

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF PHILANTHROPY

A Public Lecture

Delivered by

Denis Tracey

at

Armagh, Asia Pacific Centre for Initiatives for Change

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Invitation

To a series of public lectures



Welcome To The First Lecture on

The Spiritual Dimensions of Philanthropy

Speaker - Denis Tracey

Tuesday, 1st May 2007
7.45pm to 9.30pm
Armagh, 226 Kooyong Road,
Toorak, Vic 3142

Includes audience participation and questions

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Most of Denis Tracey's work in the past ten years has been in the not-for-profit sector. In the past five years he has published two books; *Family Business*; *the Volatile Mix of Love, Power and Money and Giving it Away*; *In Praise of Philanthropy*.

This series of lectures follows on from the "Going Beyond The Bottom Line" initiative launched at the IofC conference in Melbourne, in January 2007 and is part of the Caux Initiatives for Business program running in Europe and India.

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Caux Initiatives for Business & Initiatives for Change

Armagh, 226 Kooyong Road Toorak, 1 May 2007

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF PHILANTHROPY

In my job I spend a lot of time trying to understand why people give - and how more of them can be persuaded to do so. Often this is a pretty dry and pragmatic business, involving issues of tax and so on. But this evening I want to explore the spiritual aspects.

My qualifications are 5 years in Swinburne University's Asia-Pacific Centre for Philanthropy and Social Investment, and a very recent Grad Dip in Theology.

I want to explore how faith-based ideas influence charity, generosity, altruism and philanthropy: in other words, giving.

First, some caveats: most of the examples I will give come from the Judeo-Christian tradition, specifically Roman Catholicism. Why? Because that is the one I know most about. I will talk briefly about the other big monotheistic faiths, Islam and Judaism, but I haven't got much to say about the traditions that inform giving in Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and other cultures. Why? Because, despite my first degree being in Asian Civilisation, I don't know very much about them. However I'm pretty sure that the scriptural and other references I will give have their counterparts in other traditions. I hope to learn something from you about these before we go home this evening.

KINDNESS

I think it is true to say that all the world's major religions and ethical systems endorse kindness. We are all supposed to help the poor and the afflicted and to be hospitable. All cultures seem to have favourite legends that celebrate kindness, generosity and altruism. In Western culture the story of The Good Samaritan, legends of chivalrous knights and the life of Mother Theresa have become almost mythical archetypes. In Australia we celebrate the mateship tales of Henry Lawson, the heroism of Simpson at Gallipoli and the

steadfastness of Weary Dunlop. We especially enjoy instances of sportsmanship, such as the occasion in 1956 when the young athlete, John Landy, paused during a race to help a fallen competitor. We like to think that these actions exemplify our national qualities.

We sometimes assess the virtue of a society by the way it cares for its poor, its disabled and its vulnerable. By this measure India probably rates quite highly and the USA rather low: Australia?

I also think that most people would agree (though perhaps uneasily) with the ethicist, Peter Singer:

Quoted in Tracey (2004), p.10.

We need to challenge the idea that you can live a morally decent life just by looking after your own family and not actually causing harm to others. We need to develop a sense that if we have an abundance, we are actually doing wrong if we don't share it with people who, through no fault of their own, are living in the most dire poverty.

Indeed, some people might be inclined to delete the qualifying phrase, 'through no fault of their own'.

CHRISTIAN NOTIONS OF GIVING

Christian ideas on giving are informed by the Old Testament's repeated calls for social justice (eg, Isaiah 5:22-23 & 10:1-4 and Amos 6:12 & 8:4-6); and by classical ideas of personal piety and civic virtue, including Aristotelian ideas about how the pursuit of happiness is facilitated by making good choices. But above all they are influenced by Jesus' life and teachings.

Jesus set a much higher standard than the Old Testament writers. His calls for love, kindness and generosity are his main message. They are repeated in many ways and at different times throughout the accounts of his life. The lesson to be drawn from episodes such as Matthew's account of the Last Judgement (Mat 25:31-46); the Rich Young Man (Mat 19:16-30, Mar 10:17-31 and Luk 18:18-30); the Widow's Gift (Mar:12:41-44, Luk 21:1-4); the Good Samaritan (Luk 10:29-37);

the many and varied examples of hospitality and, above all, the Great Commandment (John 15:12-13); is unequivocal: we have an absolute obligation to give material help when it is needed, to share our possessions and to care for people in need. And there's more: we must do it with love.

After Jesus' Ascension, however, the emphasis seems to shift. One of the most arresting episodes in *The Acts of the Apostles* (generally believed to have been written relatively early in the Christian Era) is the story of Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1-10).

Now, while this purports to encourage giving, it has little in common with the gospel stories I noted before. Rather than encouraging loving altruism, it warns that those who try to evade the church's levies, such as the one described in Acts 4:32-37, will be punished - drastically and without delay.

Similarly, while Saint Paul frequently enjoins charity (eg, 2 Corinthians 8:9), this is not his main message. He is far more concerned to demonstrate Christ's universal legitimacy. His collection for the infant church in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4, Rom 15:25-28, Acts 11:29-30) may accord with Jewish tradition and Jesus' teachings, but I believe it had more to do with political considerations than with altruism. Paul chose to be accompanied by a large retinue when he delivered the money to Jerusalem and this suggests that it was largely a symbolic gesture. (And here I might observe that the question of what proportion of a charitable gift may reasonably be spent on its administration remains very contentious).

Of course it is true that the New Testament (especially Paul's letters and the Letter of James) includes many passages that warn rich oppressors and encourage care of the poor, and of course we are often reminded of the need to care for our own families. But throughout Acts and the Epistles the main emphasis is not on love, kindness and generosity, but rather on the need to keep the faith, and the heavenly rewards that this will bring - probably very soon.

But if the Church's leaders and the official texts allowed themselves to be distracted from Jesus' emphasis on altruism and charity, this aspect of his

teaching was not forgotten in Christian tradition. The stories of Christian saints, martyrs and heroes, such as the 3rd Century St Lawrence, St Martin of Tours, St Elizabeth of Hungary, St Francis of Assisi, St Vincent de Paul, Mother Theresa of Calcutta and so on all tend to emphasise the virtue and also the practical applications of loving one's neighbour.

Note, however, that even in these instances more emphasis is placed on the giver's virtue, than on the recipient's needs or entitlements. The leper who St Francis famously kisses, the beggar with whom St Martin shares his cloak and the destitute poor of Calcutta are passive figures. Their main role is to illustrate the goodness of the Christian exemplar.

And in any case, I don't think that these examples are a true reflection of the Church's attitude to Jesus' loving example. Perhaps this was an inevitable consequence of the Church's becoming bigger, more established, more bureaucratic and more comfortable. Government and religion have very different imperatives and when push comes to shove, religious leaders have often found good reasons for failing to confront powerful statesmen. Besides, for most of its history the Church has itself been stupendously wealthy and perhaps this has affected its ability to practise Jesus' main message. To urge charity towards the wretched and the poor when you are surrounded by Raphael paintings and wearing an ermine-trimmed jacket, inevitably raises credibility issues.

THE NATURE OF LOVE

Notwithstanding these difficulties, many Christian thinkers have continued to explore the nature of love and its consequences, none more so than St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Aquinas developed Aristotle's view of the world as a harmonious interplay of all substances and beings under God's benevolent supervision. All creation, he said, instinctively seeks good because it contributes to the natural order of things. Humans have an additional inclination. They want to live in society and know the truth about God. Aquinas saw charity first as an expression of humans' love for and inclination towards God, and second as a natural empathetic solidarity with their fellows. It was also an expression of a person's self-love; God is loved out of charity as the principal

good, the self is loved as "the partaker" in that good, and the neighbour is loved as a lesser "partner" in that good'. In Jesus' famous admonition 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matt 22:39), Aquinas interpreted the word 'as' as referring not to equality but to likeness.

Today we may object to Aquinas' conclusions on the grounds that the universe is known not to be a perfectly predictable, well-ordered system, but to act in ways that are sometimes haphazard and capricious. We may also draw attention to the combined influences of genetics and reciprocity. The former suggests that that charity and altruism are, at least in part, the consequences of millions of years' selective development, and the latter arises from an empirical understanding that a well-ordered society is more congenial than a chaotic one.

In any event, it seems that we are now hard-wired to desire the well-being of other people.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Now let me jump to the second half of the Twentieth Century.

Recent Christian thinkers have sought a new paradigm through which to explore the idea of love; one that was less legalistic than Aquinas's and more in accord with Jesus' admonition to love one's neighbour.

Before exploring these ideas however, we have to consider a fundamental question; who is my neighbour?

Peter Singer explores this in his disconcerting case study, *The Shallow Pond and the Envelope*. A man is on his way to an important meeting when he notices a child drowning in a pond. In deciding whether to save the child, the man understands that there is virtually no risk to him, but he might consider the possible damage to his shoes and being late for his meeting. However, says Singer, no reasonable person would fail to condemn him if for these reasons he decides to walk on. Next day the man receives in the mail an appeal from, say, World Vision, inviting him to donate to save the life of a child in

Africa. What, asks the ethicist, is the difference between these two decisions? Does the man owe a greater moral duty of care to the first child?

*I think he does. In the first place (and this is probably a flaw in the example) he may be the only person in a position to save the drowning child, while we can assume that the World Vision letter has been sent to many people. More to the point, however the dilemma ought be considered in terms of the emotional proximity between the characters. As Aquinas would have understood, no reasonable person finds it strange or reprehensible if I feel a stronger affinity towards a family member, a friend or a colleague than towards a stranger. Consider, for example, Mrs Jellyby in Dickens' *Bleak House*, who is so preoccupied with the poor in Africa that she is blind to the squalor in which her own children live. Even more remarkable is the case of the Philadelphia real-estate millionaire, Zell Kravinsky, who, as reported by *The New Yorker* in 2004, gave away virtually all of his \$40 million fortune and then, convinced that this was inadequate, donated one of his kidneys to a stranger. Mr Kravinski's family and friends considered this frankly insane, and like them we understand that our duty of care towards a person who we can directly see and hear and touch is greater than for one whose connection is less immediate.*

LAW RATHER THAN LOVE?

By the 1950s (which is when I grew up) many commentators were arguing that Catholic moral theology had developed an unbalanced emphasis on the moral law, excessively narrow concern with meeting minimum moral obligations, and a preoccupation with avoiding sin rather than doing good.

Law rather than love, they said, had become the dominant theme and the outcome was that a person avoids doing wrong, not out of love for either God or fellow humans, but for selfish motives - mainly a wish to avoid going to Hell.

This certainly accords with my own recollections of how I was brought up. The Christian Brothers and our priests never tired of pointing out the calamity of dying while in a state of mortal sin. Many strategies were recommended;

magic charms and procedures which guaranteed the wearer immunity from Hell; a short Act of Contrition which could be recited as the truck swerved onto the footpath. The emphasis was on preserving oneself from damnation. Avoiding evil because it offended God, the Blessed Virgin and others (saints, parents, teachers, etc), was a secondary consideration. But it still came before the idea of doing good for its own sake.

Indeed, now that I think of it, this attitude also informed the basic way the Brothers (and our parents too, I think) reared us. Avoiding punishment was emphasised more than seeking rewards. Perhaps this approach had a pragmatic basis. Rather than strive for perfection (as Christ had urged), we were permitted to settle for a pass mark.

I know that people from other Christian traditions will have different recollections. Perhaps we can explore these later.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Many of the ideas surrounding altruistic philanthropy resonate with Liberation Theology. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest who is credited with having popularised this philosophy, says that the key theme of the Good Samaritan story is that the Samaritan had far less in common with the injured traveller than those who passed by on the other side of the road. Actually Gutierrez goes further. He asserts that we have a duty to go out and look for people who need help.

How much of one's wealth is one morally obliged to give? In the episode of the Rich Young Man (Matt 19:16-30, etc) Jesus is explicit - everything; an answer that disappointed the young man and which many subsequent thinkers have sought to dilute.

GIVING IN TWO COMPARABLE TRADITIONS

JEWISH PHILANTHROPY

In many parts of the world, including Australia, Jews are probably the most generous members of society. This preoccupation with philanthropy is long-standing. As noted above, the Torah emphasises the importance of protecting and being generous towards vulnerable people – widows, orphans and strangers.

The Hebrew word *tzedakah*, is commonly translated as charity but has a more subtle meaning. Its root involves notions of righteousness, justice and fairness. In Judaism God owns everything and humans are only temporary custodians. Accordingly, *tzedakah* does not just mean an act of generosity, but an act of justice in which the poor receive what is their due. Leviticus 19:10 is a good example. **And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner...'**

Many Jewish thinkers have explored this, none more than the 12th Century thinker, Moses Maimonides, who said that the least virtuous form of generosity was to give as little as possible, as infrequently as possible and as publicly as possible, all the while feeling contempt for the recipient. Nevertheless, this is still better than giving nothing. However, he added, the most virtuous form of giving is to give a loan or a job rather than a gift, so preserving the recipient's self-respect and encouraging him to help himself.

No discussion of Australian philanthropy can ignore the astonishing performance of Jews in this country, especially in Melbourne where, on my approximate reckoning, at least half of our biggest givers are Jewish individuals or families – this despite the fact that Jews comprise only about 0.8 percent of the Victorian population. In my book *Giving it Away: in Praise of Philanthropy* I quoted Sam Lepski:

No matter how religiously observant they are, all Jewish people know that giving to your own community is an essential part of Jewish tradition. The Melbourne Jewish community is relatively small and everyone knows everyone else. Having a philanthropic foundation has become one of the done things, mainly because a number of the more prominent Jewish families (Smorgon, Gandel, Besen, Pratt) have done

so. In addition, the Jewish community is very good at making you feel good if you do give, and guilty if you don't. If you are known to have a capacity to give, but don't do so at the level that your peers think you should, one way or another you will be told. Peer group pressure is not unimportant, especially in a small community.

This might sound trite, but one of the main reasons why Jewish people are so generous is their immense gratitude to this country. A lot of these people had been kicked out of Europe, had no idea whether any other country would accept them, and eventually they found themselves here. I was born in Melbourne and I'm just old enough to remember what it was like during the war years. Everyone in the Jewish community had relatives and friends in Europe and we didn't know whether we would ever see them again. But we knew somehow that we had been saved; and while Australia wasn't perfect - there was intolerance and anti-Semitism here and there - we knew we were safe and we had opportunities to do well. That led to an abiding sense of gratitude and I think this is the great driving force behind Jewish philanthropy.

Melbourne also has the highest proportion of Holocaust survivors in the world, and for them these feelings were even stronger. These people tend to be very resourceful and determined, and a lot of them have been very successful.

(Edited version)

Carol Schwartz is a Melbourne business leader and a daughter of Marc Besen, of the Sussan fashion chain and a prominent Melbourne philanthropist. In her own life she is strongly committed to very engaged forms of philanthropy:-

I have never understood why Jews in literature have commonly been depicted as misers. In my experience, that simply isn't so. Perhaps it's because at one time Jews in Europe were not allowed to own land and often went into business as moneylenders. This would inevitably have led to difficult situations.

We are taught that you should give away a tenth of what you earn. You learn that from a young age, and your religion and culture and

family usually have some influence. In addition, because many of us are refugees we do feel we owe something to the Australian community that has allowed us to be free and, in many cases, successful.

Finally, I see no reason not to cite the wonderful case quoted by Hilary L Rubenstein in her book *The Jews in Victoria*. It seems that a certain Reverend Davis of Sydney remarked that some recent Russian Jewish immigrants were not the 'objectionable money-lending type'. A popular magazine, *Bohemia*, commented (possibly ironically):

We have no objection ...to the Jews being money-lenders. What we object to is that, when they lend their money, they want it back again. This is the feature of their conduct that causes them to be so frequently disliked.

MUSLIM PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy and charity are central tenets of Islam, and many Muslims regard charity as a form of worship. According to traditional concepts of Islam, charity is one of the five pillars of the faith (along with prayer, belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad, fasting in Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca).

What is perhaps less well understood outside Muslim communities is the way in which philanthropy binds Muslims to each other. In Muslim conceptions of faith and community, humans are linked to each other through their obligations to God. A charitable act is not therefore merely an act of faith, nor merely an act of community. It is the building of community through faith, and the building of faith through the deepening of community... Charity is not so much an act of piety as it is one of obligation.

Alterman, Jon Band Hunter, Shirleen, *The Idea of Philanthropy in Muslim Contexts*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC 2004.

Not surprisingly, Muslim ideas of philanthropy and charity have developed different characteristics over time, in different places and through Islam's various branches. Nevertheless there are several common notions:

- *Zakat: an obligatory contribution generally calculated at 2.5 per cent of wealth. In some Muslim countries zakat is imposed on companies as a form of tax.*
- *Sadaqah: voluntary giving*
- *Kaffara: penitential giving, often arising from having broken an oath*
- *Khoms: obligatory giving by Shia Muslims*
- *Waqf (pl. awqaf): a trust or foundation, typically intended to support institutions such as mosques, schools, hospitals, etc. A waqf can take the form of a family foundation designed to pass wealth between generations or to protect the interests of women or of specific groups. There are also corporate-based awqaf.*

Not surprisingly, Muslim philanthropy in Australia has followed broad patterns similar to those of other immigrants. The first Muslim migrants here were Afghan cameliers who, in the second half of the 19th century, opened up much of the interior. They contributed to the establishment of mosques and other institutions, mainly in Adelaide and Perth, and also to roughly-built 'bush mosques' which also served as rest stops in the interior. These days most Muslim philanthropy in Australia is mostly directed to causes and organisations within that community - schools, mosques, nursing homes and the like. In addition, some Muslim companies claim strong mutual community support. The Muslim Community Co-operative (Australia) Ltd is an interesting example. Founded in 1989 it mainly provides housing loans but operates on Shariah principles which prohibit the charging of interest.

We are also starting to see the emergence of individual Muslims who, having been successful in business, are setting up foundations that are more or less indistinguishable from others. John Khan, founder of the Crazy John's retail communications chain is the best-known of these.

GODLESS GIVING

It is perhaps appropriate here to introduce briefly another issue: if God does not exist, why do we bother to be generous? According to legend, the late Kerry Packer entertained this idea following his recovery from a near-fatal heart attack in 1990. 'Son, I've been to the other side' he is reported to have said. 'There's nothing there. And do you know what that means? You can do whatever you f-ing like'

It's worth remarking that, unlike 96 percent of Americans, neither of the two best-known American philanthropists of modern times, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, are religious. Neither was Andrew Carnegie, who, before Buffett and Gates, was perhaps America's greatest philanthropist. Note too that neither Gates nor Buffett have built monuments for themselves, like new hospitals or cancer research centers, or splendid architectural statements at elite universities. Instead, the bulk of the money is directed to existing organisations who are working to relieve human suffering.

Could it be that the motivation for this sort of giving is far closer to the altruistic ideal than most traditional philanthropy? It does seem closer to the sort of giving that Jesus recommended.

CORPORATE GIVING

Corporate philanthropy (or CSI, CSR, Corporate Citizenship) is getting a lot of attention lately. Does altruism have a place in CSI? Natalie Toohey, Director of Government, Industry and Community Relations at the Foster's Group, explored this argument in an article [Australian Financial Review](#).

Far from saving the world, my view is that business should be engaged in strategic CSR activities to save itself, as a mainstream risk-management and opportunity-capturing exercise. There is no shame about being upfront about this... To pretend that we are anything other than business can only undermine our reputation and invite charges of grandstanding and false piety, to say nothing of the credibility hit we take when, inevitably, we fail to make a big enough dent in the world's afflictions...

Viewed from all sides, the best approach must be to resist the current pressure to separate CSR from mainstream business activity and regard it as a moral obligation... A number of Australian businesses ...now manage CSR programs that explicitly aim to make a material contribution to the achievement of core business goals.

Australian Financial Review, 7 March 2006

In other words, CSR is and should be a part of a company's normal business.

An interesting alternate view was put by one of my students

The concepts [of CSR] call for altruistic, or at least less self-serving, behaviour and action. This involves concepts of abiding with the spirit, not just the letter, of the law in relation to corporate governance and ethics (certain behaviour and actions are to be dismissed notwithstanding they are technically legal or would maximise profits), philanthropy (the concept of charity as giving for no return) and social...

To engage in CSR without embracing this altruism means that the effort can be seen as a form of opportunistic public relations or advertising... CSR initiatives will always run a poor second to business objectives as the primary motivation - doing good becomes a mere by-product of business endeavours, not a positive responsibility of the company.

CONCLUSION

The research on which this talk is based included interviews with about twenty Christian business people. At first I expected that there would be a clear difference in the way Christians and non-Christians envisaged and practised giving. But no.

The main difference between Christians and non-Christians is the language in which they describe their motivation and the consequences of their actions. For

a Christian it seems relatively simple to explain why one spends time, money and energy doing good (in fact it is probably harder to justify why one does not). But an agnostic or atheist who carries out acts of altruistic kindness is generally unable to claim anything more than humanistic motives. Perhaps people who do good without acknowledged divine inspiration can be considered more altruistic. At any rate, they cannot say they are counting on being rewarded in the next life.

It seems that the main conclusion that comes from this research is that there is no uniquely Christian approach to giving. Can the same be said about other faiths? Well, that (as we academics are fond of saying) will require further research.

Thank you.

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