



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on July 24, 2017

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## Should the Government Help the Needy?

All of the world's great religions and ethical systems teach of the moral obligation to help the needy. The founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, characterized the poor as beloved of God, and condemned the wealthy and privileged for their lack of generosity to the downtrodden. For Muslims, *zakat*, or alms-giving, constitutes one of the five fundamental pillars of their faith, while among Hindus, charity toward the poor is enjoined even in their oldest religious texts. A large component of civil society everywhere consists of charitable organizations whose primary objective is to alleviate the suffering of the needy — for example, malnourished children, those suffering from debilitating diseases and disabilities, and the hundreds of millions of human beings worldwide living in extreme poverty, from the slums of Bombay to the projects of the Bronx and L.A.



Because charitable giving is so universally acclaimed, it is natural to inquire whether the most powerful of man-made institutions, governments, should engage in it. After all, if even a small individual donation can make a major difference in the life of a needy child or family, surely governments, with their vast resources, can make a far greater difference. This belief — that government, traditionally viewed in the West as a source of dangerous destructive power that must be strictly limited and contained, can be turned from its violent and repressive tendencies into a force for unlimited charity — is one of the fundamental premises of modern socialism, especially in its social democratic and Christian democratic guises so characteristic of Western European and American so-called liberalism. During the last election cycle, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders articulated this position often and persuasively, attracting millions of idealistic Americans to his campaign. But should government be involved in charitable giving to the poor and otherwise needy as a matter of permanent policy?

Charitable giving is, or ought to be, voluntary. While many churches and religions expect the faithful to donate tithes and offerings, and most ethical systems enjoin charitable giving and other forms of assistance to the needy, these are never compulsory. The other day on a bus in the poor Asian country where this author currently resides, a man with no hands boarded the bus, and after reciting a Buddhist-inspired plea for charity on his behalf, walked down the aisle. Most of the passengers, this author included, gave generously to a man in obvious genuine need. For a few minutes, that particular bus became a venue for a very generous outpouring of charity toward one of the less fortunate of God's children. And every individual who participated, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim, did so out of spontaneous generosity.

So it is with all acts of charitable giving, whether great or small. But government does not acquire its vast resources in the same way as private individuals, corporations, or churches. All taxes collected are



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done under the implicit threat of punishment for the non-compliant, including heavy fines and lengthy imprisonment — strong-arm theft — whereas in the law-abiding private sector, all money is acquired via some type of voluntary arrangement — the giving of a gift or as a result of an agreement between employer and employee, for example. Therefore, if a private individual chooses freely to give a portion of what he has been gifted or earned to the poor and needy, he has a perfect moral right to do so. His resources have come to him via voluntary interactions, and he can equally dispose of them voluntarily.

But if a government decides to distribute a portion of its assets to charitable causes, it is in effect giving stolen money. The fallacy of government “charity” conflates the giving of public funds with the giving of private funds, ignoring the crucial difference in how they were acquired by the donor. For this reason, “charity” practiced by government, whether in the form of foreign aid to poor countries; aid for international efforts to eradicate diseases such as polio; or food stamps, medical benefits, and subsidized housing to the poor among its own citizens, is in fact immoral. But because it is carried out under the banner of charity, it often passes unchallenged.

As a result of popular misunderstanding of state-administered “charity,” those who oppose it are often caricatured as heartless, selfish, and cynical. Those who criticize foreign aid to poor countries, for example, are portrayed as indifferent to the fate of the impoverished.

But in truth, government aid has almost always been spectacularly less efficient and effective at combating poverty, disease, and other social ills than aid originating from the private sector — churches, nonprofit organizations, and individual giving. There is a variety of reasons for this, among them the fact that governments tend to give to other governments — whose officials may then confiscate the donations for their own benefit or redirect them to objectives at variance with their intended purpose, such as military spending. Governments, both as givers and receivers of humanitarian funds, have no incentive whatsoever to maximize efficiency, because, unlike private organizations, they can raise more money by involuntary means, via various forms of taxation, to cover budget shortfalls. Thus, while most private charitable organizations are chronically understaffed and underfunded, run by highly driven, dedicated people paid little or nothing for their efforts, governments are always characterized by bloated, inefficient, and largely indifferent bureaucracies, whose functionaries enjoy lavish benefits and competitive professional salaries. Plus, on the national level in particular, government bureaucracies are much less aware of who truly needs assistance than local churches and charitable organizations who may personally know the unfortunate.

Under the U.S. Constitution, the federal government has no authority to provide material welfare for its citizens. And as a general principle, governments should not be involved in faux “humanitarianism,” except perhaps in the immediate aftermath of unforeseen calamities such as earthquakes and hurricanes. The best thing government can do to alleviate the suffering of the needy is protect the private organizations that do it as a matter of course — and stay out of their way.

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