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# Tracing Theology and Historical Praxis in Early Muslim-Christian Relations

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**Abstract**

In an era marked by religious pluralism and socio-political tensions, constructive engagement between Muslims and Christians has become both a theological necessity and a social imperative. This paper explored the theological and historical praxis of charity in early Muslim and Christian communities as a basis for fostering deeper mutual understanding and cooperation. Employing a qualitative, historical-comparative method, the research draws on primary sources—including the Qur'an, Hadith, the New Testament, and early theological writings—supplemented by secondary scholarly interpretations. Through historical-critical analysis, theological exegesis, and comparative theology, the study examines how zakat and ṣadaqah in Islam, and agape-inspired almsgiving in Christianity, were developed and practised as religious imperatives and social ethics. Findings reveal that Islam conceptualises charity primarily as an obligatory act of worship and social justice, rooted in divine command, while Christianity emphasises voluntary, grace-filled giving as a manifestation of God's unconditional love. Despite these differences, both traditions converge on the ethical imperatives of compassion, equity, and care for the marginalised. Furthermore, the study identifies practical pathways for interfaith cooperation, including joint educational initiatives, scholarly collaborations, leadership engagement, and grassroots charitable projects. The research concludes that charity offers a transformative platform for Muslim-Christian dialogue, serving as both a theological bridge and a social resource. It contributes to comparative theology and interfaith studies by demonstrating that shared commitments to charity can advance peacebuilding, ethical solidarity, and constructive coexistence in pluralistic societies.

**Keywords:** interfaith dialogue**;** theology of charity; Muslim-Christian relations; social justice; comparative theology

## INTRODUCTION

Interfaith dialogue is vital for addressing global conflicts frequently shaped or exacerbated by religious identities and theological divergence. In an increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world, such dialogue is desirable and necessary for

fostering mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. The significance of interreligious engagement—particularly between Muslims and Christians—rests in its potential to transform religious difference from a source of division into a foundation for cooperative and reconciliatory action (Abu-Nimer, 2020). The historical encounters between Islam and Christianity have profoundly influenced numerous societies' cultural and sociopolitical landscapes. These early interactions were not merely geopolitical confrontations but were deeply rooted in theological distinctions and convergences. The dialogue between Muslims and Christians has historically revolved around critical theological themes, including the nature of God, the person and role of Jesus Christ, the concept of salvation, and the prophetic traditions (Pratt, 2021). While these areas have often been perceived as grounds for contention, they offer fertile territory for meaningful dialogue and theological reflection. A nuanced understanding of early Muslim-Christian relations requires both historical and theological analysis. It is within this dual framework that the complexities of their interactions can be appreciated. Barella and Syukur (2024) argue that historical narratives focusing solely on conflict overlook the rich traditions of intellectual exchange, cultural borrowing, and spiritual commonality that have also characterised Muslim-Christian encounters. These interactions were contested and cooperative, giving rise to shared institutions, concepts, and practices that shaped the development of both religious communities.

Theological analysis reveals that fundamental doctrines—such as tawḥīd (the absolute oneness of God) in Islam and the Trinitarian understanding of God in Christianity—formed distinct ontological foundations (Al Mahmud, 2023). However, both traditions emphasise divine justice, mercy, and ethical responsibility. These shared moral imperatives have historically provided avenues for cooperation, especially in social and charitable endeavours, as seen in the traditions of *zakat* and *diakonia* (Ali et al., 2024; Dhifallah, 2024). Moreover, early interactions were shaped by formal theological disputations and pragmatic considerations, such as trade, governance, and communal coexistence. Theological praxis—how doctrine informed real-life conduct and institutional development—emerged as a critical factor in shaping interreligious relations. Tracing this praxis highlights how doctrines were operationalised in ways that either exacerbated tensions or fostered coexistence (Browne, 2020). A comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach—integrating theology, history, and social ethics—is thus essential for elucidating the contours of early Muslim-Christian relations. Such an

approach reveals a complex tapestry of conflict and cooperation, resistance and adaptation, exclusivism and mutual recognition. Through this lens, interfaith dialogue is understood not as a modern invention but as a continuation of historical efforts to engage constructively across religious boundaries.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, historical-comparative research design rooted in theological and historical inquiry (Abdullah et al., 2023). It explores the conceptual foundations, theological motivations, and practical expressions of charity (*zakat* and Christian almsgiving*) within early Muslim and Christian communities through critical textual analysis and interdisciplinary synthesis (Vorster, 2020). The research is document-based, drawing upon primary sources such as the Qur'ān, canonical *Hadith* collections, classical *fiqh* works, the New Testament, and early Church writings. Secondary materials include academic commentaries, journal articles, and books on interfaith dialogue, religious charity, comparative theology, and the socio-religious dynamics of early Islamic and Christian societies. The methodology is exploratory and interpretive, seeking to uncover the theological meanings, values, and social ethics embedded in sacred and juridical texts.

An interdisciplinary analytical framework (Abu-Nimer, 2020) integrates historical-critical analysis, theological exegesis, comparative theology, and socio-theological synthesis to examine how charitable practices developed within both traditions. Historical-critical analysis situates *zakat* and Christian almsgiving in their socio-political contexts, while theological exegesis interprets scriptural and juridical sources in relation to divine justice, stewardship, mercy, and eschatology. Comparative theology highlights convergences and divergences in Islamic and Christian understandings of charity, and socio-theological synthesis connects these theological insights with the communal and economic realities of early believers. Data validation is strengthened through triangulation, cross-referencing biblical and Qur'ānic texts, engaging traditional theological interpretations, and consulting perspectives from historians, sociologists, and theologians. All sources are critically evaluated for reliability, coherence, and relevance to the research objectives (Abdullah et al., 2023; Vorster, 2020).

## RESULTS

### The Historical Praxis of the Early Muslim Community

The early Muslim community's theological and historical foundations of charity are best exemplified in the practice of zakat, one of the Five Pillars of Islam (Adeoye & Pristiwiyanto, 2025; Fauzia, 2023). As a mandated act of worship and social responsibility, zakat represents a core element in the Islamic framework of economic justice and moral obligation (Ali et al., 2024). Exploring zakat's origins, development, and practical implications provides significant insights into how early Muslim communities understood and operationalised religious charity. Islam's doctrinal structure is grounded in its Five Pillars, which delineate beliefs and practices. The first of these, the *shahādah* (testimony of faith), affirms the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and the prophethood of Muhammad: *"There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger."* While the Qurʾān references the act of bearing witness (e.g., Q. 3:18), the formulaic expression of the *shahādah* is more clearly articulated in the ḥadīth literature (Es, 2024). This illustrates the complementary authority of the ḥadīth alongside the Qurʾān in shaping Islamic practice. The ḥadīth—collections of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions—play a critical role in establishing zakat's theological and legal foundations (Badawia, 2022). In Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, the ḥadīth informs legal rulings where the Qurʾān remains general or silent. *Sharīʿah*, the idealised divine law, is understood through *fiqh* as a human approximation of God's will—one that strives toward justice and equity (Norman & Ruhullah, 2024). Within this juridical framework, zakat was institutionalised as an obligatory form of wealth redistribution, emphasised in multiple ḥadīths as integral to a Muslim's religious obligations (Powell, 2009).

Derived from the Arabic root *z-k-a*, which connotes purification, growth, and blessing, zakat is not merely a tax but a spiritual act of purification—both of one's wealth and soul (Malik, 2016). It is a calculated portion of a Muslim's surplus wealth, typically 2.5%, directed to designated categories of recipients outlined in the Qurʾān (Q. 9:60). These include the poor (*fuqarāʾ*), the needy (*masākīn*), zakat administrators, new converts, those in bondage, those in debt, those striving in the path of God, and wayfarers. This multifaceted distribution mechanism reflects Islam's ethical vision of community solidarity and socioeconomic justice (Ali et al., 2024). Zakat is distinguished from voluntary charity (*ṣadaqah*) in form and function. While ṣadaqah can be given at any time

and in any amount, including to one's family, zakat is obligatory upon meeting specific thresholds of wealth, known as *niṣāb*. It must be disbursed after one lunar year (*ḥawl*) without significant asset depletion (Abad, 2021). Wealth subject to zakat includes various forms: cash, livestock, agricultural produce, gold, silver, and modern financial instruments such as stocks (Abdullah et al., 2023; Maspul & Mubarak, 2025). Jurists have debated exact calculations and applicable assets, reflecting the adaptability of zakat within diverse socioeconomic contexts (Arsalan, 2024).

While centralised zakat collection was historically supervised by state authorities, particularly under the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Islamic law allows individual disbursement, provided the eligible recipients are known (Owoyemi, 2020). Zakat collectors (*ʿāmilīn ʿalayhā*) held significant responsibilities, ensuring ethical collection and distribution. According to Ali (2024), the system was intended to sustain the social fabric of the Muslim ummah, reduce inequality, and uphold human dignity. Zakat's role was not confined to financial redistribution. It also functioned as a mechanism for fostering loyalty to the nascent Muslim community and aiding social integration (Razak et al., 2024). Including converts and the enslaved among zakat recipients demonstrates its use in consolidating communal identity and promoting liberation (Sungit et al., 2016). Moreover, the allowance for begging (*su'āl*) under strict conditions—for example, in cases of genuine loss, war, or displacement—further underscores zakat's humanitarian ethos (Dhifallah, 2024). A complementary voluntary form of charity, ṣadaqah, extends the spiritual and ethical obligations of giving beyond zakat. Unlike zakat, ṣadaqah has no prescribed amount or recipients, allowing Muslims to respond to immediate and relational needs, particularly within the family (Kakar et al., 2022). However, zakat and ṣadaqah emerge from a common theological conviction: that wealth is a trust from God, and its rightful distribution is a measure of one's faith and righteousness. Zakat alleviated material poverty and cultivated a spiritual economy rooted in divine trust and communal care. Its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to adapt to modern socioeconomic realities while retaining its foundational religious ethos.

**The Historical Praxis of the Early Christian Community**

The theology of charity in the early Christian community was deeply intertwined with the socio-economic realities of first-century Palestine and the theological imperatives articulated in the New Testament (Luff, 2019). To adequately explore the

early Christian conception of material possessions, one must begin with the semantic and theological understanding of the terms "poor" (*ptōchos*) and "rich" (*plousios*), particularly within the Lucan and Pauline traditions.

In the New Testament, *ptōchos* denotes extreme destitution—typically someone without property, kin, or social capital, and entirely dependent on others (Rhee, 2022). This contrasts with *penēs*, which refers to one with limited means but not entirely deprived. This distinction is crucial, as it underpins much of Jesus' ethical teaching regarding economic justice and divine favour. For instance, Luke 6:20—"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"—presents a preferential option for the *ptōchoi*, not simply the economically disadvantaged, but those marginalised from all societal power. The Gospel of Luke, often dubbed "the Gospel of the poor" (Lehtipuu, 2020), exhibits a consistent concern for the marginalised, highlighting that material wealth can be a spiritual hazard (cf. Luke 18:24-25). Luke 1:53 contrasts the rich and poor by stating, "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." In the Lucan worldview, wealth is not inherently evil but becomes an obstacle to salvation when hoarded or used selfishly. This dualism is powerfully illustrated in the parables of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-13) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), which serve as theological commentaries on stewardship, judgment, and the eternal consequences of materialism.

In Acts, the second volume attributed to Luke, this theological orientation manifests in the communal life of the early believers. Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-35 depict a radical model of economic sharing: “All who believed were together and had all things in common and distributed to each as any had need.” Vorster (2020) suggests this is not a blueprint for proto-communism but a theological expression of *koinōnia*—spirit-inspired fellowship grounded in love, solidarity, and detachment from material possessions. The communal sharing in Acts symbolised the new identity of the Christian community. This voluntary redistribution was not mandated by law but prompted by the Spirit, marking a shift from individual accumulation to communal generosity. Boaheng et al. (2024) note that the early Christians' economic behaviour reflected a theological conviction: wealth was a resource entrusted by God to be used for the well-being of the community, especially its most vulnerable members.

While Luke emphasised communal economic practice, Paul advanced a theology of charity through his efforts to organise a relief fund for the poor Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem. This initiative, called *logeia eis tous hagiōus* (1 Cor. 16:1), was a significant aspect of Paul's ministry and a tangible expression of ecclesial unity between Gentile and Jewish Christians. Paul's appeal to the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Galatia (2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15:25-27) was not merely philanthropic. It was theologically charged: the Gentiles, as spiritual beneficiaries of Israel's promises, owed material support to the Jewish Christians (Kaiser Jr, 2022). Paul framed giving not as condescending but as a reflection of divine grace (*charis*) and a manifestation of *koinōnia*—fellowship through mutual sharing (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4). O'Callaghan (2021) suggests that Paul's theology of giving was rooted in eschatological hope and ecclesial solidarity. Contrary to interpretations that see Paul as indifferent to social ethics, his emphasis on voluntary giving (2 Cor. 9:7) and relative economic equity (2 Cor. 8:13-15) demonstrates a robust theology of justice. His fundraising campaign demanded substantial logistical coordination, moral exhortation, and personal sacrifice, culminating in a journey to Jerusalem under risk of persecution (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:30-31).

Early Christian views on wealth and charity were not developed in a vacuum but were deeply influenced by Jewish traditions of *tzedakah* (righteous giving). In Judaism, almsgiving was more than a social duty—it was a righteous act capable of atoning sins (cf. Tobit 12:9). The Mishnah and later rabbinic literature describe elaborate systems of charitable collection and distribution, including weekly alms and provision for transient strangers (Gardner, 2015). These practices shaped the economic ethics of early Jewish Christians, who continued to see wealth as a divine trust and poverty as a spiritual condition requiring communal response. Jesus, while radical in some of his teachings, remained within this Jewish moral universe. He reaffirmed that wealth should not be idolised (Matt. 6:24), and he challenged his followers to radical generosity as a sign of discipleship (Matt. 19:21; Luke 18:22). The early Church inherited and adapted these teachings, forming structures such as the deacons' fund (Acts 6:1–6) and famine relief (Acts 11:27–30) to respond to the needs of the community.

This commitment to charity became a defining feature of Christian identity and an evangelistic witness in the Greco-Roman world. James, the brother of Jesus, encapsulated the integration of piety and social concern when he wrote: "Religion that is pure and

undefiled before God... is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). The tension between personal holiness and social action, often fragmented in later Christian history, was initially held together in the early Church's vision of holistic discipleship.

## Theological Self-Understanding of Charity

A foundational element in fostering constructive Muslim-Christian dialogue lies in appreciating and articulating how each tradition theologically conceives of charity. This "theological self-understanding" is not merely a matter of semantics but reflects deeply embedded doctrinal frameworks, spiritual orientations, and ethical imperatives that shape how charity is practised and understood within each faith. It is therefore essential to clarify how Islam and Christianity, from their respective theological loci, understand the nature, purpose, and practice of charity.

### *Charity in Islamic Theology: Worship, Purification, and Justice*

In Islam, charity is anchored in divine command and legal obligation. It is not merely encouraged; it is structured as an obligatory act of worship (*ʿibādah*) and a principal means by which Muslims enact social justice. The term zakat, derived from the root *z-k-a*, connotes purification, growth, and blessing. As one of the Five Pillars of Islam, zakat is both a spiritual discipline and a juridical duty prescribed in the Qur'an (e.g., Q. 2:177; 9:60) and elaborated in the Hadith (Hassan et al., 2024). Zakat is designed to purify one's wealth and soul, redistribute resources, and maintain social cohesion. It reflects a worldview in which wealth is considered a trust (*amānah*) from God, and humans are stewards (*khulafāʾ*) accountable for its ethical use (Powell, 2009).

Importantly, zakat is not charity in the Western sense of discretionary giving but a formal obligation owed to specific categories of recipients, including the poor (*fuqarāʾ*), the needy (*masākīn*), and others outlined in the Qur'an (Q. 9:60). Islam also encourages voluntary charity, known as ṣadaqah, which encompasses a broader range of altruistic actions—monetary and non-monetary—such as acts of kindness, feeding the hungry or visiting the sick. Ṣadaqah is considered meritorious and spiritually rewarding, but unlike zakat, it is not compulsory. Both zakat and ṣadaqah reflect the Islamic understanding that economic redistribution is a divine mandate that links God's worship with the community's wellbeing. Thus, in Islamic theology, charity is simultaneously an act of

obedience to God, a means of personal spiritual purification, and a manifestation of social equity. It is a concrete expression of Islam's holistic ethical vision where the divine, individual, and communal dimensions are integrally connected.

### *Charity in Christian Theology: Love, Grace, and Sacrificial Giving*

In contrast, Christianity roots its understanding of charity in the theological virtue of agape—unconditional, self-giving love that mirrors God's love for humanity. The Greek term *agapē* is central in the New Testament, particularly in the Pauline corpus (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13) and Johannine writings (1 John 4:7-21), where it is presented as both a gift of the Spirit and a moral imperative for Christian living (Post, 2020). Unlike zakat, Christian charity is not a legal obligation but a response to grace. Christians are exhorted to give freely, generously, and without expectation of return, reflecting the nature of divine love revealed in Christ (Luke 6:35; Matthew 5:42). This is exemplified in Jesus' teachings and actions, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and the widow's offering (Mark 12:41–44), which highlight compassion, humility, and sacrificial generosity.

Early Christian communities, mainly as described in Acts (2:44-45; 4:32-35), practised radical economic sharing, holding all things in common. Paul's fundraising efforts for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9) further underscore that charity was both a practical concern and a theological expression of Christian unity and love. In this view, giving is participating in God's grace and building up the Body of Christ (Bugbee, 2005). Therefore, charity in Christian theology is fundamentally relational—the lived expression of divine love extended to others. It involves not only material support but also emotional and spiritual solidarity. It is not bound by legal structures but is animated by love, grace, and voluntary sacrifice.

### *Comparative Implications for Dialogue*

These theological frameworks—zakat as obligatory and systemic, agape as voluntary and relational—represent distinct but potentially complementary paradigms. Both traditions affirm the sacredness of human dignity, the moral imperative of caring for people experiencing poverty, and the belief that charitable acts have eschatological significance. Recognising these theological self-understandings is crucial for fruitful Muslim-Christian dialogue. Misunderstandings often arise when one tradition's

framework is evaluated through the assumptions of the other. For example, Christian critiques of zakat as merely legalistic may overlook its spiritual dimensions. In contrast, Muslim critiques of Christian charity as unstructured may fail to appreciate its voluntary ethos rooted in grace.

Engaging in comparative theology—a discipline that explores one's tradition through learning from the other—can open new vistas for mutual understanding (Cornille, 2019). This process requires intellectual humility, doctrinal clarity, and a willingness to be challenged and enriched by the other's witness. In the context of interfaith dialogue focused on charity, acknowledging and respecting these differing theological constructions enables both communities to move beyond tolerance to collaboration. This includes joint initiatives that address poverty, advocate for justice, and promote peace, all rooted in each tradition's theological commitments' integrity.

## Shared Ethical Foundations and Social Justice

One of the most compelling areas of convergence between Islam and Christianity lies in their shared ethical emphasis on compassion, justice, and the responsibility to care for the marginalised. These shared moral imperatives are a critical foundation for constructive interfaith dialogue, especially in charitable practice. Though the two traditions emerge from different theological systems and historical contexts, both uphold a vision of society in which human dignity is protected and people with low incomes are not neglected. This ethical congruence offers theological common ground and practical opportunities for collaboration in pursuing social justice.

### *The Ethical Mandate to Care for the Poor*

In Islam and Christianity, the moral treatment of people with low incomes is not peripheral—it is central to faithful religious practice. In Islam, the ethical obligation to assist the poor and vulnerable is enshrined in the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Qur'an repeatedly commands believers to give to those in need, declaring charity as a distinguishing feature of righteousness (Q. 2:177, 9:60). The Prophet Muhammad is recorded as saying that "he is not a believer whose stomach is filled while the neighbour to his side goes hungry" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī). Similarly, in Christian scripture, the imperative to care for the poor is tied directly to the core of discipleship. Jesus consistently aligned himself with the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed. In Matthew

25:31-46, he equates acts of mercy toward "the least of these" with service to himself, making social concern a decisive criterion for divine judgment. As recorded in Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-35, the early Christian community practised a radical economic solidarity by sharing all possessions and redistributing them according to need. Thus, both traditions affirm that genuine religiosity involves more than personal piety—it entails active concern for the material and social well-being of others. This shared ethical vision provides a robust starting point for interfaith engagement.

***Theological Ethics and Structural Justice***

While Islam and Christianity emphasise individual acts of compassion, their ethical mandates extend beyond interpersonal kindness to include broader commitments to structural justice. In Islam, zakat is not merely a pious act; it functions as an institutionalised mechanism of economic redistribution, designed to reduce inequality and ensure communal cohesion. Zakat's recipients are not chosen arbitrarily but are determined through clearly defined categories, ensuring that systemic needs, such as debt relief, liberation from bondage, and support for travellers, are addressed within the framework of religious law (Al-Bawwab, 2023).

Though historically less juridical in its approach to economic ethics, Christianity similarly upholds a theological vision of justice that critiques economic exploitation and calls for the equitable distribution of resources. The writings of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, which form the ethical backdrop to Jesus' teachings, denounce social injustice and the oppression of the poor (Isaiah 58:6-10; Amos 5:11-24). The Apostle Paul's collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9) was not merely charitable—it was a concrete gesture of solidarity that sought to express the church's unity across ethnic and economic divides (Harris, 2024). This broader ethical vision challenges faith communities to go beyond episodic acts of giving and engage in sustained efforts toward economic justice. Interfaith dialogue grounded in this shared commitment can thus serve theological purposes and socio-political transformation.

***Human Dignity and the Universality of Moral Concern***

Islam and Christianity derive their ethical imperatives from theological anthropology—their understanding of the human person as created by God and endowed with intrinsic dignity. In Islam, human beings are honoured creations of God (*ashraf al-*

*makhlūqāt*) and stewards (*khulafāʾ*) of the earth (Q. 2:30, 17:70). This status entails moral responsibility toward other humans and toward creation itself. In Christianity, the doctrine of the imago Dei—the belief that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27)—grounds a vision of universal dignity and moral equality. This shared conviction that everyone deserves respect provides a powerful ethical rationale for social justice. It calls adherents of both traditions to protect the weak, challenge systems of oppression, and promote peace and reconciliation. It also offers a moral vocabulary for interfaith partnerships that is not predicated on theological agreement but on ethical solidarity.

### *Case Studies of Muslim-Christian Charitable Collaboration*

While the theological and ethical foundations of zakat and agape are compelling, their practical significance is most evident when translated into joint charitable action. Several contemporary case studies highlight how Muslims and Christians collaborate in responding to human suffering, thereby embodying their respective theological commitments to justice and compassion. In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami, Islamic and Christian NGOs—including Muhammadiyah, Islamic Relief Worldwide, World Vision, and Caritas—worked side by side to provide food, shelter, and medical care for displaced communities. Despite Aceh's history of Christian-Muslim tensions, shared humanitarian commitments overcame sectarian boundaries, demonstrating that theological imperatives of zakat and agape can converge in practice during crises. Decades of ethno-religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao created deep social divisions. However, joint relief operations between Catholic Relief Services and Islamic Relief have provided not only food and housing to displaced families but also platforms for reconciliation. Collaborative charity became a trust-building mechanism, allowing communities to reimagine their relationship beyond conflict.

The displacement of millions of Syrians created an unprecedented humanitarian challenge. Islamic Relief Worldwide partnered with Christian Aid, Caritas, and local churches to deliver education, healthcare, and food distribution to both Muslim and Christian refugee families. Here, zakat funds and Christian almsgiving converged in practical service, showing that theological differences did not prevent cooperation on urgent humanitarian needs. In Northern Nigeria, where sectarian violence has strained interfaith relations, Muslim and Christian leaders have coordinated joint vaccination

campaigns, HIV awareness programs, and poverty-alleviation projects. By pooling resources from zakat/ṣadaqah structures and church-based diakonia, these initiatives serve as grassroots demonstrations of interfaith solidarity. Taken together, these case studies reveal that interfaith collaboration in charity is not an abstract possibility but an existing reality. They show how the theological logic of zakat (structured obligation) and agape (voluntary sacrificial love) can complement each other in addressing global crises. Such practical engagements not only alleviate human suffering but also transform interreligious relations, replacing suspicion with cooperation and building trust across communities.

### *Contemporary Applications of Zakat and Agape in Addressing Global Challenges*

Beyond their historical and theological foundations, the relevance of zakat and agape is most visible in their capacity to address pressing social challenges in the modern world. Muslim and Christian charitable institutions have expanded their work to respond not only to poverty but also to displacement, environmental degradation, and public health crises. These initiatives demonstrate that interfaith collaboration in charity is not a theoretical ideal but an unfolding contemporary reality. Zakat continues to function as an instrument of social redistribution in Muslim-majority societies, increasingly integrated into national economic strategies. In Malaysia, for instance, zakat institutions have funded microfinance schemes and educational programs to empower vulnerable families (Razak, 2020). In Indonesia, zakat and waqf are used to finance healthcare and vocational training, reducing structural poverty (Fauzia, 2023). Christian charities, such as Caritas Internationalis and Christian Aid, have paralleled these efforts by advocating for economic justice while sustaining food banks and development projects (Blakemore, 2019). Where Muslims and Christians coexist—such as in Nigeria and Kenya—faith-based NGOs have collaborated on joint poverty-alleviation schemes, pooling resources from zakat and church-based diakonia to sustain food distribution and skill acquisition programs (Ali et al., 2024).

The refugee crises in Syria, Myanmar, and the Sahel have mobilised Muslim and Christian charities alike. Islamic Relief Worldwide and Muslim Aid have partnered with Christian Aid and Catholic Relief Services to deliver food, shelter, and psychosocial care to displaced communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Uganda (Dhifallah, 2024). These collaborations embody zakat's concern for wayfarers and people in bondage (Q. 9:60)

while reflecting the Christian call to "welcome the stranger" (Matthew 25:35). Joint refugee projects illustrate how theological imperatives of hospitality and justice converge in contemporary humanitarian practice. A newer frontier of Muslim-Christian charitable engagement is ecological stewardship. In Islamic ethics, humans are khalīfah (stewards of creation), a role increasingly interpreted to justify charitable projects addressing climate change and sustainability (Norman & Ruhullah, 2024). Christian perspectives, particularly those shaped by *Laudato Si'*, emphasise agape expressed as ecological responsibility (Harris, 2024). Interfaith networks such as the UN's *Faith for Earth* initiative have facilitated Muslim-Christian collaboration in reforestation, clean energy projects, and climate advocacy (Siddiqui, 2024). These initiatives extend the meaning of charity beyond human relations to include creation care.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered further opportunities for interfaith collaboration. In Nigeria and Kenya, Muslim zakat boards and Christian NGOs co-organised food banks and health education campaigns, addressing both material and spiritual dimensions of vulnerability (Adeoye, 2024). Such initiatives demonstrate the adaptability of zakat and agape to emergent global crises, underscoring their shared ethos of compassion and communal responsibility. These examples illustrate that charity, in its Islamic and Christian forms, is more than a historical or theological concept. It is a living, dynamic practice that continues to shape global responses to poverty, displacement, ecological degradation, and health crises. When mobilised collaboratively, zakat and agape not only alleviate suffering but also cultivate trust and solidarity across religious divides, embodying what Blakemore (2019) calls the "dual benefit" of interfaith action—deepened mutual understanding and tangible improvements in the lives of the vulnerable.

## DISCUSSION

### Dialogical Tools: Scholarly Collaboration and Joint Publications

A crucial mechanism for fostering constructive Muslim-Christian engagement, especially in charitable theology and practice, lies in the intentional use of dialogical tools—among them, scholarly collaboration and the publication of joint academic works. Unlike informal or grassroots dialogue, scholarly exchange provides a structured, reflective, and methodologically rigorous platform for sustained interreligious engagement. It enables both traditions to articulate their theological positions, examine

historical narratives, and evaluate ethical implications with intellectual integrity and mutual respect. In this regard, collaborative academic publications—such as jointly authored books, edited volumes, and thematic journals—offer a particularly effective means of building theological bridges and cultivating deeper mutual understanding. These efforts serve the academy and faith leaders, educators, and interfaith practitioners who draw upon such scholarship to inform their work in communities and institutions.

### *The Role of Theology in Interfaith Scholarship*

The comparative and dialogical study of theology lies at the heart of scholarly collaboration between Muslims and Christians. Comparative theology, as a field, involves the disciplined study of another religious tradition to deepen one's faith through engagement with the other (Winkler, 2012). This approach encourages participants to examine doctrinal differences and the theological resonances that may emerge from such engagement. In charity, comparative theological inquiry allows Muslim and Christian scholars to explore the conceptual frameworks underlying zakat and agape, respectively—two models rooted in distinct scriptural and theological traditions yet oriented toward the common goal of social compassion and justice. By presenting these ideas side-by-side in joint publications, scholars can highlight the distinctiveness and complementarity of their respective paradigms, helping dismantle misconceptions and foster empathetic understanding.

### *Scholarly Publications as Instruments of Dialogue*

Jointly published academic works—whether in the form of comparative theological essays, ethical reflections, or case studies of charitable practices—serve several essential functions in the broader framework of interfaith dialogue: Articulation of Theological Nuance**:** Written contributions allow for depth and precision that are often difficult to achieve in spontaneous verbal exchanges (Wendland, 2024). This is especially valuable when exploring complex theological concepts such as divine justice, grace, obligation, or stewardship. Documentation and Institutional Memory: Publications create a permanent intellectual record that future scholars and interfaith leaders can revisit, critique, and build upon (Kollar, 2016).

They serve as repositories of theological engagement and historical insight. Educational Resource: Books and journal articles on Muslim-Christian charity can be

incorporated into curricula in seminaries, universities, and interfaith training programs, equipping new generations with the tools to engage in informed and respectful dialogue (Pratt, 2021). Public Witness: In an age of religious misunderstanding and polarisation, visible academic partnerships between Muslims and Christians convey that dialogue is possible, fruitful, and faithful to both traditions (Adeoye, 2024). An example of such a tool could be a collaborative volume titled *Charity and Justice in Islam and Christianity: A Comparative Theological Dialogue*. Contributions from theologians, ethicists, historians, and practitioners could explore scriptural foundations, historical developments, jurisprudential structures, and contemporary charity applications in both traditions. This would serve as a scholarly contribution and a catalyst for practical collaboration in addressing global poverty and injustice.

### *Challenges and Opportunities in Scholarly Collaboration*

Despite its promise, interreligious scholarship is not without its challenges. Different methodologies, terminologies, epistemologies, and institutional cultures can create friction or misunderstanding (Fellows & Liu, 2013). For example, the legal-theological orientation of many Islamic scholars may differ significantly from the pastoral-theological emphasis of many Christian theologians. There may also be resource asymmetries, access to academic platforms or institutional support. However, these challenges also present opportunities. Interreligious scholarship thrives when it is mutually critical and constructively comparative, prompting both traditions to clarify and deepen their convictions. Moreover, such collaboration can model a way of doing theology that is dialogical rather than defensive—open to learning but firmly rooted in one's commitments. Rusli (2023) can adopt interdisciplinary approaches to overcome structural and intellectual barriers, integrating perspectives from religious studies, ethics, sociology, and development studies. These broaden the scope of engagement and make the scholarship more accessible to broader audiences beyond academia.

### *Integrating Charity and Social Justice in Interreligious Education*

Given the centrality of charity in Islam and Christianity, educational programs should focus on how each tradition frames, practices, and theologically interprets acts of giving. This includes examining: The scriptural foundations of zakat and agape. Historical models of charitable institutions in each tradition. Ethical debates on wealth distribution,

poverty, and economic justice. Contemporary examples of Muslim-Christian charitable collaboration. Case studies of successful interfaith humanitarian efforts—such as disaster relief, refugee assistance or community development—can be pedagogical tools to illustrate theological teachings in action. These practical insights inform students and inspire future initiatives that transcend doctrinal boundaries.

***Educational Institutions as Catalysts for Dialogue***

Universities, seminaries, and religious study centres are uniquely institutional incubators of interreligious literacy. They are sites of intellectual formation and spaces for moral and social visioning. These institutions can support dialogue in several ways: Establish interfaith departments or centres for comparative theology. Offer joint degree programs or certificates in interfaith leadership. Encourage faculty collaborations across disciplines and religious traditions. Host conferences, lectures, and workshops that unite Muslim and Christian scholars and practitioners. For example, a seminary might host an annual interfaith symposium on "Charity and Social Justice in Islam and Christianity," inviting theologians, jurists, economists, and community leaders to engage in multidisciplinary conversations. These events deepen academic understanding and signal institutional commitment to dialogue. In pluralistic and often secular educational systems, interreligious literacy equips religious and non—religious students to navigate and contribute to diverse societies. In this way, religious education becomes civic education, building the moral and intellectual foundations for peaceful coexistence.

***The Role of Religious Leadership in Promoting Dialogue***

Religious leaders—imams, pastors, bishops, and scholars—are critical in framing theological discourse and guiding their communities' engagement with religious others. As custodians of doctrinal interpretation and ethical practice, their endorsement or rejection of interfaith dialogue often determines its viability at the community level. In Islam and Christianity, leaders are viewed as teachers and moral exemplars. Their actions carry symbolic weight and serve as models for their followers. When religious leaders promote mutual understanding and interfaith collaboration, they authorise and normalise such engagement. Conversely, when they reinforce sectarian narratives or exclusivist interpretations, they risk perpetuating mistrust and division. Interfaith leadership requires a combination of doctrine literacy, relationship competence, and

ethical clarity. It involves understanding one's faith tradition, engaging respectfully with others, building trust and respect across religious boundaries, and committing to shared moral imperatives like justice, charity, peace, and human dignity. Interfaith leadership can also take institutional form. For example, councils of religious leaders—such as the *Religions for Peace* initiative or national interfaith commissions—can provide platforms for coordinated responses to social issues, including poverty, disaster relief, or refugee crises.

**Synthesis and Implications**

Synthesising the findings across the six thematic areas presented above, it becomes evident that interreligious dialogue on charity is not only possible, but deeply needed—both for theological integrity and for addressing urgent contemporary social challenges such as poverty, inequality, displacement, and communal tension. The implications of this synthesis extend into several interrelated domains: At the core of this paper lies the recognition that interfaith dialogue does not dilute theological conviction but enriches it. When Muslims and Christians engage one another over the meaning and practice of charity, they are invited to reflect more deeply on their scriptural sources, doctrines, and ethical traditions. For example, comparative engagement with the obligatory structure of zakat can challenge Christians to rethink systemic approaches to charity.

At the same time, the Christian emphasis on agape can inspire Muslims to consider the emotive and relational dimensions of giving beyond juridical obligation. Such theological deepening affirms that dialogue is not simply about consensus but mutual clarification, critical reflection, and spiritual growth. It creates a space where each tradition can better articulate its vision of divine justice, human responsibility, and the spiritual purpose of material generosity. The convergence of Islamic and Christian ethics around compassion, justice, solidarity, and stewardship provides a common moral foundation for collaborative action. Both traditions affirm that wealth is a trust from God and that its rightful use includes alleviating suffering and pursuing equity. These principles offer the ethical infrastructure for joint initiatives in humanitarian aid, community development, refugee resettlement, and economic justice. Such shared moral commitments do not erase theological differences but provide an actionable platform for Muslims and Christians to work together toward the common good.

In a world facing widespread inequality, ecological degradation, and political fragmentation, interfaith partnerships rooted in a shared commitment to charity can serve as a counter-testimony to division and exclusion. This paper's historical component reveals that cooperation and conflict have shaped Muslim-Christian interactions. Acknowledging this complex legacy is vital to building trust. Recalling shared periods of coexistence, such as in medieval Spain or during the Abbasid translation movement, reminds both communities that interfaith collaboration has deep historical precedents. Meanwhile, confronting past grievances—such as those arising from colonialism, crusades, or missionary tensions—can lead to mature reconciliation grounded in truth and humility. Moreover, recognising the cultural expressions of charity in different contexts allows each community to appreciate the diversity and creativity of religious life. When dialogue incorporates cultural dimensions—art, language, ritual, food, and festival—it becomes embodied and emotionally resonant, making theological concepts more accessible to grassroots communities.

This paper highlights the need for institutional mechanisms to foster interfaith cooperation, including joint publications on charity, comparative theology, leadership training, faith-based coalitions addressing social challenges, and collaborative charitable campaigns during sacred seasons. Institutionalising these efforts can lead to sustainable engagement, measurable social impact, and enduring relationships, moving dialogue from symbolic gestures to enduring relationships. The synthesis of findings also highlights the transformative role of interreligious education and leadership development. Equipping future religious leaders, educators, and community organisers with interfaith literacy is essential for breaking down stereotypes, nurturing empathy, and preparing communities to engage confidently across differences. Educational reform—integrating interfaith curricula into seminaries, madāris, and public universities—will ensure that interreligious competence becomes a normative part of religious formation. Leadership, both institutional and grassroots, is equally vital. When imams and pastors model respectful engagement, when local communities serve together in acts of compassion, they translate theology into public witness, showing that dialogue is not an abstraction but a lived ethic.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined the theological, historical, ethical, and political dimensions of charity in Islam and Christianity, arguing that zakat and agape constitute a powerful foundation for interfaith dialogue and collaboration. While the two traditions frame charity differently—zakat as a structured obligation of worship and justice, agape as voluntary, grace-filled love—they converge on the ethical imperatives of compassion, equity, and care for the marginalised. The analysis revealed that charity has historically functioned not only as an individual virtue but also as a communal and political force. In early Islam, zakat contributed to community cohesion and state legitimacy, while in early Christianity, almsgiving and diakonia strengthened ecclesial identity and institutional authority. In modern times, both zakat and Christian charity have been integrated into national welfare systems and global humanitarian networks, showing that charity is inseparable from wider economic and political structures. Contemporary case studies—from interfaith disaster relief in Indonesia and refugee assistance in the Middle East to ecological projects under the UN *Faith for Earth* initiative—illustrate that Muslims and Christians are already collaborating in ways that embody their theological commitments. These examples highlight that charity is not an abstract ideal but a living practice with tangible impact in addressing global poverty, forced migration, ecological degradation, and public health crises.

Theologically, interfaith dialogue on charity can be deepened by applying Swidler's principles of mutual learning, Hick's pluralist vision of shared moral truth, and liberation theology's call for justice against systemic oppression. Ethically, Muslims and Christians are challenged to move beyond episodic acts of giving toward structural transformation, ensuring that charity addresses not only symptoms but also the root causes of inequality. Practically, this study recommends the following: (1) Joint charity projects between Muslim and Christian institutions, particularly in poverty alleviation, refugee resettlement, and ecological stewardship. (2) Interfaith theological roundtables on zakat and agape, promoting deeper comparative understanding among scholars, clergy, and lay leaders. (3) Educational reforms in seminaries and madāris to integrate comparative theology and interreligious ethics into curricula, fostering interfaith literacy among future leaders. (4) Policy advocacy by faith-based NGOs, leveraging the moral authority

of charity to influence governments and international bodies toward greater social justice.

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