

The Charism of Prophecy and Poverty Eradication: A Reaction to Luginio Bruni's Article on Economy and Communion

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Abstract: Being a prophet is to speak the truth, to convey God's messages to people, regardless of the backlash the messenger may receive, just in case some people repent, and God does not punish those who do not repent. This article examines the Charism and Prophetic roles in the modern capitalist world where over 75 million people are languishing in abject poverty. The article is grounded on Luginio Bruni's manuscript on Economy and Communion. It presents a reaction to his avers on true prophesies and the nature of love that not only unites people and communities but also fosters human relationship with God resulting in a religious world economy that constantly fights poverty. The article uses empirical examples to demonstrate how selfless love and economic prosperity are inseparable. It argues that ending poverty is a universal goal that can be achieved through unity among religious organizations and true prophetic actions. This points to the Economy of Communion (EOC), which is closely linked to agape in Christianity, Sorokin's Altruistic Love, Ubuntu in Africa, the Harambee movement in Kenya, the Ujamaa spirit in Tanzania and many other forms of charism.

Keywords: Charism, Communion, prophet, Ubuntu

I. INTRODUCTION

In his manuscript "*Economy and Communion*," Luginio Bruni (2020) raises very crucial questions that cannot be ignored whenever one thinks about prophesy and prophetic economy in the modern world. As one reads the article, the Karl Marxian description of religion as "the opium of the people" (Marx, 1970, p. 131) comes in mind. The analogy in this statement shows that Marx labeled religion as an illegal practice, a narcotic that addicted its followers who never benefited from it but rather inflicted more suffering to them. Marx highlighted the exploitative nature of religion and its ability to alienate the society. Contrary to the assertion that religion not only plants the seeds of poverty but also irrigates them, Bruni brings in a completely different dimension where he defines a religious world economy that actually thrives and flourishes to the advantage of the poor. In fact, opium is also an analgesic drug or a painkiller that brings a sigh of relief to those who follow it and are in suffering (Cohen et al, 2021). This is what religion should do; ameliorate the suffering of the people. In the light of the above, this article examines five main themes from Bruni's arguments in the aforementioned article. They include the paradox of true prophesy, reversing the gains of globalization, losers in the modern economies,

commoditization of poverty, and charting the way forward by helping the poor as a way of worshiping God.

A narrative literature review was used to gather information from journal articles, authentic websites, and textbooks. In this case, the literature was critically evaluated using a qualitative approach. In order to ensure that the results are not biased, expert intuitive evidence was applied. This was based on the work of Luginio Bruni and documented experiences in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa. In addition, practical examples from organizations such as the Grameen Foundation and the Focolare Movement were used.

The Paradox of True Prophesy

Prophetic economics can help in eliminating poverty if and only if people stick to the true call of the true religion. Even though Bruni was specific about Christian religion, his argument seems to point towards any true religion that "derives its pedigree from heaven" from where it comes and towards where it moves. Citing verse 17 of James 1 in the Lamsa Bible (2001), Smith (1864) described true religion as "a beam from God, as every good and perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the father of lights, with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning" (Smith, 1864, p.5). In this context, true religion cannot be exploitative and as destructive as the opium narcotic that is responsible for over 70% of all drug-related deaths in the United States (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2020). What clearly comes out of Bruni's article is the existence of false prophets whose acts make religion look like a narcotic and less like a sign of relief to the poor, oppressed and the vulnerable members of the society. While prophets are supposed to be links between God and the people, Bruni has raised concerns about the dangers that false prophets pose to the vulnerable members of the society. He outlines the characteristics of false prophets to warn those who may fall prey to their antics. As Bruni (2020) explains, false prophets are thirsty for fame, wealth, and popularity at the expense of the poor members of the society. Unlike true prophets who are voices in the wilderness, the affluent and celebrity nature of false prophets have turned to be voices in 'green orchards along streams of abundant clean water.' This has distanced them from the reality of the poor who are increasingly finding it difficult to love such prophets. Contrary to the poor, the rich and the powerful in the society

worship false prophets. They pay them to counter true prophesy. The rich use their wealth to manipulate and win the favor of false prophets. As Ansah and Ansah (2021), stated, true prophets are in contact with the one true God because they speak on His behalf besides conveying His messages to the people. In this regard, if a prophet does not seem to act within the expectation of the true religion, such prophets serve mammon. As Bruni states, money under the capitalistic economy has become the modern-day idol and the driving factor for proliferation of false prophets. For lack of possible ways of dealing with false prophesy in a world where freedom of worship and belief is a human right, cautioning people against falling prey into it is the only way to go as Bruni demonstrates.

Many true prophets experienced role distance, role conflicts and backlash from the public. Some of the warnings they gave were not taken seriously unless the worst happens. While this kind of behavior was heartbreaking, such prophets continued to communicate God's message to the people. As Bruni puts it, the effectiveness of communication and the urgency with which people had to act to avoid God's wrath was undermined by God's forgiveness due to his gracious and merciful character whose unfailing love slowed his anger. As protectors of the word, the prophets complained that God chose them to send the warning messages only to forgive and avert impending calamity. This does not mean that prophets wanted people to sin and get punished in order for prophesies to come true. It is what Bruni calls the paradox of prophesy that demonstrates that forgiveness of God is to those who repent. Furthermore, it shows the courage of prophets to speak the truth without worrying about the consequences or the negative reaction of the people, if God decides to forgive and save everyone for the sake of those who repent. In fact, Abraham praised and thanked God for sparing his only son after requesting him to sacrifice Isaac. By preventing Abraham from sacrificing his son, God fulfilled the promise to make him the father of great nations. He spared Abraham's son and multiplied his descendants like the stars of heaven, as He had promised. This tells us that no matter how disappointed the prophets were when God's actions did not meet their expectations, it is always for the betterment of the people and for His glory. This means that whenever prophets are confronted by this paradox, obedience and acceptance of the will of God should always prevail. After all, God is love and an economy driven by love of God cannot fail to meet the needs of the people especially the poor and the vulnerable (Reddie, 2022).

Turning Back the Clock of Globalization

What was considered a milestone in the realization of the dream of creating a global village is rapidly collapsing. False prophets, rumor mongers and misinformation spreaders stifle the gains of globalization by encouraging inward-looking and protectionist tactics. Bruni pointed out that the Brexit and rejection of refugees in some European countries were ways of creating frontiers and erecting walls to protect

the 'we' from 'them'. This has become the norm where citizens of poor and developing countries find it difficult to enter into developed nations no matter how important the reason is. The truth is that states are using visa restrictions to limit mobility of people especially from poor countries, which has increased access inequality in foreign spaces. As Neumayer (2006) noted, "trans-national mobility is encouraged for passport holders from privileged nations, particularly rich Western countries, at the expense of severe restrictions for others" (p. 72). The situation is gradually escalating to use of violent tactics. For example, anti-China sentiments have become stronger in countries like India, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Ghana among others (Sibiri, 2021; Kumakura, 2020; Panda, 2020). Xenophobia is also rising. This, according to Kirik et al (2015, p. 188), points to its three main causes that include the following. The first is the social asymmetry that exists in economic and political systems around the world, which creates perceptions of superior and inferior states. The second is the existing inequality in the global distribution of opportunities within the economic and political spheres. The third is inter-regional stratification which exacerbates unhealthy competition among nations. This has been witnessed in many countries across the world including South Africa, some European countries, Malaysia, United States and so on (Nyamnjoh, 2010; Satiani & Singh, 2021; Tayeb & Hong, 2021; Huang & Liu, 2020). In fact, the emergence of COVID 19 fueled anti-immigrant reactions, white supremacist groups, ultra-nationalist ideologies, anti-semitic as well as xenophobic conspiracy suppositions that continue to demonize foreigners and refugees in Europe and United States (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As Bruni observed, people who immigrate to more developed countries have wounds that include insecurity and lack of opportunities. Ironically, the wounds of such immigrants pain some residents of the host countries who view the immigrants as the real wounds. They equate these immigrants to hell, mere losers, and opportunists who have nothing to contribute to the host countries.

Commodification of Poverty

While many advocacy groups have expressed interest in fighting global poverty, some methods and hidden agendas behind some of these initiatives are cause for concern. Bruni describes an increasingly popular trend of the "culture of immunity," in which organizations, especially non-profit organizations (NGOs), are helped by those who do not want to see, touch or interact with the poor in order to keep them away. For these people, poverty is like leprosy, if not worse, because it is contagious and can even be 'transmitted'. They give money to the agents, mainly the NGOs, to take care of the poor. However, the increasing number of cases of fake charities receiving aid for the poor and diverting it or enriching themselves has affected the good work of genuine NGOs. Any reference to this element as a pretext to label and demonize NGOs can only be a misnomer and misinterpretation and must be rejected. The message that Bruni seems to articulate is that of converting poverty into a

commodity sold by fake charities to those who do not want to see or deal with the poor. They exploit the generosity of others to enrich themselves with donations for real charity. Their product is the poverty they claim to want to eliminate. Some use graphic images of the poor to appeal for help. These images are actually advertisements that fake charities use to market their product, poverty. The use of images of people living in extreme poverty to solicit financial support is 'poverty porn' (Dolinar & Sitar, 2013, p. 27). In fact, Poverty porn is a term often used to describe "representations of the impoverished in developing countries as a way to garner sympathy (and ultimately financial aid) for those in need" (Cantrell, 2020, p. 234). In his article, Bruni calls for a radical change in the way people treat the poor. Many NGOs are successful in working with the poor. A good example is the Grameen Foundation, which uses digital platforms to provide financial assistance to women in poor and developing countries. Indeed, this organization embodies the typical charism as Bruni explains because it believes in partnerships. Through partnerships, the organization has a team of experts to provide multidimensional solutions to poverty, "including access to financial, agricultural or health services and knowledge" (Grameen Foundation, 2022). In other words, Grameen Foundation provides sustainable, people-powered solutions to families affected by poverty. This is indeed an example of charism, as Bruni recommends. According to him, "the typical charism of love for the poor is an embrace, a kiss, contamination with poverty, taking them home..." (Bruni, 2020, p.3). In other words, helping the poor involves working closely with them and supporting them.

Real Bumpers in the Modern Economies

Success and failure are cultural values that have been poorly defined to create narrow and limiting ideals in modern society. As Taylor (2021) pointed out, these definitions are at the root of the unfulfilling lives that many people lead as they strive for wealth, beauty, influence, and high social statuses (Taylor, 2021, p. 44). Bruni recalled the long-standing debate about poverty as a characteristic of losers. He noted that compensation packages that reflect a person's value to a company are determined by what a company considers a loser or a winner. These values are primarily determined by the "merit scale," which defines the ranking criteria of a hierarchical pay structure. While the use of merit scale is not a major issue, Bruni is concerned about the exclusion of certain qualities, particularly those that are ethical in nature, when a company defines the parameters for evaluating performance and determining compensation. As competition continues to intensify in many economic sectors, companies are looking for ways to minimize costs and maximize sales that increase profit margins. According to Abutalibov et al (2017), this competition can result in compromised product quality besides putting employees and consumers at risk. The consequences may be disastrous for employees and workers at a time when the company reaps huge benefits from unorthodox methods as investors and executives realize huge financial gains. In the eyes of society, these companies,

executives and investors are winners. In contrast, companies that adhere to high ethical standards to preserve the safety and dignity of consumers and employees may not generate abnormal profits, making them appear to be losers in the modern world. Bruni seems to suggest a redefinition of losers and winners by introducing ethical parameters for qualities that are largely ignored. These qualities are the true definition of love, which is never part of the mission of corporations seeking to maximize profits or returns. The Holy Bible, in 1 Corinthians 13, for example, describes love as being patient, kind, contented, modest, humble, courteous, unselfish, slow to anger, forgiving, truthful, protective, trustworthy, hopeful, persevering, dependable, and so on. The Holy Qur'an 42:23 also promises great reward from the most glorified and highest God for those who engage in acts of love when it states, "... Tell them, (O Prophet): "I do not ask you for any recompense for my work except love towards kinsfolk. Whoever does a good deed, We shall increase its merit for him" (Qur'an Online, 42:23). In fact, if these qualities are taken into account in the definition of losers and winners, real bumpers will emerge. Consequently, there will be few people who will be "left feeling caught in the untenable situation of having little opportunity for success and a great chance of failure" (Taylor, 2021, p. 44). Accordingly, those few would be living with the guilt of being unsuccessful and trying to make amends to catch up with the vast majority who would have succeeded already. Bruni's assertion on the link between existence of the poor in the society and to who people pray is debatable. He stated: "The presence of the poor is what tells us that that prayer of yours is not addressed to idols but to God" (Bruni, 2020, p. 3). For instance, while helping the poor is good, how a person offers the aid may also be self-seeking and idolatry as stated in Matthew 6:2-4. Furthermore, the bible has also linked poverty to wrong decisions that people make as in Proverbs 23:21. In such a case, the aid given to the poor may make their condition worse. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that work among the poor and physically fit adults go hand in hand with the aid they receive. Could this be the religious world economy that Bruni suggests?

The Economy of Communion Project

Chiara Lubich, a spiritual leader, is accredited for developing the economy of communion (EOC) that negates Marxian analogy of religion and opium (Pallister, 2020; Bruni, 2014). In another article, Bruni and Zamagni (2004) describe the religious world economy. They cautioned about commoditization of everything in what could appear as a global supermarket where redistribution, gift as well as exchange principles no longer matter. On the contrary, they backed the transformation of the modern market economy into a global village. In their submission, they argued in support of the EOC project that has one main challenge according to them: "to show that it is possible to find a place for love within the economic domain" (Bruni & Zamagni, 2004, p. 91). While this is a huge challenge in the modern world, several experiences in Africa have proved that it is neither

utopian nor impossible in the knowable world. Such examples include *ujamaa* in Tanzania, *Harambee* movement in Kenya and the *Ubuntu* idea that originated from South Africa. The concept that drives these experiences is love and communion that is not only anchored in Christian and Islamic teachings but also in African traditions.

Uniting power in Economy and Communion

The EOC seems to be the smoother of religious and cultural divides in the modern economic world. Its values are embedded in Islamic teachings just as it is anchored in Christian values. The Holy Qur'an, for instance, describes selfless love that promotes common good of others for the sake of *Allah subana wa taala* (God the Most Glorified Exalted is He). It emphasizes the importance of economic value and the need for observing ethical values in business. For example, Quran Online 5:8 states: "O you who have believe! Be upright to Allah, witnessing wit justice; and let not the hatred of a certain people prevent you from acting justly. Adhere to justice, for that is nearer to piety; and fear Allah. indeed, Allah is informed of what you do" (Itani, 2015). This verse calls for justice and love as virtue that cannot go unnoticed before God. Similarly, Salih bin Abi Hassan's *hadith* that emphasized on love states: "I heard Sa'eed bin Musayyab saying: 'Indeed Allah is *Tayyib* (good) and he loves *Tayyib* (what is good), and He is *Nazif* (clean) and He loves cleanliness, He is *Karim* (kind) and He loves kindness, He is *Jawad* (generous) and He loves generosity'" (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 2799). This *hadith* shows that justice and love go together. Generosity does not mean giving what one does not like. Surat Al-Insan 76:8 says: "And they give food, out of their love for Him (Allah), to the needy, and the orphan, and the captive" (Qur'an Online 76:8). In this case, if you give what you still love out of generosity, and for the sake of God, it is a form of worship. Islam calls for deliberate efforts of perfecting one's actions. This includes constant improvement (*ihsan*) and communion. Ma'ruf (2021) points out that helping the poor is a mandatory obligation for the rich through charity or *zakah*. Ma'ruf (2021) pointed out that "*zakah* is the only tenet of worship in Islam that ordains the relationship with Allah and people" (p. 209). This means two things. First, business activities in Islam are supposed to be driven by strict adherence to ethics. Second, success in business comes with an obligation to take care of the needs of the poor. The EOC project, as Bruni and Zamagni (2004) explains, has a lot in common with Islamic teaching. Actually, EOC highlights love as the only similarity that unites the modern multi-religious world. This shows that EOC can cure the class antagonism between the rich and the poor that, according to Sinha and Dang (2021), characterizes the modern capitalist world.

Altruistic Love: Elevating the Genius

Since society is about human relations and the 'we feeling' can only be espoused within an environment of selfless love, Sorokin mentioned that the aspect of religion cannot be ignored. He called this altruistic love that involves good neighbors, who sympathize with situations, understand others

besides encouraging them to do well and pursue their goals too no matter how lonely or desperate they are. Love goes hand in hand with care. As quoted by Weinstein (2004, p. 53), Sorokin stated: Love "is furnished by thousands and millions of our plain "good-neighbors." Each giving a modest contribution of love, in their totality they produce an enormous amount of "love energy" (Weinstein, 2004, p. 53). Without creating strong moral foundation that builds good neighbors, society cannot be satisfactory.

Sorokin talked about what it means to be a good neighbor. Such a person must act out of love by offering aid to others. He or she is also friendly and strong promoter of individual as well as intergroup relations (Llavador, 2006). Sorokin's definition reminds people about the greatest commandments as explained in Matthew 22:37 and 39: "...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (King James Bible Online, 2022).

Ubuntu

The EOC project is a version of *Ubuntu* idea. According to Müller et al (2019, p. 3), "*Ubuntu* is the African idea of personhood: persons depend on other persons in order to be. This is summarized in the expression: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means, a person is a person through persons" (Müller et al, 2019, p. 3). It is a communion bound by love, common goals, and quest for uniting people to achieve community goals by promoting the best qualities in each individual. *Ubuntu* can be equated to agape in the bible or Sorokin's altruistic love. Agape is a Greek word that stands for pure and sacrificial love that is expressed willful with the aim of promoting the highest good of other people (Bourgeault, 2020). In fact, Mawere and Marongwe (2016) observed that "agape seems most close to an African understanding of love as the central nerve of *ubuntu* on which all relationships are anchored" (Mawere & Marongwe, 2016, p. 295). The aspect of communal love that lacks in the English meaning of love is captured in *ubuntu*. In this case, love cannot exist without sharing as well as concern for improving quality of other people's lives. Actually, *ubuntu* is the true meaning of human existence. It is about humaneness, personhood, morality, group solidarity, conformity, compassion, dignity of humans, and respect. It is about shared values that go beyond one's culture (ta Uitz, 2005). In this case, *ubuntu* is a complex system where people depend on one another in production and consumption based on sharing of locally available resources that are allocated for the benefit of the entire community and the common good. Different versions of *ubuntu* exist, and few among these were demonstrated in the *Harambee* movement in Kenya and the *ujamaa* in Tanzania.

Harambee: Pulling Together

Harambee movement, which was coined by the Kenya's first president Mzee Njomo Kenyatta, promoted self-help action where people in rural areas united to pursue their

development agenda (Winans & Haugerud, 1977). It sought to promote hard work as well as self reliance through human investment programs. People pulled their labor and resources together in what was described in Swahili as *Harambee*, which became the country's slogan when Kenya got its independence. Such actions were taken out of love and patriotism where one person's problem was viewed as a community's problem. When the second president of Kenya Daniel arap Moi assumed office in 1978, he strengthened the calls for *Harambee* through what came to be known as Nyayo philosophy that was defined by calls for "peace, love, and unity" (Lugano, 2022, p. 312). Many development projects have been implemented through *Harambee* fundraising where people made contributions in money and kind based on their ability. By so doing, the needs of many poor families have been met. No arithmetic figure was proposed on how much one could contribute to support the poor without compromising business enterprises. Unlike *Harambee* where contributions are based on what one was willing and able to give, contributions in the EOC are linked to profits from business enterprises. In other words, EOC is more specific where "companies should split their profits into three parts in order to help the poor, create new jobs in the company, and promote the culture of giving" (Bruni, 2014, p. 37). Unlike in EOC, *harambee* required little effort to promote the culture of giving because it was assumed that many people still practiced African traditional religion within their ethnic communities after independence. As Magesa (2014) indicated, sharing is a distinguishing and self-enforced feature in African religion that required little or no effort to promote (Magesa, 2014). The EOC seems to be an improved version of the merger between *Harambee* and African traditional religion.

Ujamaa Familyhood in Tanzania

Nothing gives a better feeling than being part of a family where love reigns, and that's exactly what the familyhood that defined *Ujamaa* sought to do (Fortmann, 2019). According to Cornelli (2012), "*Ujamaa* was not just a development theory but it was also an ideology, a reconstruction of an imaginary relationship at the level of the state, which should be reinstated in order to free Tanzanians from the yoke of domination" (Cornelli, 2012, p. ii). In what Julius Nyerere called African values that defined African socialism, he cited several communal values that included the following. The first was respect for all people no matter what roles they played in building a solid community. The second was the community ownership of basic goods. The third was the obligation for every member of the community to work (Sheikheldin, 2015). Some of these values seemed far-fetched and were meant to promote economy and communion. However, the *Ujamaa* was to be made possible through love, sharing and work. According to Nyerere, every aspect of *ujamaa* was supposed to be guided by love as Orogun and Pillay (2021) observed when they summarized *Ujamaa* ideology as follows:

"Love is instructive in building a common society without any dispute on its importance. As individuals are loved by parents from birth, Nyerere stated that such action should grow into a community culture, this will address the selfish nature of the spirit of individualism in society. For Nyerere, the love attitude must be viewed such that everyone understands that they fall and rise together. Everyone must understand that 'I exist because there is we'" (Orogun, & Pillay, 2021, p. 6).

II. CONCLUSION

Understanding the role and qualities of a true prophet is a key ingredient in promoting love and justice in any economic system. In fact, economic development and religion complement each other if the virtues of love for God and neighbors define human relationships. As Bruni demonstrates, religion is not responsible for economic inequality in society, but false prophecies are. Instead, it should be seen as a pain reliever, a facilitator of justice, and a solution to the high level of poverty that characterizes many capitalist economies around the world. True prophecy is not a comfortable situation for those chosen to carry God's message, as it involves many challenges that are largely related to defending God's word and the needs of the poor and vulnerable in society. While globalization was widely seen as the acceptance of the "other" and the removal of barriers that prevented people from exercising their freedom to commune, it is slowly fading away. Some of those who claim to be fighting poverty have actually commoditized it to swindle money from unsuspecting people who are uncomfortable to live among the poor. It is the weaknesses of modern capitalist economies that the EOC project seeks to address by using its ability to bring together people of all faiths, including Christians, Muslims and African traditionalists. In fact, the EOC clearly articulates the possibility of finding a place for love in the economic realm. Although with limited success, acts of altruistic love, *ubuntu*, *harambee* spirit, and *ujamaa* 'familyhood' have demonstrated that the EOC is a feasible project in Africa and perhaps the long-awaited solution to poverty with greater rewards that extend to the spiritual realm in the form of eternal life.

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