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***Charity across Faiths: The Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Giving in  
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam***

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***Abstract***

*God has created the whole universe and put all the required resources for the humanity. He bestowed different mental capacities to human which help out them to learn their livelihood. Some people in very society become incapable to earn. For those weaker people God command the rich to give something from their wealth so they could also fulfill their needs. Charity holds a strong position in Judaism, Christianity and Islam with different frameworks. If we see Judaism, Tzedakah is known as covenantal duty to develop equity and justice through acts of giving. It is reflected in rabbinic teachings and biblical commands. In Christianity the emphasis is on caritas, or selfless love that is inspired in the teachings of Jesus Christ AS. According to these teachings charity is a personal virtue and communal obligation. Islam provides the most comprehensive system of Charity in shape of zakah (Obligatory almsgiving) and sadaqah (voluntary charity). It develops social welfare and spiritual purification along with other benefits. In revealed religions charity is through God's commandment and essential moral imperative which develops the growth of believers. This study highlights the theological foundation, historical evolvement and contemporary applications of Charity in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is a qualitative research based on books, articles and online sources to address the social inequalities and developing interfaith understanding.*

**Keywords:** Charity, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Tzedakah, Zakah, Almsgiving

**Introduction**

The concept of charity is deeply rooted in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is the right of poor and need in the wealth of rich ones. This act of sacrificing wealth because of divine commandment brings reward for the believer here and hereafter. Through this the weaker sections of society can eat food and maintain their necessities. It is also considered a test and trial for the wealthy if one spends the money on poor or not. The religious scriptures of all Abrahamic faiths highlight its

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importance and command for a welfare society. This study explores the theological foundations and historical development of charity in Abrahamic societies.

### **1. Charity in Judaism**

The term *Tzedakah* is used in Judaism to represent the concept of charity. It is considered central ethical and spiritual practice in the Jewish tradition and law. This term is derived from the Hebrew root *tzedek* which means righteousness or justice. The concept of voluntary philanthropy embodies a religious and moral to support the poor people.

#### **Theological Foundations of Charity**

The term *tzedakah* is found in Hebrew Bible. The acts of generosity are encouraged and divinely commanded. The Torah describes: “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”.<sup>5</sup> This teaching highlights the taking cares of poor in the society and adopts lenient behavior with them.

The term *tzedakah* also have the meaning of justice and fairness. It emphasizes the ethical redistribution of people resources in needy people. According to the teachings of Isaiah, “learn to do right, seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow”.<sup>6</sup> It highlights not only financial but all kinds of help to weaker section of the society.

#### **Rabbinic Elaboration on Tzedakah**

Rabbinic literature stands on the biblical injections of charity. It provides guidelines for doing practice on it to develop social welfare. The Mishnah describes: “A person is obligated to give to the poor according to what they need”.<sup>7</sup> This teaching highlights the personalized nature of *tzedakah*. The giver considers the specific circumstances of the recipient.

The Jewish scholar, Maimonides narrates a hierarchy of charitable giving in the *Mishneh Torah*. According to this, helping someone provides self-sufficiency in shape of providing employment or a loan. Maimonides describes: “The highest form of charity is to prevent poverty by giving a person a gift or loan or by finding employment for them”.<sup>8</sup> He adds the employment in existing forms of charity like gift or loan.

#### **The Communal Aspect of Charity**

In Judaism, the charity is considered an individual as well as communal responsibility. The Talmud motivates for the establishment of charity institutions like communal funds, food distribution and supporting needy in all circumstances. *Bava Batra* 8b describes the role of society to organize and manage these resources emphasizes for collective accountability.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 15:7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 1:17.

<sup>7</sup> *Mishnah Pe'ah* 8:7.

<sup>8</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:7-14.

<sup>9</sup> *Bava Batra* 8b.



The Jewish communities and Synagogues historically made *hekdesh* (charitable trusts) and *kupah* (community funds) to deal with the needs of poor. These institutions made the charity equitable by developing a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity. Contemporary Jewish organizations like Mazon and Jewish Federation continue to deal with humanitarian needs and social causes worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Spiritual Dimensions of Tzedakah**

Other than the practical benefits *tzedakah* has deep spiritual importance. The Talmud describes: “Charity is equivalent to all the other *mitzvot* combined”<sup>11</sup>. *Mitzvot* means all other kind of good deeds and acts of kindness. So charity encompasses many blessings and rewards for the believers. The mystical tradition of Kabbalah links *tzedakah* with the sefirah of *chesed* (loving-kindness). It is one of the ten emanations via which God interacts within world. Individuals emulate God’s attributes by giving charity. It develops cosmic harmony and spiritual growth. Zohar highlights this aspect and portrays *tzedakah* as a means of drawing closer to the divine and rectifying the world.<sup>12</sup>

### **Charity in Contemporary Judaism**

Contemporary Jewish societies and communities have adapted the foundational principles of *tzedakah* to deal with the needs of poor. Organizations such as HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) show the Jewish commitment to welcome strangers and supporting refugees according to the biblical injunction: “Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”<sup>13</sup>.

Digital platforms have also developed the practice of *tzedakah*. It enables individuals to contribute for global causes for making welfare societies. Websites like GiveWell and Charidy develop impactful and transparent giving. It aligns with the Jewish values of efficacy and accountability.<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has explored the enduring relevance of *tzedakah*. He argues that it encompasses the Jewish vision of intergenerational justice and ethical responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Challenges of Charity**

*Tzedakah* is considered a cornerstone in Jewish life. It faces some ethical and practical challenges. It is challenging to allocate the resources while balancing global and local needs to address and eliminate poverty. Rabbinic authorities have discusses these issues in detail to seek harmonize compassion with prudence.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jewish Federation. “Our Mission.” Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://www.jewishfederations.org>.

<sup>11</sup> Bava Batra 9a.

<sup>12</sup> *The Zohar*. Translated by Daniel C. Matt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 10:19

<sup>14</sup> Charidy. “How It Works.” Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://www.charidy.com>.

<sup>15</sup> Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Dorff, Elliot N. *The Way Into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005.



The concept of *tzedakah* also highlights the questions about the specific relationship between giver and recipient. Jewish ethics also gives importance to preserve the recipient's respect as described in Talmud: "It is better to throw oneself into a fiery furnace than to embarrass someone in public".<sup>17</sup> This scriptural principle develops the respectful administration of charity.

*Tzedakah* shows a deep synthesis of compassion, justice and spiritual development. It is rooted in the Hebrew Bible and also elaborated in rabbinic tradition. It addresses individual and societal responsibilities. It aims to develop equity and dignity. Moreover, it transcends material aid and offers a model for ethical living in the world.<sup>18</sup>

## **2. Charity in Christianity**

Charity has a central place in Christianity which is found in Holy Scriptures for the development of moral values and social welfare. The term "Charity" is from Latin word "caritas" which means love and this term often used with the word love in Christian texts. It reflects the selfless love through acts of compassion, generosity and justice.

### **The Biblical Foundations of Charity**

In Bible, the Old and New Testaments represent the basics for the Christian concept of charity. In the Old Testament, the charity is associated to the covenantal relationship between humanity and God. The laws of Moses represent care for the weaker sections of society that include widows, strangers and orphans. The Book of Leviticus describes: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God".<sup>19</sup> This practice of harvesting is known as gleaning which shows an ethic of social responsibility and justice.<sup>20</sup>

The New Testament also presents charity as an important part of discipleship. Jesus Christ's AS teachings describe the significance of generosity and love. The Parable of the Good Samaritan narrates the broader nature of charity, challenging cultural and social boundaries. Jesus AS describes: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me".<sup>21</sup> This statement highlights the theological principle which represent that acts of charity are actually acts of devotion to divine.

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<sup>17</sup> Berakhot 43b.

<sup>18</sup> Rasool, Hafiz Faiz, Aatur Rehman, Abbas Ali Raza, Muhammad Hamza, Abdul Waheed, and Anwar ul Haq. "AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ABOUT THE REASONS OF CORRUPTION AND ITS ERADICATION IN PERSPECTIVE OF ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS." *Folia Linguistica-Journal* 15, no. 03 (2022): 90-100.

<sup>19</sup> Leviticus 19:9-10

<sup>20</sup> Rehman, Aatur, Hafiz Muhammad Shahbaz, Fatima Noreen, Hafiz Faiz Rasool, and Abbas Ali Raza. "God's Existence In Primary Islamic Sources: An Analytical Study In View Of New Atheism." *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 9 (2022): 26-33.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 25:40



Pauline theology also highlights the concept of charity as a practical reflection of God's love. Paul describes: "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love".<sup>22</sup> This text elaborates charity as the highest level of virtue which is essential to Christian moralities and spiritual development.

### **Charity in Early Christian Thought**

The early Church Fathers like Augustine of Hippo and John Chrysostom have also described the practical and theological aspects of charity. Augustine considers charity as the completion of the law and the main essence of Christian life. In his writing, *De doctrina Christiana*, he says: "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."<sup>23</sup> According to Augustine, charity was a personal virtue and a social obligation, calling for systemic equity and justice.

John Chrysostom is known for the eloquent sermons, describes: "The rich exist for the sake of the poor. The poor exist for the salvation of the rich."<sup>24</sup> This mutual relationship shows the association of the Christian community. The acts of charity are beneficial for the giver and the recipient.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Institutionalization of Charity**

The Christian Church has played an important role in institutionalizing charity. Monastic communities also impressed with the teachings of Christ AS, and established hospitals, orphanages, and alms houses to help the weaker sections of the society. The Benedictine Rule, formulated by St. Benedict of Nursia, included care for the poor and hospitality as central monastic duties.<sup>26</sup>

In medieval period the Catholic Church motivated on almsgiving was codified in canon law. The concept of the "corporate works of mercy," was taken from Matthew 25 which provided a framework for the development of charitable activities in the societies. These activities consists of feeding to hungry, clothing to naked, and visiting to sick.<sup>27</sup>

The Reformation also developed new aspects for charity. Protestant leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated for systemic approaches to end the poverty and hunger. Calvin, for

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.36.

<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Raza, Abbas Ali, Salman Arif, and Hafiz Muhammad Masood Ahmad. "تعمیر شخصیت میں سماجی رویوں کی اہمیت اور " : IMPORTANCE AND REQUIREMENTS OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN CHARACTER BUILDING: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY IN THE LIGHT OF THE QUR'AN AND SUNNAH." *PAKISTAN ISLAMICUS* (An International Journal of Islamic & Social Sciences) 3, no. 2 (2023): 95-114.

<sup>26</sup> St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), Chapter 53.

<sup>27</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), para. 2447.



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example, made the Geneva Poor Relief system combining private philanthropy with public welfare initiatives.<sup>28</sup>

### **Charity in Contemporary Christianity**

In contemporary era, Christian organizations are leading humanitarian efforts globally. Agencies such as Caritas Internationalis and World Vision exemplify the global reach of Christian charity. These organizations are addressing issues like poverty, hunger, disaster relief and education. These organizations hold the Christian call to serve “the least of these,” integrating faith with practical activities.<sup>29</sup>

Theological teachings on charity have evolved within time to address modern challenges such as environmental justice and economic inequality. Pope Francis, in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, attaches charity with the stewardship of creation and urges Christians in combating with ecological degradation and its affect on vulnerable communities.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Spiritual Significance of Charity**

Charity in Christianity is considered an ethical and a social duty as well as a profound spiritual practice. Through Christ's AS selfless love, Christians become the part in God's redemptive work. Theologian Karl Barth elaborates charity as “a response to the grace of God,” and emphasizes its transformation power in the life of the individual.<sup>31</sup>

Charitable activities serve as the development of spiritual formation and cultivate virtues like humility, compassion and gratitude. The Desert Fathers, early Christian ascetics also considered charity as a path for holiness and encouraged almsgiving the source to overcome selfishness and greed.<sup>32</sup>

### **Challenges and Critiques of Charity**

Charity has great importance in Christian life. It is not without critiques and challenges. Some theologians say that charity should be accompanied with justice to deal systemic causes of inequality and poverty. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of liberation theology describes that charity is today a commandment of justice. This view point develops personal acts of generosity and social well bieng.

Others have critiqued the potential for paternalism in charitable practices, urging Christians to approach giving with humility and respect for the dignity of recipients. Christian ethics emphasize

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<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.7.6.

<sup>29</sup> Caritas Internationalis, “Our Mission,” accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.caritas.org>.

<sup>30</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), Chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 4.2.2.

<sup>32</sup> Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 52.





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that charity should empower rather than demean, reflecting the inherent worth of every individual as created in God's image.<sup>33</sup>

Christian charity is rooted in biblical teachings and developed by centuries of theological reflections. It shows a deep expression of justice and love. From its Biblical start to contemporary development, charity inspires Christians for serving others selflessly and embodies the divine association and love.

### **3. Charity in Islam**

Charity in Islam is known as *sadaqah* and *zakat*. It is repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an and Ahadith final Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Charity is obligatory practice for the rich in Islam and has very significant place in Islamic moralities. It serves as a spiritual obligation and a means to get social justice. Islam provides most comprehensive framework for the welfare of poor and weaker section of the society through loans, obligatory charity, occasional charity and voluntary charity.

#### **Charity as a Divine Command**

The Qur'an motivates for the charity and describes it as an important obligatory duty for the Muslims who have specific level of amount. It is an act of worship and a way for purifying one's soul and wealth. The Qur'an describes: "Establish prayer and give zakat, and whatever good you put forward for yourselves – you will find it with Allah".<sup>34</sup> This teaching shows charity's role as an individual obligation and a societal welfare.

The religious teachings to give charity go beyond material wealth to acts of kindness. It is mentioned in the Hadith: "Every act of goodness is charity".<sup>35</sup> Such inclusive teaching shows the essence of charity as a moral framework that runs all other aspects of a Muslim's life.

#### **The Concept of Zakat**

The term *Zakat* is derived from the Arabic root "z-k-y" which means "to purify," is one of the Five Pillars of Islamic theology. It is a obligatory charity which is imposed on eligible Muslims. The Qur'an also elaborates the categories of recipients for zakat: "Zakat expenditures are only for the poor, the needy, those employed to collect [zakat], for bringing hearts together [for Islam], for freeing captives [or slaves], for those in debt, for the cause of Allah, and for the [stranded] traveler".<sup>36</sup> This detailed and comprehensive allocation describes zakat's role to alleviate poverty and promote social equity and justice.

Scholars have discussed the precise percentage and conditions of zakat, obligatory for every eligible Muslim, but the consensus of scholars' remains that it should amount to 2.5% of a Muslim's annual savings. This comprehensive systematic redistribution of one's wealth serves for

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<sup>33</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 132.

<sup>34</sup> Qur'an 2:110

<sup>35</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 13, Hadith 56

<sup>36</sup> Qur'an 9:60



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preventing societal inequalities in Muslim communities and developing communal harmony. Al-Qardawi's *Fiqh al-Zakat* is a great work which highlights these Islamic principles and provides a detailed juristic analysis of zakat's principles and its implications.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Zakat vs. Sadaqah***

*Zakat* is obligatory; *sadaqah* is a voluntary act of charity. The Qur'an encourages for both *zakat* and *sadaqah*: "The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain]. It grows seven spikes; in every spike is a hundred grains"<sup>38</sup>. This Qur'anic teaching motivates Muslims to give generously and highlights the excellent rewards that are promised by Allah.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also motivated believers and elaborated the importance of *sadaqah* through different Hadiths. He (PBUH) described, "Protect yourself from hellfire by giving even half a date-fruit in charity"<sup>39</sup>. This Hadith narrates that not any act of charity is too small, reinforcing the accessibility and universality of *sadaqah*.

### **Ethical and Social Dimensions of Charity**

Charity in Islam transcends monetary donations, encompassing acts of kindness, forgiveness, and community service. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated, "Your smile for your brother is a charity".<sup>40</sup> This perspective aligns charity with *ihsan* (excellence), a core Islamic value that encourages believers to seek Allah's pleasure through selfless acts.

Socially, charity serves as a tool for empowerment and inclusivity. By addressing the needs of marginalized groups, it fosters societal cohesion and reduces disparities. Modern studies corroborate these outcomes, suggesting that Islamic charitable practices contribute to economic development and social stability.<sup>41</sup> The Islamic Relief Worldwide organization, for instance, exemplifies these principles by channeling zakat funds into sustainable development projects globally.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Spiritual Rewards of Charity**

Islamic teachings promise immense rewards for acts of charity, both in this world and the hereafter. The Qur'an states, "Those who spend their wealth [in Allah's way] by night and by day, secretly and publicly ... their reward is with their Lord"<sup>43</sup>. Such assurances motivate Muslims to give consistently, irrespective of their financial status.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Al-Qardawi, Yusuf. *Fiqh al-Zakat*. Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah, 1991.

<sup>38</sup> Qur'an 2:261

<sup>39</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 24, Hadith 498

<sup>40</sup> Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Book 34, Hadith 1956.

<sup>41</sup> Kahf, Monzer. "The Role of Islamic Charity in Alleviating Poverty." *Islamic Economic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2005): 22-33.

<sup>42</sup> Islamic Relief Worldwide. "Annual Report 2022." Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://www.islamic-relief.org>.

<sup>43</sup> Qur'an 2:274





Hadith literature further elaborates on these rewards. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) narrated that charity extinguishes sins as water extinguishes fire.<sup>44</sup> This metaphor underscores charity's purifying effect on the soul, aligning material generosity with spiritual growth.

### **Charity in Contemporary Contexts**

The relevance of Islamic charity extends to modern challenges, such as poverty alleviation, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid. Organizations like Zakat Foundation and Muslim Hands leverage Islamic principles to address these issues on a global scale. Their initiatives demonstrate how charity, guided by faith, can transform lives and foster resilience in crisis-stricken communities.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, digital platforms have revolutionized charitable giving in the Muslim world. Apps like LaunchGood enable Muslims to support causes ranging from education to healthcare, making sadaqah more accessible and impactful.<sup>46</sup> Scholars like Dr. Ingrid Mattson have highlighted the significance of such innovations, arguing that they align with Islam's emphasis on adaptability and compassion.<sup>47</sup>

Charity in Islam embodies the religion's holistic approach to spirituality and social justice. Through *zakat* and *sadaqah*, Muslims fulfill their divine obligations while contributing to societal well-being. Rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, Islamic charity serves as a timeless model of ethical living, inspiring generosity, compassion, and resilience across generations.

### **Conclusion**

Charity, deeply rooted in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, represents a profound synthesis of justice, compassion, and spiritual growth. In Judaism, *tzedakah* is not merely a voluntary act but a divine obligation that promotes social equity and ethical living. The rabbinic emphasis on preserving dignity and empowering recipients reflects a holistic approach to giving. Similarly, Christianity frames charity as an extension of God's love, demonstrated through selflessness and communal care. From early Church practices to modern humanitarian organizations, Christian charity has continually sought to embody faith in action, balancing personal virtue with systemic justice.

In Islam, charity is both a spiritual duty and a societal cornerstone. The obligatory *zakah* ensures wealth redistribution to address poverty and inequality, while *sadaqah* emphasizes voluntary generosity as a means of cultivating piety and humility. Islamic teachings align charity with broader goals of societal harmony, reflecting the Qur'anic vision of a just and compassionate community.

Despite differences in doctrinal details, all three faiths converge in viewing charity as a divine commandment and a moral imperative. This shared commitment underscores the transformative

<sup>44</sup> Sunan Ibn Majah, Book 9, Hadith 4210.

<sup>45</sup> Zakat Foundation. "Transforming Lives Through Charity." Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://www.zakat.org>.

<sup>46</sup> LaunchGood. "About Us." Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://www.launchgood.com>.

<sup>47</sup> Mattson, Ingrid. *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.



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potential of charity to address contemporary global challenges, including poverty, inequality, and social fragmentation. By fostering empathy, justice, and solidarity, charity remains a timeless ideal that transcends religious boundaries, offering a model for ethical living and interfaith dialogue in an ever-changing world.