ALMSGIVING

Introduction

The concept of almsgiving dates back to the around the 6th century BCE (Before Common Era) according to Hindu Sanskrit texts. Sanskrit texts are the spiritual teachings and ideas of Hinduism. For many major religions today, almsgiving is part of their beliefs and worship practices. In some instances, it is considered necessary for spiritual growth and maturity. Though there are multiple interpretations of the word alms, (charity, poor-tithe etc.) the basic principal is the same.

Definition

Alms or Almsgiving is giving to others as an act of virtue, materially or in the sense of providing capabilities (e.g. education) freely. The modern word is derived from several translations to include Old English, Late Latin, and Greek which mean, "pity, alms" from two Greek words "merciful" and "pity".

Judaism

Tzedakah

It is a Hebrew term which means righteousness but used more commonly to denote charity. Refers to the religious obligation to do what is right and just. This obligation is a continuation of the Maaser Ani or poor tithe or poor man's tithe.

Shmita

The Sabbath or Sabbatical year is the seventh year of the seven-year agricultural cycle according to the Torah for the Land of Israel and is observed in contemporary Judaism. During this time, agricultural activity is forbidden. Any fruits or herbs which grow of their own accord and where no watch is kept over them are considered ownerless and may be picked by anyone.

Islam

Sadaqah

Sadaqah is the Islamic concept of charitable giving, voluntary with no set rules to govern the practice. It is more comparable to Christian influenced formulations of the notion of "alms" than the Zakat.

Zakat

The Zakat is an obligatory practice according to Islam. It is charitable giving governed by a specific set of rules within Islamic jurisprudence.

Zakat is the third of the five pillars of Islam which requires that 2.5% of one's savings and business revenue and 5-10% of one's harvest be given to the poor. It is based on the principle of Islam that all things belong to God and, therefore, wealth is held by human beings in trust.

Zakat means "to purify", "to develop", and "cause to grow". It is an act of worship according to Shariah, the purification of our possessions by setting aside a portion for those in need. The cutting back, like the pruning of plants, balances and encourages new growth.

Buddhism

Theravada

In this sect of Buddhism, nuns and monks go on a daily almsround to collect food. The practice offers the laypeople the opportunity to make merit (protective force resulting from good deeds, acts, or thoughts). A Theravadan Buddhist Monk or Nun cannot receive money in place of or in addition to food. This would be considered an offence and he or she could be expelled.

Mahayana

In this sect of Buddhism, daily almsrounds have been all but abandoned due to resistance from the local populations. In China, Korea, and Japan there were those who opposed the idea of giving food to "begging clerics" with no tradition of gaining merit by donating to these practioners.

Nirvana

In Buddhism, almsgiving is the beginning of one's journey to Nirvana. Nirvana represents the ultimate soteriological release, the liberation from repeated rebirth.

Hinduism

Dana

Dana is the Ancient concept of alms-giving dating back to the Vedic period of Hinduism.

Vedas

The Vedas are religious texts originating in ancient India, consisting of hymns from tribes of the area between 2500 BCE and 1900 BCE. These texts postulated religious culture through synthesis with the preexisting religious cultures of the subcontinent and gave rise to Hinduism. They are the oldest in Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism.

Christianity

Charity

Charity is the voluntary giving of help to those in need as a humanitarian act. Charity is often associated with religion. The word is from Old English and means a Christian's love of one's fellows until the beginning of the 20th century. In the English language through the Old French word "charite" and the Latin "caritas", used in the Vulgate New Testament which is the Greek word "agape".

Offertory

This practice is the traditional moment in Roman Catholic Mass, Anglican Eucharist and Lutheran Divine Services when alms are collected. Baptist or Methodists engage in alms through "tithes" and "offerings".

Love Offerings

In the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches the collection of alms and tithes has not been formally linked as it is many western religious churches but almsgiving as well as fasting and prayer is an important part of spiritual life. And for those whose financial circumstances do not permit the giving of monetary alms, they may give alms in other ways such as intercessory prayer and acts of mercy.

Many fellowships today collect these offerings for the poor, destitute or victims of catastrophic loss. Traditionally, Deacons and Deaconesses are responsible for distributing these gifts to the widows, orphan and others in need.

Among many Christian forms of worship and denominations, the collection of tithes and offerings are given to support the church's mission, budget, and ministry. The collection of tithes and offerings is also to aid the poor as an act of Christian charity in conjunction with communal prayer. Some churches place the offering basket or plate on the altar signifying that the offering is made to God and indicative of the bond of Christian love. And further, private acts of charity are considered virtuous only if done for the admiration of others.

Motivation

Why do we practice almsgiving?

What if any are the benefits of almsgiving?

Consider these positions when giving alms: (most righteous to least righteous)

-you enable the recipient to become self-reliant
-give when neither party knows the other's identity
-give when you know the recipient's identity, but the recipient doesn't know your identity
-give when you do not know the recipient's identity, but the recipient knows your identity
-give before being asked
-give after being asked
-give less than you should, but giving it cheerfully
-give begrudgingly

(Maimonides, Jewish scholar and sage)

Conclusion

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven." Matthew 6:1 (KJV)