

Styles of giving

by [Jerry Dean Weber](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

Edited by Warren F. Illchman, Stanley N. Katz and Edward L. Queen II, Philanthropy in the World's Traditions. (Indiana University Press, 382 pp.)

Long an area neglected by scholars, philanthropy has received a lot of attention recently. Those who work with churches on financial matters have welcomed this trend, even though scholars frequently reach different, even contradictory conclusions about the state of giving.

The current focus on the subject began with Robert Wuthnow's *God and Mammon in America* (1994). His book was followed by two that specifically explored giving in American churches: in *Money Matters* (1996) Dean Hoge and a group of interdisciplinary scholars investigated personal giving in congregations of five denominations; in *Behind the Stained Glass Windows* (1996), John and Sylvia Ronsvalle argued that church income is down because people are giving to a wider array of causes at the expense of the church. More recently, in *Financial Meltdown in the Mainline?* (1997), Loren Mead averred that churches face a financial crisis. But scholars like John Mulder (in *Financing American Religion*, edited by Mark Chaves) disagree with Mead.

Not only do scholars interpret the situation differently, they present conflicting statistics. The Ronsvalles report a continued decrease in the percentage of disposable income given to the church. *Giving USA*, published by an association of professional fund raisers, is more optimistic. The association's annual report for 1997 indicated that, as in the past, religion received the largest percentage of charitable contributions from Americans. Indeed, giving to religious organizations increased by 6.1 percent between '96 and '97. The giving to my organization, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation, has increased for the fourth year in a row.

Warren F. Illchman, past executive director of the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy; Stanley N. Katz, senior fellow of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University; and Edward L. Queen II, director of the religion and philanthropy project at the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, asked a group of scholars to describe the distinctive form that philanthropy took in particular cultures and historical periods. The result is a comparative study of philanthropy in different times and places.

The essays are grouped under five topics: philanthropy in nonliterate aboriginal traditions, historical and textual roots of philanthropy, philanthropy in cultural context, philanthropy and social change, and new directions in philanthropy. The authors studied philanthropy in Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, Jewish, Native American and Orthodox Christian religious traditions in Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, India, South Asia, China and Japan. The only continent neglected is Australia.

These essays explode our parochial ideas about philanthropy but also confirm some of our presuppositions. The authors demonstrate that religion is crucial to the distinct form that philanthropy takes in a culture. Several also found that issues of status and power influenced giving. Various understandings of duty and obligation have played a role in what cultural forms giving and philanthropy have taken, as they do in American conceptions of stewardship. The cultural and historical perspectives these essays provide may lead us to conclude that the contradictory reports on religious giving today may simply reflect our own culture's diversity.

In "Reciprocity and Assistance in Precolonial Africa" Steven Feierman reminds us that dominance and privilege are part and parcel of philanthropy. The point "is that philanthropy inevitably has a two-sided character in which kindness and privilege experience an uncomfortable marriage to one another." In precolonial Africa giving was a

form of incorporation, a means by which a stranger became part of the family and the religious community. Today, we often do not have time to give the same communal meaning to philanthropy.

John A. Grim makes clear that philanthropy and giving in Native American societies are part of a cosmological understanding. Similarly, for many Christians the term "stewardship" is synonymous with the syllogism of creation: God created the world and all that is in it; all that I have is a gift from God; therefore, I should give a portion of what I have received back to God. When this view is expressed as a duty or an obligation, it becomes a detriment to giving. Grim's essay reminds us that because secular Americans tend to see giving in individualistic terms, they need help to understand that there is something larger than the self.

Most Christians recognize generosity and service as essential elements of Christian giving and philanthropy. The question is whether they put this belief into practice. Amanda W. P. Guruge and G. D. Bond point out the central importance of generosity and service in Theravada Buddhism. *Dana*, or generosity/giving, is more than a virtue for Buddhists. Buddhist tradition also emphasizes the importance of giving thanks for donations. Perhaps Christians can learn better to express thanks for philanthropic gifts.

As one who assists Presbyterian congregations with the establishment of endowments, I read Said Amir Arjomand's essay with particular interest. A professor of sociology at SUNY at Stony Brook, Arjomand discusses philanthropy, the law and public policy in Islam. He shows how *waqf*--which we would translate as endowment or legal foundation--operates as an instrument of public policy in Islam. In contrast, most of the churches that I have worked with understand that a portion of their endowment's work goes toward mission or ministry with persons outside their own religious community. In many cases churches see endowments as instruments of congregational policy, and forget that they could be used as agents of change.

Amanda Porterfield, professor of religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, writes about the unintended consequences of philanthropy. In her history of the Mount Holyoke Missionaries in northwest Persia, western India, and southeast Africa, she explores philanthropy's imperialistic connotations. Her essay makes us aware that careful thought must go into charity and giving, and that we must be concerned about the long-term consequences of our philanthropy.

The three essays that end the book give important insights into the way philanthropy is conditioned by specific national cultures and histories. Adele Lindenmeyr focuses on the influence of Russia's history of authoritarian paternalism. Vivienne Shue describes the resurgence of both individual and social philanthropy in China. And Andrees A. Thompson and Leilah Landim outline the development of a new form of philanthropy in Latin America, one sensitive to the area's cultural and religious heritage.

The cross-cultural understandings this book provides can do much to help us determine the distinctive shape and form American religious philanthropy might take in the future.