

History of Anonymous Giving: A Forum

02.20.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



A year ago, we posted [To Give or Not To Give – Anonymously, That Is](#) (March 27, 2018). With a light-hearted touch, we discussed the reasons why current-day donors choose either to give to charity with great fanfare or to conceal their identities as benefactors of certain institutions or causes.

Of the two paths, the more intriguing is that of anonymity. Why do philanthropists make this choice? The two most frequently cited reasons are: (1) following religious teachings or ethical beliefs; and (2) staying off the radar of overzealous charity fundraisers. A bit surprisingly – or not – running away from solicitors beats out the morality rationale by a wide margin.

Last summer, the blog *HistPhil* presented an excellent [forum of essays](#) on this provocative topic. ***Anonymous Giving in the U.S.***

HistPhil was created in 2015 to discuss “the history of the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, with a particular emphasis on how history can shed light on contemporary philanthropic issues and practice.” Its founders saw a need to “bring together, scholars, nonprofit practitioners, and philanthropists in common dialogue on the past, present, and future of philanthropy.”

Co-editor Benjamin Soskis, affiliated with the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute and author of articles and books on philanthropy, kicked off the series on July 18, 2018. In [Introducing HistPhil’s Forum On The History Of Anonymous Giving](#), he notes the “...ambiguous place that anonymous giving now occupies within contemporary attitudes towards philanthropy.”

On the one hand, Soskis writes, this is a “... a time when anonymous mega-giving seems to have [declining cultural cachet](#)” as “[d]onors now announce major pledges on [Facebook](#); solicit ideas for philanthropic spending on [Twitter](#); write profiles for the [Giving Pledge](#) as carefully crafted as any campaign bio; and subject themselves to the scrutiny of an increasingly demanding, and critical, public.”

Ironically, there is no shortage of cash contributed far away from the sunlight. In this connection, Soskis notes not only the explosion of political “dark money” in 501(c)(4)s and super PACs, but also the rise of “institutional alternatives to philanthropic foundations, such as LLCs and donor-advised funds.” The latter have weak “donor disclosure requirements” or none at all, a development he argues has “also bolstered the place of anonymity within the philanthropic scene.” Soskis explains that “(e)ach of these developments has its own history, although they often intertwine.”

Benjamin Soskis and the other editors – philanthropy historians Maribel Morey of Clemson University and Stanley N. Katz of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School – undertook this series “given the uncertain status and legitimacy of anonymous giving in American society.”

The *HistPhil* forum on the history of anonymous giving “examine[s] not just how the practice of anonymous giving has developed over time, but how its justifications and its critiques have evolved, and how legal and political institutions have shaped this development.”

Forum Articles

The selected articles, in order of publication, are well worth reading and using as the basis of a sector-wide discussion on this timely and important topic:

- [*Sound Not a Trumpet, Let Your Light Shine: The Tension At The Heart of Medieval Attitudes Toward Anonymous Giving*](#) (July 20, 2018) by Professor Adam Davis, Visiting Fellow at Cambridge and Professor of History at Denison University.
- [*It’s No Secret: The Atlantic Philanthropies And The Benefits And Drawbacks to Operating Anonymously*](#) (July 23, 2018) by Christopher G. Oechsli, CEO and President of The Atlantic Philanthropies.
- [*Beyond Maimonides’ Ladder: Anonymous Charity In Early Jewish Tradition*](#) (July 25, 2018) by Associate Professor Gregg E. Gardner, the Diamond Chair in Jewish Law and Ethics at the University of British Columbia.
- [*The Historical Case for Charitable Donor Privacy*](#) (July 30, 2018) by Sean Parnell, vice president for public policy at The Philanthropy Roundtable.
- [*The Price Of Privacy: What’s Wrong With The New Shadow Giving System*](#) (August 1, 2018) by David Callahan, founder and editor of Inside Philanthropy.
- [*Expressive Anonymity: What Pseudonyms in 19th Century Charity Subscription Lists Tells Us About Donors*](#) (August 13, 2018) by Sarah Flew, Head of Foundation & Business Partnerships at the London School of Economics and Political Science.
- [*Policing the Borders: A History of IRS Regulation of Political Activity*](#) (August 24, 2018) by Roger Colinvaux, Professor of Law at the Columbus School of Law at The Catholic University of America.
- [*Revisiting ‘Disciples or Demigods’: The Case For and Against Anonymous Giving Now and a Quarter of a Century Ago*](#) (September 11, 2018) by Paul Schervish, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and retired

founder and director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College.

Conclusion

The *Forum on the History of Anonymous Giving* concentrates primarily on “the American scene,” but the editors want to learn more about this topic as it developed in “other national contexts.” They encourage anyone with insights or information to contact them. They also want to hear from readers, generally, about this issue.