

Poverty in the New Testament and the Quran: An Intercultural Viewpoint

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Abstract

In the modern era, there exists a multitude of critical problems. One of these problems, poverty, has persisted throughout the ages. In recent years, its rapid worsening has led to a spiral increase in the number of people living below the poverty line worldwide. This continuing predicament reasonably begs the question of how the issue of poverty is approached from a theological standpoint in the predominant texts of the world's most popular religions, Christianity and Islam. The aim of this article is to investigate, by employing the method of quality content analysis, how the issues of poverty and support of the financially weak are approached in the New Testament and the Quran, as well as to identify if there are points of convergence or divergence between them. This investigation led to the conclusion that the texts of the New Testament and the Quran invariably converge in the view that the financially weak should be approached positively and supported as far as possible. In addition, both texts concur that it is absolutely necessary to provide financial support to these people in a respectful way. At the same time, the two texts diverge in the obligation to provide financial support to the poor. The Quran views charity as a means of expiating one's sins and entering heaven, while no corresponding obligations are found in the New Testament.

Key Words: Poverty, New Testament, Quran, intercultural viewpoint, Christianity, Muslim

It is undeniably acknowledged that the social phenomenon of poverty has led a considerable part of the world population to live in poverty of universally unacceptable conditions. As a concept, poverty has various dimensions, since it encompasses several issues such as financial and social well-being, human dignity and freedom, and inequality (Harper, Alder, and Perezniето 2012).

Communities plagued by poverty almost always confront grave problems in vital sectors, such as nourishment, housing, health, education, and criminality (Kerry, Pickett, and Wilkinson 2012). More particularly, urban poverty exerts a catalytically negative influence, on a global level, on the living standard of millions of people and especially children (Bartlett 2012), who are the most distressed.

Diachronically, the way of measuring poverty has been a major issue for both economists and sociologists. Economics has adopted the criterion of the percentage of the population whose income is below its internationally accepted financial limits (Atkinson 1976). This criterion is rather precarious, because it is impossible to calculate “hidden” personal and family income.

At the same time, a sociological approach regards as poor those people who seek and receive financial aid from social services (Jones 1990). Therefore, from a sociological viewpoint, it is necessary to support financially weaker people as a means of confronting or mitigating the phenomenon of poverty (Barrientos 2012).

In multiple ways, every religion focuses on supporting humans, especially the poor who face serious problems and have increased needs. It is for this reason that religions have doubled down on the bane of poverty and sought to confine it. This reasonably begs the question of how religions can contribute to the solution or mitigation of the problem of poverty, given that all of the most popular religions highlight the support of and solidarity with the poor, while encouraging an active and substantial contribution to financially weaker people such as orphan children, widows, and the sick.

In sum, poverty constitutes a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. In confronting and hopefully mitigating this problem, religions stand in favor of the poor, while assisting in actions that aim at relieving the poor and limiting poverty.

Theory

Conceptual Content and Principles of Intercultural Education

Intercultural education constitutes a vital subject area in contemporary educational and social reality, to which there exists no universally accepted conceptual approach. Nonetheless, a particularly successful definition terms intercultural education as education that aims at the preparation of independent people for participation in a democratic, multicultural society characterized by cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious difference and inequality (Batelaan and Van Hoof 1996).

The purpose of intercultural education is, among other things, to contribute to the understanding of the various ethnic and racial groups, the acknowledgement and equal appreciation of cultural differences, the broadening of awareness of multicultural coexistence, and the realization that the modern world is in constant interdependence (Gay 2000). Also, intercultural education is imbued with specific principles, such as education for empathy, solidarity, and intercultural respect, as well as education against the nationalist way of thinking (Essinger 1990).

Intercultural education has a particular purpose, and is imbued with certain principles that focus on major social problems such as poverty, striving to solve or alleviate them.

Methods

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it seeks to investigate, by means of content analysis and from the intercultural point of view, how the issues of poverty and provision of assistance to financially weaker people are approached in the texts of the New Testament and the Quran. Second, it intends to identify if there exist any points of convergence or divergence between the two religious texts.

In order to investigate the New Testament, four of its renditions which are considered among the most successful in Greece were used (Vassiliadis, Galanis, Galitis, Karavidopoulos 2003; Vellas, Antoniadis, Alivizatos and Konidaris 1990; Kolitsaras 2005; Trembelas 2009). For the text of the Quran, two translations which are regarded as two of the best in the Greek language were used (Bilal 2010; Pentakis 2010).

The research sought to answer two research questions. First, how are poverty, the poor, and financial support of the poor approached in the New Testament and the Quran from the intercultural viewpoint? Second, are there points of convergence or divergence in the respective texts on these specific issues? And if so, what are they?

The Treatment of Poverty and the Poor in the New Testament

By the sheer multitude of references to the poor, the New Testament undoubtedly prioritizes the poor. More particularly, the New Testament text features the strong admonition of John the Baptist to the Pharisees and the Sadducees concerning their lack of assistance to the poor (Matt. 3:7-10). In essence, he indirectly urges them towards empathy and solidarity with financially weaker people.

Prompted by a question posed by John the Baptist, Jesus refers to the spiritual exaltation of the poor (Matt. 11:2-6), a reference that establishes the importance of empathy, solidarity, and respect for the financially weak. Also, the hymn of the Virgin Mary highlights certain crucial points, such as the elevation of the poor and the feeding of the hungry (Luke 1:52-55). Furthermore, it is notable that Jesus' sermon delivers a joyful message to the poor (Luke 4:18-19), who are undeniably in need of other people's assistance.

Special mention should be made of the parable of the Great Banquet, in which Jesus encouraged people to hold banquets at home inviting the poor, disabled, lame, and blind, as they are unable to return the hospitality (Luke 14:7-14). Essentially, he called for respect for the otherness of financially weaker people, and the weak in general. Yet, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus no doubt constitutes the most representative example of how Jesus approached poverty and the poor (Luke 16:19-31). In this parable, poor Lazarus, and poor people in general are elevated within the context of life after death, while the importance of helping the poor is being underlined.

Financially weaker people are also mentioned in the epistle of Apostle James. More specifically, the text of the epistle notes that poor Christians will be raised high by God as a reward (James 1:9-11), while also alluding to the issue of bias against financially weaker

people. Moreover, it condemns discrimination on the matter of the place taken by the poor in religious gatherings, as well as the humiliations they endured. At the same time, it emphasizes that God has chosen those who are poor in the present life to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom of God (James 2:1-13).

Furthermore, in the text of the Apocalypse, it is stressed that the rich should not be proud as, in reality, they are impoverished, naked, and blind. Hence they are advised to change their behavior (Apoc. 3:14-19). Therefore, exceptional merit and respect are attributed to poor people through the undermining of wealth.

In all, the New Testament approaches poor people and poverty as a phenomenon in a particularly positive way, while projecting – whether directly or indirectly – inherent principles of intercultural education through corresponding references. At the same time, behaviors that downgrade the poor as human entities and personalities are emphatically condemned, whereas solidarity, empathy, and respect toward them are promoted.

The Provision of Financial Assistance to the Poor in the New Testament

Throughout the ages, the provision of financial assistance to the poor has been a significant issue. Therefore, it is instructive to investigate the references to this assistance in the text of the New Testament, as that will aid in clarifying the Christian approach to this matter. Beginning with the Gospel according to Matthew, it is determined that all the people who demonstrate charity toward their fellow humans are to be praised. More specifically, it is claimed that those who are charitable toward their fellow humans will receive the equivalent charity of God (Matt. 5:7). This assertion constitutes an encouragement of acts of charity – philanthropy, as well as a stimulus for empathy and solidarity towards the poor.

The supreme act of charity should not be carried out in front of people so as to invoke praise (Matt. 6:1-4), but rather in a manner so discreet that those who receive it may not be put in a difficult position or take offense. This bidding is of heightened importance, as it demands respect for the receivers of financial aid.

The urging to commit acts of charity in favor of financially weaker people as a means of getting closer to God is documented in three of the Gospels (Matt. 19:16-25, Mark 10:17-27, Luke 18:18-30). This urging further establishes the significance attributed by the New Testament to supporting the poor.

Special focus is required on the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-40), through which the reader becomes familiar with the divine wish for philanthropy to grow, since it constitutes a criterion for the entrance of nations, and thus of every individual, into the kingdom of God. It is evident that ways of behaving toward the hungry, the thirsty, and the homeless are criteria, but not the means, for entrance into the kingdom of God. In essence, it emerges that a measure for reaching the kingdom of God, according to the standards of Jesus, is philanthropy and the correct behavior towards the hungry, the thirsty, and the homeless, that is, financially weaker people.

Jesus' praise for the contribution of the widow to the church treasury (Mark 12:41-44) is also noteworthy. More particularly, Jesus extolled the donation of the widow which, although quite small, is the offering of a destitute person. In contrast, He did not make equally positive comments about larger contributions to the church treasury that had been deposited by richer congregants, as these came from their surplus, unlike what had happened in the case of the widow.

Moreover, the book of the Acts of the Apostles features glorifications of the acts of charity committed by Cornelius (Acts 10:28-32) and the Christians of Antioch, who sent monetary assistance to those in Judea that were stricken with great hunger (Acts 11:19-30). This demonstrates an absence of nationalist ways of thinking and respect for financially distressed people.

From studying the epistles of the Apostles, it is ascertained that Christians are often urged to commit acts of charity. More specifically, Paul the Apostle encourages those who commit good acts, such as almsgiving and offerings of wealth, to do so with simplicity, kindness, and sincere love (Rom. 12:8-21). In this way, Christians are spiritually protected from taking pride in their actions.

The leading proponents of Christianity in Jerusalem sought to organize collections to gather money from the Gentiles for the purpose of covering the needs of poor Christians. Paul thus praises the faithful of Macedonia and Achaia for their collection for the sake of financially weaker people of the church of Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26-33). He also stresses emphatically that the purpose of the offer is to achieve equality for all and not to deprive some of their wealth so as to relieve others (2 Cor. 8:1-15). At the same time, he does not fail to remind them that no offer should be forced or made with sadness (2 Cor. 9:1-15). Undoubtedly, the primary purpose here is to aid the poor, while a second goal is to protect Christians from excesses in the help being offered, so as to prevent creating problems within their family environment.

Paul the Apostle supplies the Christians of Corinth (1 Cor. 16:1-4) with advice similar to that addressed to the Galatians (Gal. 2:1-10) concerning the collection of money. More particularly, he asks of them to prepare an offer that is optional and generous, while spiritually and morally elevating those who help, reminding them that their benevolence toward the poor lasts for eternity.

Special mention should also be made of the content of the epistle of James the Apostle, in which he reproaches those who hold that they have faith but do not help the ones who are deprived of food or clothes (James 2:14-17). In essence, he denounces those who do not exhibit empathy and solidarity toward the poor in matters that are crucial for human survival, such as nourishment and clothing.

In his epistle, Jude the Apostle stresses the necessity of giving alms in the correct way and with distinction (Jude 22-23). Undoubtedly, the performance of acts of charity within a definite framework does not diminish the characteristics of empathy and solidarity that typically distinguish it, but aids in delivering charity correctly and for the benefit of those really in need.

To conclude, financial support of the poor, characterized by empathy, solidarity and respect, is encouraged in the New Testament because it is an act that contributes to the spiritual and moral perfection of the person that supplies it, as well as to the relief of those who receive it. It is emphasized that financial support of the poor must be administered with respect for their dignity, and without any sense of pride on the part of the almoner, as this downgrades the value of the act.

The Treatment of Poverty and the Poor in the Quran

Through the Quran, Islam exerts a considerable influence on the attempt to solve various social problems including the poverty which appears to be quite grave in many developing Muslim countries.

In comparison with the view of economics, Islam exhibits an entirely different way of solving key problems such as poverty, the inequality of people's income, and the uneven distribution of wealth in general (Karima and Neamat 2014), as it focuses intently on the crucial issue of the sufficiency of goods (Jones 1990). Within this framework, the Quran offers a plan for the reformation of society and, at the same time, full guidance as to how the poor may enjoy a more just treatment (Bonner 2005). More particularly, the Quran asserts that poverty has individual characteristics and is affected by social structure and natural disasters (Di Ajeng 2015). Meanwhile, acts of charity are encouraged, interest rates are strictly forbidden, and lenders are in some cases urged not to claim the money owed (Kaleem 2010).

Taking the above into account, it is to be expected that the Quran should involve a wide range of references to the phenomenon of poverty and the existence of poor people. To be more specific, the Quranic text incorporates the invitation to provide food to the poor (22,28), since the absence of this offer is regarded as a sin (69,34; 74,44). These lines contain a clear message in favor of the poor, as well as empathy toward and solidarity with them.

Moreover, the text of the Quran focuses on direct and practical ways of behaving towards orphan children and the poor. More particularly, it is claimed that God condemns those who do not honor the orphans, feed the poor, or help by giving food to an indigent relative or person lying down on the street (90,15-16). It also mandates not to oppress orphans or reprimand beggars (93,9-10).

At the same time, the reader of the Quranic text is informed by the assertion that Muslims will face hardships through the loss of their income and will be called to face poverty and hunger (2,155). Therefore, the exhaustion of income and the existence of poverty function as a means of tribulation, as well as proof of faith in God, as poverty does not constitute a means of punishment but rather an indirect reward for the Muslim's faith.

The reference to Satan using poverty as a way of intimidating people is indeed noteworthy (2,268). Along the same lines, there is an important invitation to the poor to stop fearing poverty, since God is capable of offering wealth to humans (9,28-29). An effort

is thus made to psychologically empower the poor and the potentially poor, who are once again deemed worthy of assistance and respect.

The Quran also offers to the faithful who are unable to fast the alternative of “buying off” the days of fasting by bringing food to a poor person (2,184), thereby demonstrating the value of helping the poor, even if indirectly.

What is more, special focus is placed on the avoidance of the misappropriation of other people’s fortunes using sinful means (2,188). This strong advice constitutes a medium for the protection of financially weaker people and their resources, whatever they may be.

In the case in which a debtor appears to be clearly incapable of paying off his debts, the Quran proposes that the lender should facilitate the payment of these debts or resign his/her claim on them (2,280), thus identifying with the predicament of the debtor.

In the text of the Quran, the careless vows taken by a person are associated with the help supplied to financially weaker people. More particularly, a proposed way to atone to God for such pledges is to offer food to ten poor people (5,89). Accordingly, those who kill some game while on a pilgrimage must atone by feeding poor people or by fasting themselves (5,95). Once again, solidarity towards the poor constitutes a means of atonement for unacceptable acts.

Among the populations to which the Quran was addressed at the time of its propagation, it was not uncommon for parents to resort to the murder of their children if they appeared to be financially unable to raise and nourish them. It is for this reason that the Quran features an urge to Muslims not to kill their children due to the fear of living a poor life (6,151) since God will take over their nourishment (17,31). This admonition includes understanding and compassion towards children.

A line in the Quran maintains that those who attempt to and insist on associating God with other Gods will suffer from contempt and poverty (17,22). As a result, there exists a direct correlation between poverty and the association of the true God with false Gods, since poverty is presented as a form of punishment for those who do not recognize the true God.

In sum, the Quran explicitly highlights the necessity of monetary assistance for financially weaker people. This service should be carried out with solidarity, empathy, and respect, all the while seeking to relieve these people of their troubles as far as possible and in the most substantial of ways.

The Provision of Financial Assistance in the Quran

Islam intends to eradicate or mitigate poverty. Within this framework, the zakat has diachronically constituted one of the most significant tools for combating and relieving poverty in the Muslim world (Hassan and Khan 2007), a tool that may be utilized for financial support of the poor, debtors, and so on (Kabir 2010).

For several centuries, and especially in the region of the Middle East, Muslims have been engaging in acts of charity to relieve the poor and maintain social balance (Bonner, Ener, and Singer 2003). Doing charitable acts is a milestone for Muslims in an attempt to

redistribute wealth, which could be characterized as an Islamic economy of poverty (Bonner 1996).

Muslim countries use the zakat in their effort to redistribute part of the wealth in favor of the poor (Kusuma and Sukmana 2010). Essentially, the contribution of the zakat in the fight against poverty and the strengthening of social welfare is crucial, as it “transfers” wealth from the rich to the poor and also helps in limiting the uneven distribution of wealth (Abdul and Bayu 2013).

Focusing on the text of the Quran, it is observed that there is a call directed towards the faithful to offer the zakat, give alms in spite of their destitution (2,3; 2,43), and care for the orphans and the poor (2,83). These acts are suggestive of empathy and solidarity for those who are really in need of financial assistance.

Despite the fact that, throughout the ages, it has been common practice to put aside the surplus of the family budget, the Quran encourages the faithful to give – apart from the zakat which is taken for granted – part of their surplus as alms (2,219) to the poor.

Furthermore, a point is made in the Quran that Muslims should be devoted to God, pray, and give alms (22,78; 31,4; 73,20), since those who do so are thought to have secured a great reward in the next life (11,18; 27,3; 57,7). On the other hand, not giving alms is likened to refusing the next life (41,7) and, by extension, paradise. Consequently, the above lines highlight the utmost importance of standing by the poor, as it is linked to life after death.

In the Quranic text, almsgiving is linked with the Muslim’s absolution for the sins he/she has committed. More particularly, it is mentioned that whoever gives alms is absolved for his/her sins (5,45), while it is categorically stated that mercy will be awarded to all Muslims who offer alms (7,156). This claim can be regarded as an encouragement of almsgiving, which undoubtedly increases solidarity with the poor. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that almsgiving may function as a means of coercing God’s mercy.

A separate reference is made to almsgiving on the part of idolaters. More specifically, it is said that if idolaters prove that they have repented and also give alms, they should be viewed as brothers/sisters in faith (9,11-12). This demonstrates that almsgiving is welcome, regardless of its source. Besides, the empathetic realization of the condition of the poor and the solidarity towards them must not be associated with the person who gives, but rather with the act itself.

There are numerous references made to the extent of the sum of almsgiving, and to whether even a slight financial help should be offered through almsgiving. The Quran states that God will supply the faithful with a reward for his/her good acts, no matter what the amount given is (9,121). Therefore, offering financial aid to the poor constitutes an act of mercy, irrespective of the size of that aid.

Financial assistance of the poor is a vital moral dimension for every Muslim, as it is a moral debt that will be met with a reward by God (2,110). Almsgiving additionally functions as a tool for the development of piety. More specifically, when the faithful offer what they hold most precious for the sake of almsgiving, the process of approaching piety is facilitated

(3,92). As a result, the faithful are motivated towards almsgiving and solidarity in the interest of the poor.

Moreover, almsgiving is connected with the dimension of justice. A person is deemed to be just when he/she offers a part of their wealth to the poor, the orphans, and the beggars (2,177; 17,26). It thus follows that the person regarded as righteous is the one who behaves with empathy towards the financially weak.

The Quran berates those who spend money on charity in order to attract the attention of other people (4,36-39), while harshly denouncing the charity characterized by conspicuousness and a disposition towards ostentation. Meanwhile, the Quran includes the assessment that God knows every charitable human act, making it thus preferable to be generous towards the poor in secret, as God will remove some of our sins. In any case, the Quran prompts the faithful to practice almsgiving either publically or secretly (14,31), since what is offered will be returned to the donor (34,39). At the same time, it is mentioned that all money spent on charity contributes to the giver's own good because what is offered in charity is bound to be rewarded by equivalent benefits done to the giver, so that we are not done wrong (2,270-274).

The Quran objects to the fact that almsgiving is often followed by insult. More particularly, when offense follows almsgiving, it is preferable to utter a good word and an apology. Therefore, the faithful should preferably avoid giving alms with sarcasm or with the intention of a reward (2,263-264). These verses undeniably foreground respect for the poor.

What is more, the Quranic text condemns those who forget almsgiving, whether deliberately or not. These people are termed hypocrites, while it is also overemphasized that they are leading each other astray so as not to practice almsgiving. They thus forget God, but God will fail to remember them, too (9,67). Consequently, almsgiving is once again associated with how the faithful will be accepted by God, or not.

It is indeed remarkable that, in the Quran, those who disfavor almsgiving or do not practice it in any form are treated negatively. More specifically, it is said that those who disapprove of the people who practice almsgiving freely, and those who do not manage to offer any alms of their own will be met with the derision of God, who will lead them to terrible tortures (9,79). In effect, this verse functions as a tool for the coercion and intimidation of the faithful, as it forces them to give alms so as to avoid horrible plights.

In the text of the Quran, charity is linked with disease, since it is stressed that the existence of an illness must be combined with some charitable act (2,196; 23,4-6). This process is ultimately beneficial for the poor, who enjoy the solidarity of their ill fellow humans.

The verses of the Quran that focus on the expenses made by the faithful for orphan children, strangers, and those who live in dire financial circumstances are worthy of close investigation. More specifically, it is mentioned that God is aware of these expenses (2,215; 17,28) and that they will be blessed multitudinously (30,38-39), as God is pleased with acts of charity. It is also emphatically stressed that charitable people are endowed with an absence of sorrow and fear, as a reward by God (2,275-277).

It is not uncommon for acts of philanthropy and charity to be carried out with money that has not been gained with honest means, or with paltry and useless material goods of no value. In the Quran, it is noted that almsgiving should involve wealth that was acquired honestly, thereby rejecting almsgiving that is carried out using wealth that was unlawfully or unjustly amassed. At the same time, it is stressed that objects which are paltry or useless and would not be accepted as presents by the donor himself/herself must not be offered for the purposes of almsgiving (2,267).

Deciding who should be the recipient of almsgiving is a critical matter since it is often argued that people on the receiving end of almsgiving are sometimes those who do not actually need it. In the Quran, it is clearly stated that almsgiving concerns the poor, the destitute, the people in need, low-paid workers, debtors, and prisoners (9,60). In spite of this, certain people deny any form of alms, although being in financial need. It is for this reason that the Quran urges the poor to accept alms and pray for those who offer them, because God holds almsgiving in high esteem and demonstrates mercy (9,103-104).

To conclude, it is evident that the text of the Quran prompts the faithful toward almsgiving for the relief of financially weaker people. This support should be given with solidarity, empathy, and respect, without any disposition towards ostentation on the part of the donor. At the same time, the provision of alms that originate from illicit wealth or entails worthless materials condemned.

Findings

The investigation of the New Testament and the Quran concerning the vital issue of poverty yields obvious points of convergence and divergence. More particularly, the texts under examination converge on the matter of financial assistance towards financially weaker people, which should be carried out with respect for the receiver and without pride, ostentation, or conceit on the part of the donor.

The two separate holy texts also agree that the size of this support should fall within the confines of each person's actual financial potential, while even the smallest financial contribution made with virtuous and humanitarian motives is fervently applauded.

The principal point of divergence is the obligatory nature of almsgiving underlined by the Quran which is not reciprocated in the New Testament, since the latter provides the faithful with free will as to how he/she will act on the matter.

Special mention also needs to be made of the fact that the Quran associates financial aid to the poor with the absence of sadness or fear and the assurance of entering paradise. On the other hand, in the New Testament, almsgiving is lauded as an act, but is not projected as a necessary prerequisite for securing salvation.

It is also notable that, in the Quran, almsgiving is in some cases perceived as a means of atonement for condemnable acts. However, no equivalent reference or sufficient evidence of any such association is to be found in the New Testament.

To conclude, there exist certain points of convergence and divergence concerning the issue of poverty in the texts of the New Testament and the Quran. These could serve as a starting point for the organization of an intercultural dialogue between Christianity and Islam on this matter. The aim of this dialogue must be the adoption of measures for confronting and alleviating poverty, which has expanded on a global scale.

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