

# Common Values: Religion and Basic Goods Provision

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Edited by A. Barrera and R.C. Amore

Kenneth A. Reinert  
Schar School of Policy and Government  
George Mason University

## Abstract

The basic goods approach is a type of economic ethics that begins with the concept of human needs and focuses on the fulfilment of these needs through the provision of basic goods and services. This chapter uses the lens of common values to assess the extent to which the religious ethical traditions of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam support a policy focus on basic goods provision. It also considers the relationship of the religious ethics of basic goods provision to the secular tradition of moral minimalism. Finally, the chapter considers some current practical applications of the religious ethics of basic goods provision for policies in the areas of economic globalization, development policy, and humanitarian assistance. The considerations of the chapter suggest that a common ethics of basic goods provision does exist across Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam.

Keywords: Economic ethics, religious ethics, basic needs, basic goods, common values

## *Introduction*

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the issue of basic goods provision from the perspective of three religious ethics traditions: Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. A focus on basic good provision is part of what Reinert (2011, 2018a) calls the *basic goods approach*. The basic goods approach is a type of economic ethics that begins with the fundamental concept of human need. It embraces the concept of human well-being introduced by Griffen (1986), namely that ‘*well-being is the level to which basic needs are met so long as they retain importance*’ (p. 42, emphasis in original). Basic goods are those goods and services that help to meet these basic needs. As shown in Reinert (2018a, 2020), there is a great deal of global deprivation in basic goods provision, with significant detrimental impacts on human well-being. Basic goods provision is therefore of immense practical as well as ethical interest.

While there is no definitive list of basic goods, Reinert (2018a, Table 3.1) provides one possible list and motivations for it. The list consists of nutritious food, clean water, sanitation services, health services, education services, housing, electricity, and human security services. The

basic goods approach views these as the *ingredients of well-being* that allow human beings to be healthy, literate, and able to participate meaningfully in their societies. They make human flourishing, however conceived, possible. The basic goods approach argues that certain goods and services need to be treated differently than others and given priority in policy deliberations. Similar lists appear throughout the works in religious ethics considered here.

To effectively evaluate the role of basic goods provision in the ethical traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, this chapter draws on the notion of *common values*. This ethical concept has been introduced and justified by Bok (2002) as being ‘easily recognized across societal and other boundaries’ and ‘so clear-cut as to offer standards for critiquing abuses’ (p. 1). Bok also suggests that ‘to the extent that they are acknowledged as common and respected as such, they can provide a basis from which to undertake the dialogue and collaboration now needed’ (p. 1). Such common values form a sort of narrow universalism that avoids the pitfalls of both comprehensive universalism and relativism. This middle ground is important because both comprehensive universalism and relativism suffer from what Bok calls *premature closure*. Premature closure is characterized by ‘either holding one particular set of values to be so self-evident as to require no further justification or allowing the rhetoric of moral incommensurability to block every inquiry concerning them’ (p. 49). Reinert (2011) has suggested that the basic goods approach escapes these pitfalls. Assessing this claim is part of the agenda for this chapter.

In this chapter, we will consider the extent to which common values characterize Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic ethics regarding basic goods provision in economic and social outcomes assessment. The tentative conclusion reached is that *they indeed do*. While important, this conclusion might not be as surprising as initially thought. As observed by Rizk (2008), for example, the ‘ethical teachings of most religions are largely compatible with each other and with secular views’ (p. 249), and Nienhaus (2010) states that ‘Islamic economic ethics exhibits considerable overlap with Western-Christian perceptions in the field of individual ethics’ (p. 78). Such considerations operate at a broad level. Our purpose here is to see if they apply to the specific ethical issue of basic goods provisioning. We begin our inquiry with Christianity.

### *Christianity*

There is evidence of concern with and attention to basic goods provision in the traditions comprising Christian ethics. For example, at a broad level, Bedford-Strohm (2012) notes ‘as

Christians we speak of a God who is... inseparably linked with a preferential option for the poor' (p. 1). Bedford-Strohm roots this 'preferential option for the poor' in Jesus' 'golden rule' statement (Matthew 7:12) 'do to others what you would have them do to you' and describes it in universalist terms. His statement of the preferential option for the poor is a strong one:

This option has often been criticised as exclusive and divisive. And it is certainly true: the fact that it is a *preferential* option means that it is a conflictual option, that it supports certain interests as opposed to other interests. But ultimately it is not a partial but a universal option. It intends justice *for all*. It is only partial as long as the universal intention is blocked by the pursuit of the illegitimate interests of some at the cost of others (p. 2, emphases in original).

Bedford-Strohm writes from the perspective of Lutheran economics ethics, but there are other relevant traditions. For example, in the realm of Catholic social thought, Barrera (1997) assesses the needs concept, particularly the *universal access principle*. According to Barrera, 'the universal access principle is brought to bear on issues pertaining to competing claims through its *just use* requirement which in turn is further developed in its *superfluous income criterion* where resources are allocated according to need' (p. 468, emphases on original). Barrera notes that 'the operative rule of distributive justice in this approach is the priority accorded to satisfying unmet needs.... This... gives rise to a twofold typology of goods: (1) what is needed and (2) what is not' (p. 468). This approach maps directly on to that of Reinert (2018a, Figure 12.1) who distinguishes between basic goods provision that fulfills needs and non-basic goods provision that fulfills wants.<sup>1</sup> The preferential option and the universal access principle are entirely complementary.

Barrera (1997) develops these ideas further, distinguishing between minimum consumption levels that he terms 'constitutive' of human life and excessive consumption that he terms 'dysfunctional'. Regarding constitutive consumption, he states that 'there is an indispensable minimum consumption basket of material goods necessary for physical survival and basic health' (p. 471). In this, he echoes the secular work of Braybrooke (1987) who notes that 'the concept of needs differs top and bottom from the concept of preferences' (p. 5). Braybrooke defines basic needs as things that are 'essential to living or to functioning normally' (p. 31). He also emphasizes

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<sup>1</sup> Reinert (2018a) also emphasizes that needs fulfilment via basic goods provision more directly supports human flourishing (capabilities expansion) and even economic growth than does wants fulfillment.

the role of a minimum standard of provision that helps to define ethical obligations. For example, Braybrooke would be in complete agreement with Barrera's call for 'basic sufficiency for all' (p. 472).

In practice, Barrera calls for a ranking of goods according to a needs-based urgency, with constitutive goods receiving the highest ranking. This relates to what Braybrooke (1987) terms the 'principle of precedence' to ensure that there is full access to basic goods. In economic terms, this can be translated into a 'lexicographic' priority. There are thus links between Catholic social thought on basic goods provision and non-religious moral philosophy.

Barrera raises the question of how far obligations to meet needs extend, a perennial issue in ethics that balances universalistic versus particularistic considerations. In the Christian tradition, a partial answer to this comes from the concept of *agape* with origins in the contribution of Nygren (1932). *Agapē* is defined by Grant (1996) as 'God reaching out to humanity' (p. 4) and more fully by Andolsen (1981) as 'an absolutely disinterested love modeled on God's love for unworthy human beings' (p. 69). It is defined more simply and more relevantly to our concerns here by Outka (1972) as 'equal-regard'. While there is much discussion of how we are to properly conceive of *agapē*, it has relevance to basic goods provision. In general terms, Sferrazzo (2020) states that 'an agapic behavior is... adopted in order to establish a relationship with another individual, which is oriented to the common good' (p. 234). More specifically, Andolsen (1981) notes that 'in situations in which the needs and desires of all parties cannot be satisfied, basic human needs (both physical and psychological) should be met first. The party in greater need has a *prima facie* claim in the other' (p. 80).

The *agapē* concept has the potential to be applied to economic ethics broadly, and to basic needs provision specifically, but this does not seem to be fully realized in Christian economic ethics. Equal-regard (Outka, 1972) for the common good (Sferrazzo, 2020) would most certainly recognize and try to address basic needs (Andolsen, 1981) through the provision of basic goods and services. But these connections need to be more fully worked out. As we will see, equivalent concepts exist in Buddhist and Islamic economic ethics, and in these cases, they have been more fully developed.

Returning to Bedford-Strohm (2012), he makes a useful distinction between utopian forms of Christian economic ethics and an 'ethics of responsibility' that he calls the 'public theological

economic model'. This links basic needs considerations to the realities of market mechanisms. In his words, 'only when theologically-based ethical goals are mutually related to a careful reflection of political and economic strategies and their expected consequences, can theological ethics really give guidance to politics and economics and the debate about it in civil society' (p. 5). This has some important implications. For example, Reinert (2015) has applied the basic goods approach to the issue of food security, and Bedford-Strohm applies his public theological economic model to this issue. There are very few incompatibilities between the two approaches, although Reinert does not employ any explicit system of religious ethics. That might lead some to conclude that religious ethics are superfluous to the endeavor, but one can also suggest that such ethical considerations can help make explicit and contextualize the values guiding policy deliberations.

We have seen here a compatibility between certain strands of Christian economic ethics and the basic goods approach. An emphasis on basic goods provision can be compatible with these ethics in both Protestant and Catholic traditions. A true test of potential common values, however, requires that we cross over into other religious ethical traditions. To begin this process, we next consider Buddhism.

### *Buddhism*

The provision of basic goods and services has a long history in Buddhism, going back to the edicts of emperor Asoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. According to Nikam and McKeon (1959), Asoka displayed in his edicts 'a concern with the material welfare and happiness of his people' (p. 3), as well as an influence of Buddhist teachings (*dharma*) on charity. Note that one translation of the Christian concept of *agapē* is as charity, so there is already some overlap here. In Pillar Edict VII, Asoka called for the 'distribution of gifts' to 'worthy recipients of charity'. In Rock Edict II, he stated: 'Everywhere provision has been made for... medical treatment.... Medicinal herbs have been imported and planted wherever they were not previously available. Also, where roots and fruits were lacking, they have been imported and planted'. Asoka made similar statements regarding the provision of water.

As noted by Reinert (2018b), Asoka's edicts are 'evidence of a first instance when Buddhist ethics, human need, and actual policy converged in a constructive way' (p. 612). More than two millennia later, as represented in this chapter, we are still struggling to do this within systems of

religious ethics. Asoka was an emperor ahead of his time. In a real sense, we are still trying to catch up with him.

Moving forward to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, we next consider the social policy prescriptions of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna as expressed in his *Royal Counsels*. As reported in Thurman (1986), Nagarjuna called for a universal health system to ‘dispel the sufferings of children, the elderly, and the sick’ (240), including the distribution of medicines. He also called for the provisioning of ‘seasonal food, drink, vegetables, grains, and fruits’ (244) and introduced the idea of grain reserves for lean times. In this, his goal was to ‘cause the blind, the sick, the humble, the unprotected, the destitute, and the crippled all equally to attain food and drink without omission’ (320). In the realm of education, Nagarjuna suggested the setting up of ‘centers of teaching’ (310-311). The focus on basic goods provision is quite clear.

Nagarjuna is most famous for his Buddhist philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and it is at first glance ironic that the developer of such a subtle concept would turn to the practical matters of basic goods provision. Thurman (1986) attributes this to the presence in Nagarjuna’s thought of *mahākaruṇā*, the ‘great empathy’ or ‘great compassion’. *Mahākaruṇā* serves a similar function here as does *agapē* in Christian ethics, and Thurman explicitly recognizes the presence of common values between Christian and Buddhist ethics. He states:

It is always essential to remember... the fundamental inconceivability of all things, for which great love seems finally the only adequate response. Nagarjuna insists that “the profound enlightenment in practice, is emptiness creative as compassion.” Jesus Christ’s “Love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself,” and Augustine’s “Love God and do what you will”—these two great “pivotal phrases” are very much in the same vein, using of course the theistic term for emptiness. In a culture more used to those great statements, we might express Nagarjuna as follows: “Open thy heart to absolute emptiness, and love all thy neighbors and thyself!” (p. 32).

It worth recalling that Thurman’s aim in his article is to describe a Buddhist *social policy*, and that, in so doing, he expresses these common values between two religious traditions.

Reinert (2018b) also notes that issues of basic goods provision are to be found in Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition of the Six Perfections or *pāramitās*, particularly the Perfection of Generosity. The Perfection of Generosity is explicitly linked to the provision of food, water, clothing, and shelter. Further, Wright (2009) notes that ‘one thing that Mahayana Buddhist authors realized... is that generosity is best understood as an achievement of a *whole society* and not simply of individuals within that society’ (p. 29, emphasis added). Therefore, the Perfection of Generosity is a matter of social and economic *policy*, not just of individual action. Wright takes this important point further, stating that ‘much of the pointless suffering in the world can be alleviated through intelligent political action, and any contemporary account of the perfection of generosity will acknowledge this’ (p. 47). Although Buddhism, even Mahayana Buddhism, is sometimes seen as overly focused on individual spiritual development, Buddhist thinkers often include a program leading to the common good.

In the modern era, one touchstone of Buddhist economic ethics is Payutto’s *Buddhist Economics* (2016). In a manner similar to Barrera (1997) in the Christian tradition, Payutto makes a distinction between ‘wise consumption’ based on discriminative knowledge and ‘unwise consumption’ based on a lack of such knowledge. In making this distinction, he implicitly takes up the perennial issue of non-prudential desire. Relatedly, he makes a distinction between two kinds of desires. First is the desire for ‘true well-being’ (*chanda*), and second is the desire for ‘pleasurable experience’ (*taṇhā*). In other words, Payutto makes a distinction between needs and wants.

Payutto applies this distinction by identifying what is known in the Buddhist monastic tradition as the ‘four requisites’ of food, shelter, clothing, and medicine, what Neminda (2019) calls the ‘four basic commodities’. Payutto states that if ‘people are deprived of the four requisites, this will interfere or prevent people’s intellectual and wisdom development, which is essential to culture and civilization’ (p. 5). Neminda relatedly states that:

Not having enough basic commodities to avoid poverty causes two primary problems according to Buddhist teachings. The first problem is regarded as the root of bodily suffering. It is realized as hunger, sickness and short life, which creates an immense obstacle to the cultivation of the mind. The second problem is that

poverty... leads to many problems in society, such as immorality, conflicts and disharmony (pp. 27-28).

Leaving the monastic realm, Reinert (2018b) modifies this tradition to the expanded ‘eight requisites’ of nutritious food, clean water, sanitation, health services, education services, housing, electricity, and human security services. He argues that this is an appropriate set of ‘requisites’ (basic goods and services) for Buddhist economic ethics. However, he does this from a similar set of considerations as those expressed by Payutto and Neminda.

There are similar themes to be found elsewhere in contemporary Buddhist thought. For example, Essen (2010) states that, in Buddhist economics, ‘the provisioning of basic material needs... serves as the foundation for spiritual advancement’ (p. 73). This is echoed in Neminda (2019):

In Buddhism, material well-being is a necessary condition to support the cultivation of the mind. This implies that insufficient material well-being... can cause suffering that may impede the practice of mental development. From the Buddhist perspective, the main objective of economic activities is to alleviate suffering.... Poverty is regarded as the problem of economic life (p. 25).

Neminda (2019) broadly reflects other authors in stating that material deprivation is itself a form of suffering but also has secondary effects through unethical behavior and social disorder. A basic standard or minimum standard of basic goods is to be a prime objective of good governance, a notion to be found in the traditional economics of Pigou (1932) who also emphasized the role of a minimum standard.

Reflecting such considerations, Brown (2017) states that ‘in Buddhist economics,... everyone is assumed to have the right to a comfortable life with access to basic nutrition, health care, education, and the assurance of safety and human rights’ (p. 2). As is evidenced by the arguments in Reinert (2018b), while the right to a ‘comfortable life’ might be a bridge too far in Buddhist economic ethics, the right to escape premature death and curtailed health and social participation certainly is not.

Brown and Zsolnai (2018) suggest that Buddhist economics ‘requires the economy and society to *do different things* and to *do things differently*’ (p. 511, emphases in original). One of



these relates to Bedford-Strohm's (2012) preferential option for the poor and Barrera's (1997) universal access principle and superfluous income criterion discussed above in the Christian tradition. Brown and Zsolnai (2018) state:

Middle class and rich people around the world have more than adequate consumption, education, and health care, and do not need to continue "improving" their consumption. Poor people need to continue improving their living standards with adequate food, shelter, transportation, education, and medicine. (p. 508).

This again comes back to the provision of the eight requisites or basic goods suggested by Reinert (2018b). It is perhaps worth noting that a fundamental if overlooked part of the Buddhist focus on suffering (*duḥkha*) is what Rahula (1974) terms 'ordinary suffering' (*duḥkha-duḥkha*) and not just the psychological or existential suffering on which much of contemporary and popular Buddhism is focused. It is difficult to see how ordinary suffering can be alleviated without a keen focus on the eight requisites.

Loy (2001) seems to recognize this in his focus on what he terms 'destitution needs'. He creatively defines *duḥkha* as 'ill-being' and notes that the four requisites were devised for renunciates and need to be expanded to a fuller set of destitution or basic needs. Like Reinert (2018a Chapter 12), he notes that meeting basic needs is entirely affordable on the world scale and is more a matter of a lack of will. We will come back to his considerations in the conclusion to this chapter.

It does seem that there is a significant degree of overlap in the ethical considerations of Christianity and Buddhism regarding the importance of basic goods provision, and this overlap relates to a similar set of concepts. We will next see that this is also the case in Islamic economic ethics.

### *Islam*

It appears that the question of basic goods provision is also a part of Islamic economic ethics. Perhaps the most direct, original expressions of this comes from the *Ḥadīth*, the collection of the traditional sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. First it is stated that (Al-Tabarani, 751): 'A man who fills his stomach while his neighbor is hungry is not a believer'. This is extended beyond just food in the statement that (Tirmidhi, 2341): 'The son of Adam has no better right than that he

would have a house wherein he may live, and a piece of cloth whereby he may hide his nakedness, and a piece of bread and some water'.<sup>2</sup> These sentiments expressed in the *Hadīth* form a starting point for the role of basic good provision in Islamic ethics, and they have been carried over into more contemporary considerations.

At a broad level, we find in Islamic economic ethics the concepts of *tawhid* or unity and *adl* or equality/justice. For example, Choudhury (1983) emphasizes the role of brotherhood in Islamic economics and that this principle implies the valuing of both social justice and equality. To be more specific, this implies the 'just use and distribution of His resources' (p. 94). This is echoed in Nasr (1989) who states that 'Islamic economics enjoins social justice and economic equality' (p. 525) and that 'justice... is defined as the absence of *unjustifiable* inequalities' (p. 520, emphasis in original).. Building on these basic principles, Nienhaus (2010) notes that 'luxury is frowned upon; Islam preaches moderation; and the use of surpluses for social aims is meritorious. The needy have their own claim for solidarity from the community' (p. 79). As these sources indicate, a starting point for Islamic economic ethics is therefore brotherhood and solidarity that arise from *tawhid* and *adl*.

As in the Christian and Buddhist traditions, the concept of human need also features in Islamic economic ethics. For example, as part of a much larger discussion of Islamic economic ethics, Chapra (2008) considers the role of human needs, stating that 'the excessive rise in claims has indirectly hurt the *need fulfilment* of the poor' (p. 9, emphasis added). Chapra (2008) also considers the tension between basic goods and needs fulfilment against non-basic goods satisfying wants fulfilment. He states that 'since luxury and conspicuous consumption goods and services constitute a substantial part of spending, a large proportion of scarce resources gets diverted to the production of these goods and services, leaving inadequate resources for the production of goods and services to satisfy the basic needs of the poor' (pp. 9-10). These ethical conclusions are entirely compatible with the basic goods approach.

The consideration of human needs is related to the concept of *israf*. As noted by Choudhury (1983), 'excessive or wasteful consumption... is called *israf*.... An Islamic society gives consumption priority to the necessities and comforts of life in this order. It is widely agreed upon

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<sup>2</sup> These two quotations are as translated in Islamic Relief Worldwide (2014).

by many Islamic scholars that the production and consumption of luxuries is prohibited in as far as this is tantamount to *israf* (pp. 100-101). This approach to luxury production and consumption is also entirely compatible with the basic goods approach because it implicitly places a priority on needs fulfillment over wants fulfillment.

The issue of human needs also arises in considerations of work (*amal*) in Islamic economic ethics. Possumah, Ismail and Shahimi (2013) take up this issue in some detail. In the process, they touch upon the issues of basic needs and basic goods provision. For example, in a discussion of wages and employer-employee relationships, these authors note that the 14<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi made a distinction between necessities, wants, and luxuries, something that was later done by the economists Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall. Further, they explicitly link this to the basic needs theory originating in the International Labor Organization (e.g., Lisk, 1977). Possumah, Ismail and Shahimi (2013) state:

It is the duty of the whole Muslim society in general and of its rich in particular to take care of the basic needs of the poor and if the well-to-do do not fulfill this responsibility in spite of the ability to do so the state can and should compel them, to assume their responsibility (p. 267).

How is this to be achieved? A key instrument in providing basic goods is the redistributive wealth taxes known as *zakah* or *zakat* that is used to fund social welfare programs. Nienhaus (2010) refers to paying *zakah* as ‘one of the most fundamental religious duties for a Muslim’ (p. 83). In describing this measure, for example, Choudhury (1983) states:

Literally, the word *zakah* means sweetening and it is meant to purify wealth from its evil tendency to accumulate more and more in fewer and fewer hands on account of the unequal opportunities that men enjoy. Through *zakah* the wealthy Muslims are made responsible individually and collectively for providing the basic necessities of all members of the society. Islam does not object to the earning of large sums, but makes it a bounden duty of the wealthy to see that not a single soul is deprived of the basic needs of living (p. 101).

*Zakah* is therefore a policy instrument to ensure the universal provision of basic goods and services. Its ultimate inspirations are the principles of *tawhid* and *adl*. These play a similar role as

*agapē* in Christian economic ethics and *mahākaruṇā* in Buddhist economic ethics. These inspirational overlaps are notable because each is very close to the roots of the traditions. They suggest the possibility that common values might not be superficial but run relatively deep, providing a common motivation for both recognizing and responding to deprivations in basic goods and services.

We have seen that there is indeed a degree of common values regarding the economic ethics of basic goods provision and basic needs fulfillment across Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. There is therefore evidence for Bok's (2002) general claim that such common values exist and Reinert's (2011) more specific claim that they apply in the case of the provision of basic goods and services. We will next briefly consider how these common values translate into the realm of economic and development policy.

#### *Areas of Practice and Policy*

To be valuable, economic ethics need to be applied in the realm of economic and social policy. To varying degrees, the ethical traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism have stepped into this realm. Regarding basic goods provision, a relevant policy realm is development aid and humanitarian assistance. Because development processes take place within the larger context of global economic relations or economic globalization, these larger processes also become quite relevant. Here we will briefly consider some of the forays of religious ethics into these areas of economic and development policy.

The World Council of Churches' (2005) *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE)* background document attempts to provide a sustained critique of economic globalization from the perspective of Christian economic ethics, addressing global trade and global finance. From a technical economic standpoint, there is much to critique in it. The document paints with an overly broad brush, shunning many important details taken up, for example, by Goldin and Reinert (2012). As with many such policy documents, it alludes to a 'neo-liberal' model that remains both under-defined and unattached to what contemporary neoclassical economists suggest in terms of effective policy. However, it is noteworthy that human needs play an important counterpoint to contemporary economic globalization throughout the document. Here is one example:

Neoliberalism assumes that ‘good governance’ exists where governments liberate markets and restrict their sovereign right to determine their own policies through privatization, dollarisation, or enforceable ‘free trade’ agreements. Failure to comply with these policies, and the failure of these policies, once implemented, to produce the promised benefits, are blamed on ‘bad governance’ rather than on the neoliberal model itself. Yet the most fundamental understanding of democracy, justice and self-determination underlines that the only way to secure genuine good governance is through the regulation of capital and markets to serve the needs of the people, as defined by the people themselves (pp. 11-12).

The World Council of Churches (2014) revisited these issues in its *An Economy of Life for All Now* document. This document expresses ‘a shared *commitment*... to construct global financial systems oriented towards satisfying people’s needs’ (p. 5, emphasis in original). It also notes that ‘this commitment is consistent with *common values affirmed by other great moral traditions*’ (p. 5, emphasis added). The document describes policy changes to move in this direction, but the invocation of common values is significant. These are not just active in the more conceptual realms of economic ethics but are also being applied in policy considerations.

We can see something similar in the case of the British NGO Islamic Relief Worldwide, established in 1984. As described by Petersen (2012), Islamic Relief is the largest transnational Muslim organization in the world and focuses on ‘microfinance programmes, education, health and nutrition, orphan sponsorships, water and sanitation, emergency relief and seasonal projects’ (p. 145). Petersen also states that ‘core principles of the organization are neutrality, universalism and impartiality’ (p. 145). As it turns out, although the work of Islamic Relief was inspired by ‘Islamic humanitarian values’, its explicit Islamic ethics were addressed sometime after the organization had been successfully in existence.

Islamic Relief’s ethics have been expressed in the Islamic Relief Worldwide (2014) report *An Islamic Perspective on Human Development*, a document that considers ‘the key principles and core values that underpin Islamic views on development, poverty reduction, human rights and advocacy’ (p. 3). Development is often conceived as improvements in human well-being, and Islamic Relief does so, using the term adopted by many Muslim economists, namely *falah* (literally ‘success’). The standard model of economic development is as growth, with alternatives also being

available (capabilities expansion and human development). Islamic Relief embraces the latter, stating that an environment that supports *falah* ‘can only be created in societies that work to remove sources of human deprivation in multiple dimensions. This is contrary to the prevailing view of development focused on economic growth alone’ (p. 3). This approach to development policy is entirely compatible with the approach of the World Council of Churches.

As discussed in Barrera (2007) and Reinert (2020), it is possible to see the commitment to basic goods provision in terms of basic subsistence rights. Islamic Relief Worldwide recognizes a rights-based approach to development, stating that ‘a rights-based regime based on Islamic principles will have substantial overlap with the conventional concept of a rights-based approach to development as both will seek to bring about social justice’ (p. 7). Among the rights listed by Islamic Relief are the rights to food, shelter, health, education, and security, all of which appear in the basic goods approach.

Interestingly, along with social justice (*adl*), Islamic Relief Worldwide (2014) also embraces compassion (*rahma*) as a core value, and here the connection to Buddhist economic ethics (*mahākaruṇā*) is quite direct. This organization also explicitly states that Muslims can provide humanitarian aid to non-Muslims, an expression of the organization’s universality. Islamic Relief refers to the ‘duty for Muslims to act in cases of humanitarian need and to do so without discriminating against non-Muslims’ (p. 19). Humanitarian efforts are also explicitly linked to the *zakah* or *zakat* discussed above.

In perhaps an even stronger expression of common values, the Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide (2018) worked together on a document addressing the role of religion in humanitarian work. Regarding the aims of this document, the two organizations state that ‘the guidance should be inclusive of all humanitarian actors, assisting both secular and faith-based organizations in the course of their work in the field’ (p. 5). The document is structured according to ten domains, and these include health, education, food security and nutrition, shelter, water, and sanitation. That is, basic goods and services are part of the structure of this inter-faith collaboration.

The collaboration expressed in Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide (2018) does not move from ethical principles to practice. Rather, it starts with the common,

practical experience of aid and humanitarian organizations and works towards principles of practice. In the case of food security, for example, these organizations state:

Religious institutions and leaders are actively involved addressing the root causes of food insecurity, as well as directly responding to situations in which communities have insufficient food. All religions have a requirement to ‘help the hungry’, and this common purpose facilitates a collaborative approach in the affected areas. Religious institutions and ecumenical and inter-faith bodies build on core teachings about feeding the hungry (p. 70).

This is a practical expression in an interfaith document of a multi-religious commitment to address the human need for nutritious food via basic goods provision.

Interestingly, and as noted by Barnett and Stein (2012), there are relatively few Buddhist development aid organizations. This fact remains a bit of a mystery given the ethical considerations discussed here. The organization most recognized is Tzu-Chi, founded in 1966 in Taiwan to defray the medical costs of poor Taiwanese. It is now active in approximately 50 countries, including the United States. One central focus of Tzu-Chi is on aiding the deprived, and Lee and Han (forthcoming) describe its activities as ‘global disaster relief and medical humanitarian work’ (n.p.), so there is definite resonance with basic goods provision. Regarding health services, Tzu-Chi includes an International Medical Association (TIIMA), established in 1998, that Lee and Han describe as ‘a rare international voluntary medical association with the ability to mobilize thousands of medical professionals’ (n.p.) in a manner comparable to Doctors without Borders.

The United States activities of Tzu-Chi have been of interest to observers. For example, Tzu-Chi was active in the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, and in New Orleans in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina. These activities seem to have been motivated in basic needs terms. The leader of Tzu-Chi, the Buddhist Nun Cheng Yen, described this motivation as follows: ‘Taiwan used to be such a poor place after World War II. Relying on aid from the U.S., many poor people have something to eat, to attend schools, and even to develop our economy’ (quoted in Lee and Han, forthcoming, n.p.). In other words, the intent was to reciprocate in the meeting of basic human needs.

That said, as stressed in Huang (2009), there is a charismatic quality to the role of Cheng Yen in the Tzu-Chi organization. The one well-known Buddhist relief organization is motivated not only by compassion, but by its members' devotional relationship to the organization's leader. To use Huang's terms, disentangling compassion from charisma in assessing the activities of Tzu-Chi is important, but beyond the scope of this chapter.

### *Moral Minimalism: The Secular View*

We have seen that there is a great deal of overlap among Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam regarding the role of basic human needs and the basic goods and services required to address them. To expand this further, it is worthwhile to also briefly consider whether there is any additional overlap with relevant secular ethics. The considerations found in Reinert (2011, 2018a,b) suggest that such potential overlap might be found in *moral minimalism*. This would help to extend potential common values even further.

Moral minimalism is described by Walzer (1994) as 'a simplified... morality' based on 'mutual recognition among the protagonists of different fully developed cultures' (p. 17) that offers 'a certain limited, though important and heartening solidarity' (p. 11). For the term 'different fully developed cultures' we can substitute 'different fully developed religious ethics'. As an example, Reinert (2011) suggests that 'a Muslim citizen of Pakistan who lacks shelter in the winter months due to (a) recent earthquake and the Christian citizen of Honduras, similarly lacking shelter due to a mudslide, despite residing in very different cultural spaces, would agree that the basic goods shelter is of utmost value' (p. 61). These are potential common values that are ever present given the well-being and even survival challenges faced by human beings the world over.

In the subsistence rights context, moral minimalism is described by Shue (1996) as a 'morality of the depths' or 'the line beneath which no one is allowed to sink' (p. 18). Similarly, Braybrooke refers to it as the 'rock bottom' of ethics (p. 131). These secular ethical conceptions are fully compatible with the religious ethics considered here, and this compatibility is notable. As noted by Bader (2008), 'moral minimalism is the most plausible, agreeable, and robust theoretical strategy to defend global justice under conditions of more or less deep cultural diversity inside and between states' (p. 542). The fact that there is a minimalist component of Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic ethics regarding basic good provision is quite important to the considerations of this chapter.



Finally, it is possible to conceive of a common ethics of basic goods provision as part of a projects of constructivist ethics of the type advocated by Riordan (1991), a Christian scholar of the common good. This constructivist project would focus less on exacting philosophical principles and more on the pressing considerations of deprivation about which *agreement can be reached* despite the presence of philosophical, religious, and cultural differences, resulting in a set of ‘ultra-thin’ ethical priorities. It is even possible to consider that an agreed-upon list of basic goods and services could take the place of Rawlsian primary goods in a minimalist concept of justice along the lines suggested by Nelson (2008). As we have seen here, such a view of justice would have some real resonance in the ethical traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam.

### *Conclusion*

Let us now return to Bok’s (2002) concept of common values. She envisions these ‘areas of overlap’ as having three components (p. 57): ‘duties of mutual support and loyalty’; ‘constraints on specific forms of violence and dishonesty’; and a ‘thin notion of procedural justice’. Minimal levels of basic goods provision impact *all three* of these categories.<sup>3</sup> As Apel (2000) stresses, the search for such common values or universal ethics becomes especially important in an era of globalization.

In the Buddhist context, Loy states:

The problem is not that we do not have enough resources to provide for the basic needs of everyone. We have more than enough. The problem is a lack of collective will, enough will to overcome the simple fact that that the people who have the most say about what happens to the earth’s resources do not care to do it. It is just not a priority for them.... In other words, the problem of world poverty is not primarily an economic one. It is a matter of our collective intentions and therefore our values (pp. 70-71).

These requisite values could potentially be the ‘common values’ introduced by Bok and considered in this chapter. Indeed, the considerations of this chapter indicate that such common values regarding the basic goods approach are shared among Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam,

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of forms of violence, the relevant basic service is human security services discussed in a secular context in Chapter 11 of Reinert (2018a).

as well as in the secular ethics of moral minimalism. Apel's (2000) preferred outcome is a universal 'procedural principles of discourse ethics; (p. 153), but that is not what we have provided there. However, his second-best option that he considers to be 'very useful' is 'an empirical-inductive ascertainment of common values and an ad hoc agreement on this basis' (p. 153). This, to some extent at least, we have provided here.

Given this result, and the widespread deprivation in basic goods provision as identified in Reinert (2018a, 2020), what practical steps might be taken? One possibility is for a consideration among the three traditions of religious ethics to embrace some sort of Basic Development Goals (BDGs) similar to those outlined by Reinert (2020). As Reinert notes, a minimum set of seven BDGs (and ten targets) addresses basic goods and services provision and maps directly into existing subsistence rights language in the United Nations. Applying the common economic values of the three major religions to a set of BDGs would help to set global policy priorities to address the most acute kinds of deprivation. And that is indeed of utmost common value.

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