Bridge to God

By the third century, the gesture of giving became miniaturized.

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When Latin Christians of late antiquity thought of religious giving, they went back to what for them was the beginning—to the words of Jesus. The words of Jesus to a rich young man encapsulated the whole notion of the transfer of “treasure” from earth to heaven: “And Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven’” (Matt. 19:21; cf. Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22, MEV). Jesus repeated this challenge to his disciples: “Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no

moth destroys” (Luke 12:33).l

This notion was also current in Jewish circles. The Jerusalem Talmud of the late fourth century contains a story about King Monobazos, the Jewish king of Adiabene on the Euphrates. He was said to have spent his fortune on providing food for the poor in Jerusalem. His infuriated relatives accused him of living up to his name, which was derived from the word *bazaz*—“to plunder.” Monobazos was plundering the earthly inheritance of his family. He answered them at length: “My fathers laid up treasure for below, but I have laid up treasures for above. They laid up treasures in a place over which the hand of man may prevail; I in a place over which no hand can prevail. . . . My fathers laid up treasures for others, I for myself. [For] my fathers laid up treasures useful in this world, I for the world to come.”

The commands of Jesus and the story of King Monobazos urged or described heroic acts of renunciation and generosity. By the third century AD, however, in both Judaism and Christianity, the gesture of giving had become miniaturized, as it were. One did not have to perform feats of heroic self-sacrifice or charity to place treasure in heaven. Small gifts would do. But the notion of the transfer of treasure to heaven by acts of mercy retained its otherworldly shimmer. Cyprian, for instance, treated the steady, low-profile flow of alms to the poor as a form of *thésaurisation* in heaven on the same footing as the renunciation of all wealth that Jesus had urged on the rich young man.

In Christian circles, the notion of treasure placed in heaven through almsgiving colored perceptions of other sayings of Jesus. For instance, Jesus had also told the story of the unjust steward. This steward had used his tricky financial dealings to make friends, so that those who were obliged to him might take him into their houses once he had been dismissed from his job. Jesus concluded: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (Luke 16:9). Christians of this period took this to mean that those who received money from believers (whether the recipients were holy persons, clergymen, or the poor) would welcome these believers into their dwelling places in heaven. Indeed, believers could even build their own mansions using the funds that they transferred to heaven through acts of charity on earth. Heaven was not only a place of great treasure houses, it included prime real estate in a state of continuous construction due to the good deeds performed on earth by means of common, coarse money.

This notion was summed up in a delightful story told in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, which were written in 594:

> There was a pious cobbler, Deusdedit, in Rome [so Gregory tells us]. Every Saturday he took a portion of his week's earnings to the courtyard of the shrine of St. Peter at Rome. With these he gave alms to the poor who assembled at the shrine. The result of the cobbler's charity was revealed in a vision to a pious person. The vision was of a house being built in heaven. But this happened only on Saturdays. For Saturday was the day on which Deusdedit went to St. Peter's to give alms to the poor. The house was the cobbler's "mansion" in heaven, built by the "treasure" that he had transferred to heaven every Saturday through his gifts to the poor. A similar vision revealed that these mansions were treasure houses in themselves. They were built with bricks of pure gold.

Gregory stood at the end of many centuries of Christian giving inspired by the notion of the transfer of treasure to heaven through almsgiving. Gregory's stories circulated largely unchanged and unchallenged for a further thousand years. But when one turns to present-day scholarship on this theme, we find that the idea of "treasure in heaven" is surrounded by a loud silence. Neither in the Catholic *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* nor in the Protestant *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* is there an entry for *trésor* or *Schatz*. Nor can such an article be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Indeed, it is only recently (in 2013) that the lucid and refreshingly uncensorious study by Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, has offered a satisfactory analysis of the relation between almsgiving and the accumulation of treasure in heaven in the Old Testament, in later Judaism, and in early Christianity.

Even the few articles devoted to the theme of treasure in heaven have approached it with ill-disguised embarrassment. In one such study, Klaus Koch insisted that when Jesus spoke of treasure in heaven, he must have meant something very different from the meanings that came to be attached to it in later centuries. Belief in the direct accumulation of treasure in heaven through almsgiving on earth (which was illustrated so vividly by the stories of Gregory the Great) was dismissed by Koch: it was "*für den Protestanten eine abscheuliche Vorstellung*"—"a notion abhorrent to any Protestant."

Modern Catholic authors have been no less reserved when confronted with this notion. A large grave inscription erected over the tomb of Hilary, the famous bishop

of Arles (430–449), declared that the bishop, through his renunciation of wealth, had "bought up heaven with earthly gifts." There is no hint of embarrassment in those proud lines. Not so with their modern interpreters. The editors of a 2001 catalog of the early Christian monuments of Arles suggested, somewhat timidly, that such a phrase might strike a modern person as "a formula which certain of us . . . would no doubt have found somewhat abrupt or heretical!"

It is the same in Jewish circles. Faced with the tale of King Monobazos, even the great Jewish scholar Ephraim Urbach felt ill at ease. He confessed that it was difficult to see in Monobazos's "prolonged and monotonous explanation . . . traces of a more refined doctrine . . . [some] sublimation of the materialistic simile of collecting treasures above through squandering them below."

Altogether, we are dealing with a notion that causes acute embarrassment to modern persons. Such embarrassment is calculated to make the historian of religion sit up and take notice. Why is it that a way of speaking of the relation between heaven and earth that late antique and medieval Christians took for granted seems so very alien to us? Perhaps it is we who are strange. Why is it that we have such inhibitions in approaching the subject of the joining of God and gold?

Faced by the need to explain modern inhibitions, the religious historian is well advised to turn to modern anthropologists. Their work reminds us that we, as modern persons, are out of step with past ages. They point out that our particular notion of exchange is the product of the commercial revolution of modern times. As the anthropologist Jonathan Parry makes clear, "as economic transactions become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationship, the transactions appropriate to each become ever more polarized in terms of their symbolism and ideology. . . . Western ideology has so emphasized the distinctiveness of the two cycles [religious relations with heaven and commercial transactions on earth] that it is then unable to imagine the mechanisms by which they are joined." Nowadays, the thought of such a joining of religion and commerce strikes us as something more than a harmless exercise of the imagination. Rather, it has the quality of a joke in bad taste.

Modern anthropologists have done well to explain part of our inhibitions when confronted with the images in which early Christian and medieval giving practices were saturated. But these inhibitions are not solely a modern phenomenon. As Marcel Hénaff has shown in his brilliant and extensive meditation *The Price of Truth:*

Gift, Money, and Philosophy, ancient philosophers from Socrates onward made a clear distinction between ordinary exchanges for ordinary goods and the existence of goods so precious and so nourishing to the mind and soul (such as their own teachings) that they would be tarnished and diminished by being connected in any way with mere money.

Early Christians were well aware of this tradition. They appealed to it relentlessly when attacking the rituals of their rivals—pagan and Jewish sacrifice, for instance—in which large outlays were involved. But they retained the great images of the transfer of treasure from earth to heaven and of the preparation of heavenly mansions through regular almsgiving. These were much more to them than mere metaphors. To adapt the title of a modern book on the role of metaphor in structuring social cognition, these were metaphors to live by (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson). The constant use of the metaphor of “treasure in heaven” charged the circulation of money, on all levels within the churches, with a touch of the glory of heaven.

The notion of placing treasure in heaven through almsgiving remained a metaphor to live by for Jews and Christians because, in the words of Gary Anderson, the act of almsgiving “allowed the individual to enact the miracle of God’s grace” on earth. Even a small gift to the destitute mirrored the mercy of God to a human race that was as totally dependent on him for its survival as beggars were dependent on the rich for alms. Almsgiving triggered the ultimate hope of a world ruled by a Creator who would reward mercy with mercy.

Furthermore, on a more subliminal level, the notion of treasure in heaven gripped the imagination because it seemed to join apparent incommensurables. To transfer money to heaven was not simply to store it there. It was to bring together two zones of the imagination that common sense held apart. In an almost magical imaginative implosion, the untarnished and eternal heavens were joined to earth through “unrighteous mammon”—through wealth that was traditionally associated with all that was most transient and, indeed, with all that was most sinister on earth, all too heavy with associations of violence and deceit and, even when honestly come by, still smelling of the grave. If the brutal antithesis between heaven and earth, pure spirit and dull matter, could be overcome in this way, then all other divisions might be healed.

Not the least of these divisions was the gulf between rich and poor. In the Christian imagination, the joining of heaven and earth was refracted (in miniature, as it were) through the joining of two persons (or groups of persons) in incommensurable social situations—the rich and the poor—through the gift of alms. Hence we should not imagine that the relation between rich and poor in Christian circles was governed only by compassion and by a sense of social justice. Christians could be compassionate. Their reading of the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament) kept them fully aware of the passionate concern for social justice of the prophets of ancient Israel. But both Jewish and Christian giving to the poor always involved something more than that. Almsgiving was not only a matter of horizontal outreach to the poor within society. It evoked a symbolically charged vertical relationship. It tingled with the sense that almsgiving created a bridge over a chasm that was as vertiginous as that which separated earth from heaven and human beings from God.

For, like God, the poor were very distant. Like God, the poor were silent. Like God, the poor could all too easily be forgotten by the proud and the wealthy. Hence there was an imaginative weight, for early Christian readers, in the seemingly matter-of-fact reminder of St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians “that we should remember the poor.” For by remembering the poor, pious believers (Jewish and Christian alike) took on something of the vast and loving memory of God. God never forgot the poor, while human beings—whether because they were proud or simply because they were too busy—found the poor to be, alas, eminently forgettable.

In this way, to remember the poor was seen as a joining of opposites that echoed, in society itself, the paradoxical joining of heaven and earth, of base money and eternity, and of God with humanity. Without such perilously anomalous bridges (each of which flouted human common sense), the universe itself would fall apart. The rich would forget the poor. The living would forget the dead. And God would forget them all.

One should add that the transfer of treasure from earth to heaven through almsgiving was not the only great image with which Jews and Christians sought to bridge the many chasms that played a vivid role in their imaginative world. Other images addressed the same problem—how to join the seemingly unjoinable.

In order to appreciate this, let us turn for a moment to the parable of Hermas, a Christian prophet who was active in Rome sometime around AD 140. Walking on his farm outside Rome, Hermas noticed a vine trained over an elm tree. The vine was

fruitful. The elm tree was dead. He noted: “I am thinking about the elm and the vine, that they are excellently suited to each other. . . . This vine bears fruit, but the elm is an unfruitful stock. Yet this vine, except it climbs up the elm cannot bear fruit. The rich man has much wealth, but in the things of the Lord he is poor, being distracted by his riches. But the poor man, being supplied by the rich, makes intercession for him.”

The rabbis faced a similar juxtaposition of potentially irreconcilable groups within the Jewish community. These antithetical groups were not simply the rich and the poor. Talmudic scholars were contrasted with the ignorant common people—the *ammei ha’aretz*.

A vivid rabbinic saying resembles the parable of Hermas. It spoke of the fruitful and the unfruitful parts of the vine so as to show that each contrasted group in the Jewish community (though poles apart in many ways) was dependent upon the other: “This people is like unto a vine; its branches are the wealthy, its clusters are the scholars, its leaves are the common people. . . . Let the clusters pray for the leaves, for were it not for the leaves, the clusters could not exist.”

In both cases, the image of the vine was used to conjure up an ideal of organic, almost subliminal, symbiotic unity. Matter and spirit, fruitful vine and mere unfruitful wood, earthly treasure and heaven (all of them normally considered to be antithetical and mutually exclusive) could be seen to flow into each other. At stake in the Christian communities in Rome, as with their Jewish neighbors, was not simply how to care for the poor but how to maintain solidarity in a community in which the poor represented one pole alone (but a highly charged pole) in a culturally and socially differentiated group.

This preoccupation with solidarity, and with the overcoming of potential cleavages, fits very well with what little we know of the social composition of the Christian communities in Rome that Hermas had addressed. In the second and third centuries AD, most Christians were not rich. Most thought of themselves as *mediocres*—as respectable, middling persons, such as had always found a social niche for themselves in large cities like Rome and Carthage. Their charity was not spectacular. It was low profile and effectively limited to fellow Christians. There was little or no outreach to the pagan poor. Rather, the average “poor” person in the Christian communities was a fellow believer down on his or her luck.

For this reason, we should be distrustful of the high-pitched language of Christian writers and preachers of this and later times. They wished to present Christian giving as the joining of mighty opposites. Their language drew a notional crevasse between rich and poor across what was, in reality, a socially low-profile and relatively unstratified community. What mattered for such authors was not to feed the masses but to conjure up imagined antitheses within the Christian community that only Christian charity and Christian prayer could overcome.

It is important, however, to realize that the maintenance of a sense of solidarity in the Christian communities involved far more than the circulation of money. Ritual practices that combined almsgiving with intense prayer on behalf of fellow Christians (whether living or dead) played an even more central role in maintaining solidarity among Christians than did charity to the poor alone.

The crucial issue was how best to express solidarity with the dead. In this, the practice of intercessory prayer was decisive. Prayer was thought to bridge the most poignant of all crevasses—the ultimate, chill chasm between the living and the dead. What was distinctive in Jewish and Christian circles was the manner in which relations with the dead echoed closely the metaphors associated with the notion of treasure in heaven accumulated through alms to the poor.

Almsgiving to the poor became an irremovable part of the celebration of Christian funerals and memorial meals. And it did so, in no small part, because the state of the physically dead echoed with chill precision the state of the socially dead. Both the dead and the poor were creatures reduced to ultimate helplessness. Both depended on the generosity of others. Both cried out to be remembered in a world that could all too easily have forgotten them. But to forget either the dead or the poor was doubly abhorrent to religious groups, such as Jews and Christians, whose worst fear was that their God might forget them.