

## **Graduate Thesis**

# **Religion and Poverty: A study of The Abrahamic Religions Throughout Greater Seattle.**

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**Abstract**

One value that the majority of the world's religions share is the practice of helping other human beings that are in need. This effort may be accomplished in many different ways depending on geographic location and religious beliefs. This study addresses the motivation behind and methods used by the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities throughout the greater Seattle area by examining portions of the *Qu'ran* and Bible, and providing examples of how each religion addresses poverty. While each community chooses to help poor and needy people based on religious beliefs and what they believe to be right, there are certain methods and principles that experts in the fields of poverty elimination and community development believe to be most successful. The purpose of this study is to compare and contrast the different ways that the three religious communities in Seattle address poverty, and to recognize the best practices within each religion. If the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities would learn from each other, poverty will be addressed more successfully.

## **Introduction**

The number of people living in a state of poverty or desperate need throughout the world is astounding. Many of these people could not survive without benefiting from the support of individuals, families, governments, and organizations. There have been thousands of initiatives established to help eradicate poverty throughout the world with the goal of helping others in need who cannot help themselves. Some of these initiatives have been locally based and supported primarily by families and individuals while others, such as the Millennium Project, have been supported by a wide variety of families, non-profit organizations, and national governments. Regardless of the size, amount of financial support, number of individuals contributing, or issues of poverty that each initiative or project supports, each has its own specific goals. Because of the multitude of problems related to poverty, a wide variety of people, approaches, and solutions are needed to reach each individual or community in need.

This paper will focus on the efforts of religious communities throughout the greater Seattle area to address issues of poverty. Specifically, the concentration will be on the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The purpose is to compare and contrast the methods used by each religious community, and to understand the benefits and drawbacks of each unique approach. The desired result is that if each religious community learns from the others' best practices, solving issues of poverty throughout greater Seattle will be done more successfully.

It is necessary to describe the motivations and actions of Seattle-based Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities as they each address poverty in accordance with their religious teaching. In order to understand the inspiration of each religious community, a

brief analysis of their foundational texts is required. This will be done by examining specific references to charity, the poor, the oppressed, and serving those in need made in The Bible and The *Qur'an*. Following the scriptural analysis will be several examples of how different individuals, organizations, churches, mosques, and synagogues are practically approaching this issue, gathered primarily from personal interviews that were conducted with members of each religion. The conclusion will provide an explanation of some of the differences and similarities in how each religion addresses poverty, as well as a recommendation for how these communities can be more effective based on academic research by experts in the field.

The Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities were chosen not only because Abraham is a common designation that establishes a common heritage, but also because each religion is influential in the fight against poverty. While each religion has members throughout the entire world who contribute to the fight against poverty, they are all active in addressing poverty throughout greater Seattle.

### **Abraham's Significance**

The Jewish, Islamic, and Christian faiths are often referred to as the Abrahamic Religions, especially in groups of people who seek to recognize the similarities between the three, because they all believe that Abraham is the patriarch of their religion and the founder of monotheism. Although Abraham is the patriarch of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and his influence has created many similarities between these religions, it is important to recognize that there are many theological differences.

When Abraham was seventy-five, he entered into a covenant with God. God required Abraham to leave the home of his father and seek the land that God had promised to both he and his descendents. In return, God promised to make Abraham into a great nation if he would serve God alone. This covenant between Abraham and God signifies the foundation of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. To each religion, Abraham represents a model of how humankind should respond to God's commands and live a life that displays courage, faith, obedience, sacrifice, and trust in one supreme God.

#### Abraham in Judaism

In the Jewish community Abraham is referred to as *Avraham Avinu*, or "Abraham our Father," because God promised him that through his offspring, all the nations of the world would be blessed. Jews believe that the covenant between Abraham and God was passed on through the genetic line of Isaac. According to Old Testament scripture, God promises Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). The Jews believe that God made this statement with direct reference to their nation.

#### Abraham in Islam

Muslims believe that Abraham was sent by Allah (God) to found the religion of Islam. While Christians and Jews believe that the covenant between Abraham and God was passed down through his son Isaac, Muslims believe that the covenant was given to both of his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. After Hagar, Abraham's second wife, and Ishmael were driven out by Sarah, Abraham's first wife, they wandered in the desert looking for water. Angels descended upon them and promised Hagar that God would bless Ishmael and make him the father of the nation. It is believed that Hagar and Ishmael eventually

settled in what is today Mecca, Saudi Arabia, where Ishmael's descendents became Muslims.

### Abraham in Christianity

Christians believe in the same history and covenant as Jews, but they additionally believe in the New Testament, which states that Jesus Christ, God's only son, was sent to earth to live and die as human, thus fulfilling the promise that God made to Abraham.

Those who believe in Jesus as their savior become Christians.

### **What is poverty?**

It is difficult to provide a definition of poverty because each individual has a unique understanding of what constitutes poverty based on their current economic or social status, their life experiences, the culture they live in, their worldview, and what they believe to be the necessities of life. For example, a wealthy broker in the New York Stock Exchange will likely define poverty differently than a single mother infected with AIDS living in a Kenyan slum. What the broker views as a necessity, the single mother may view as a luxury she will never obtain. An item the single mother may spend years saving for is the same item the broker can afford to throw in the garbage because it is more than one year old. Because of this variance, poverty is difficult to define in a single sentence or through a few synonymous words. World Bank provides the following definition on their website:

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time.

Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. So poverty is a call to action -- for the poor and the wealthy alike -- a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities. (World Bank)

It is important to recognize that helping those who live in poverty means more than just addressing a lack of money or material possessions. Limiting the definition of poverty in this way excludes people who are truly powerless because they lack basic human resources. This, in turn, limits the ability of individuals and communities to help the impoverished. While many religious communities address the lack of money or material possessions in the lives of the impoverished, it is important to recognize that helping those who live in poverty can mean more than that. It may include providing food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, health care to the sick, a job to the unemployed, freedom to the oppressed, and much more. To limit the definition of poverty is to limit the ability of individuals and communities to help the impoverished. While the definition of poverty should be broad and inclusive, for the purpose of this paper it will be used to describe the state of an individual or family who is in need and is being served by the Jewish, Islamic, or Christian communities.

Now that poverty has been properly defined, it is important to understand what the foundational text of each religion says in regard to addressing poverty.

### **Biblical and *Qur'anic* Commands**

It is important to understand the difference in authority and influence of the Bible and *Qur'an* in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The Old Testament is significant to each religion because it describes the creation of the world and the beginning of mankind. As mentioned in the section on Abrahamic Religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity believe the Old Testament documents the foundation of their religion. Jews recognize The Old Testament as the entirety of their scriptures, while Christians and Muslims recognize both The Old Testament and The New Testament. Additionally, Muslims proclaim the *Qur'an* to be the Holy Scriptures given by Allah (God) through the final prophet Muhammad. Although Islam recognizes the Bible as being an important religious document, the *Qur'an* is the central religious text.

Following is an explanation of some of the most significant scriptures related to caring for the needs of the poor, oppressed, and impoverished.

#### Judaism and the *Tenakh*

There are hundreds of scriptures throughout the *Tenakh*, or Old Testament as referred to by non-Jews, that describe God's desire that the needs of the impoverished are met. Many of the scriptures were written for a similar purpose and can be grouped together to provide an understanding of a specific concept or teaching. There are several primary reasons that Jews serve the poor based on commands in the *Tenakh*. This section discusses the nature of God's character as defined in the *Tenakh*, His commands to the Israelites to care for the poor, and the blessing that is received by those who carry out the commands.



One of the primary reasons that followers of the *Tenakh* believe it is important to help the impoverished is because God Himself modeled such behavior. In Chapter 9 of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the nation of Israel that it is only by God's grace and mercy that they will possess the land that God promised. The Israelites had turned a stubborn heart toward God numerous times, but the Lord forgave them and continued to uphold the covenant He made with Abraham. Likewise, Jews are expected to be gracious and merciful people.

In Chapter 10, Moses continued to remind the nation of Israel of the covenant they made with God. As he lists a set of expectations and requirements for what God desires from the people, he said the following:

For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

Here, Moses warned the Israelites to not callous their hearts or stiffen their necks towards others, particularly to the widow, orphan, and alien. The Jews believe that if the God of Abraham loved and served the underprivileged and those in need, so too should the people who call Him God. It is important to note that while God does not want the Israelites to be negatively influenced by the Gentiles (see God's prohibition of intermarriage in Deuteronomy 3), He still modeled an attitude of love toward the aliens, or outsiders, by feeding and clothing them. This reinforces the idea of loving and serving those in need regardless of their position toward God.

In the Psalms, we find a record of David's thankfulness for God's love and provision, specifically for those in need. In Psalm 34, verse 6, David wrote, "The poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles." In deciding to mention the poor man specifically, David reminds readers of the importance of one's attitude toward those in poverty.

In Psalm 68, David writes a song for the Lord, calling others to praise God for the things He had done. He described God as "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation" (Psalm 68:5). It is clear from the preceding verses that caring for the poor, widowed, orphaned, and alienated is part of God's character. Therefore, Jews believe that God expects the same from the Jewish community.

Not only does God set an example for the Jewish people through His character, He commands the same from His chosen people, the Israelites. In the book of Exodus, God gave the Law to Moses. Shortly after the 10 Commandments, God told Moses, "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan...if you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest" (Exodus 22:22). Here, God did not change the laws for the widows and orphans, rather, He commanded the nation of Israel to be aware of their condition and treat them accordingly. God warned that their vulnerable status should not prompt others to take advantage of them.

The author of Psalm 82:3-4 wrote, "Vindicate the weak and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked." Jews recognize these verses as a command from God on the proper response

toward poverty. It is the responsibility of the Jews to provide for the needs of the weak, fatherless, afflicted, destitute, and needy.

Later in the *Tenakh*, the prophet Isaiah suggested, at the beginning of Chapter 58, that the people did not understand why God had not noticed their prayers or good deeds. Although the Israelites may have recognized that their behavior was sinful, they believed God would still bless them, as they were His chosen people. Throughout the *Tenakh*, God commands the Israelites to fast for many reasons. They fasted when loved ones were sick or had died, when they sought God's forgiveness, when they were in danger, to remember important events, and for many other reasons, but the common motivation was in response to a command from God or for the purpose of pleasing Him. In the early verses of Isaiah 58, it is clear that the Israelites fasted for the wrong reasons. Isaiah prophesied the following:

Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the ends of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Here, God not only condemned the fasting that took place within the nation of Israel, but He commanded a different type of fasting. He desired a fast that benefits the lives of the poor, oppressed, and impoverished because that kind of fast showed love for God and concern for His people. Instead of fasting only for personal spiritual benefit, God desired the Israelites to serve others through their fasts. Additionally, the service to the poor is one way that the Jews can worship God. Daniel Groody commented, "As the prophets of

Israel repeatedly insist, without attending to the rights and the needs of the poor, people cannot truly know God nor render to God true worship” (p. 40).

In addition to regular fasting, God calls the nation of Israel to care for the needy, the aliens, the widows, and the poor by providing food for them. The following verses are commands for the Israelites to leave a portion of their harvest for aliens, widows, and orphans. The alien is used to describe an outsider, or someone who is not an Israelite.

When you reap the harvest of your land, moreover, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field nor gather the gleaning of your harvest; you are to leave them for the needy and the alien. I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 23:22)

You shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat. (Exodus 23:10-11)

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you eat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. (Deuteronomy 24:19-21)

These verses command the Israelites to rid themselves of selfishness and provide for the poor and hungry.

Finally, the *Tenakh* suggests that God will bless the Jews for giving to the poor. Proverbs 19:17 says, “One who is gracious to the a poor man lends to the Lord, and He

will repay him for his good deed.” The author not only states that graciousness to the poor is a method of serving God, He also suggests that God will repay those who give to the poor. It is not clear how God will repay a gracious giver, but many Jews believe it is through financial blessing.

The author of Psalm 41 wrote, “How blessed is he who considers the helpless, the Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble” (Psalm 41:1). The author suggested that God recognizes when an individual provides help to the helpless, and God will do so in return. Jews believe that one of the most effective ways to receive God’s blessing is by helping those in need.

In Her book *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law & Tradition*, Rabbi Jill Jacobs discusses the overarching themes of the Jewish community in their approach toward poverty. She discussed the following verses as one of the main Biblical texts that teach on the subject of poverty:

However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do

not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:4-11)

Referring to these verse, Jacobs wrote, “The overarching Jewish attitude toward the poor is best summed up by a single word in this biblical text: *achikha* (your brother). With this word, the *Torah* insists on the dignity of the poor and it commands us to resist any temptation to view the poor as somehow different from ourselves” (p. 12). She continued to write, “In addition to challenging us to see the poor person as a member of our family, the word *achikha* also disabuses us of any pretense that we are somehow inherently different from the poor” (p. 12). Jacobs argues that one of the main reasons that Jews care about the poor is because a poor person is no different in the eyes of God. Neither should they be different in the eyes of a wealthy Jew.

Based on Old Testament scripture, Jews believe that serving people in need is one way they can show their love for God. It is clear that God’s nature is to love and care for the poor. Additionally, He commands His followers to do the same and promises that He will bless them in return. Because of this, the majority of Jews believe that true commitment to God requires a commitment to providing for the needs of others.

### Islam and the *Qu'ran*

There are five pillars of Islam that must be practiced by all members. They are faith, prayer, *zakat*, the fast, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. While each of the pillars is equally important, the principle of *zakat* is especially relevant in the context of helping people in need. The word *zakat* literally means purification and growth, and “is an obligatory welfare tax, to be paid annually by all adult Muslims on all surplus earnings” (Ayoub, p. 60).

It is important to notice some of the important aspects of *zakat*. First, *zakat* is to be paid once per lunar year, or approximately once every 355 days. All Muslims are required to pay *zakat* when a certain amount of money or assets, called *nisab*, is reached or exceeded. If an individual does not reach *nisab* in a calendar year, then *zakat* is not obligatory but optional. The precise amount of *nisab* is determined by the current value of silver and gold and may vary from year to year. Mahmoud Ayoub, author of *Islam: Faith and History*, wrote, “The tax is set at two and a half percent of the value of all wealth accumulated during the year above a certain amount [*nisab*]. This includes savings earned through trade, any other gain – may it be financial or in livestock, agricultural produce, or revenue from real estate – and all other revenues” (Ayoub, p. 60).

Each Muslim calculates his or her own *zakat* individually. Because Islam believes that all things belong to the Lord, and wealth is a symbol of God’s trust, it is detestable for a Muslim to give less than 2.5% for *zakat* if he/she exceeds *nisab*. Ayoub wrote, “By offering *zakat* Muslims purify themselves from greed and attachment to material possessions...in the meantime, the poor and the needy and the community in general all

benefit” (Ayoub, p. 60). In other words, the money gained from *zakat* is to be used to help the poor and needy.

In addition to *zakat*, each Muslim is encouraged to give as he or she is able through *sadaqa*, or “voluntary charity.” The following story was told by Hamed, director of the social services program at Iman Center in Kirkland, Washington and represents the importance of charity in Islam:

The Prophet said: “Charity is a necessity for every Muslim.” He was asked: “What if a person has nothing?” The Prophet replied: “He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity.” The Companions asked: “What if he is not able to work?” The Prophet said: “He should help poor and needy persons.” The Companions further asked, “What if he cannot do even that?” The Prophet said, “He should urge others to do good.” The Companions said, “What if he lacks that also?” The Prophet said, “He should check himself from doing evil. That is also charity”. (Hamed)

This story suggests that it is imperative that every Muslim does what he or she is able to do to help others in need. While *zakat* is commanded for every Muslim who exceeds *nisab*, those who have little are still required to help the poor in other ways.

In addition to *zakat*, the *Qur'an* provides other examples of and exhortations to give. Because the *Qur'an* is believed to be a direct revelation from Allah to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, each verse in it is viewed as a command from God to every Muslim.

The word charity is used regularly throughout the *Qur'an*, and is observed by Muslims through provision for the poor. While financial provision is a common form of



charity, Muslims recognize other ways to provide charity to the poor. This may include providing clothes or blankets for the homeless or food for the hungry. Other methods of providing charity for the poor will be discussed in the section on methods of serving.

Following are some scriptures from the *Qu'ran* related to charity:

Only he should visit or tend God's houses of worship who believes in God and the Last Day, and is constant in prayer, and spends in charity, and stands in awe of none but God: for [only such as] these may hope to be among the right-guided!  
(9:18 Asad)

He who used to enjoin upon his people prayer and charity, [40] and found favour in his Sustainer's sight. (19:55 Asad)

These verses provide clarity and understanding for the importance of charity among every Muslim. They suggest that the giving of charity pleases God.

It is important to recognize that Muslims believe that Allah is just, and will judge people according to what they deserve. To those who give freely to the poor and participate in charity, Allah responds with love and compassion. To those who ignore the needs of the poor and spend their money on selfish pleasures, Allah will punish them for their evil deeds. The following verses from the *Qu'ran* explain Allah's response to the actions of people:

If you do deeds of charity openly, it is well; but if you bestow it upon the needy in secret, it will be even better for you, and it will atone for some of your bad deeds.  
And God is aware of all that you do. (2:271 Asad)

Verily, those who have attained to faith and do good works, and are constant in prayer, and dispense charity - they shall have their reward with their Sustainer, and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (2:277 Asad)

O ye who believe! There are indeed many among the priests and anchorites, who in Falsehood devour the substance of men and hinder (them) from the way of Allah. And there are those who bury gold and silver and spend it not in the way of Allah. Announce unto them a most grievous penalty - On the Day when heat will be produced out of that (wealth) in the fire of Hell, and with it will be branded their foreheads, their flanks, and their backs, their flanks, and their backs. "This is the (treasure) which ye buried for yourselves: taste ye, then, the (treasures) ye buried!" (Surah at-Taubah 34-35)

Similar to Old Testament scripture, the *Qu'ran* commands Muslims to show their concern for the poor by helping them. The use of the word charity throughout the *Qu'ran* is often understood to suggest financial provision for the poor. Each Muslim's involvement in helping the poor, whether through *zakat* or charity beyond the minimum requirement, is judged by Allah. He will find favor with those who give much, and judge harshly those who are selfish. Thus, Muslims place much value on their involvement with the poor and needy.

### Christianity and the New Testament

Christians believe that the New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old Testament and that Jesus Christ was the Messiah prophesied about throughout the Old Testament. Although Christians believe in the truths and commands of the Old Testament, this section focuses on New Testament scripture related to the impoverished because Old

Testament scripture was examined in the section on Judaism. Daniel Groody wrote, “In the New Testament one out of every sixteen verses is about the poor. In the Gospels, the number is one out of every ten; in Luke’s Gospel it is one out of every seven, and in James, one out of every five” (p. 32). The New Testament teaches that Jesus came to help the needy, that serving the needy is akin to serving Jesus himself, and that those who love God ought to show that love by helping those in need.

At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he came to Nazareth where He was raised as a child. He entered the synagogue and began to read from the Old Testament, as was the tradition on the Sabbath. After opening to the book of Isaiah, Jesus said:

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” (Luke 4:18)

This scripture is important for two primary reasons. First, Jesus asserted His authority by stating that the spirit of the Lord God is upon Him, and that His authority was directly from God. Secondly, in addition to proclaiming the gospel, He was commissioned by God to meet the needs of others by releasing the captives, giving sight to the blind, and setting free the oppressed. Jesus understood that addressing issues of poverty and need must be done in a variety of ways. Christians believe that Jesus is the model for how they are to live their lives today. Bryant Myers commented regarding this verse, “Jesus’ mission is a holistic mission to the poor” (p. 35). If Jesus was sent to help the needy, Christians who desire to live by Jesus’ example should do the same.

Later in Jesus' ministry, He taught a parable to address people who made a habit of hosting public events with improper motivation. Jesus addressed those people who desired to be noticed and honored, even to the point where they were ignoring or oppressing those who were less fortunate. He said:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

(Luke 14:14)

Jesus suggested that the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind should not be overlooked in favor of the rich. Contrary to a society where many men exalted the rich because it often provided personal benefit, Jesus commanded His followers to associate with those who were poor and unable to provide anything in return.

One of Jesus' most commonly known teachings with respect to the poor and impoverished is found in Matthew 25. At the end of his speech on the Mount of Olives, Jesus described what would happen when the Messiah returned. His warning served to remind those listening to pay attention to those less fortunate than themselves. The following passage comes at the end of Jesus' teaching to His disciples:

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you

clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.”

Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.” Then He will also say to those on His left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothes Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” Then they themselves also will answer, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?” Then He will answer them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

(Matthew 25:34-40)

Jesus taught His disciples that the way they responded to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, unclothed, sick, and oppressed is the same response they have for Him. Thus, one factor that determines a Christian’s love and service to Jesus Christ is how they serve the less fortunate. Additionally, Jesus suggested that He will judge people based on their treatment of those who are need. He said He will bless those who bless others, and He

will curse those who curse others. Jesus' teaching provides clear instruction of how Christians are to respond to poverty.

Later in the New Testament, the apostle John, who some theologians consider to be the cousin of Jesus, seemed to echo the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25. In a passage written to instruct followers of Jesus on how to love one another, John wrote, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). John suggested that those who love God must help others in need. If a Christian has the ability to give, but ignores a person in need, John questions whether the love of God abides in him.

In the book of James, the author, most likely the brother of Jesus, wrote to the twelve tribes who were dispersed throughout the region. The recipients of the letters were most likely Jewish-Christians who were being instructed by James to live a life worthy of the calling of Jesus Christ. James concluded the first chapter of his letter by stating, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). James suggested that true followers of God do not merely hear His commands; they act on them. Rather than falling captive to the practices of the world, those who love God must respond to people in need.

It is clear throughout the New Testament, whether from the teaching of Jesus Christ or the letters written by other Christians, that those who truly follow the commands of Jesus Christ must care for the needs of the impoverished. Not only did Jesus recognize this duty as one of His purposes on earth, but He commanded His

followers to take action as well. While this may be done in a variety of ways, addressing poverty is necessary for every Christian.

### **To “save” or serve**

There is an important decision, or dichotomy as seen by some, that every religion must address when it comes to helping the poor, oppressed, needy, and impoverished. Each religion must choose what is more important, converting those in poverty or helping them with their physical needs. This dichotomy is central to understanding a religion’s teachings about and it’s follower’s response to poverty. While there may not be a unified stance on this question within each religion due to varying philosophies, this section will attempt to explain the approach taken by members of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

### We are not in the business of Proselytizing

The Jewish community does not focus on religious conversion or proselytizing when addressing poverty. Rabbi Allen Cook of Temple De Hirsch Sinai said, “We are not in the business of proselytizing or converting; that is God’s job. We address the poor because we are all creatures in God’s eyes and we need to work together to reach the place where God wants us to be” (personal communication, October 6, 2009). Jews believe that every human being was created equally in the image of God and that God desires all humankind to work together to help those in need. Conversion to Judaism, or an acceptance of Jewish beliefs and values, is not as important as addressing the physical needs of people living in poverty. “Getting the ‘message’ across, the message that there is a God who loves the people on earth, is secondary to meeting physical needs”, said Cook (personal communication, October 6, 2009). Kim Greenhill, director of community

services at the Jewish Federation of Seattle said, “Conversion is not a Jewish focus” (personal communication, October 13, 2009). Many of the verses throughout the Old Testament, including Leviticus 23:22 mentioned previously in the section on scriptural commands, do not suggest that conversion to Judaism should be included in a Jews service to the needy. Rather, Jews believe that Old Testament scripture teaches that caring for the physical needs of the impoverished should be the primary concern.

Additionally, Jews do not believe that the goal of religion is to make it to heaven. Greenhill said, “Jews don’t believe in heaven in the same context as many religions do. We believe that this is the life that matters to God, and the way to please Him is by helping others” (personal communication, October 13, 2009). One of the primary reasons that any religion seeks to convert others is to save them from hell or evil by providing them entrance into heaven or afterlife. Because Jews do not believe this is necessary, they focus on addressing the physical needs of the poor. They believe that God expects every person to make the most of their life here on earth by helping others and treating others with respect and dignity.

### Intention Matters

The prophet Muhammad said, "No babe is born but upon *Fitra* (as a Muslim). It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Polytheist" (Sahih Muslim, Book 033, Number 6426). Because of this belief, the majority of Muslims do not believe that someone can convert to Islam; rather, an individual who decides to officially practice Islam is simply reverting back to the condition they were born into. Muslims believe that every human is to be treated with respect and that every man and woman has the recognition of Allah imprinted on their souls. However, it is up to each person to make a



decision to recognize Allah as his or her God. Thus, Muslim's desire for non-Muslims to recognize Islam as truth, but they realize that conversion is the responsibility of Allah.

With respect to those living in poverty, Muslims believe that meeting their physical needs takes priority over their commitment to Allah. Charity is an important theme throughout the *Qur'an*, and Muslims are expected to give to the needy without expecting anything in return. Hamed, director of the social services committee at the *Iman* Islamic center in Kirkland, WA who preferred to be referenced by his first name, said, "One of the most important aspects of Islamic giving is the intentions behind one's actions. If a Muslim gives to the poor with improper motives, his or her act is completely invalidated" (personal communication, October 30, 2009). If the focus of helping the poor becomes conversion, or reversion, it deemphasizes the Islamic belief that all human beings were created by Allah to be treated equally. "If a Christian, Jew, atheist, or member of any other religion gets the idea that help from the Muslim community is being given in exchange for conversion, it would leave them with a bad feeling" (Hamed personal communication, October 30, 2009). It is important that an individual in need does not believe they are receiving help from a Muslim in exchange for religious conversion, but rather out of genuine concern for his or her well being.

It is the duty of each Muslim to faithfully practice *zakat* and charity regardless of the religious condition of the needy. If the opportunity to teach about Allah and the prophet Muhammad arises, then a Muslim should speak freely about his or her beliefs; however, it is not of primary concern when addressing poverty within the Islamic community.

Serving is Good, Saving is Necessary

This topic is heavily debated in the Christian church and has been a source of arguments, quarrels, and division among Christians. On one end of the spectrum there exist Christians who follow a social gospel, commonly attributed to intellectual Protestant churches or communities. Many supporters of the social gospel believe that Jesus Christ will not return until the world is devoid of social evils. Thus, it is extremely important for the Christian church to take strong action to support the poor, oppressed, impoverished, and marginalized. Not only do social gospel supporters believe that social action encourages the return of Christ, but they also believe it is the best way to show the love of God to non-Christians. Many Christians who oppose the social gospel movement believe that there is too much focus on meeting the physical needs of people instead of meeting their spiritual needs through evangelism, or sharing the gospel message.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are many Christians who believe that spreading the message of the gospel to convert people to Christianity should be the focus of the Christian church. This viewpoint is commonly attributed to the evangelical churches or Christians who adhere to a fundamental or conservative view of Christianity. While many evangelical Christians also strive to serve the poor and needy, others believe that evangelism is the only purpose of a Christian.

Although there are individuals and communities who practice one of the abovementioned extremes, most Christians believe there is a middle ground. It is commonly argued that if the goal of Christians is to be like Jesus Christ, then members of the Christian community should both evangelize and serve the poor and needy. Throughout the gospels in the New Testament, Jesus does both. There are accounts of Jesus healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and teaching his disciples to meet the needs of

the poor. However, it is also clear that Jesus spent much of his time meeting the spiritual needs of others and teaching them how to live a life that pleases God.

The majority of Christians believe that the duty of a Christian is to balance the verbal proclamation of the gospel and to meet the physical needs of the poor. Leah Klug, pastor at Quest Church in Seattle, said, “There is a good tension that exists between evangelism and ‘social gospel’ issues, or meeting physical needs. You cannot have one without the other. It is not either one or the other. They must come together” (personal communication, September 14, 2009). Stott wrote, “Social action is a partner of evangelism. As partners the two belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own two feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself” (Stott, p. 27).

While both evangelism and social action, or caring for the physical needs of the poor, are seen as important, the majority of Christians would argue that spiritual needs are more important than physical needs. There are several reasons for this. First, a common belief is that the end goal of Christianity is to spend eternity with God in heaven. Jesus taught his disciples that He is “the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Him” (John 14:6). Because many Christians believe the previous two statements are true, it is logical for them to believe that saving a person from eternal separation from God must be a priority that can only be answered by spiritual transformation, or conversion.

Secondly, a well-known verse in Matthew 28 has led many Christians to place a greater importance on meeting the spiritual needs of the poor. In verse 19 and 20, Jesus

tells his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” In the majority of Bibles, this passage falls under a heading titled “The Great Commission.” As a result, many Christians believe that making disciples, or preaching the gospel, is commanded as being more important than meeting the physical needs of the poor.

Thirdly, many Christians recognize Jesus’ teachings, such as His command to store up treasures in heaven instead of on earth, as placing a higher importance on the eternal than the temporal. Thus, sharing the gospel with the poor, oppressed, and impoverished gives them an opportunity to make a decision that will affect their eternity, while providing a meal only provides temporal benefit. Tim Keller, senior pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, NY and adjunct professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote the following in his article *The Gospel and The Poor*:

Evangelism has to be seen as the “leading edge” of a church’s ministry in the world. It must be given a priority in the church’s ministry. It stands to reason that, while saving a lost soul and feeding a hungry stomach are both acts of love, one has infinitely greater effect than the other. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, Paul [The Apostle] speaks of the importance of strengthening the “inner man” even as the outer, physical nature is aging and decaying. Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being. This is true, not because the “spiritual” is more important than the physical, but because the eternal is more important. (p. 10)

Finally, some Christians believe that the Biblical accounts of Jesus' life portray His focus on spiritual needs rather than on physical needs. They recognize the time Jesus spent healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and meeting the physical needs of the poor, but believe that the New Testament's record of Jesus' life shows a greater focus on teaching about God and meeting spiritual needs. Because of this, most Christians tend to focus on spiritual needs, or saving, over physical needs, or serving, though the majority would say that both are still important.

Regarding service to the poor and evangelism, Keller wrote, "Many [Christians] today are seeking for some sort of balance. On the one hand, some say that while both are necessary, is the means to the end of evangelism. That is, we [Christians] should do mercy and justice only because and as it helps us bring people to faith in Christ... this means-to-an-end view opens Christians to the charge of manipulation" (Keller, p. 9). If one of the goals of meeting the physical needs of the poor is an opportunity to evangelize, manipulation will likely be unsuccessful. Neither does this method fit with the teachings of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, chapter six, where Jesus teaches his listeners to care for those who are "ungrateful and wicked." Therefore, many Christians understand the importance of providing for the needs of the poor and evangelizing strictly out of a genuine love and concern for their well being, both physical and spiritual.

### **Methods of Service**

There are many things done throughout the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities to meet the needs of those living in poverty. Although research, experience, statistics, and academic information proves that some methods of addressing poverty are

more successful than others, it is important that addressing poverty is not limited to a small number of solutions. There are religious communities throughout the entire world that focus on meeting the needs of the poor, however; this section will focus on how the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities throughout the greater Seattle area are engaging this issue.

The majority of communities, churches, temples, mosques, or organizations approach impoverished people in a variety of ways. The information gathered for each religion was done through a combination of academic research and personal interviews. While the examples provided in the following section are from a small sample of organizations, each was chosen as a representation of each religious community throughout greater Seattle. It is important to recognize, however, that there is not only one way that each religion approaches poverty, but that there are religious organizations within each religion that don't adhere to the most common practices of addressing poverty.

#### Supporting Jewish Organizations and Communities

The following three organizations were studied to determine the practical ways that the Jewish community is engaging poverty throughout Seattle: Temple De Hirsch Sinai, The Jewish Federation, and Jewish Family Services. While Temple De Hirsch Sinai is a reformed Jewish community, The Jewish Federation and Jewish Family Services employ both reformed and orthodox Jews, thus providing a cross section of Jewish beliefs, values, and practices.

Temple De Hirsch Sinai is a Reformed Jewish community and has two buildings, one located on Capitol Hill in Seattle and another in Bellevue, a suburb 10 miles from

downtown Seattle. The Temple “connects families in a Jewish community, encourages Godly worship in many different ways, and teaches scripture and Jewish values” (Cook, personal communication, October 6, 2009). It is home to approximately 1,400 Jewish families, and addresses poverty in four specific ways: by teaching, through a social action committee, by offering a “*Mitzvah* of the Month” project, and by financially supporting Jewish organizations that do hands on work with the poor.

The Rabbis at Temple De Hirsch Sinai are committed to teaching their members about the responsibility of the Jewish community to improve the lives of individuals, families, and entire communities living in poverty. This is accomplished primarily in regular services through the teaching of Old Testament scripture. Rabbi Cook said, “We often teach about the Jewish responsibility to serve those in need. This is done from the pulpit on a regular basis and is one important responsibility of every rabbi” (personal communication, October 6, 2009). In addition to regular teaching, members of Temple De Hirsch Sinai who are interested in learning more about a Jews responsibility to help the poor have the opportunity to be mentored by Rabbis or other leaders in the Temple. “There are many members here at Temple De Hirsch who are interested in serving the poor. Our leaders may meet with these people to ensure they are learning and becoming actively involved,” said Cook (personal communication, October 6, 2009).

For those individuals, Temple De Hirsch Sinai has a social action committee that is dedicated to providing opportunities for members of the temple to get involved with helping the poor and needy. This is done in the following ways: promoting projects or events that are sponsored by other organizations affiliated with the Jewish community, challenging people to become individually involved in the lives of the people they come

in contact with, determining how donated money is spent to support the poor and needy, and planning the “*Mitzvah* of the Month” project. Members of Temple De Hirsch Sinai who desire to be more involved in addressing poverty can apply to be on the social action committee.

Every member of the Temple has the opportunity to participate in the “*Mitzvah* of the Month” project. Rabbi Cook explained, “*Mitzvah* is the Hebrew word that means commandment, and is colloquially translated as ‘good deed.’ The ‘*Mitzvah* of the Month’ is not necessarily something that is commanded directly by God, but is more a random act of kindness” (personal communication, October 6, 2009). Most of these projects are in partnership with non-profit organizations that are seeking volunteers for a specific program or project. Rabbi Cook clarified, “Some past examples include collecting coats and blankets for homeless shelters, donating food to a food drive, and serving food at a local shelter”, explained Cook (personal communication, October 6, 2009). These activities are agreed upon by the social action committee and attract a large number of members from throughout the entire Jewish community, not only from Temple De Hirsch Sinai.

One of the most important ways that Temple De Hirsch Sinai addresses poverty is by financially supporting Jewish organizations that work directly with people in need. Although the temple supports several organizations, Jewish Family Services and The Jewish Federation of Seattle are the two primary beneficiaries.

The Jewish Federation is located in downtown Seattle and strives “to ensure a vibrant Jewish community that is connected locally, in Israel and worldwide” (Jewish Federation Website). According to their website, staff members “connect people to



Jewish opportunities and Jewish giving, bringing the community together to celebrate strengths and plan for the future, and raising funds for a wide variety of vital needs in the Jewish community.” The mission and vision of The Jewish Federation is accomplished through a wide variety of projects and programs directed at people of varying ages, backgrounds, and professions.

One of the Federation’s most important responsibilities is providing funds to many non-profit organizations around the world. These organizations have a wide variety of functions, including feeding the homeless, caring for abused women, providing for the needs of recent immigrants to Jerusalem, and providing education to underprivileged children. Kim Greenhill, director of community services at the Federation, explained, “Many synagogues and temples are not set up to do social services. I would probably not give money to my synagogue to help the poor; they are not in that business. They are in the business of teaching about the issues, not doing the work” (personal communication, October 9, 2009).

Even the Jewish Federation does not regularly engage the poor and needy through hands-on activities, but they distribute millions of dollars to organizations that do. Greenhill explained, “One of our greatest responsibilities is to collect money from a wide variety of Jewish communities and dole it out to other communities or organizations that do work that is in line with common Jewish beliefs and values” (personal communication, October 13, 2009). Because of this reputation, the Federation receives more Requests for Proposals each year than they are able to fund. There is a stringent process to determine which organizations receive funding. Although the receiving

organization is not required to be Jewish affiliated, one of the most important factors in whether their values are similar to the values of the Jewish community.

Additionally, there are several funds within the Federation that are used for specific purposes. For example, the Jewish Communities Campaign Fund is used to support Jews in need locally and around the world. These funds feed the hungry, care for the sick and aged, and educate young children in need. Another example is the Center for Jewish Philanthropy. This sector of the Jewish Federation plays a key role in engaging members of the community and promoting philanthropic opportunities.

The Jewish Federation also places a high value in the education and inclusion of the Jewish youth in activities and projects addressing poverty. There are three major programs aimed specifically at getting the youth involved.

The first is The Jewish Youth Philanthropy Team, referred to as J-Team within the Jewish community. The team is comprised of teenagers from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade who are interested in social action and willing to make a one-year commitment. “We want to help Jewish teenagers understand their responsibility as a member of the Jewish community to help those in need,” said Greenhill (personal communication, October 13, 2009). Once selected, each teenager is responsible to fundraise for the community pot, which will be donated to a variety of non-profit organizations at the end of each school year.

Throughout the yearlong program, members of the J-Team are required to volunteer for numerous organizations that serve the poor and needy with the purpose of helping each teenager understand the type of organization he or she is most passionate about. At the end of the school year, the J-Team must agree upon which organizations will receive funds from the community pot.

Another youth-focused program at the Jewish Federation of Seattle is the Youth Mitzvah Fund. “This program encourages children between the ages of 12 and 14 to fundraise money for their own personal *Mitzvah*, or good deed, fund,” said Greenhill, “A portion of this fund is set aside for the purpose of charity or helping people living in poverty” (personal communication, October 13, 2009). The child is encouraged to donate this money to a non-profit organization of his or her choice.

The third program directed toward Jewish youth is J-Serve, which is a nationally celebrated day of Jewish youth service. This program was created by teenagers to encourage other teenagers to engage in service opportunities in their local neighborhoods and communities. For the past five years, J-Serve has designated one day per year for youth to complete community service projects. Greenhill explained, “With each of these projects, we’re trying to get these teens to get away from the ‘what’s in it for me’ mentality that is so common in our culture. We want to start teaching the younger Jewish generations about repairing the world at a very young age” (personal communication, October 13, 2009).

Finally, there are two important programs that The Jewish Federation supports financially and by encouraging volunteer work. “Fighting Poverty with Faith” is a “national movement that encourages members of any religion to join with one another in the fight against poverty. Participating organizations make a commitment to participate in an interfaith week of action to encourage government officials to make poverty-reduction a key element of the future of politics” (Greenhill, personal communication, October 13, 2009). Throughout the dedicated week, participants are encouraged to engage in

volunteer project with members of other religions, build community relations, and encourage poverty-related teaching in public schools.

Another program is run by The Jewish Federation in Seattle and is titled “Focus and Fight: A Call to End Poverty.” This program encourages every Jewish individual, community, and organization to help alleviate poverty through a number of events or activities. These activities include a mitzvah match, which is a pairing of a local synagogue that can give financially to a local school or non-profit organization, the provision of poverty-focused curriculum to teachers and parents, and a speakers’ bureau that provides people an opportunity to be encouraged by individuals who have experienced poverty. Greenhill explained, “One of the purposes of ‘Focus and Fight’ is putting a human face to poverty. Too often we treat poverty like it is something that will never affect us. We try to get a lot of people involved who have experienced poverty. From their stories, we can learn how to better help people in need” (personal communication, October 13, 2009).

The third organization studied was Jewish Family Services (JFS). JFS is located a half mile east of downtown Seattle and seeks to “deliver essential human services to alleviate suffering, sustain healthy relationships and support people in times of need” (Jewish Family Services Website). Although their mission is not centrally focused on helping people who live in poverty, many of the programs intersect with the lives of the poor and needy. There are eight main groups of people that JFS strives to serve: children and youth, young adults and singles, couples, parents and families, aging adults, refugees and immigrants, people with disabilities, and people with emergency needs. JFS is committed to helping anyone in need, regardless of religious affiliation. A wide variety of

services are needed to meet the needs of a growing population of people in need. While JFS offers services to many different types of people, there are several programs committed to addressing poverty.

Offering employment services is one important way that JFS helps people who lack economic resources. The employment service program focuses on refugees, immigrants, and the homeless. The five important steps in this process include employment assessment, job readiness, employment counseling, job placement, and job retention. To ensure that JFS is able to help a wide variety of people, they are staffed with case managers who are fluent in over 10 languages. Additionally, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are offered on a regular basis to help people with limited English speaking ability. This has been found to greatly improve their ability to find and retain employment.

Because many of the refugees and immigrants are unfamiliar with the social structure and government policies in Seattle, JFS offers resettlement and social services programs. The resettlement programs focus on obtaining housing for immigrants and providing ESL courses to simplify the transition to living in the United States, while the social services programs offer transition services for school, medical, and legal needs, assistance with citizenship applications, and childcare for working parents. Each of these programs not only support individuals and families living in poverty, they also focus on poverty prevention. One of the most successful ways to alleviate poverty is to ensure that people never reach a state of desperate need.

Another way that JFS addresses poverty is by addressing emergency needs. This is done in the following ways: offering emergency housing vouchers, providing financial

assistance, operating a food bank and home delivery program, and providing small loans to qualified individuals.

Many of the services offered by Jewish Family Services are aimed at preventing an individual or family reaching a state of poverty. While they do offer food and finances to help struggling families, the prevention approach is unique to many of the other programs discussed in this paper. Instead of focusing on the poorest of the poor, or on people with the most need, JFS focuses on individuals and families that are one bad break away from living in poverty.

The primary way that many of the Jewish temples and synagogues throughout the greater Seattle area address issues of poverty is through financial provision. Because of this, it is important to understand the efforts of two of the main beneficiaries. Through a wide variety of non-profit organizations, the Jewish community is able to positively impact the lives of poor individuals and families throughout the world. “It is a mandate to help others if you are a Jew,” said Greenhill (personal communication, October 13, 2009). Rabbi Cook explained, “I wouldn’t say it’s an obligation to the point where someone would be excommunicated if they were not helping someone less fortunate, but even if you only have a penny you should still give. There is someone out there with only half a penny” (personal communication, October 6, 2009).

#### Giving to the poor is not an option in Islam

In the Islamic community, helping those in need is a mandatory part of following the commands of Allah. Because many of the scriptures in the *Qur’an* address this issue by commanding Muslims to give charity, the most common way the Islamic community provides for the needs of the poor is through financial giving. Chau, Martin, and Patel

suggested that Islam believes that “God creates monetary wealth and this wealth ultimately belongs to and is the property of God. Human beings should only use property and wealth to glorify God. The poor and destitute are entitled access to wealth by right. Wealth should be distributed equitably” (p. 75). However, there are many other ways the Islamic community addresses poverty. The *Iman* Center located in Kirkland, Washington, a suburb approximately 10 miles east of downtown Seattle, has several programs that meet the needs of people living in poverty. The *Iman* Center provides an accurate representation of how many Islamic communities in the greater Seattle area address issues of poverty.

The most important and active way the *Iman* Center engages poverty is through their social services committee. The committee is made of both religious leaders and regular members who operate a fund that is supported by attendees of the *Iman* Center. Each member of the committee takes serious their responsibility and strongly believes that the fund must be used in a way that is pleasing to Allah. Hamed, director of the social services committee, explained, “Just as charity is mentioned throughout the *Qur'an*, it is equally important that charity is not squandered, but spent wisely to benefit many people in need. Once you get the trust of the people supporting the social services committee, you must not break that trust” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Additionally, as discussed in the “To Save or Serve” section, the intention and motivation behind financial giving is an important characteristic of the Islamic religion. This concept is represented by the Arabic word *Niyah*, which suggests that an individual’s intentions is just as important, if not more so, than the action itself. For example, if a Muslim intends to do a good deed, but does not succeed due to a circumstance that he or she

cannot control, Allah is still pleased with them. Alternatively, if an action is done that benefits another individual, but the Muslim giving did so with improper motives, Allah is not pleased.

Hamed explained that “The social service fund is used for many regular needs, including feeding the hungry, clothing the homeless, paying a bill for a poor family, and helping recent immigrants with the initial costs of moving to a new neighborhood, state, or country. In addition to the regular needs, the fund is used for a wide variety of needs that are presented to the committee through a detailed application process” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Once an application is received, one member of the committee reviews it to ensure that it meets some basic criteria established by the committee members. It is then brought before the entire committee to discuss whether they will provide all or a portion of the requested funds. Because of the *Iman* Center’s reputation for helping people in need, they receive requests for more money than they have in their fund. This makes it difficult for the committee to determine which needs are the most important, so a hierarchy was created to establish consistent guidelines for financial giving.

“The most important needs are the ones that exist within the families who are active in The *Iman* Center,” explained Hamed (personal communication, October 30, 2009). Next, the committee accepts requests from families in community where the *Iman* Center is located. They believe that Allah has placed them in Kirkland for a specific purpose, and it is their obligation to provide for members of the community, whether Muslim or not. Finally, if money still remains after the family and local needs are met, finances are distributed to surrounding neighborhoods, other cities, and around the world.



Additionally, Hamed explained, “an individual or family is more likely to receive money if they are in an extreme state of need. For example, a single mother who works three jobs to provide for her four children will often be granted money before a single male who is in need” (personal communication, October 30, 2009).

Another important aspect of the social service fund is that the money is given in a way that honors the dignity of the recipients. Hamed said, “Helping certain families gets extremely difficult because we are so concerned with each family’s privacy. It is important that our gifts remain confidential” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). For example, if an individual or family requests food for a week to make it to their next paycheck, the committee will often provide the family with a gift card at a local grocery store. “This allows the family to preserve their dignity because the transfer can be done in a secretive way, not allowing others to recognize the needs of specific families,” explained Hamed (personal communication, October 30, 2009).

In addition to the social service fund, The *Iman* Center regularly engages in four other programs dedicated to serving the poor and needy. First, they have a program titled “Feed the Hungry,” through which members of the center volunteer at least once per month in a local homeless shelter. This provides individuals and families the opportunity to serve hot meals to people living on the streets. Hamed said, “We always prepare *halal* food, or kosher food. We bring the best that we have and we prepare it as best we can, as if we were preparing it for a special religious occasion” (personal communication, October 30, 2009).

There is also a food bank located on the bottom floor of the *Iman* Center. Members who are financially stable are encouraged to regularly provide grocery store gift

cards or non-perishable food that can be given to families in need. This food is not only given to members of the *Iman* Center, but is also distributed to families throughout the community. “Recently, we have been taking a lot of the food to local shelters or food banks because we haven’t had a lot of families in need,” explained Hamed. “We even took the food to one of the tent cities” (personal communication, October 30, 2009).

For the last nine years, members of the *Iman* Center have participated in building a home for Habitat for Humanity. This encourages the Muslim community to commit time, energy, and effort in building a new home for a family in need and is done in partnership with the Jewish and Christian communities. Hamed explained, “We partner with the Jewish and Christian communities because we are all working toward the same goal: to help a family in need. It would be nice to do this more often, but it doesn’t seem as though the Christian community is interested” (personal communication, October 30, 2009).

Finally, the *Iman* Center participates annually in an event titled “Day of Dignity.” All Muslims living on the eastside of Seattle are encouraged to gather to assemble gift baskets that are taken downtown and distributed to people living in poverty. The baskets are made of essential items that many homeless people lack, including food, warm clothing, blankets, and toiletries.

While those are only a few examples of the ways the Islamic community is meeting the needs of people living in poverty, it signifies the importance of responding to Allah’s command to give generously through charity. For Islamic communities throughout the greater Seattle area, there are many programs similar to those in the *Iman*

Center. Regardless of what center or mosque a Muslim attends, they are all taught about their responsibility to help people in need.

### Use Your Gifts, Talents, and Abilities

As mentioned in the previous section, the Christian community has a wide range of opinions and beliefs regarding the balance between evangelism and meeting the physical needs of the poor. Because of this, the methods used to serve people living in poverty vary widely from church to church and organization to organization. Some communities dedicate their efforts strictly to evangelism, others focus only on physical acts of service, but the majority of Christians believe that both must be done. While the Christian community has published entire books written on this subject, this paper will focus on the work done by Eastside Christian Fellowship (ECF), a non-denominational church located on the eastside of Seattle in Kirkland, and New Life Church, located approximately 20 miles north of Seattle. ECF and New Life Church have members from a wide variety of backgrounds, representing a large spectrum of Christian views toward poverty. Because of this, they are an accurate representation of the middle ground between the extremes of practicing the social gospel or practicing evangelism only.

There are six main ways that ECF addresses issues of poverty: Mexico missions trips with *Amor* Ministries, partnering with Christian Ministries in Africa (CMIA), partnering with New Horizons Ministry (NHM), the annual coat and blanket drive, the church benevolence team/fund, and by encouraging each individual to serve in an area they are passionate about.

The first three ways mentioned above that ECF addresses poverty is by partnering with three different non-profit organizations. Every year, Eastside Christian Fellowship

sends at least one team to Mexico in partnership with *Amor* Ministries, one team to Kenya with Christian Ministries in Africa, and participates in monthly activities at New Horizons Ministries. The purpose of each of these partnerships is two-fold: to provide for the physical needs of an impoverished family, sick orphan, or homeless teen that is living below the poverty line and to evangelize. The main purpose of the Mexico trip is to build a new house for a family in need. During the building process, as children, adults, and entire families pass by and ask questions about the project, ECF members have the opportunity to evangelize to the poor. Efforts are also made to provide for the needs of other families who live near the construction site.

The five main programs that CMIA operates include partnering underprivileged children with sponsors who contribute a monthly amount to provide for their well being, planting churches throughout six countries in Africa, providing education to children who could not afford it otherwise, operating numerous orphanages, and developing leaders through their Christian ministry school. The partnership with CMIA allows the leadership at Eastside Christian Fellowship the opportunity to present its members with a wide variety of opportunities to address poverty. Those who feel more comfortable and are able to provide financially can do so through general giving or child sponsorship. Individuals who desire hands-on experiences can travel to Kenya to volunteer in practical ways in the orphanages, schools, and churches. This type of partnership allows all members of the church to get involved.

The third organization that ECF regularly supports is New Horizons Ministries, located in downtown Seattle. The mission of NHM is “to be in relationship with homeless and street involved young people, serving and loving in the way of Jesus, and

equipping them to leave street life” (New Horizon’s Ministry Website). Eastside Christian Fellowship partners with them in several ways. First, the members of the church provide financial support by donating to specific projects or programs. Secondly, ECF sends teams to the NHM facility several times per month to serve meals. This allows individuals to engage with the street youth in practical ways. Additionally, some of the adults at ECF have become mentors for some of the youth. Finally, NHM benefits from ECF’s annual coat and blanket drive.

Another way ECF seeks to help those in need is through an annual coat and blanket drive. Each fall, ECF donates coats and blankets to several organizations that distribute them to homeless individuals throughout Seattle. The drive is operated over two weekends. The first weekend, members of ECF distribute over 1,000 flyers that explain the purpose of the drive to homes around the church’s neighborhood. The following weekend, the church returns to each home to collect any coats or blankets the family is willing to donate. Once all of the donations are collected, they are organized by gender and size before being loaded into a large moving truck. Several volunteers then deliver the coats and blankets to organizations throughout Seattle who distribute them to homeless individuals and families.

Another way Eastside Christian Fellowship addresses poverty is through the Benevolence Team. This team operates a fund that is dedicated to helping individuals and families in need. The team has two important responsibilities. Their primary concern is to prioritize the needs of the individuals and families who have requested financial support from the benevolence fund. Because the team is unable to meet every request for financial support, it is important that certain needs take precedence over other needs.

Providing for the needs of ECF members is more important than providing for individuals or families outside the church. Furthermore, caring for widows, children, and single mothers takes priority over other individuals or family units. When a request for finances is received, each member of the team votes on whether to accept or reject the request. Each individual can vote in one of three ways: in favor of the request, not in favor of the request, or in favor of a partial gift. A vote for the final option suggests that the individual or family requesting funds is worthy of receiving support, but not to the full extent of their request. Once every team member has had the opportunity to vote, a final decision is made based on the majority vote.

The second responsibility of the benevolence team is to raise money to increase the fund. This is done throughout a variety of ways. First, any person is able to donate money directly to the benevolence fund. Secondly, there are several major fundraising events throughout the year, including a silent auction, live auction, and bake sales. Finally, a small percentage of ECF's annual income from tithes and offerings goes directly to supporting the benevolence team.

Finally, the pastoral staff and elders at Eastside Christian Fellowship encourage every individual to serve people in need in any other way that one is able to. It is commonly believed throughout the Christian community that God places gifts and talents in each individual. These gifts are to be used to honor God through service to Him and service to other people. Some gifts that are mentioned in the Bible include exhortation, giving, leadership, mercy, service, teaching, knowledge, wisdom, and evangelism.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul encouraged Christians to use their gifts with others to serve God. Just as each member of the human body has a different purpose, so

too does each member of the Christian church. The church functions most effectively when each member does what he or she is good at. For example, ECF encourages individuals who are gifted in teaching to volunteer as a tutor, mentor, or teacher. A church member who is gifted in leadership may be well equipped to serve as a board member at a local non-profit organization that serves the homeless community in Seattle. There are many different ways that Christians are encouraged to be involved in service to the poor and needy outside of the church community.

New Life Church, located in Everett, WA serves the poor and needy in the following ways: hosting an annual CityFest Block Party, supporting a Global Gift Guide, participating in an annual trip to Bangladesh, “adopting” Bhutanese refugee families who have relocated to Everett, and encouraging church members to use their gifts and talents to serve the poor in a variety of other ways.

Each summer, New Life Church hosts a CityFest block party that is open to any local resident. The purpose of the block party is for members of the church to serve individuals and families in their community in a wide variety of ways. Pastor Rick Sawczuk said, “Our first priority is to help with the physical needs of members in our community, but we always preach the gospel as well. It is important for each volunteer to realize that you are meeting a physical need for the sake of the gospel” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). New Life Church offers many complimentary services to members of the community, including but not limited to haircuts, meals, bicycle repairs, simple auto repairs, fingernail and toenail painting, and games for children. Many of the families who attend CityFest are in difficult financial positions, so a free meal and haircut is extremely beneficial. After several hours of activities, one of

the church pastors teaches all attendees about Christianity and how they can learn more from the church. “Volunteering at CityFest and providing services to local families is one way we can show them that we care,” Sawczuk remarked (personal communication, September 30, 2009).

Another way that New Life Church helps the poor and needy, both locally and globally, is through participation in a global gift guide. Sawczuk explained, “Our global gift guide is an opportunity for families who may not be able to get out into the community to still contribute to the services of our church through financial giving” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). The gift guide provides an opportunity for individuals and families to donate between \$10 and \$3,000 in order to provide something for a family in need. Items in the guide include backpacks for local students, a fresh cooked meal for the homeless, chickens to produce eggs for families in South America, wells to provide water for entire villages in Africa, and much more. Each of the past three years, New Life Church has raised approximately \$100,000 for the global gift guide.

Like many other Christian churches in America, New Life Center sends teams overseas for mission’s trips. While New Life has sent teams to many different countries around the world, they are currently interested in partnering with a local church in Bangladesh to meet the needs of the poor. On a scouting trip last year, Pastor Sawczuk explored the two potential opportunities that New Life could support in future trips to Bangladesh. First, there is a need for local Bangladeshis to be trained in evangelism and Christian principles. Sawczuk commented, “I don’t think our church should be doing the evangelism in other countries because it is more successful and meaningful when coming



from the nationals. However, I do think training the nationals is something we should participate in” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). Secondly, there is a need for individuals with business experience to educate poor families on simple business practices and techniques. Bangladesh has become one of the world’s most well known countries for micro-loans, particularly because of the work done by the Grameen Bank. Because the micro-loan industry has grown rapidly, many poor individuals are receiving loans with little or no business training. New Life is evaluating whether to send teams of individuals to train the poor in basic business practices. This would improve the likelihood of success throughout the micro-loan industry in Bangladesh.

Several years ago a Bhutanese refugee family that had recently relocated to Everett Washington approached New Life hoping that the church would assist them financially. New Life agreed and began providing for a portion of their basic needs, including rent, utilities, food, transportation, and more. As time passed, the Bhutanese refugee community began to grow. The more families that arrived in Everett, the greater the need was. Today, New Life provides assistance to over 10 Bhutanese refugee families and plans to help more in the future. “This is one way we can tell someone about Jesus without preaching the gospel,” Sawczuk commented, “we are just showing them love” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). New Life has helped Bhutanese refugees obtain citizenship, apply for social security cards, study for a driver’s license, apply for jobs, and much more.

Finally, common to many Christian churches, New Life also encourages their members to use whatever skills and talents they have to help people in need. “This may be one of the most enjoyable parts of my job,” commented Sawczuk. “Doctors

volunteering to work for free, teachers tutoring homeless families, mechanics working on cars for the poor – all of these things are ways we can use our gifts for God” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). These acts of service are done for the same reasons as mentioned above in the section on Eastside Christian Fellowship.

Although ECF and New Life Church are only two examples of Christian organizations that serve the needs of the poor, their variety of approaches provide an accurate representation of the Christian community throughout the greater Seattle area. Contrary to the practices of the Jewish and Islamic communities, the majority of Christian churches and organizations incorporate evangelism in their programs that address poverty. The balance of meeting the physical and spiritual needs of the poor varies between churches and organizations, but most of them practice both.

### **Recommendations**

It is clear from the preceding examples of how the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities in the greater Seattle area approach issues of poverty, that there are a wide variety of ways to help the poor and needy. Whether it is giving money to the jobless, providing meals to the hungry, giving coats to individuals living on the streets, or providing a new home to a family in need, each act of service by these religious communities makes an impact on the lives of others. While some individuals help the poor and needy out of obligation or duty, many people do so because they want to make a difference in the lives of others to reduce poverty. Therefore, each individual, community, or organization has the ability to improve their approach to poverty by learning from other individuals, communities, or organizations.

As stated in the introduction, one of the main purposes of this research was to understand and analyze the methods each religious community is using to reduce poverty and serve the needy. Furthermore, comparing the methods and best practices of each community allows for suggestions to be made to each religious group, organization, or community as to how they can improve their approach to issues of poverty. The goal is not to evaluate each religious text, criticize each religion, or develop a new theology. Rather, the purpose of comparing each approach is to improve the influence that each religious community has on reducing poverty. Thus, it is important to look at a variety of methods and beliefs that are used and make recommendations as to how each religious community can benefit from implementing each method or belief.

#### Sense of Obligation

Within the Jewish and Islamic communities, there is an understanding that every member of the religious community is obligated to help the poor and needy. While the method used is often determined by the individual (excluding the obligatory giving as defined by *zakat* in the Islamic community) and may include financial provision, clothing the homeless, providing meals for the hungry, and much more, the participation in addressing poverty is not optional. Hussein Al-Zabani, a member at the Iman Center, said, “I would never consider halting my provision for the poor and needy for fear of what Allah would think of me. It is an important part of Allah’s commands” (personal communication, October 30, 2009). When every individual in a particular religious group, organization, or community is dedicated to serving the poor, they understandably have a greater ability to make an impact on the lives of those in need.

In the Christian community, addressing poverty through provision or service is encouraged, but is not often considered an obligation. This is often because of the importance of evangelism, which can lessen the need to care for the physical needs of the poor and impoverished. While there are certainly many Christians who seek to address poverty, some choose not to participate because it is not considered an obligation. If the Christian community were to make this a higher priority, there would be a natural increase in the number of individuals meeting the needs of the poor. This in turn would play a key role in reducing poverty.

#### Use of Talents and Abilities

As mentioned in the section that discussed how Eastside Christian Fellowship and New Life Church addresses poverty, the Christian community believes that God has given each individual certain gifts and talents. While these talents may be used for many things, the majority of Christian leaders recognize the value in using them to help the poor and needy. Many skills, such as teaching, medical practice, mechanical knowledge, and many more can be extremely valuable to individuals, families, and communities who cannot afford to pay for such services. Thus, the Christian community encourages its members to help the poor by using the gifts and abilities that God has given to them.

In the Jewish and Islamic communities, the practice of using personal talents and abilities to help the poor is less common. This does not mean that individuals in these communities are less talented; rather, they are just not often encouraged to use their talents to help the poor. One possible reason for this is the importance of financial giving in each of these communities. Because many Jews and Muslims are focused on financial provision for the poor, they may ignore their ability to influence poverty by using

practical skills. If the Jewish and Islamic communities would use the wealth of knowledge and skills within their community to address poverty, many more poor individuals and families would benefit from their involvement.

### Involving the Youth

The Jewish community throughout greater Seattle strives to involve Jewish youth in their projects and programs aimed at reducing poverty. As discussed in the section on the methods that the Jewish community uses, several programs dedicated to your involvement were explained. Not only does this encourage Jewish youth to understand the reality of poverty and the affects it has on individual's lives, but also it motivates them to get involved at an early age. As many psychologists would argue, habits are formed at a young age based on the environment a child grows up in. If this is true, encouraging the youth to be involved in the alleviation of poverty creates habits in them that will continue into adulthood.

It would be beneficial in the fight against poverty if the Christian and Islamic communities would follow the lead of the Jewish community and involve youth in their efforts to help the poor and needy.

### Long-Term Development

Rick Sawczuk commented, "I am not interested in partnering with an organization or getting involved in serving the poor unless it is going to be a long-term commitment. I am interested in transforming the lives of the poor, not just placing a Band-Aid over their problems" (personal communication, September 30, 2009). In other words, Sawczuk suggested that a one time gift or aid will not successfully change the life of the individual who receives the benefit. Providing a meal to the hungry or money to a homeless man on

the street will only meet a temporary need. “While temporary aid may be necessary,” Sawczuk continued, “it falls short of the long-term change we should be seeking” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). In order to truly reduce poverty, the lives of the poor and impoverished must experience permanent change. The only way for this to occur is for those who are working with them to make a long-term commitment. This must become a focus of the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities throughout the greater Seattle area if there is to be a significant reduction in poverty.

### Holistic Approach

New Life’s approach to working with the Bhutanese families exemplifies the importance of a holistic approach to poverty. If New Life had provided only finances to the original refugee family and not thoroughly examined additional needs, the Bhutanese community would not have experienced much success. However, New Life’s dedication to long-term commitments has enabled them to holistically care for the needs of over 10 families. They have provided for the physical needs of Bhutanese families by offering them finances, food, transportation, and much more. The families have also benefited mentally and emotionally from education, encouragement, and meaningful relationships with members of New Life. Additionally, the spiritual needs of some of the Bhutanese families have been met through the acceptance of Christian teaching and practices. The result is that these individuals and families are striving toward independence. A family that earns an income, learns the English language, creates meaningful relationships, and has new meaning to their life because of religious beliefs is no longer dependent on New Life for support.

If the entire Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities would embrace New Life's approach to holistic ministry, more individuals and families would no longer be dependent on the provision of others. Rather, the change experienced by the poor would be sustainable lasting.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was not to determine which religious community spent more time serving the poor, which religion gives the most amount of money to non-profit organizations, or whether each religion was living up to the commands of their scriptures. Rather, the purpose was to explore how the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities address issues of poverty. This was done in three different ways. First, the motivations for members of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity to help the poor, needy, and impoverished was covered through an analysis of scriptures from the Old Testament, New Testament, and Qur'an. Secondly, this paper addressed the issue of whether each religion focused more on the physical or spiritual needs of the poor. And thirdly, it provided examples of the practical things that each religious community is doing to address poverty throughout the greater Seattle area.

This approach provided a solid foundation to provide recommendations for how each religious community could learn from the efforts of the other two to strengthen the fight against poverty. Many problems have a greater chance of being successfully solved when there is a variety of input that is considered; the alleviation of poverty is no exception. It will take a wide variety of approaches, communities, and methods to reduce poverty in Seattle and throughout the world. It is unfortunate that theological differences

and historical events have dissuaded different religious communities from working together to fight poverty. If the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities in greater Seattle were motivated to help the poor solely because they wanted to reduce poverty, there would not be as much resistance to working together. Laying aside their differences, religious communities that partnered together in their approach to poverty and learned from the best practices of the others would become more successful.



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