision, operate globally to provide essential services like healthcare, education, and disaster relief, while also working to address systemic issues that perpetuate poverty (Holland, 2020). This dual approach—addressing both urgent needs and

root causes of poverty—reflects a comprehensive Christian ethic, recognizing that meaningful poverty alleviation requires sustainable and systemic solutions (Myers, 2011).

Christian social teaching has further evolved to engage with modern economic structures and advocate for social justice. The concept of “preferential option for the poor,” prominent in Catholic social teaching, calls for prioritizing the welfare of the impoverished and marginalized when making social and economic decisions (Gutiérrez, 1988). This principle has inspired advocacy within Christian communities for policies that reduce inequality, protect human dignity, and promote economic justice on a larger societal scale (Holland, 2020). By emphasizing the interconnectedness of faith and social justice, Christianity contributes a unique moral and spiritual dimension to poverty alleviation efforts worldwide.

Biblical Teachings on Charity

Charity, or the act of giving to those in need, is a central theme in Biblical teachings, where it is often portrayed as an expression of love and justice. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, charity is not merely suggested but is presented as a moral obligation for believers, integral to fulfilling God’s commandments and reflecting His love. For instance, Deuteronomy 15:11 calls for openhandedness towards the poor, reinforcing the idea that generosity is an essential part of community life (Blomberg, 2021). The Hebrew term for charity, (*tzedakah*), is rooted in the concept of justice, illustrating that supporting the disadvantaged is as much about righteousness as it is about compassion (Boda, 2017).

In the New Testament, Jesus’ teachings emphasize charity as an embodiment of love, central to the Christian ethic. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), for instance, teaches that

compassion should transcend social boundaries and that love for one’s neighbor requires active assistance for those in need, irrespective of personal differences (Holland, 2020). Furthermore, passages like Matthew 6:1-4 encourage discreet giving, advocating for humility in charity to keep the focus on helping others rather than seeking social recognition (Blomberg, 2021). This humility-centered approach reflects the Biblical perspective that charity is about meeting human needs as part of a personal commitment to God’s will.

The early Christian church established charitable practices that formed the foundation of a socially responsible community. In the Book of Acts, believers shared their possessions and provided for those in need, forming a model of communal support and mutual aid (Marshall, 2019). This early model laid the groundwork for Christian social teaching on charity, which views wealth as a resource entrusted by God for the benefit of all. This principle of stewardship aligns with the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who in 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, emphasizes giving generously and cheerfully, framing charity as an expression of gratitude to God (Esler, 2017).

These Biblical teachings on charity have inspired centuries of charitable work and continue to shape Christian approaches to social justice. Today, the Biblical call to charity remains central to Christian ethics, encouraging believers to address both immediate and systemic needs within their communities. Christian charities often draw on Biblical teachings to justify and motivate their work, combining immediate assistance with long-term development efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality (Myers, 2011). Thus, Biblical teachings on charity extend beyond mere acts of giving; they serve as a theological framework for fostering a just and compassionate society.

Tithing and Charitable Giving

Tithing, traditionally understood as giving one-tenth of one's income, has a significant history in Judeo-Christian teachings, serving both as an act of worship and a means of supporting religious institutions and the less fortunate. In the Old Testament, tithing is rooted in Mosaic law, where Israelites were instructed to give a tenth of their agricultural produce and livestock as a sign of gratitude and obedience to God (Leviticus 27:30-32). This tithe supported the Levites, who were responsible for temple services, and also provided for those in need, including orphans, widows, and foreigners (Baker, 2019). In this way, tithing embodied both a religious duty and a social responsibility, integrating worship with tangible support for the vulnerable in society (Gane, 2020).

In the New Testament, while tithing is mentioned less explicitly, principles of generosity and sacrificial giving are emphasized, extending the concept of tithing into a broader ethic of charity. For example, in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, Paul encourages believers to give generously and cheerfully, indicating that giving should flow from a willing heart rather than obligation (Blomberg, 2021). This reorientation of tithing toward voluntary charity shifts the focus from a fixed percentage to a mindset of abundant giving that aligns with Christian values of love and compassion (Esler, 2017). The practice of tithing, therefore, is seen not as a rigid command but as a spiritual discipline that cultivates a generous heart and aligns believers with God's mission to care for the disadvantaged.

In modern Christian contexts, tithing continues to function as a primary means of supporting churches, charities, and community services, helping to sustain programs that address poverty, education, and health. Studies show that tithing can foster a sense of purpose and participation in a community, reinforcing believers' commitment to social welfare and mutual aid (Smith & Emerson, 2020). Many Christians view tithing as a minimum

benchmark for giving, often supplementing it with additional offerings or donations to support specific charitable causes. This approach combines traditional tithing with a broader view of stewardship, where wealth is regarded as a resource entrusted by God for the common good (Baker, 2019).

Tithing's role in charitable giving is further examined in the context of modern economic and social challenges. In her analysis, Marshall (2019) highlights that, for many Christians, tithing is more than just a financial commitment; it is a formative practice that shapes their identity and reinforces ethical priorities. By maintaining regular contributions to their faith communities and charitable initiatives, Christians actively participate in alleviating societal issues, fostering a culture of charity rooted in shared faith values. Through this lens, tithing is both a personal spiritual discipline and a means of effecting social change, aligning individual resources with a collective mission of compassion and justice (Myers, 2011).

Key Principles of Christian Poverty Alleviation

Christianity's approach to poverty alleviation is rooted in its fundamental teachings on compassion, stewardship, and justice. These principles are seen in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who consistently emphasized care for the poor and marginalized. Christian poverty alleviation is therefore not merely charity; it is an effort to reflect God's love and justice on Earth.

i. *Compassion and Mercy*

The principle of compassion is central to the Christian perspective on poverty. Jesus' teachings frequently underscore the importance of showing mercy and empathy toward the poor (Luke 6:36, NIV). In Matthew 25:40, Jesus states, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (NIV), emphasizing that acts of kindness to the poor are acts of kindness to God.

Compassion-driven actions provide dignity to the recipient, recognizing them as God's creation and equal in worth (Clarke, 2016).

ii. Justice and Equity

Justice is a recurring theme in the Bible, often linked with fair treatment and alleviation of economic disparities. The prophet Micah emphasized that God requires believers to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly" (Micah 6:8, NIV). Justice in Christian poverty alleviation goes beyond charity; it involves addressing systemic issues that lead to poverty, such as discrimination and exploitation. According to Myers (2011), Christians are called not only to provide relief but also to advocate for policies that promote equity and fairness within society.

iii. Stewardship

Christian poverty alleviation includes the concept of stewardship, which sees resources as entrusted by God and meant to be used for the common good. As stewards, Christians are encouraged to manage their resources responsibly and to use them in ways that benefit others (Wright, 2006). The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) teaches that God expects believers to invest their resources to bear fruit, which includes supporting and empowering those who are economically disadvantaged.

iv. Empowerment and Holistic Development

Christian approaches to poverty alleviation emphasize empowerment rather than dependency. Recognizing that poverty is multifaceted, Christian organizations often advocate for holistic development, addressing not only material needs but also spiritual and social needs (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). Empowerment encourages the poor to participate in their own up-liftment, preserving their dignity and promoting self-reliance.

v. Community and Fellowship

Christianity emphasizes the importance of community and shared responsibility. The early church exemplified this by pooling resources and ensuring that "there was no

needy person among them" (Acts 4:34, NIV). Community-based poverty alleviation efforts foster a sense of belonging, helping individuals feel supported and valued. Moreover, Christian communities often function as networks of mutual aid, encouraging members to assist each other through difficult times (Volf, 2006).

Comparison of Zakat and Christian Charity

Zakat and Christian charity are foundational practices in Islam and Christianity, respectively, and serve as religious mandates to aid those in need. Both practices share common goals of promoting social justice and reducing poverty, but they differ significantly in their theological basis, mechanisms, and scope. This section examines the similarities and differences between Zakat and Christian charity by focusing on their theological foundations, forms of practice, and societal impact.

i. Theological Foundation

Zakat, derived from the Arabic root meaning "to purify," is a compulsory form of almsgiving in Islam, regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Zakat mandates that Muslims donate a fixed portion (usually 2.5%) of their accumulated wealth annually to benefit specific categories of recipients, including the poor, debtors, and travelers (Al-Qaradawi, 2011). This obligatory nature of Zakat distinguishes it from other charitable activities in Islam, such as sadaqah, which is voluntary. Zakat is intended not only as a means of redistributing wealth but also as a way to purify one's assets, symbolizing a person's moral and financial responsibility to the community (Iqbal & Mirakhor, 2017).

In Christianity, charity stems from the principle of agape, or selfless love, as described in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 13:1-13). Unlike Zakat, Christian charity is not mandated by a specific rule or percentage; rather, it is encouraged as a voluntary act inspired by Jesus' teachings. The giving is seen as a

response to God's love and as a way to emulate Christ's compassion for the marginalized and disadvantaged (Klassen, 2005). Christians are urged to give not out of obligation but from a heart of generosity and love, reflecting Jesus' teachings on selfless compassion (Matthew 25:31-46).

ii. Practice and Forms of Giving

Zakat is highly structured and regulated. It is calculated based on specific categories of wealth, such as income, savings, livestock, and agricultural produce. The distribution of Zakat is also strictly defined; it can only be given to certain eligible groups, including the poor, orphans, and those in debt (Quran 9:60). Additionally, the government or authorized institutions may collect and distribute Zakat to ensure its proper usage (Abu-Zahra, 2008). This regulatory approach aims to establish a systematic redistribution of wealth, reducing economic disparities within the Muslim community (Chapra, 2008).

While, Christian charity, by contrast, is more flexible and diverse in its expressions. Charity can take the form of donations to churches, aid organizations, or directly to individuals in need. It may be spontaneous or part of regular giving, and the act of giving is often accompanied by encouragement for the donor to support community development, social services, and humanitarian aid. Christian charity is driven more by individual conscience than by legal requirements, allowing believers to respond to needs in diverse ways based on their circumstances and convictions (Pullella, 2013).

iii. Societal Impact

Both Zakat and Christian charity have considerable societal impact, primarily in alleviating poverty and supporting welfare. Zakat aims to create an equitable society by redistributing wealth, thus reducing economic disparities and helping to build a sense of community solidarity (Iqbal & Mirakhor, 2017). Some Muslim-majority countries have integrated Zakat into their social welfare policies to provide assistance to low-income households, promote

education, and fund healthcare services (Al-Qaradawi, 2011).

While, Christian charity plays a crucial role in addressing social issues globally, with various Christian organizations actively involved in relief work, education, and healthcare. Many churches and faith-based charities work towards eradicating poverty, supporting refugees, and providing disaster relief. Christian charity also emphasizes empowering recipients, often involving local communities in projects that promote self-sufficiency (Klassen, 2005). This approach aims to bring about sustainable change by addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality.

While Zakat and Christian charity share the common purpose of assisting those in need, they differ in their motivations, structures, and methods of implementation. Zakat, as an obligatory pillar of Islam, enforces a systematic redistribution of wealth and fosters a collective sense of duty within the Muslim community. Christian charity, on the other hand, operates more flexibly, encouraging voluntary giving motivated by love and compassion. Despite these differences, both practices contribute significantly to social welfare and embody the ethical teachings of their respective faiths.

The Impact of Christian Charity on Poverty Alleviation

Christian charity has a longstanding role in addressing poverty and promoting social welfare. Rooted in the teachings of compassion and service, Christian charitable organizations worldwide aim to alleviate poverty by providing essential resources, social services, and developmental support to underserved populations. This literature explores the impact of Christian charity on poverty alleviation through direct assistance, community development, and advocacy, while examining some challenges faced by these initiatives.

i. **Historical and Theological Foundations**
The concept of Christian charity is deeply embedded in Christian theology and dates back to the early Christian church, where believers were encouraged to share their resources with the needy as an expression of Christ's love (Acts 4:32-35). The New Testament emphasizes the importance of generosity, encouraging followers to care for the poor and marginalized (Matthew 25:35-40). Christian charity is grounded in the principle of agape—selfless love—which underpins its commitment to addressing poverty as a moral and spiritual obligation (Klassen, 2005).

Over the centuries, Christian institutions have built hospitals, schools, and relief organizations, reflecting their dedication to aiding those in poverty. Modern Christian charities, such as Caritas Internationalis and World Vision, continue this legacy by implementing global programs that aim to empower individuals and communities (Jones, 2017).

ii. **Direct Assistance to the Poor**

One of the primary ways Christian charities impact poverty alleviation is through direct assistance, providing food, shelter, healthcare, and financial support to those in need. In many low-income regions, Christian charities are a critical source of aid, filling gaps where government resources are limited or unavailable. By providing basic necessities, these organizations help to stabilize vulnerable populations and address immediate poverty-related challenges (Pullella, 2013). For example, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides emergency food and shelter assistance in disaster-hit areas, directly alleviating hunger and homelessness in affected communities (Carroll & Brewer, 2018).

iii. **Community Development and Sustainable Empowerment**

Beyond direct assistance, Christian charities increasingly focus on sustainable poverty alleviation by investing in community development initiatives. Programs that promote education, vocational training,

microfinance, and agricultural support aim to address the root causes of poverty and help individuals attain economic self-sufficiency (Miller & Yamamori, 2012). These approaches are based on the belief that empowering individuals economically is crucial for long-term poverty reduction.

For instance, World Vision's "Sponsorship Programs" provide educational resources, healthcare, and nutrition, helping children and their families gain access to opportunities that break the cycle of poverty. Through initiatives such as microfinance, Christian charities also support small businesses and encourage entrepreneurship, allowing families to build stable sources of income (Jones, 2017).

iv. **Advocacy and Policy Influence**

Christian charities also play a significant role in advocating for social justice and poverty alleviation at the policy level. These organizations often collaborate with governments and international bodies to influence policies on human rights, labor conditions, and social welfare, using their platforms to advocate for the poor and marginalized (Clarke, 2011). For example, the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church have long campaigned for policies that improve access to healthcare, education, and social protections for the impoverished, aiming to shape policies that address systemic inequalities (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013).

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite their contributions, Christian charities face various challenges in their poverty alleviation efforts. A significant challenge is ensuring that aid reaches those who need it most and is used effectively. Additionally, some critics argue that Christian charity efforts can sometimes unintentionally create dependency rather than promote long-term self-sufficiency, especially if assistance is provided without community input (Bornstein, 2005). To mitigate this, many Christian charities have

shifted to models that prioritize community-based development and local empowerment, allowing beneficiaries to take an active role in the solutions being implemented.

Another challenge is maintaining transparency and accountability. Charitable organizations are often scrutinized for how they manage funds, with public trust relying on their ability to demonstrate that donations are used efficiently and ethically (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013). To address this, Christian charities have adopted more rigorous reporting and evaluation practices to ensure their work effectively benefits the target populations.

Convergence and Divergence in Religious Poverty Alleviation Approaches

Religious traditions play a pivotal role in addressing poverty, often guiding both individual and organizational efforts toward social welfare and economic equity. Major religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism integrate poverty alleviation into their doctrines, emphasizing acts of compassion, justice, and community support. While these religions share similarities in their ethical motivations to alleviate poverty, their approaches differ due to theological frameworks, operational structures, and cultural contexts. This section deals with the convergence and divergence in religious poverty alleviation approaches by examining their motivations, methods, and challenges.

i. Shared Ethical Foundations and Motivations

A shared ethical foundation across religions is the moral imperative to care for the poor and promote social justice. Many religious texts stress the importance of compassion, viewing the alleviation of poverty as a duty that believers should fulfill as an expression of faith. For example, the Bible emphasizes charity through teachings like the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), highlighting the need for selfless assistance to those in need. Similarly, the Quran

mandates Zakat, an annual almsgiving of 2.5% of wealth for eligible Muslims, as a way to purify wealth and aid the disadvantaged (Quran 9:60; Al-Qaradawi, 2011). In Hinduism, *dāna* (charity) and *seva* (service) are considered virtuous acts, where giving is encouraged as a path to personal and social harmony (Narayanan, 2013). Buddhism, likewise, teaches *dāna*, the practice of generosity, as a fundamental aspect of compassion and a means to reduce suffering in the world (Queen & King, 1996).

The convergence in these ethical motivations stems from a common belief in the moral and spiritual benefits of helping others. All major religions view poverty alleviation as an act that promotes community, harmony, and social equity, aligning with a collective commitment to address human suffering and promote well-being (Canda & Furman, 2010).

Divergence in Approaches and Methods

i. The Role of Obligation vs. Voluntarism
One major divergence is the level of obligation placed on followers. In Islam, Zakat is a compulsory practice, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, which creates a formalized system of wealth redistribution. This obligatory approach contrasts with Christianity, where charity is encouraged but remains a voluntary expression of faith. This difference shapes how resources are mobilized and distributed within these faith communities. Islamic charities typically operate structured Zakat programs with set eligibility criteria, while Christian organizations are often more flexible, adapting assistance based on individual and community needs (Iqbal & Mirakhor, 2017). In Hinduism and Buddhism, charitable practices are also encouraged but are not institutionalized as they are in Islam. Hinduism emphasizes the personal virtue of giving, with different forms of *dāna* (charity) tailored to specific needs, often aligning with traditional customs or social obligations (Narayanan, 2013). In

Buddhism, while generosity is highly encouraged, it is often focused on supporting monastic communities and spiritual growth rather than systematic poverty alleviation (Queen & King, 1996).

ii. Community Development and Long-Term Empowerment

Another point of divergence is the focus on immediate relief versus long-term development. Christian charities have increasingly shifted toward developmental approaches, focusing on sustainable community development and empowerment rather than only providing direct aid. Organizations such as World Vision and Caritas Internationalis implement programs in education, healthcare, and economic development, viewing poverty alleviation as part of social justice (Jones, 2017). In contrast, Islamic charity often emphasizes the distribution of wealth through direct support. However, modern Islamic organizations have begun to incorporate long-term empowerment into Zakat programs, recognizing that sustainable poverty alleviation requires investments in skills, education, and healthcare (Abu-Zahra, 2008).

Buddhist and Hindu charitable organizations often blend direct relief with personal and community development. Buddhist charities, particularly in East Asia, focus on education and healthcare, often integrating social welfare with spiritual support (Miller & Yamamori, 2012). Hindu organizations, such as the Ramakrishna Mission, emphasize education, healthcare, and self-reliance to uplift impoverished communities, aligning their work with the broader goal of *seva* (selfless service) (Narayanan, 2013).

Challenges and Criticisms

Religious poverty alleviation efforts face unique challenges that arise from both internal and external factors. For example, dependency is a common issue in religious charity, particularly where aid is distributed

without building long-term capacities. Critics argue that continual dependence on external aid can inhibit the development of self-reliance in impoverished communities, particularly when the focus is on direct aid rather than empowerment (Bornstein, 2005). Another challenge is balancing religious identity with inclusivity. Faith-based organizations sometimes face criticism for focusing on their own religious communities or for being perceived as proselytizing under the guise of charity (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013). To address this, many religious organizations emphasize humanitarian values that transcend religious boundaries, providing aid based on need rather than faith. For example, Islamic Relief and World Vision serve diverse communities without religious discrimination, aiming to maintain inclusivity and ethical integrity (Carroll & Brewer, 2018).

Convergence in Social Impact

Despite differences, religious poverty alleviation approaches share convergent impacts, particularly in areas such as poverty reduction, education, and healthcare. Faith-based organizations often operate in regions where government services are insufficient, thus serving as critical social safety nets. Studies show that these organizations not only provide essential services but also foster a sense of dignity and hope among recipients, promoting social cohesion and community resilience (Canda & Furman, 2010). By addressing both immediate needs and structural challenges, religious charities contribute significantly to global poverty alleviation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While Zakat is an Islamic form of mandatory almsgiving, exploring it from a Christian perspective offers a unique opportunity to understand and enrich poverty alleviation efforts across faith traditions. By drawing on the theological,

ethical, and operational elements within Christianity, these recommendations aim to enhance mutual understanding, foster collaboration between faith-based organizations, and strengthen poverty alleviation programs that reflect both Christian and Islamic values.

Encourage Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration: Establish regular interfaith seminars and joint working groups to discuss effective poverty alleviation strategies, with the aim of sharing insights from Zakat and Christian charity practices. These forums could be led by faith-based organizations and encourage active engagement with communities from both religions.

Integrate Theological Principles with Development Goals: Integrate principles of compassion, dignity, and community responsibility from both faith traditions in poverty alleviation programs. This could involve training and workshops for Christian charity organizations to understand Zakat's principles of economic justice, redistribution, and social welfare as a structured and spiritual obligation.

Emphasize Long-Term Empowerment Over Direct Aid: Christian charities could adopt more structured, long-term poverty alleviation models inspired by Zakat, focusing on economic development and self-reliance. Programs like microfinance, vocational training, and educational support could be strengthened to reduce dependency and foster sustainable economic growth.

Leverage Christian Values of Voluntarism in Complementary Programs: Christian organizations could coordinate with Islamic institutions during Zakat distribution to provide complementary services that address the multifaceted needs of impoverished individuals, thereby creating an integrated network of care and support.

Promote Inclusive and Non-Discriminatory Aid Programs: Christian organizations should commit to inclusivity by regularly assessing their aid

programs to ensure all communities are served equitably, irrespective of religious, ethnic, or social background. This commitment could be publicly endorsed to encourage greater community support and strengthen cross-cultural understanding.

Implement Transparent and Accountable Financial Practices: Adopt and promote transparent accounting practices similar to Zakat models, where the flow of funds and their impact on poverty alleviation are clearly documented and made available to the public. This level of transparency can help attract interfaith donors and build trust within diverse communities.

Support Grassroots and Community-Based Initiatives: Christian organizations should prioritize grassroots and community-driven initiatives that align with both Christian and Islamic principles of self-reliance and community support. Investing in local leaders and grassroots organizations enhances the impact of poverty alleviation and ensures programs are responsive to the community's specific needs.

CONCLUSION

The study of Zakat from a Christian perspective reveals rich insights into how religious values shape poverty alleviation efforts across faith traditions. Both Islam and Christianity underscore compassion, justice, and the moral responsibility to support the poor, although their approaches differ. While Zakat is a structured, mandatory form of wealth redistribution in Islam, Christian charity is generally voluntary, often centered on the principle of *agape*—selfless love that calls for aid to the marginalized. Together, these traditions offer complementary models for addressing poverty.

Christian perspectives on Zakat encourage mutual respect and understanding, underscoring that mandatory and voluntary giving can work synergistically to address poverty's complex challenges. As Christian organizations increasingly focus on

sustainable development, empowerment, and community-centered approaches, they can integrate aspects of Zakat's structured distribution and targeted social support to enhance their programs. Collaborative efforts between Islamic and Christian charities also foster greater inclusivity, transparency, and impact, broadening the reach of poverty alleviation efforts and strengthening social bonds across cultural and religious divides. Ultimately, this dialogue highlights the power of interfaith approaches in alleviating poverty, promoting a shared vision of compassion, justice, and social welfare.

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Maichiki

Department of Christian Religious Studies
School of Secondary Education

Isaac Peter

Arts and Social Science Programmes
Kaduna State College of Education,
Gidan-Waya