CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES IN GHANA: AN ETHICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Social, religion, economic, psychological, and political factors in the Ghanaian society can reduce as well as induce poverty. Understanding private Christian approaches to poverty alleviation is very significant in addressing the harsh living conditions poverty exerts on some Ghanaians. Through the approach of ethical inquiry, this article attempts a critical examination of fundamental assumptions underlining some Christian approaches to poverty reduction in Ghana. By uncovering this assumptions, the article provides insight into how Christians in Ghana view the phenomenon of poverty and poverty reduction strategies. It also probes how these Christian views are expressed in actual poverty reduction practices in Ghana.

Key words: Christian, ethical, poverty, poverty reduction

INTRODUCTION

Ghana appears to be racked with issues of poverty. Whiles the population of other countries progress in their standards of living and increase their affluence, some individuals in the Ghanaian populace seem to continuously experience abject poverty and constant deterioration in the reception of basic human services such as health, education, food, water, and shelter. The results of the study on poverty profile in Ghana from 2005-2013, conducted by the Ghana Statistical Service in 2014 termed "Ghana Living Standards Survey Round 6 (GLSS6)," indicates that poverty has been reduced in Ghana. Based on the GLSS6, Ghana had achieved the first target of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Evidently, the GLSS6 indicates that poverty in Ghana has been reduced from "51.7%" (in 1992) to "24.2%" (in 2013). Translated into real terms, the GLSS6 revealed that "6.4 million" individuals in Ghana are living in poverty as at 2013 compared with the "7 million" individuals in Ghana who lived in poverty in 1992 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014: 44). Also, the GLSS6 report showed that "8.4%" of Ghanaians live in extreme poverty as at 2013 compared with the "16.5%" of Ghanaians who lived in extreme poverty in 2006. In reality, therefore, "2.2 million" Ghanaians live in extreme poverty as at 2013 compared with the "3.6 million" Ghanaians who lived in extreme poverty in 2006 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014: 44).

Certainly, GLSS6 indicates convincingly that progress has been made in important areas such as social infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Yet, the results of GLSS6 raises some questions that calls for answers. Why hasn't poverty been completely eliminated or reduced to the barest minimum? To what extent do Ghanaians perceive the reality of such reductions in their daily lives? How do we explain the phenomenon where few individuals increasingly become
successful and wealthy while relatively many individuals in the Ghanaian community disproportionately continue to live in poverty? Ironically, this situation persist in a country that is statistically known to be Christian-71.2% of the population profess the Christian faith. In light of this, it suffices to probe: Do Christians have any responsibility in the face of such a situation in our world? What role or approach should Christians adopt should they decide to help the poor in Ghana? These are the leading questions that this article endeavors to shade some light on. This article attempts to answer these questions by first determining the meaning of the concept of poverty. This is followed by a review of Christian views on appropriate attitudes towards the poor. After this, the article probes some of the approaches that Christians in Ghana have adopted regarding the issue of poverty.

**Definition of poverty**

The term poverty is a middle English translation of the old French *poverté* and the Latin *paupertas*. Both words are derived from the Latin *pauper* (meaning poor in English). It is generally considered as "the state of being extremely poor...(or) the state of being inferior in quality or insufficiency in amount...(or) the renunciation of the right to individual ownership of property as part of a religious vow" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2016, n.p.). Common to this three-fold conception of poverty is the idea of deprivation. The notion of deprivation implies someone who possesses less amount of money and material possession than society deems necessary to fulfill fundamental human needs. These needs in-exhaustively include malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high birth rates, underemployment...low income, "standards and activities which are common or customary" (Townsend, 1979: 915), "poor health, low levels of education or skills, an inability or an unwillingness to work, high rates of disruptive or disorderly behavior...improvidence"(Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015: n.p.) as well as the non-existence of functional amenities such as safe water, sanitation, solid waste collection and disposal, storm drainage, public transportation, access roads and footpaths, street lighting, and public telephones. Apart from this economic aspect, these basic needs may also be lacking in both socio-cultural and moral terms.

If poverty suggests deprivation, then, it would be possible to assign three categories of meaning to it. In this vein, poverty may be conceived of as social poverty, pauperism, and moral poverty (Hobsbawm, 2015: n.p.). Social poverty suggests a definable social structure that is based solely on lack of wealth. This lack of wealth could either be relative or absolute. In relative terms, social poverty implies an individual's or group' lack of resources in fulfilling these basic needs in comparison with other members in the same society. Social poverty, in absolute terms, describes a situation in which an individual or group "lacks the resources" (Marshall, 1998: n.p.) needed to satisfy basic human needs.

Pauperism refers to a condition in which individuals or groups lack the capacity to sustain a livelihood at a minimum level generally accepted by the community without aid coming from outside of that individual or group. Moral poverty, on the other hand, identifies the reality of poverty in an individual's or group's system of values (Hobsbawm, 2015: n.p.). In other words, moral poverty implies "simplicity, austerity, and severity" (Berry, 2015: n.p.) considered essential in religious life. It appears that poverty was use as a measurement of "temperance and continence" (Berry, 2015; n.p.). It was probably the sign of distinguishing the religiously proper value of things from things of imaginary value.
Aquinas shared similar view. He stated that an unmistakable way to express true discipleship in Christianity and "usefulness" (cited in Berry, 2015: n.p.) to one's community was to embrace poverty. Similarly, Algernon Sidney thinks that poverty induces and maintains virtuous living in people (Sidney, 2007). In the category of moral poverty, one could distinguish voluntary from involuntary moral poverty. Voluntary moral poverty describes persons who were born poor but chose to maintain the state of poverty "as an expression of their love of God" (Berry, 2015: n.p.). In other instances, these individuals may have been born into wealth but willfully gave up their wealth in order to further a "virtuous Christian life" (Berry, 2015: n.p.). Involuntary moral poverty defines the destitute and prone to be inhibited from achieving the "higher moral values."

Different types of poverty may be identified. The distinction is often base on "time or duration...and distribution" (Berry, 2015: n.p.). One type of poverty is cyclical poverty. This type may be extensive in a given population. However, its degree of occurrence is temporal. Another type of poverty is collective or widespread poverty. This type may be in the form of generalized and concentrated "collective poverty" (Berry, 2015: n.p.). Both describe a permanent situation in which there are inadequate resources to satisfy basic human needs. Such a condition may be perennial in a given population. Lastly, poverty could be described in terms of case poverty. Case poverty is marked by a situation in which an individual or group lives in a state of general wealth but the individual or group is unable to provide for themselves personal needs that are vital for sustaining their lives (Berry, 2015). This inability could be as a result of physical or mental disability. Whatever type of form poverty may take, its effects are generally considered harmful to both individuals and society at large. Some of these harmful effects include nutritional deficiencies causing deaths in some instances, relatively low life expectancy, high rates of infant and maternal mortality, high levels of unemployment or underemployment, high rates in armed robbery, and general poor health.

In the Bible, the term 'poverty' generally describes the class of individuals who continuously struggle to obtain the resources needed to satisfy their fundamental needs. It would seem that the term refers specifically to individuals who are unable to meet their "own needs" (Atkinson, 1995: 678). By this description, one could identify the sick, the physically challenged, the orphaned, the widowed, strangers, aliens, slaves, prisoners, the young, the old, women, and single persons (Atkinson, 1995: 678; Mani, 2008) as part of this category. These persons normally depended on others for survival. In particular, they depended on other masculine figures in the community for subsistence: husbands, fathers, brothers, law enforcers, and doctors (Mani, 2008).

Christian Views on Helping the Poor

Christian views on helping the poor could be categorized into two-those who believe helping the poor is unethical and those who believe Christians have a divine mandate to help the poor in whichever way they can. Generally, those who advocate that it is morally wrong to help the poor base their argument mainly on two premises. First, helping the poor will lay obsolete the biblical injunction that those who refuse to work should not be fed (2 Thess. 3:10). This injunction seems to suggests that aids to the poor may induce laziness or an attitude of dependence among those who willfully refuse to work to enable them sustain and maintain their lives in the human society.

Second, poverty may be the tool with which God achieves some of His purposes. In the case of Job, God was vindicated after Job remained steadfast throughout all his poverty (Job 1:12-19). In a similar manner, God allowed groups and individuals to be poor as a result of disobedience.
(Amos 5:11, 27). The history of the Israelites would seem to reveal this truth (Ps 109:16; Isa 47:9; Lam 5:3). Theirs was an history of fortune and misfortune—their fortune boomed whenever they obeyed God and anytime they disobeyed God, they encountered untold misfortune in the form of siege and slavery. In light of this, any attempt to relieve individuals from poverty could amount to a human's attempt to thwart the desires and purposes of the Divine.

Contrary to this view, some Christians propose that God by His very act and commands expects human beings to offer help to other individuals who may not be as fortunate as they. The basis for this proposal could be fourfold. First, some of the appellations used for God reveal that He ultimately cares for the poor. The Bible presents many titles that generally describes the relationship between God and the poor. Some of these titles are Defender, Protector, Rescuer, Provider, Savior, and Refuge of the poor (Deut 10:18; 1 Sam 2:8; Ps 9:9; 10:16-18; 12:5; 14:6; 35:10; 34:6; 68:10; 72:4; 109:30-31; Isa 19:20; 41:17; 25:4; Jer 20:13; 22:16). Since Christians have a duty to imitate God (Lev 11:44; Matt 5: 48; 1 Pet 1:16), it is appropriate to expect that those who profess faith in God who is kind to the poor would express similar attitude towards the poor.

Second, the act of helping the poor appears to be a sign of personal surrender to God. In the Bible, the act of showing mercy to the poor is a virtue that God endorses. In some places in the Bible, true faith in God is expressed in kindness to the poor (Jam 1:27; Mic 6:6-8; Isa 58:7). Elsewhere in the Bible, kindness to the poor becomes a test of faith (Matt 19:21; Lk 18:22; 12:33; 19:8). Often times, ignoring the needs of the poor, when one has the means to show kindness, could amount to despising Jesus Himself (Matt 10:42; 25:45; Pro 19:17). Given the biblical relationship between helping the poor and true Christianity, it suffices to state that genuine worship of God may fail if it is without acts of kindness to the poor.

Third, one's attitude towards the poor could attract either blessings or curses from God. In no uncertain terms, the Bible reveals that acts of kindness towards the poor attracts God's blessings (Deut 15:10, 11; Pro 11:25; 14:21; 19:17; 22:9; Ps 41:1-3; Isa 58:6-11; Luke 14:14) whereas an attitude of neglect regarding the poor induces God's displeasure and curses (Deut 27:19; Ps 72:12-14; Pro 14:31; 28:27; Isa 10:1-3). Since Christians are constantly in need of God's blessings (Pro 10:22) in one way or the other, it is inconceivable that any genuine Christian would willfully ignore the plight of the poor.

Lastly, acts of kindness towards the poor are required for all Christians. The Bible has many references of this divinely given obligation of taking care of the poor. Such obligations could be adduced either from clear guidelines from God or may be inferred from the institution of the Year of Debt Cancellation and Year of Jubilee. In order not to ignore the poor, God included them in His law. Based on these provisions, the poor-needy, orphan, widow, stranger, sick, and alien-were to be helped (Ex 21:1-11; 23:10-12; Lev 19:9-11; 23:32; 31:8-9; Deut 14:28:29; Pro 22:22-23; Zech 7:8-10). In addition to these provisions, God instituted the Year of Debt Cancellation (Deut 15:1-6) and the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-43). The Year of Debt Cancellation, occurring every seven years, mandated all debts owed to be cancelled. The Year of Jubilee, on the other hand, occurred every fifteenth year. This year ensured that all slaves and prisoners were set free as well as debts relieved.

It is probable that knowledge of God's concern for the plight of the poor formed the basis from which the early church showed kindness to the poor (2 Cor 9:7; 1 Tim 5:9-10; 6:18). Together with the guidelines, these institutions reveal God's concern for the poor as well as His desire that His children extend similar concern and acts of kindness towards those who are poor among them.
In light of this, one can infer that generous acts shown towards the poor are expressive of genuine faith in God.\(^2\) This would seem to suggest that Christians have a God-given mandate to assist the poor in whichever way they can.

**Christian Assumptions Underlining Poverty Reduction**

Given the exploitative way by which some may claim to help the poor, it is proposed that two main assumptions undergird Christian acts of kindness towards the poor. First, there is need to understand the plight of the poor before help is offered. Some assistance to the poor have been done whilsts ignoring the personal concerns of recipients. Often such aids are given to the poor as prescriptions of what the donors assume could help alleviate poverty. Some of the means of helping the poor include redistributing resources to poor households and communities through women (Haddad, Hoddinott, Alderman, 1987), improving the health of children and curbing truancy in schools (Miguel & Kremer, 2004), the implementation of rural bank concepts (Burgess & Pande, 2002), and savings or adoption of new technologies (Ashraf, Kalan & Yin, 2006).

However, such acts of kindness have been found to be "hopelessly inadequate" (Bunting, 1995: 679). At best, they create perpetual dependence of the poor on donors (Prahalad, 2004). Also, such acts of kindness to the poor may debase the personality of the poor relegating the poor to the status of inferiority. In the long run, they turn the poor into a sort of human test tubes. For acts of kindness to be highly effective, Christians may seek to understand the plight and circumstances of the poor before offering any assistance to them. This is particularly important in situations where Christian donors may not be the implementers of the plan to alleviate poverty. Seeking to understand the plight of the poor would not only correct many misplaced beliefs donors have about the poor but would also treat those in need as persons who have personal dignity and "free will" (Hill, 2008: p. 38).

Second, Christians may examine the worldview from which acts of kindness are done. Current developments involving poverty alleviation appears to be conducted within the context of a worldview that separates religion from developments. Such separation emanates from the modern worldview that has succeeded in delineating the "physical" realm from the "spiritual realm" (Newbigin, 1989: 119). Whereas that which is unseen belongs to the spiritual realm, the events of daily life occur in the physical realm. Consequently, adherents to the modern view see poverty as a phenomenon in the physical realm that has no connection with the spiritual realm. For this reason, poverty alleviation programs are generally considered sole responsibilities of human governments and other human institutions.

Contrariwise, the Biblical worldview does not see a dichotomy between the physical and spiritual realms. It is a sort of "holistic worldview" (Myers, 2011: 6). In this holism, the physical and spiritual world constantly interact. The interaction is such that none may be considered to be disconnected from each other. Together, both realms are under the control of the Creator. It is suggested that Christian acts of kindness to the poor would be based on the biblical worldview and...
not on the modern worldview. From this worldview, therefore, Christians may appreciate the biblical concept of salvation as encompassing changes in both the physical and spiritual realms. By this knowledge, Christian leaders may cooperate with governmental agencies and private individuals who work to mitigate the terrible effects of poverty on human life.

**Christian Approaches to Reducing Poverty**

Based on these two assumptions, Christians may help the poor in some ways. These include the act of giving, capital investment programs, service delivery, and calling individuals to their basic duties. The act of giving appears to be one of the commonest ways by which the poor are helped. People may provide food, shelter, and money to those in need. In the short term, it may relieve the poor of their temporary need but in the long run, it may not be effective. For this reason, it is suggested that other means of helping the poor complement the act of giving.

Another approach to helping the poor could be capital investment. By this approach, the poor are helped to set up their own businesses and run them in ways that would accrue profit so they would help themselves. Further, Christians may offer their services to help relieve the poor of their needs. This may particularly be an excellent means in situations where resources for helping are limited. For example, Christian doctors may offer free healthcare services for the poor. Also, Christian teachers may offer their teaching services for free. In the same vein, other Christian professionals such as lawyers, engineers, etc and other artisans may aid the poor by offering their services to them. Moreover, Christians may educate those in need of their basic duties in life. This may be significant in situations in which poverty results from laziness or ignorance. By making those in need aware of their God-given duties, the poor may be psychologically ready to work to move themselves away from the poverty line.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has discussed Christian attitudes towards poverty reduction strategies in Ghana. Taking poverty to mean socio-cultural and moral deprivation, the paper identifies the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the alien, the slave, and the sick as poor. Despite the proposal that the poor may be suffering from either their unwillingness to work or from the displeasure of God and so should not be helped, Christians generally see acts of kindness towards the poor as mandatory. In light of this, the act of showing kindness to the poor may be attributable to the titles used in the Bible for God, kindness as an expression of genuine faith in God, blessings for showing kindness to the poor and curses for ignoring their plight, and kindness as enjoined by the laws of God. For acts of kindness towards the poor to be most effective, the authors suggest that a two-fold assumption should underlie such gesture. These are a quest to understand the plight of the poor before helping them and helping from a biblically holistic worldview. From this standpoint, Christians may help the poor through acts of giving, capital investment programs, service delivery, and calling individuals to their basic duties.

**REFERENCES**


