

2019

Addressing Homelessness Through Religion

Brian Nguyen

Dominican University of California

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Brian, "Addressing Homelessness Through Religion" (2019). *Service-Learning | Student Scholarship*. 4.
<https://scholar.dominican.edu/service-learning-student-scholarship/4>

This Undergraduate Student Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by the Service-Learning at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Service-Learning | Student Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.

Brian Nguyen

HONO 3190

May 13, 2019

Addressing Homelessness through Religion

Every time I pass by a man in the street holding up a piece of cardboard saying “Homeless, Will Work for Food”, a little girl standing next to her mother by the side of the road begging for money, or families sleeping in tents underneath bridges on vacant industrial property or by shopping malls, it makes me question why the US is able to spend billions to help poor countries in the world but hasn't solved its own problems. Reading Forbes magazine that ranked the 100 largest US charities in 2018, I am surprised to see many US charities such as Americares Foundation, Habitat For Humanity International, and Food For The Poor are rated as top ranking for their large revenue and high percentage of charitable commitment to support for international needs; while day by day I see more homeless people roaming around the streets, sleeping by their carts, or getting in long lines waiting for a place to stay at the homeless shelters in my community and nearby cities. Insufficient income and lack of affordable housing are the leading causes of homelessness. Homelessness not only affects those that are homeless, it affects everyone living in the community.

I understand that some may feel uncomfortable when they see the homeless. They may question how these people allowed themselves to come to the point of homelessness. Many are skeptical and continue to have certain stereotypes about the homeless such as being lazy, dirty, and suffering from drug/alcohol problems. People make the choice to look the other way and refuse to acknowledge the hardships most of the homeless have to endure every day. Fortunately, many religions address problems with the homeless community in our society in different ways.

Although Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism may have different beliefs, they all encourage people to help homeless people by reaching out and giving aid to the hungry and the needy.

I started volunteering at Ritter Center to help homeless people while gaining a newfound understanding of them for myself. At the Ritter Center, I provide food we have at the pantry for the homeless who come by. The first time I arrived, I was kind of nervous for thinking of all negative clichés I've seen and heard about the homeless. What surprised me was when I realized that one member of our volunteer group was also homeless. Dale became homeless after his parents passed away by car accident. He told me, "I felt total despair when my parent died and found myself in a darkness. I couldn't pay for the rent, afford for all utility bills and food. I decided to move out and joined with homeless people on the street." Fortunately, his friends gave him moral support, encouraged him to think about what is best for his future and introduced him to a church in his hometown where he got help for housing. He continued, "I volunteer here at the Ritter Center to help those like me because I know what it's like for them. It means a lot to me."

To me, homeless people are individuals or families who lack and can't support permanent housing to survive on a daily basis due to harsh financial circumstances. The homeless people that I've met at Ritter Center are nothing like the stereotypes for the most part compared to the ones I've seen on the streets. I've seen a lot of older adults, but sometimes I see children or even teenagers who come by the pantry. Most of them became homeless because their wages and income were not enough to cover rent or a mortgage and other necessities like food, medicine, health care, transportation, and child care. Some had made it past high school but became unemployed for more than a year. Knowledge of this has given me a different perspective on the way we see homeless people. They're human beings, educated, have manners and can look like

normal people I'd see on a regular basis. They think about love, life, stress, money, friends and want to be given another chance to be a better people than they once were. I feel the Ritter Center is doing the best they can to help those who come by with what resources they can offer. In addition to meals, they offer non-facility-based care, help with employment services and find homes for those who can manage one. In the Christian faith, I've learned about the commandment for people to love God and love one another. I have been taught about giving a hand toward poor or homeless people; the needy should be treated with open arms and given enough to make up for what they lack. Those who show concern for the poor will be rewarded in the afterlife for their generous acts. After this experience, I will continue to have more positive attitudes toward homeless people and treat them just like anybody else. They need compassion and a little help in a way that can keep their hope for a better life. I believe being at the Ritter Center was the right place for me.

At the Ritter Center, no matter if they are employees or volunteers, they probably are somehow influenced by Christian doctrine that teaches about giving aid to the hungry and the needy. They are people whose hearts go out to those in need, who unconditionally work with the homeless because they want to be a part of community; feel sympathy and believe it's the right thing to do; and are genuinely kind people who want to treat homeless people with dignity. Their act of compassion could have a deep and lasting impact on the life of others.

The Ritter Center is a community-based organization that provides crucial support in food, clothing, showers, medical services and more. The food supply that arrives mainly comes from food banks and other community partners. The problem Ritter Center has to face is there isn't always enough funding or sources of food. Often times, there is not enough food supply to provide the homeless demand. This can cause days where the food has to be rationed or there

won't be any food deliveries until much later in the day. When I asked Shaun Marshall, the manager of the Ritter Center, about what he thought about the issue of homelessness, he said "The shortage of affordable housing in the County, especially rental housing, is an obstacle to finding solutions for homelessness." He continued, "If you do Google search about house renting in San Rafael, you can see the average rent for an apartment in San Rafael is \$2,585, a 2% increase compared to the previous year, when the average rent was \$2,531. The relentless increase in housing costs not only affects the current homeless individuals but adds to the challenge to all working people as well." Continuing with our conversation, I asked Shaun, "How does it impact the Ritter Center?" He responded, "The Ritter Center is impacted by this because we are often a service of last resort where people can get assistance with the bare basics like food assistance, medical care, showers and laundry, and rental assistance. We also can help with car repair from time to time. The Ritter Center offers walk-in therapy for no cost as well to help clients with deeper and root cause issues."

According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. The core teaching of Buddhism is that the stress and unhappiness of life are caused by our desires and ego-clinging. People generally believe that external conditions such as houses, food, cars, and money are essential for everyone to enjoy life. It seems that these things that are impermanent can make people happy, but if we look more deeply within, we shall see that the pursuit of this impermanence would leave us in a state of disappointment, anxiety and suffering. Buddhists view the real source of happiness is inner peace. If our mind is peaceful, we shall be happy all the time, regardless of external conditions. Buddhist teaching also states that "giving, or generosity, is one of the Perfections of Buddhism, but to be "perfect" it must be selfless, without expectation of reward or praise. Even practicing charity "to feel good about

myself" is considered an impure motivation." That is why Buddhism doesn't seek publicity for charity. The Buddha taught a series of practical rules and methods, the famous Eight-Fold Path, that teaches the Right Ways of Life which were designed to help people to diminish their suffering. Still, there are popular Buddhist charities today named Tzu Chi USA and Buddhist Global Relief, etc. giving a helping hand to provide food aid to the malnourished and hungry people, build schools, offer medical care, and respond to disasters around the globe. Yet, there is The Divine Lineage Center in Laytonville, CA, a place of deep healing and transformation by educating people to give access to inner and outer peace and provide a pathway to sustainable prosperity, happiness and enlightenment for all.

Jewish teachings about the poor and charity are similar to Christian teachings and also encourage aiding the needy. The Torah, the entirety of Jewish laws and traditions, emphasizes on helping the poor as rationales in response to God's command: "For the poor will never disappear from the earth, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 11). However, the ideal practice of providing help to the poor in Judaism much differs from Christianity. Jewish teachings focus their lesson that giving to the poor is an act of justice and righteousness or a duty that cannot be forsaken even by those who are themselves in need. All Jews are required by Jewish law to give one-tenth of their income to the poor while Christian churches on the other hand may need financial supports without the law or obligation about giving 10% of their income to the churches. With this firm financial support, many American Jewish charity organizations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, American Jewish World Service, American Jewish Committee, etc. have formed in providing aid to Jewish and non-Jewish communities around the world through a network of social and community assistance programs.

People around the world view America as a wealthy, prosperous and world-leading nation; therefore, homelessness could not be such major issue. However, a closer look reveals a sobering reality. Homelessness is here and it is prevalent in America! The numerous potential causes of homelessness such as domestic violence, marital distress, mental illness, and substance abuse are varied and complicated; the inability to obtain sufficient income to pay for affordable house is the main cause of homelessness. With the rapidly inflating house prices, job layoffs and high living costs, a person or family struggling to pay for necessities may lead them to homelessness. When they struggle with chronic food insecurity, hunger, and homeless, they have intense feelings of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem and are easily trapped in a vicious cycle of drug, alcohol, violence or divorce. These issues create a domino effect that makes it harder to understand the real cause of the problem. As helping the homeless is a consistent theme of the three religions mentioned above, many communities are working to help embrace the immense numbers of the hungry, needy, homeless, and those without hope. Unfortunately, many people look away or deny helping homeless individuals because they believe they're not responsible and have no obligation to help. They say homelessness impacts their lives in terms of tax dollars they have to pay and the lack of safety they feel every time they encounter a homeless person in their neighborhood.

Homelessness is a large problem in the United States. The government has tried helping by organizing relief centers but these aren't effective enough. Funding for the homeless is coming slowly but the demand for help is still high. Ending homelessness may be a difficult task but it is still solvable. Our government could learn a thing or two from the way Japan, Canada, Denmark, and Singapore's government handles the issues of homelessness. It's impressive to see either no homeless or less than 0.1% homeless people in these 4 countries. If we could get the

government and all religious charity organizations to come together for a plan of building a productive area, then take all the homeless people in so that they can start their new and better lives. That's is what Henry Ford believed, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."