Re-thinking philanthropy as religious cost signalling in the context of socio-economic transformation in South Africa

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This paper provides a brief literature review on the church role in socio-economic transformation in South Africa and employs costly signalling theory to approach religious participation in philanthropy as means to attain fulfilment and meaning in life. Article argues that philanthropy should be broadened to seriously consider the role of religious practices and commitment to charity and highlights the need to reconsider philanthropy not just as institutional corporate social responsibility, but as collective generosity and giving which takes various forms in the African context which takes the role of religion seriously. Challenging paternalistic notions of philanthropy, the paper also notes that despite the waning commitment to traditional practices of hospitality, care and kindness towards the needy which traditionally underpinned Christian mission, recent responses to challenges posed by the COVID-19 revived the African spirit of hospitality and argues that there is a need to re-think philanthropy in the light of various forms of African hospitality as reflected in the traditional practices of religious communities.

Keywords: Philanthropy, Cost signalling, Religion, Socio-economic Transformation, South Africa

Introduction

Religion provides humanity with a sense of purpose and as O'Halloran (2010) notes, 'religion and Charity have been inextricably entangled throughout their long history'. These practices have been at the centre of religious participation in provision of care and support for the needy. Despite religious charity being one of the markers of spiritual commitment to the wellbeing of humanity, these practices have not been considered as philanthropy. Given the changing socio-economic global landscapes as a result of COVID-19 impact, it is important that the role of religion in philanthropy be considered. As Psychology Today observes; [1]

> "Since the earliest humans walked the earth, individuals have wondered where they came from, why they're here, and what it all means. Religion, by and large, represents society's attempts to answer those questions... Is religion good for us? Psychologists have debated the question for decades. Some separate a commitment to organized religion from participation in personal spiritual practice, favouring the latter. But a persuasive body of research finds that religious belief and participation can help people cope with stress, and that many reap significant benefits from the social support of a religious community.

Given that religious commitment to the well-being of society revolves around charity, it can be argued that religious practices are a signal or an indication of values which demonstrate a commitment to religious works as a critical component signalling sacrificial giving and a commitment to socio-economic transformation. In South Africa where levels of inequality are extremely high, sharing of resources and giving to the needy through acts of hospitality, kindness and pastoral

care are a biblical imperative which inform Christian mission. According the World Bank Report on poverty and inequality in South Africa compiled by Sulla et al[2] South Africa is the world's most unequal country in the world. This research laments the reality that it has been more than two decades after South Africa overcame the racist apartheid system that trapped the vast majority of South Africans in poverty, but more than half the country's population still lives below the national poverty line and most of the nation's wealth remains in the hands of a small elite.

The agenda of socio-economic transformation is at the heart of Christian mission. For example, Leepo Johannes Modise considered the Role of the Church in Socio-Economic Transformation by briefly analysing the historical background of Reformation and reviewed the role of the ecumenical church (SACC) prior to democracy in South Africa as a model for our involvement in socio-economic transformation and assessed the social and economic challenges facing the church and society in democratic South Africa while exploring 'what role the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA) is playing (descriptive) and ought to play (normative) through all her structures to transform the socio-economic situation in South Africa.'[3]

In another significant contribution in the historical analysis of the Church's role in socio-economic transformation, Jerry Pillay traced the historical impact of the church in transforming, developing and changing society as he considered 'how the church in selected periods in history, mainly in the reformation era, worked towards the transformation of society and communities'[4] and demonstrated how this can be applied to the church in the South African context while exploring the changing dynamics and characteristics of being church today.

In examining statements by South African political leaders and challenging politics of exclusion and populist politics in South Africa, Buhle Mpofu lamented how the current South African political discourse is a far cry the ANC's Freedom Charter statement that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, and mapped the changing fortunes of migrants in South Africa and interrogating the place of migrant in the various structural or economic development policies from Mandela's Reconstruction Economic Development (RDP), Mbeki's Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) and more recently, Zuma's Radical Economic Transformation (RET), and Ramaphosa's 'new dawn' dispensation which has been riddled with COVID-19 corruption and looting of funds. By engaging religion as a lens for conceptualization of marginality the paper posited that a just and inclusive socio-economic transformation in South Africa is possible if the religious concept of justice informs public policy design and implementation within the framework of human rights.

Therefore, religion has a significant role in philanthropy and Christian mission albeit, in small acts of charity and kindness should constitute part of the definition of 'philanthropy as it includes sacrificial acts of love as exemplified by charitable works in faith communities'.[5] While considering philanthropy as 'costly signalling', McAndrew notes that 'Costly Signalling Theory proposes that we send honest signals about ourselves through handicaps —signals about our genetic quality, our access to resources, or our cooperative nature—that would be hard to fake, and that this can have long-term benefits for us'. For him, costly signalling theory offers a viable explanation for many human actions that might be otherwise hard to explain. MacAndrew later considers religion as costly signalling arguing that;

Religion has long been thought of as a social mechanism for enforcing cooperation within cultural groups. One of the ways in which it may successfully accomplish this is by using religious commitment as a costly signalling device. All religions have rituals, taboos, and other requirements that can be very costly in terms of time, money, or effort. Fasting, tithing, frequent and lengthy prayer and/or religious services, and dietary requirements that are difficult to follow require a good deal of commitment. Thus, religious commitment can be a signal of commitment to the group's values that is hard to fake, and a signal that one is likely to be a reliable, cooperative group member. A historical analysis of communal societies discovered that the groups with the costliest membership requirements survived for the longest times, but only if the commune had an underlying religious reason for existence.

Webster[6] defines philanthropy as "the love of mankind; benevolence towards the whole human family; universal good will. It differs from friendship, as the latter is an affection for individuals". This definition has theological and religious connotations regarding traditional practices for compassion and care for the poor. As David King[7] later observed;

While terms such as charity, philanthropy, and benevolence were often used interchangeably throughout much of American religious history, religious giving primarily focused on charity as care for those within one's religious community as well as a priority of giving to the poor. By the late 19th century, a rise of rationalized, professional, and sometimes secular philanthropy countered the traditional focus of religious giving through more systematic charitable organizations. The rise of major donors and foundations added a new wrinkle as they sought to reshape the focus of philanthropy and garnered increased attention even as small, individual givers still served as the bedrock of religious philanthropy. In addition to congregations, mission societies, humanitarian organizations, as well as parachurch agencies dominated this ever-evolving landscape.[8]

Therefore, there are varying contemporary definitions of philanthropy, with some dating back to the enlightenment period and Sulek[9] observes that;

> A general pattern may be seen to emerge...whereby the further back one goes from the present, the less philanthropy may be understood as simply an outward act of charity or charitable society. Instead, as one approaches the Enlightenment era, philanthropy comes to ever more refer to aspects of rational consciousness, inner ideals, or dispositions of human nature that motivate outward acts of benevolence. Significantly, though, Bacon's seminal late-Renaissance definition of philanthropy as "goodness,

affecting the weal of men" continues to inform some notable contemporary academic definitions of the term.

In a survey conducted by Scott McConnell[10] executive director of LifeWay Research in Nashville, the findings released on May 10 show that most Protestant church members believe that giving 10 percent of their income is a biblical requirement which they should follow but define the practice of tithing in a variety of ways. According to this survey, close to 50% of the 1,010 Protestant Americans interviewed indicated that they give their tithes to a Christian ministry or department focused on charity work, instead of a church. One in 3 suggested that tithes should be directed to the needy in our communities, and more than 1 in 6 indicated that are comfortable with their financial contributions directed to a secular charity. For most of the respondents, "...tithing is just another term for generosity,"[11].

A special report[12] *on giving to religion from Giving USA Foundation and the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy* titled *"Giving to Religion" explored religious giving in an era of declining affiliation and attendance by* drawing on data from the University of Michigan's Philanthropy Panel Study and found that people who are religiously affiliated are more likely to make a charitable donation of any kind, whether to a religious congregation or to another type of charitable organization. Sixty-two percent of religious households give to charity of any kind, compared with 46 percent of households with no religious affiliation (Giving USA 2017).

As Giving USA (2017) further observed, religious congregations receive the largest share of American charitable giving. They received 32 percent of all charitable donations in 2016, according to the most recent estimates from *Giving USA 2017*. Giving to religion totalled $122.94 billion—more than double the $59.77 billion given to education, the next largest subsector. There is enough evidence to suggest that religious practices have a significant role in philanthropy, although this is less acknowledged - especially in the African context where philanthropy assumes various forms.

African traditions of hospitality as philanthropy

In Africa, Christian missional practices have been handed down to local communities either through traditions of structural practices organised by local leaders or through faith-based structures developed by missionaries. These practices take various forms of traditions. Traditions include a "temporal process (*traditio*) of handing down valued material."[13] They tend not to determine the duration of their past presence, and tend to transfigure their moment of foundation.[14] Traditions bridge the difference between continuity and discontinuity. In this sense, traditions are often understood to stand in opposition to progress, innovation, and, most pointedly, modernity.[15] Such tensions are clearly evident in African communities that advocate advancement of indigenous knowledge systems which are often overlooked against euro-centric and modern practices. It is important to note that 'traditions are necessarily innovative themselves'[16] by the very act of constituting something that is to be preserved in the future and which is legitimized with reference to an allegedly superior past.

For most African communities, traditions aim at preserving a sense of identity and belonging. This is achieved through different forms of institutionalization, ranging from loose groups and occasional events via associations and movements to formal organizations. These structures are visible in South African community-based structures such as stockvels,[17] which operate in different social contexts, such as local, national, global, and diasporic ones, and sometimes bridge the difference between them. As part of the social dimension of traditions, it is also paramount to look at political, economic, and legal implications of traditions. For instance, traditions can be used to justify a socio-political order and to stabilize and legitimate political power. By examining religious traditions related to socio-economic transformation and the sacrificial commitment that come with these practices, we can appreciate the role of religious and traditional practices in philanthropy.

Re-thinking Philanthropy

Kerry O'Halloran[18] notes that; 'religion and Charity have been inextricably entangled throughout their long history. The foundations of the three main religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – are each bedded down on doctrines that require their members to do good for others mainly by caring for the ill or destitute and giving to those otherwise in need'. Given the rich diversity of traditional and missional practices which encourage caring for the needy, Christian communities have traditionally been known to be hospitable and caring towards the needy as part of the foundations for Christian care. For example, Christian Care in Zimbabwe was formed in 1967 by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches as 'an arm of the churches called to witness the presence of God among the poor and disadvantaged who are burdened by oppression, poverty, ill health, lack of freedom or knowledge to make sustainable life supporting choice'.[19]

Traditionally, Christian mission in Africa has always involved child care and orphanage programs, missionary hospitals, poverty alleviation and income generating initiatives, peace building and community mobilization. For example, in South Africa Christian care is housed at a Methodist centre in pine Town which runs feeding schemes to provide meals to the hungry[20] and Noupoort Christian Care Centre[21] outside Colesburg in the Northern Cape, provides long term rehabilitation for addiction to drugs and alcohol.

In South Africa researchers Moyo and Ramsamy[22] define African philanthropy as "surrendering oneself to the service of humanity while being resilient and absorbing the challenges associated with development and transformation." These scholars provide an African perspective of philanthropy

observing that "in African cultures one's neighbour cannot go hungry when the other could give help; this is reflected in African philanthropy. Giving and sharing is at the heart of philanthropy."[23]

As Ricthie Gabrielle (2020) further argues, this definition reflects growing efforts across the African continent to broaden the[24] meaning of the term philanthropy to include the full spectrum of formal and informal giving practices,[25] such as:

> Providing financial support for extended family
> Giving cash directly to poor individuals
> Giving through religious structures
> Community initiatives such as stokvels (savings clubs)
> Regular donations to non-profit organisations (NPOs)
> Institutionalised giving through, for example, a Trust

Concurring with the above observations, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge the executive director of a local NGO, Inyathelo posed a critical question; "What does African Philanthropy look like...?"[26] and Vuyiswa Siduduzo director of C.S Scott Foundation rightly noted that "[o]ne of the emerging conversations on giving and caring in Africa, is about how we define philanthropy and rightly argues, 'there has been a call, locally, to redefine what philanthropy means because giving is the DNA of Africa but that is not called philanthropy"

These observations reflect a particular view and desire to explore philanthropy not just as institutional corporate social responsibility, but as a collective global initiative to address the needs of local communities. The task of re-thinking philanthropy is necessary given that in South Africa[27] and elsewhere on the African continent[28] there is also a growing body of literature that explores the role of giving in the building of communities. For example, the African concept of *Ubuntu* has been explored in the African context as a particular inter-relational view of humanity that reflects communal traditions of mutual support and care for the needy, therefore philanthropy in Africa take varying forms. According to Amkotten[29], Archbishop Desmond Tutu defines 'ubuntu' as 'the essence of being a person. It means that we are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence, we are made for family. When you have ubuntu, you embrace others. You are generous, compassionate'. Shelagh Gastrow, the director of Gastrow Bloch Philanthropies agrees with these views as he points out that:

...there are lots of different levels of philanthropy in South Africa; indigenous philanthropy, community philanthropy, where people take-action in their communities and use what little resources they have... We certainly have a long history of philanthropic Foundations, some of them are quite substantial and there are new ones being set up all the time.[3]The formal and informal giving practices of the Africa have been clearly demonstrated in responses to recent challenges posed by COVID-19 in both religious and non-religious communities. For example, as a response to COVID-19 crisis, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) called on both religious and non-religious communities to work together and developed a Coronavirus pastoral plan which identified Crisis relief as one of its four pillars, alongside pastoral care, bulk communication and advocacy which aimed at mobilising self-organised action networks identified as Local Ecumenical Action Networks (LEAN) and operating at congregational and neighbourhood level.[31] These networks were comprised of a minimum of 10 congregations and their leaders created a support structure through which local communities collaborated with government and non-governmental organisations who sought to provide emergency relief to families affected by COVID-19 lockdown.

Crisis Relief: For the destitute, as identified by local church structures (LEANs), and in concert with Government, using a voucher system for basic needs purchases (SACC 2020:2)... Relief: Churches in care and acts of mercy will be available to serve as relief centres for distribution and support for those in need - food, water, sanitisers, etc., whatever relief in support of government services during this time of need. Using church and community networks of communication, identify the most vulnerable and activate relief support for them.[32]

As part of the SACC coordinated LEAN activities, congregations of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) mobilised resources to support distressed families. Given that Presbyteries had suspended face to face council meetings – opting for virtual gatherings - congregations were encouraged to use the travel budget for poverty relief.

There are many religious communities which responded to the needs of the poor, providing support not just to their own members, but also extending care to local communities in their vicinity during the COVID-19 lockdown which resulted in economic turmoil as most people lost jobs from March 2020. The photos above were circulated by the Gavin Memorial congregation of the UPCSA with the following message; 'Finally, we delivered thank you so much to everyone who extended their hand for our Covid-19 food parcels. We managed to help 20 families both from our congregation and the communities.'[33]

The traditional understanding of philanthropy was rooted on religious traditional practices and not just relegated to government and business initiatives as seen in contemporary philanthropic practices. For example, minutes of the South African Department of Social development with NGOs on COVID-19 food distribution update on 29 May 2020[34] during the emergency response to poverty and hunger resulting from COVID-19 lockdown show that there were;

> Four NGOs – Solidarity Fund; Red Cross Society; FoodForward South Africa; Gift of the Givers – briefed a joint virtual meeting of the Portfolio and Select Committees on their food security programmes followed by a response by the Ministry and Department. SASSA provided an update on COVID-19 special grant. There was no time to discuss the quarterly foster care progress report required to be provided to the North Gauteng High Court and the Centre for Child Law.[35]





This is one example of how churches in Africa were involved in charity during COVID-19 Crisis. Photos from FB: William Gavin Memorial UPCSA, 02 May 2020.

This is an indication that most of the religious organisations were working independently from government structures in their community initiatives to alleviate poverty or simply went on default compassion fatigue, abdicating the responsibility to care for the poor to the government and non-governmental organisations. As a result, South Africa experiences massive COVID-19 corruption as politicians diverted some funds to personal use through flouting tender procedures.[36]

Paul Valley[37] notes that philanthropy is popularly supposed to transfer money from the rich to the poor...[but] this is not the case. Citing the American example, he observes that statistics from the United States - the most philanthropic of nations – show that barely a fifth of the money donated by big givers goes to the poor. Instead, a lot of those funds are channelled to the arts, sports, education, health and other cultural initiatives. While at a glance these efforts can be deemed "good causes", a deeper analysis shows that;

> the common assumption that philanthropy automatically results in a redistribution of money is wrong. A lot of elite philanthropy is about elite causes. Rather than making the world a better place, it largely reinforces the world as it is. Philanthropy very often favours the rich – and no one holds philanthropists to account for it.[38]

Basically, there is something fundamentally wrong with modern philanthropy. There has been an increase in philanthropy foundations with an estimated 260 000 foundations established globally[39] and over $1.5tn between them. The scale of giving from these foundations is enormous - the Gates Foundation alone - gave £5bn in 2018, more than the foreign aid budget of the vast majority of countries, but the global scale of poverty has worsened to alarming levels.

Conclusion

This paper provided a brief literature review on the church role in socio-economic transformation in South Africa and employed costly signalling theory to approach religious participation in philanthropy. Exploring varying definitions of philanthropy, paper argues that philanthropy should be broadened to seriously consider the role of religious and traditional practices commited to charity and highlights the need to reconsider philanthropy not just as institutional corporate social responsibility, but as collective generosity and giving which takes various forms in the African context.

Note:

1 See https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/religion.

2. Sulla,Victor; Zikhali, Precious. 2018. *Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: An Assessment of Drivers, Constraints and Opportunities (English).* Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530481521735906534/Overcoming-Poverty-and-Inequality-in-South-Africa-An-Assessment-of-Drivers-Constraints-and-Opportunities.

3 Modise, P.L. 2018, The Role of the Church in Socio-Economic Transformation: Reformation as a Transformation Process. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae,* 44:3, 1.

4. Pillay, J., 2017, *The church as a transformation and change agent*, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73:3, 1.

5 (McAndrew 2018:5)

6. Webster, N. 1989. *Noah Webster's first edition of an American dictionary of the English language.* San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education.

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8. Ibid.

9. Sulek M., 2010, On the Modern Meaning of Philanthropy. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. Vol. 39: 2, 13.

10. McConnell, S. 2020). Churchgoers say gifts to charity, needy count as tithing. Available at: https://religionnews.com/2018/05/10/churchgoers-say-tithing-isnt-just-for-church-but-for-charity-needy/ (Accessed 19/10/2020).

11. Ibid.

12. Giving USA. 2020. *Special Report on Giving to Religion*. Available at: https://givingusa.org/just-released-giving-usa-special-report-on-giving-to-religion/. (Accessed 19 October 2020)

13. Bronner, S. J., 2011, *Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture* (Lexington, KY), 40.

14. Balke, F, 2011, Gründungserzählungen. In Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft, München.

15. Bronner, S. J., 2011, *Explaining Traditions*, 47.
16. MacIntyre, A., 2007, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (3rd ed., Notre Dame, IN),
222.
17. In South Africa these are community-based savings or investment societies to which members regularly contribute an agreed amount and from which they receive a lump sum payment at the end of the year. They often hold regular meetings and parties that are funded by the members and generate profits for the hosts, sometimes providing care members in times of distress.
18. O'Halloran K. 2010, *Charity and Religion*, in: Anheir H.K.., Toepler S. , eds, *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*. Springer, New York, NY.
19. (Christian Care 2020)
20 See https://www.africanadvice.com/1109122/Feeding_Schemes/Kwazulu_Natal/Christian_Care/.
21. See https://www.noupoort.co.za/.
22. Moyo and Ramsamy (2014:669)
23. (Moyo and Ramsammy 2014:666).
24. htpp://www.mott.org/FundingInterests/Regions/southafrica.
25. He cites examples such as Wilkinson-Maposa et al, 2007; Habib, A. and Maharaj, B., 2008; Aina, T. A. and Moyo, B. (eds), 2013; Moyo, B. and Ramsamy, K., 2014.
26. (Madlala 2020:1)
27. For example, see Wilkinson-Maposa et al (2007); Giving to Help, helping to Give, 2013.
28. See Aina, T.A. and Moyo B. (eds), 2013 African Grantmakers Network.
29. https://amkottentravel.wordpress.com/2012/07/19/archbishop-desmond-tutu-explains-ubuntu/. (Accessed 19 October 2020)
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http://resourcingphilanthropy.org.za/snapshot-report/philanthropy-in-south-africa/ Accessed 19/10/2020.
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32. Ibid.
33. (FB Post 2 May 2020)
34. Available at: https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/30339/ (Accessed 15 May 2020).
35. (Social Development: 2020:1)
36. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-20-siu-probes-r5-08-bn-in-questionable-covid-19-tenders-while-lists-of-ppe-contracts-emerge/(Accessed: 15/09/2020).
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