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Editor

# The Request and the Gift in Religious and Humanitarian Endeavors

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## CHAPTER 5

## How Asking and Giving Beget Distrust in Christian Child Sponsorship

*Hillary Kaell*

Sharon is perched casually on an unoccupied cubicle desk at ChildFund's headquarters in Richmond, Virginia. In the mid-twentieth century, ChildFund was the largest Christian sponsorship organization in the United States, and even in the world. Like all sponsorship programs, it asks people in the West to give a set monthly sum for the well-being of a particular child abroad, whose photos and letters are then transmitted to the donor. Today, ChildFund retains about 450,000 US sponsors, which though impressive is fewer than its newer, nondenominational evangelical competitors, especially World Vision and Compassion International, each with about twice that amount. Sharon and I are comparing these numbers and mulling over a subject that came up repeatedly during my time at the organization's offices: the name change from Christian Children's Fund (CCF) to ChildFund in 2009. Sharon, who works in the marketing development office, takes the company line and defends the move. She points out that the organization had changed names before; it was established in 1938 as China's Children Fund and became CCF in 1950. Further, and more importantly from the organization's perspective, the word "Christian" obfuscated the fact that CCF had stopped proselytizing

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in the 1980s and had always supported children of many religions.<sup>1</sup> “It’s more transparent and accountable now,” Sharon says.

Then she paused, dropping the corporate speak: “We tried to be *honest* with people. It was the *right* thing to do!” It was a gamble, at least in the short term. Angry callers accused ChildFund of cutting Jesus out of public life and disobeying the gospel injunction to let one’s “light” shine (Matt 5:15). They variously blamed rampant political correctness, Barack Obama, or pressure from Muslims in the global south. While these voices represent a comparatively small percentage of the total sponsorship base, it is still painful for ChildFund employees that thousands of sponsors dropped their sponsorships and thousands more said they will not renew when “their” child finishes the program. “We’re still the same now as we were then,” Sharon says, “... But they say, ‘You’re no longer Christian, we can’t trust you.’ Look, I’m a Christian like most of us here actually and... we tell them, we still do what Jesus wanted for others, [for] the least of these. You could even say we’re *more* moral on the marketing side since it’s more honest than before.”

As Sharon intuits, the name change posed a problem that went much deeper than merely the loss of brand recognition. In the American sponsorship market, asking for donations is predicated on an organization’s ability to instantiate certain moral qualities, such as honesty and trust. This expansive view of the “moral life” of Christian companies dovetails with a number of recent studies on capitalism and religion that move beyond Weber’s famous thesis of a Protestant ethic to explore how religion and capitalism are entangled in people’s lives (Maurer 2005, Muehlebach 2013; on US Protestantism, e.g., Moreton 2010; Lofton 2014; Valeri 2010). Building on this theme, I examine the key role of dis/trust in the sometimes tense relationship between Christian child sponsorship organizations and their supporters. The stakes are especially high in charitable endeavors like child sponsorship that ask Christians *here* to support people *there*, since the fruit of their donations is never concretely manifested in places where givers can easily evaluate it for themselves.

The conclusions I present are the result of ongoing research on child sponsorship since 2012, including archival work and three months of fieldwork in 2014 at the ChildFund and Compassion International headquarters in Richmond and Colorado Springs. My contention is that such organizations’ ability to ask for donations is reproduced through a dialogical model of alternating forms of transparency, namely, audit culture and Christian relationality. This model of trust creation begins with human informational systems, upon which it superimposes trust in God’s authority, thus creating (as much as possible) a sense of ontological security for

Christian donors. The chapter begins with two sections that clarify how child sponsorship fits into anthropological theories of economy and charity, and how the global nature of these exchanges affects economies of trust. The third section elaborates my central point regarding transparency, where I explore the relationship between secular audit culture and Christian concepts of mentorship and stewardship. I conclude by revisiting some responses to the CCF name change.

### CHILD SPONSORSHIP AND ECONOMIES OF GIVING

Anthropologists have long recognized that giving mobilizes a “moral category of person” (Bornstein and Redfield 2010, 8; Mauss 1990; Dumont 1985) and that charity in the West derives from a distinctly Christian worldview (Douglas 1990, vii). Child sponsorship is emblematic. Although the first such programs are often traced to Save the Children, a British humanitarian organization created in the wake of World War I, this system of giving actually has deep roots in Protestant foreign missions. British and American women, in particular, used forms of child sponsorship to raise money for their burgeoning missionary societies since the mid-nineteenth century. Nor were humanitarian organizations, such as Save the Children, necessarily “secular” in the sense of omitting religion, although they were decidedly nonsectarian. In its US incarnation, Save the Children Fund was run mainly by clergy, including a young Presbyterian pastor named J. Calvitt Clarke. After leaving in the 1930s, he formed China’s Children Fund, which became CCF in 1950 (and ChildFund in 2009). CCF grew quickly in the 1950s and 1960s, along with other nondenominational Christian sponsorship programs, notably World Vision and Compassion which were founded in 1950 and 1952, respectively. With millions of individual sponsors, today child sponsorship is arguably the most lucrative form of Christian giving in the United States, raising billions of dollars a year (Barrett 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Most studies of sponsorship have focused on the appeal of the suffering child, pointing to how such mediated spectacles produce globalized sentiment and a “politics of pity” (Stephens 1995; Boltanski 1999; Cartwright 2005; Curtis 2012; Bornstein and Redfield 2010, 4). Along these lines, a number of ethnographic studies critique this form of charity and others like it (Bornstein 2001, 2010; Malkki 2010). Others criticize the individualizing neoliberal models of success such programs produce and promote (O’Neill 2013). While the spectacle of

suffering (and successful) poor children does offer insight into sponsorship's appeal for US Protestants, it remains a broad explanation at best since similar tropes resonate with other contemporary donors too (e.g., in Rhea Rahmán's chapter in this volume). Moving away from the aesthetic and affective forms of marketing in child sponsorship, then, I turn to something that Erica Bornstein notes in her ethnography of World Vision in Zimbabwe: for Christian sponsors, there is explicit spiritual significance in such economies of giving (2001, 2005).

Susan Harding (2000) and Simon Coleman (2004) have produced some of the best-known work on economies of giving in forms of evangelicalism. In her study of fundamentalist pastor Jerry Falwell, Harding argues that people give because of the pastor's charisma and his ability to link appeals to biblical types. Importantly, she remarks that Christian givers aim to "vacate the commercial economy and to enter another realm, a Christ-centered gospel, or sacrificial, economy in which material expectations are transformed" (2000, 109). Coleman's work on Sweden's Word of Life church, which is based on a US model, more closely examines how giving is embedded in broader theologies that seek to project the self outward in expansive forms of spiritual agency, which then redound to the believer as spiritual and material blessings.<sup>3</sup>

This work clarifies the co-constituent nature of religion and economy, thereby pushing us to recognize "economics of religion, but also economics as religious practice" (Coleman 2011, 26). However, it is not incidental that both Coleman and Harding when she analyzes fundraising (2000, 121–124) describe a particular branch of evangelicalism: prosperity theology where adherents expect material returns when they invest "seed" money. Faith giving is rooted in risk, in the sense that it encourages spending beyond one's means – for both givers and askers like Jerry Falwell – so as to rely entirely on God's blessings. Bob Pierce, who founded World Vision, subscribed to a version of this theology. He would write cheques "in faith" for projects without the requisite funds in the bank, leaving his fledgling ministry constantly in debt and his staff holding all-night prayer sessions to ask God to make ends meet (King 2013, 78).

Without discounting the importance of this theology nor the fluidity with which people adapt it – no doubt some sponsors see giving in such terms – a distinction should be drawn: contemporary Christian sponsorship organizations do not pitch their requests as seed money and, based on my initial interviews, most sponsors do not give for that reason either. For

example, one of the first times that sponsorship piqued my interest I was at a nondenominational megachurch in Vermont conducting fieldwork for an earlier project. During worship, the pastor noted the presence of flyers for a new child sponsorship program in the church foyer. "It is a blessing we have so many hearts to help," he told us, "but we don't want to fall into misguided love. Let's be careful where we invest our money." He offered to assess the organization's reputability and report back. This caution underlines a key difference from prosperity theology. As Coleman shows, in faith giving the end result (i.e., exactly how the money is spent) matters less, if at all, compared to the *fact of circulation*, through which believers "act in faith." By contrast, sponsorship assumes very clear objectives related to economic progress in the children's countries, as well as relationship building between sponsors and "their" children (Bornstein 2001, 597, 2005, 45–66). It is thus more closely aligned with older categories of charity and alms giving, wrapped up in US Protestant notions of "good stewardship" that accompanied the (often rapid) growth of denominational boards and other large institutional bodies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As such, we do well to turn to Marcel Mauss, who provided a classic anthropological distinction between alms and gifts. The former, he wrote, combined ancient ideas about the gift, fortune, and sacrifice in the Semitic tradition. Generosity became seen as an obligation under the laws of divine justice: those who have been favored with superabundance by God should rid themselves of (some of) it lest the poor or the gods be avenged. Among the Jews in the Mishnaic era, the sacrifice of property became alms for the poor, an idea adopted in Christianity. Gifts, on the other hand, required reciprocity (1990, 18). Commenting on Mauss' idea, Mary Douglas notes that recipients of charity in the modern West often resent it for precisely that reason: when charity is seen as alms – a "free gift" with no obligation of return – the giver implicitly refuses social ties with the recipient (1990, vii). Charitable gifts, in other words, at least theoretically keep giver and recipient at arm's length.

Other scholars and practitioners dispute this pessimistic vision (Scherz, this volume), at least when charity is done "well;" today evangelicals often replace the word charity with "partnership" for that reason. Yet there is an important truth to Mauss' insight: although the Christians who sponsor children do not view it as alms – that is, a divinely mandated (obligatory) form of justice like ancient Jewish *tzedakah* – by and large they do perceive it as a divinely inspired (voluntary) redistribution of the superabundance

God has given them. Sponsorship publicity materials continually remind potential donors that they are spiritually and materially privileged (Bornstein 2005, 47), making it incumbent upon them to give back. Although this message has been especially insistent since the 1970s, it dates to the early years of contemporary sponsorship organizations. In the 1940s, CCF President J. Calvitt Clarke repeatedly asked supporters “for supreme, unselfish sacrifice on the part of every American” to save Chinese children caught up in civil war.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, as Douglas implies, we must distinguish between theories of gifts as “free” (and corresponding distinctions between alms and gifts) and the perspectives of actual stakeholders. The parties involved – givers and recipients of charity, solicitors of donations – may have differing, even conflicting, ideas about what these transactions mean and the kinds of social action they entail. Sponsorship, for example, straddles the line between “alms” and “gifts.” The programs are couched as “free” in the sense that donations are voluntary and entail no explicit reciprocity (especially since the recipient is a child). Yet they appeal in large part precisely because they are *also* understood as gifts that create affective ties between giver and recipient. By exchanging letters, presents, and photos, they produce bonds of fictive kin (cf. in Hinduism; Bornstein 2010, 127). This model has attracted Christian givers ever since sponsorship’s early development in missions because it mirrors the Protestant mentor-convert ideal (e.g., Engelke 2013, 231). In this model, a convert comes to fully know Christ through the personal, spiritual encouragement of a Christian mentor. In return, the mentor’s own faith is renewed and strengthened. For this reason, more explicitly evangelical organizations, such as Compassion, strongly emphasize letter writing (which they describe as “encouragement”): if sponsors merely give money, there can be no spiritual uplift for either party, giver or recipient.<sup>5</sup> It is a relationship that requires particular attention and care in a global enterprise.

### GLOBALISM AND GOD

Based loosely on the Platonic idea of the “really real,” anthropologists have noted that human beings perceive degrees of reality in experiences: a fleeting impression or emotion will seem less real – and therefore less trustworthy – than something with more substance or longevity (Kroner 1954, 351). To some degree, this idea impinges directly on all modern, commercial transactions, which are conducted over a period of time and

across spaces where people do not know each other personally. Contemporary capitalism is thus predicated upon a significant element of trust or, as Anthony Giddens writes, a deliberate leap of faith (Giddens in Möllerling 2001, 411; Gambetta 1988, 229). The “really real” is especially problematic in forms of globalized charity like child sponsorship because the mechanism for creating a close, even kin-like, relationship is so highly attenuated. Money is transmitted to an organization to be relayed to a child whom the sponsor will never meet, in a place the sponsor has never been.

Sponsorship is a manifestly modern charitable endeavor. It was built upon nineteenth- and twentieth-century commercial networks that used money wires, cheques, telegraphs, and telephones to expand the world. Simultaneously, it mobilized other modern technologies, such as printing presses and photography, to bridge the gaps inherent in such exchanges and thereby confirm the realness of endeavors abroad. Today, sponsorship organizations are experimenting with Facebook and YouTube videos to keep sponsors and children in contact and connected to the organization. However, the primary mode of exchange remains the photograph and letter. All organizations provide sponsors with a yearly photo of their child, which they are encouraged to display in a prominent location as a mnemonic device. Sponsored children also send a number of letters or drawing per year (usually three), as specified by each organization. Letters are translated but the original is also included to give sponsors a “reality check,” as one Compassion employee told me: the child is real and here is the proof.

The archives are littered with complaints that speak to the difficulties of this project to make global children really real. Not surprisingly, donors most often lose faith when the system of letter writing breaks down. In 1960, for example, a CCF sponsor wrote tersely on behalf of her women’s circle about their boy in Korea. “Four letters have been written to Jung Sil including one my grandson, a boy about his age, wrote thinking perhaps a letter from another boy would prompt him to write us. The question has arisen in our group as to the authenticity of this project. Is this boy getting this support we are sending? . . . Should I not receive some definite word about him soon, I feel I cannot ask the ladies to continue his support.” Unanswered letters produced serious doubt about the “authenticity” of sponsorship as a whole. Where is the money going? Does the boy even exist? CCF President Clarke understood the precariousness of sponsors’ trust and took such complaints very seriously as a result. This instance

prompted him to write an excoriating letter to the Korea office, declaring that he would “not stand for such neglect and that drastic action will be taken unless there is a marked improvement.” Such “lazy” and “unappreciative” men, he fumed, should not superintend CCF orphanages.<sup>6</sup>

When Christian sponsorship programs render global children real, they continually emphasize the role of God or Holy Spirit as an omniscient party in the relationship. In the 1950s and 1960s, Compassion sent prospective sponsors a packet of ten or so wallet-sized photographs of children’s faces (Fig. 5.1).

The recipient was instructed to study each face, read the story on the back of the card, look at the face again, and pray for each child so that he or she would find a sponsor. During this process, the prospective donor was also expected to be highly attuned to God’s voice in order to discern which child was meant to be hers.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, the system had some kinks: the children in the photos were often no longer available by the time the sponsor had prayed over them and sent back a response (although

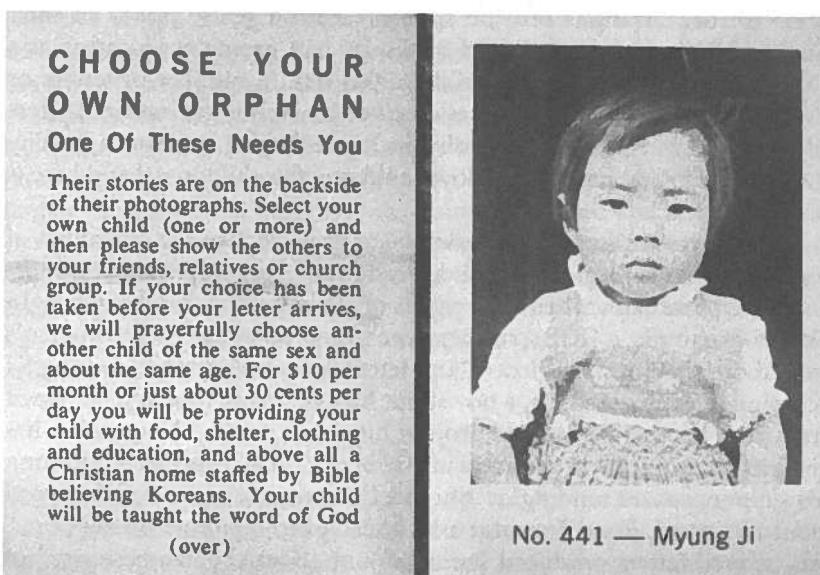


Fig. 5.1 Instructional card and photograph packet sent to Compassion sponsors, c.1965. Used by permission of Compassion International Inc. All rights reserved

the company promised to “prayerfully” pick another one). Today, new technology has remedied the problem. Each child’s photo is uploaded online and, according to Compassion’s marketing team, prospective sponsors still pray over the listings, which are then updated instantaneously when a child is selected. Thus begins what Compassion calls the “love relationship initiated by the sponsor’s response to the Holy Spirit’s prompting.”<sup>8</sup>

As the sponsorship continues, many Americans are stymied in their letter writing or prayers (“intelligent” prayers that focus on particular needs) because they know neither the child personally nor much about his or her culture. At these times, they are again encouraged to spiritualize the relationship, relying on God’s bridging power. The Compassion website notes:

When we don’t have a face-to-face relationship with our sponsored children, prayer can be an excellent tool to help build one... Even when we don’t always know all the particulars of our sponsored children’s daily lives, we can still be praying for God to be moving in their hearts and transforming them to be more like Christ. And at the same time you’re praying for your sponsored child, your sponsored child is praying for you.<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on mutual prayer and the guiding force of the Holy Spirit means that Christian sponsorship organizations often see themselves as “marketing relationships that will last for all eternity!”<sup>10</sup> God is continually mediating and regulating (potentially flawed) human relationships – before they begin, during the sponsorship, and into an eternal future.

My main argument in this chapter is that the role of God is crucial in the sponsor–organization relationship as well. While development and marketing teams at Compassion and ChildFund are careful never to *equate* sponsors’ relationship to the company with the sponsor–child relationship grounded in Christian ideals of charity and witness, they nevertheless draw a parallel. By continually foregrounding God as the omniscient party animating the primary relationship (sponsor–child), it is implied that God works in similar ways in the secondary (largely unspoken) relationship between sponsor and organization.<sup>11</sup> In short, by inculcating a certain distrust of purely human relationships (Lebner 2012; Robbins 2014), the organizations nurture in sponsors a sense of deeper trust in God as the ultimate overseer.

## TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY IN DIALOGICAL MODES

Anthropologists of religion have explored trust in multiple ways: for example, how it operates in the performance of rituals (Astuti and Bloch 2013), or how intersubjectivity relies on trust in other people's intentions (Sahlins in Robbins 2014, 4–5). Much less work has been done regarding the more abstracted kind of trust that animates companies' appeal to consumers. Piecing together pioneering sociologist Georg Simmel's scattered writings on the topic, economist Guido Möllering (2001) notes that for Simmel trust is fundamental to the ordering of society and, more specifically, to the creation of modern capitalism in its transition from material money to credit (Simmel 1990, 179; Seligman 1997). Simmel's inquiries were driven by an apparent discrepancy between the "hard" sociological functions attributed to trust (e.g., how it induces behavior or produces cohesive societal relations) and the "soft" basis upon which it appears to rest in human reasoning: whether we trust something or not seems to have little empirical basis. These two aspects are bridged, Simmel posited, through something more than "weak inductive reasoning" (e.g., a farmer's expectation that his seeds will grow). Instead, *real* trust – the kind needed to actively sign over a cheque to ChildFund – requires a quasi-religious faith. According to Simmel, "...no matter how exactly and intellectually grounded [social forms of confidence] may appear to be, there may yet be some additional affective, even mystical, 'faith' of man in man... which [perhaps] goes back to the metaphysical sense of our relationships..." (1990, 179).

Simmel never elaborates on this metaphysical feeling, though it is central to his thought. Perhaps for this reason, notes Möllering, it largely dropped out of sociologists' and economists' subsequent work on Simmelian theories of capitalism (2001, 406, 409). Möllering calls it "suspension" and, although he reemphasizes the mystery of a "state of mind which has nothing to do with knowledge, which is both less and more than knowledge" (1990, 179), he views it in purely secular terms. Anthropologists studying other states "beyond knowledge," such as friendship or love, have noted a similar trend toward secularization in academic work (Lebner 2012). One could, however, interpret Simmel's work as including at least the possibility of metaphysical relationality. Thus loosely following his insight that trust is both empirical and metaphysical, I contend that Christian sponsorship organizations attract a clientele through a continual dialogue between these two seemingly mutually

exclusive modes of trust, which I shorthand as positivist/capitalist and metaphysical/Christian.

Each day during my stay at ChildFund as the workday wound down and the cubicles emptied out, I headed to the archives – decades of carefully preserved documents stashed away in the closets and cupboards of ChildFund's meeting rooms. As Erica Bornstein remarked regarding World Vision's annual audits and project reports for donors, one is struck by "the partiality of such documentation." Where, she wondered, was "the religion" that animated the lived experience of nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers and aid recipients? (2005, 40–41). While Bornstein is right, her insight about partiality can be read differently if we consider how obscuring religion, *and then sporadically reinventing it*, may actually reveal something important about dialogical modes of trust. Consider, for example, a series of letters by CCF's second President, Rev. Verbon E. Kemp, in 1968. Writing from Seattle, Miss Vivian Moffatt (in a very typical complaint) accused the organization of wasting money on advertising and staff salaries. Barely able to contain his annoyance, Kemp begins, "It would be interesting to know the basis of your accusations about CCF." He follows with, "If you are interested in the facts, we suggest that you study [sic] the enclosed summary financial statement taken from our most recent certified audit." In the second paragraph, however, he completely switches gears: "Many of the staff executives here and abroad are ordained ministers. To all of us this work is a Christian vocation dedicated to the extension of the Cause of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth." He ends, "cordially I am inviting your attention to consideration of the facts of the case."<sup>12</sup>

In Kemp's letter, trustworthiness relies on two sets of equal "facts": the secular audit and the sacred call of vocation. Based on archival letters like this one, CCF officials seem to have resorted to the sacred in particularly difficult cases to foreclose further complaints or concerns.<sup>13</sup> Although avowals of this kind were not therefore often necessary, when they did happen supporters would have comprehended them immediately since they relied on a preexisting structure of feeling built up through continual (often subtle) reiteration: CCF regularly used words with moral connotations familiar to Christian readers (hope, joy, and love), included in their logo a cross hovering above a child's face (Fig. 5.2), and used casual Christian sign offs in sponsor newsletters (e.g., "In His name"). Taken together, each one continually (re)injects Christian trust into capitalist interaction.

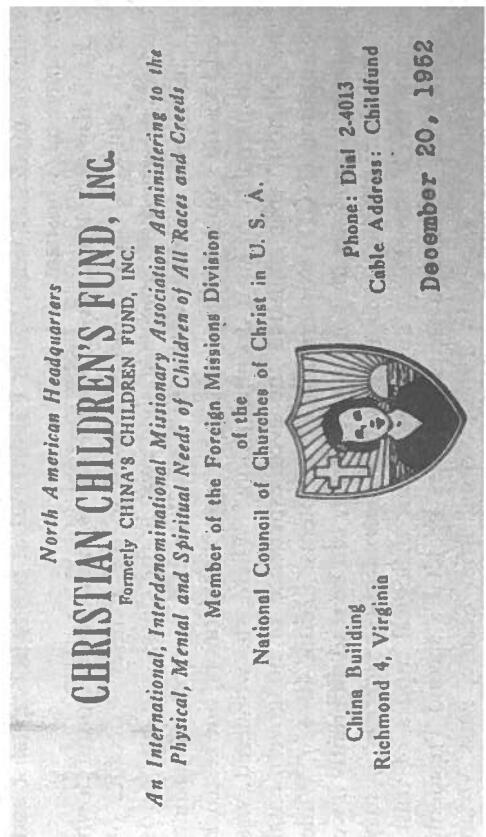


Fig. 5.2 Christian Children Fund's logo, 1952. Used by permission of Child Fund

My point is that Kemp's two-step model for inculcating trust relies on *alternating forms of transparency – secular “audit culture” and Christian relationality*. Focusing on the former for a moment, studies have argued that modern capitalism obviates the direct relationships possible in small-scale societies. Instead, it produces an audit culture that seeks to create absolute trust through transparency and immediacy of information (Strathern 2000). In child sponsorship organizations, this includes sending regular audits and financial reports to sponsors (the “partial documentation” as per Bornstein). It also invests the power of oversight in outside bodies, which require regular financial information produced by a professional (certified) accountant. Such outside bodies played no small part in sponsorship organizations’ development, especially since they had to assure donors of their trustworthiness without the traditional backing of denominational mission boards.<sup>14</sup> Thus, although Clarke had little interest in Christian institutional bodies *per se*, from its earliest incarnation CCF made every effort to maintain good standing with nondenominational missionary bodies; it joined the Foreign Missions Conference of North America and then the National Council of Churches’ Division of Foreign Missions after it was formed in 1950. From the 1940s on, Clarke also engaged in tense, sometimes acrimonious, relations with the National

Information Bureau (NIB) and its affiliates. He could not dismiss them entirely because across the country sponsors regularly wrote into Chambers of Commerce and the NIB about CCF “reliability” and “efficiency.”<sup>15</sup>

In the CCF archive, one sees the slow, negotiated process of professionalization during the middle decades of the twentieth century as Christian companies and their pastor-CEOs were disciplined into secular modes of trust. The NIB repeatedly asked CCF to provide a satisfactory operating budget in the 1940s. In fact, there were *no* reports about spending from either their domestic or foreign offices. “A budget would be, more or less, an artificial thing,” Clarke wrote the NIB rather blithely in 1947.<sup>16</sup> Religious credentials were moral currency: as a certified pastor, Clarke explained, he would spend as God led him and according to the amount of money CCF could raise. Likewise, Clarke’s partners in Asia could be trusted since they were long-term missionaries.<sup>17</sup> Other pastors who started sponsorship organizations in this era (e.g., Bob Pierce at World Vision or Everett Swanson at Compassion) perhaps even more clearly saw themselves as emulating latter-day apostles, raising and spending money with God’s guidance.<sup>18</sup> Their role overlaps to some degree with the Weberian idea of charismatic authority. However, it is important to note that Christian credibility in these organizations very quickly moved beyond one individual alone, even a charismatic founding pastor. Rather, it was the combined efforts of Christians at *every* level of the bureaucratic machine – from the Board of Directors down to the orphanage supervisors – that made it a truly “trustworthy” system.<sup>19</sup>

Such guarantees were not, of course, sufficient for the NIB, which was tasked with creating and policing what anthropologist Alberto Corsín Jiménez calls the “new culture of corporate ethics.” This audit culture brooks only one version of the reality of relationships: “relationships that are real and robust because they are transparent, instantaneous and point to no context but themselves” (2011, 179). As Corsín Jiménez writes, in the capitalist ideal “morality emerges thus not as an aspect of human relationships but as a feature of the infrastructure of information” (2011, 180). We might add that audit culture also eliminates the human–God relationship as a sufficient guarantor of trustworthiness. Over the 1960s and 1970s, sponsorship organizations became increasingly inured to secular audit culture. Today, it is hard to imagine Clarke’s refusal to set a budget. All major sponsorship organizations feature an “accountability”

section prominently on their home pages, displaying their credentials from a slate of institutions including Charity Navigator, the Better Business Bureau, the American Institute of Philanthropy, and the Charities Review Council.

Audit culture attempts to create an ideal of absolute trust. In order to draw attention to its illusory nature, Corsín Jiménez traces alternate modes of trust in small-scale societies, including Rane Willerslev's ethnography (2007) of the Siberian Yukaghirs. The tribe engages in what Willerslev calls a "demand sharing" economy where people are expected to demand others' possessions and acquire them even by trickery; this form of exchange characterizes human-human encounters, as well as those between humans and animals or spirits. While Willerslev's main focus relates to how mimetic empathy colors the relations between hunters and their prey (2007, 189), Corsín Jiménez uses the example to make a broader point: in other economies, the interplay between trust and distrust may be explicitly recognized. Such societies clarify how trust is produced through the exigent work of relationship building, where relationships may be embedded in a sphere Corsín Jiménez calls the "occult."<sup>20</sup> These settings, he notes, are familiar in ethnographic accounts (including classic studies by Evans-Pritchard and Gluckman). In short, time and again anthropological work on "others" does recognize that trust is relational, not based on informational flows alone. It is contingent, rather than absolute, and a "device for coping with the freedom of others" (Gambetta 1988, 219).

Although US Christians and Yukaghirs may at first seem worlds apart, at least with regard to Western capitalism, in fact Christians also recognize *distrust* as an operating principle in economic exchange. This brings us to the second form of transparency: Christian relationality. I have already alluded to Christians' distrust of purely human relationships but it deserves reiteration. In Protestant cosmology, humans are sinful creatures. This concept varies in intensity depending on the type of Christianity. Evangelicals regularly note that the world is "fallen" (sinful). Mainline Protestants or liberal Catholics may disagree wholeheartedly. Based on an internal survey of sponsors after ChildFund's name change, it seems that those who reacted most negatively were by and large in the former camp—conservative evangelicals and (some) Catholics.<sup>21</sup> As Christians, these sponsors hold in tension their relationships with other humans (whom they may indeed trust) with their inherent skepticism about human nature.

In this schema, the closest one can be to truly trustworthy – transparently "sincere" and morally good (Keane 2002) – is to be saved through Jesus Christ. Christians are not perfect, of course, but being saved is one step toward overcoming the fallenness of human nature. Because Christians continually "check in" with God in prayer, there is some guarantee of divine oversight.

The theme in Kemp's 1968 letter to Vivian Moffatt continues to pervade discourses circulating in Christian sponsorship organizations today. Organizations reproduce a disciplined secular audit culture in order to situate themselves as fully modern and therefore trustworthy while *also* recognizing the Christian ambivalence about any human-made societal construct, including capitalism. Returning to Bornstein, the people who send (and receive) these audits do, in fact, recognize their partiality. The subtext is that another kind of "audit" is also being done: the humans in charge of the organization are continually attuned to God's counsel, guiding them to morally upright business practices. The dialogical relationship between these two forms of transparency – audit and confessional – acknowledges the interrelationship between trust and distrust (or right action and sin) in a Christian ethic of capitalism.

That this system is capitalistic should not be forgotten. In Harding's study of Falwell (2000), for example, she describes gaps between trust and distrust that occur when he lies about his past. Harding argues that his congregants forgive him by taking what amount to leaps of faith, patterned after their Bible reading practices; each time something seems untrue or unprovable they bridge the gap through faith, thereby binding themselves closer to the new interpretation. Child sponsorship organizations have no equivalent to the established bond between Falwell and his followers. Nor, to view it inversely, can they blame failings on clear instances of human sin that reside in an individual, like Falwell, who can repent. It is much harder to pinpoint who is at fault in a large corporation. Not surprisingly, then, Christians treat the sponsorship market as precisely that – a market. If one organization fails them, they find another that better expresses the kind of dis/trustworthy capitalism they seek. Thus when ChildFund changed its name, thereby seeming to deny Christian modes of transparency and trust, a number of sponsors reacted by voting with their feet: transferring their support to World Vision, a more explicitly evangelical company.<sup>22</sup>

## NAME CHANGE REVISITED

As both Simmel and Mauss recognized, a certain “spirit” or “unaccountable feeling” produces the trust that keeps people involved in systems of exchange. Thus it is not surprising, perhaps, that in reviewing the fallout from ChildFund’s name change, its employees often talked about a break-down in “honesty” and “trust,” without which they could no longer effectively ask sponsors for support. The goal of this chapter has been to explore the multiple interlocking ways that trust operates in these sponsorship programs. A key factor, I have argued, is the role played by *distrust* in Christian capitalism and charity, an idea I draw from earlier work on non-Christian tribal economies (Corsín Jiménez 2011) and the politics of friendship (Leibnner 2012).

By distrust, I mean that Christians view human beings and human systems – including economics – as always fallible to some degree. Only God is fully trustworthy (though perhaps inscrutable too). This idea animates Christian capitalism in general; however, it is especially important in the programs under discussion here. Sponsorship organizations produce trust by expending significant resources to reify the relationality of the human-human relationship between sponsor and child, which is enabled and guided by God. The primacy of this relationship is driven by two important Christian ideals: the Protestant mentor/convert and the charitable giver/recipient. As an ideal, however, it is continually hampered by sponsorship as a global project where givers are asked to support a child whom they will never meet in a place they will never go. Thus the very appeal of sponsorship – where new technologies make possible a one-to-one relationship that spans geographic boundaries – also continually reproduces distrust.

In order to make this relationship “really real” and foreground the Christian ideals above, sponsorship organizations continually downplay their own mediating role. Nevertheless, they do need to reorient at least some of the sponsor’s loyalty and trust toward themselves so as to ensure that sponsors will respond to further asking, such as when their child finishes the program or after a brand change like at ChildFund. One way this happens, I argue, is by continually drawing parallels between the primary relationship (sponsor/child) and the secondary one (sponsor/company). By foregrounding God as the omniscient party in the former, they imply his active involvement in the latter too.

The second part of my argument looks more closely at how Christian modes of trust creation work hand in hand with secular audit culture.

Large sponsorship corporations successfully sustain highly intricate bureaucracies that mediate the relationships between millions of sponsors and children. They have also been able to grow in major part because of their promotion of nondenominational Christianity. Yet these characteristics have also continually led to issues of trustworthiness, precisely because of the scope of the organizations’ bureaucracy and (especially in the early years) their lack of affiliation with traditional denominational boards. Further, while both sponsors and sponsorship organizations understand Christian relationships as emblematic of trust(worthiness), asking inevitably involves epistemic opacity about intentions and stewardship practices, leading to major investments in secular audit culture (Strathern, 2000; Frederick Klaits, *pers. comm.* 2 January 2015).

My overarching point, then, is that the distinction between (infallible and informational) audit and (fallible and personal) relationality is less fixed than theoretical work may suggest; in practice, these two modes of transparency interrelate and thereby reinforce each other. From sponsorship organizations’ perspective, trust creation (however imperfect) relies on a dialogical interplay between the two, as evident in their publicity and mailings. Sponsors receive, for example, detailed monetary reports alongside descriptions about how Jesus works through the staff. They log on to sponsorship home pages to find lists of the secular auditing organizations alongside promises of being “Christ centered” (Fig. 5.3).

One might still ask why Christian sponsors may be upset when their money is not used as they expected. While more research is needed into sponsors’ views, I suspect that part of the reason has to do, first, with how sponsorship corporations are more “faceless” than ministries run by a charismatic pastor whom givers know and therefore trust to make decisions on their behalf (e.g., in Harding’s work on Falwell). Second, most sponsors are not adherents of prosperity theologies that encourage putting resources into circulation, no matter where they “land” (e.g., in Coleman’s work on Word of Life). Rather, in the missionary and development models from whence sponsorship programs derive, *results* do matter. It matters whether or not children are being helped and how. Further, morality is assumed to derive from good stewardship, meaning careful, planned, restrained Christian business practices. If the evangelical pastor in the Vermont megachurch I quoted above is any indication, this complex of moral qualities is understood to be reflected in givers, as well as askers. If the sponsorship organization fails, not only does the child suffer but the sponsor has also failed to exercise careful Christian judgement.



Fig. 5.3 Screenshot of welcome page on [www.compassion.com](http://www.compassion.com)

Returning, then, to (some) sponsors' sense of outrage and confusion following ChildFund's name change. Although Sharon, like others at ChildFund, saw the change as *producing* trust through honesty, clearly those sponsors disagreed. For them, it seemed like a negation of the kind of Christian capitalism and charity upon which CCF had been built. It cut to the heart of the contention that God is an animating force in the relationships that make up child sponsorship, including between sponsor and organization. God, as an entity separate from human agency, is the ultimate overseer: Christians will act like Christians (i.e., be trustworthy within a recognized moral schema) because they are in relationship with God, even if the sponsor cannot directly oversee the dispersal of his money abroad. In short, while

ChildFund saw the name change as modeling corporate transparency because it was a more "honest" portrayal of their aims, the donors who withdrew saw it as a denial of the Christian transparency that ensures an ongoing moral "audit" of human behavior. In becoming ChildFund, then, the organization seemed to deny the tripartite relationship between itself, donors, and God. For sponsors, that was a serious breach of trust.

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#### NOTES

1. Historically, proselytism was dependent on CCF local partners, missionaries, and "native" superintendents, and thus sporadic. In 1969, under President Verbon E. Kemp, the Religious Status article of the bylaws stated, "...all children in [CCF's] orphanage-schools shall receive Christian teachings, bearing witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." In 1974, it was greatly softened (adding "without requirement or obligation") and subsequently eliminated (Losen, c.2002). There was also a pragmatic reason for the name change: it helped unify a single global brand since "CCF" was only used in the United States. As a result, field workers had to create separate publications for each donor country. For example, the Ethiopian team had to address three sets of donors with different organizational names in the United States, Ireland, and Australia (Louis Weeks to Thomas C. Hogan, *Letter*, September 11, 2009. Courtesy of Dr. Louis Weeks).
2. According to Forbes, four Christian organizations that rely in part (or largely) on sponsorships are among the 25 largest charities in the United States: Food for the Poor, World Vision, Compassion, and Feed the Children. Compassion and World Vision alone raise 1.5 billion from private donations, nearly all of which is sponsorship (Barrett 2014). Thousands of smaller Christian NGOs use this model too.
3. The Word of Life pastor was trained in the United States and subscribes to the "faith movement" that grew out of American Pentecostalism. In U.S. denominational terms, Christian Children's Fund would be considered more "mainline" whereas Compassion is conservative evangelical (originating in fundamentalist Baptist churches). However, such labels are messy in the context of these large organizations that explicitly pitch their appeals transdenominationally.

4. Clarke to Sponsors, *Letter*, c. 1941. Box IB21, Folder 9, JCC.
5. For more details on the spiritual impact for givers, see, for example, “Volunteer Network Handbook” (1999) 3. No Box, Folder USA1999.09.06.01, *Archival materials*, Compassion International (Colorado Springs, CO). For more on children, see “Write my Child,” *Compassion International Website*, 2014. Accessed January 11, 2015. <http://www.compassion.com/letter-writing/write-my-child.html>
6. Charlotte de Fries to J. Calvitt Clarke, *Letter*, July 18, 1960; J. Calvitt Clarke to William H. Henry Jr., *Letter*, July 26, 1960. Box IB22, Folder 2, JCC.
7. “Choose Your Own Orphan” c. 1954. Box Korea, Folder KR1954.03.03.01. Everett Swanson to Friend of Compassion, *Letter*, September 1, 1964. Box USA: Documents, Folder 1964, Publication General. *Archival materials*, Compassion International (Colorado Springs, CO).
8. “Volunteer Network Handbook” (1999) 3. USA1999.09.06.01, *Archival materials*, Compassion International.
9. “31 Days of Prayer for Your Sponsored Child,” *Compassion International website*. Accessed January 11, 2015. <http://www.compassion.com/get-involved/31-days-of-prayer-for-children.htm>
10. “Volunteer Network Handbook” (1999) 3. USA1999.09.06.01, *Archival materials*, Compassion International.
11. “Unspoken” because, based on my discussions with staff in the Compassion and ChildFund marketing and research departments, surprisingly little information is gathered about sponsors’ spiritual motivations for giving. A number of staff noted that this kind of research is stymied in part because it problematically inverts the logic of Christian witness and charity, clarifying a personal benefit in the “sacrificial gift” (Muehlebach 2013, 517). It also inverts the (not unrelated) logic of development work, which focuses on outcomes for recipients, not givers.
12. Verbon E. Kemp to Miss Vivian Moffatt, *Letter* March 20, 1968 Box IIB, Folder 8, JCC.
13. CCF never used “the sacred” indiscriminately. It is used with individual (Christian) givers but not in letters with the Better Business Bureau or other secular organizational bodies.
14. Dr. Jay Clarke, *Personal Interview*, December 11, 2014.
15. For example, Mrs. Charlie Snyder to Chamber of Commerce (Richmond, VA), *Letter*, September 23, 1953; Verbon E. Kemp to Miss Manila Lyman, Relations, Nashville Chamber of Commerce, *Letter*, June 3, 1955; Miss Laura Roberts to Chamber of Commerce (Richmond, VA), *Letter*, November 5, 1957. Box IB26, Folder 11, JCC.
16. Clarke to Mrs. E.R. Goodwin (National Information Bureau, New York), *Letter*, February 26, 1947. Box IB21, Folder 9, JCC.
17. For example, Clarke to Sponsors, *Letter*, c. 1941. Box IB21, Folder 9, JCC.
18. For example, a commissioned biography of Clarke attributed the growth of CCF to the “miracle of human love” and quotes Clarke denying that he ever asks for funds; he merely tells Americans about needs and then God moves them to give (Janss 1961, 2, 30). Pierce, who saw himself as “the next Billy Graham,” traveled Asia as a missionary and committed money to people based on where he felt God was leading him (King 2013, 76, 78).
19. Nevertheless, nearly every sponsorship organization descended into power struggles when the founding pastors (especially Jay Clarke and Bob Pierce) left in the 1960s. While there are differences – Clarke was elderly and highly controlling, Pierce was mentally unstable (King 2013, 78) – in both cases the Boards of Directors felt their presence hindered expansion and professionalization (including financial accountability). Both Clarke and Pierce felt ousted from what they considered a personal ministry and each one responded by starting new organizations. At Compassion, Swanson had the good sense to pass away early (in 1965); however, by 1980, his wife was also convinced to leave her position on the Board for similar reasons. The break was amicable and in 1990 she was given the honorary title “Director Emeritus” (Lee 2014, 130, 144).
20. Corsín Jiménez never quite defines what he means by “occult.” However, his phrasing echoes John and Jean Comaroff’s (1999) contention that “occult economics” result from the failure of emerging neoliberal capitalism, leading to systems where magical means (especially sorcery) are deployed to secure material ends. In Corsín Jiménez, “occult” seems to refer to supernatural systems of relations that are hidden, though not invisible. His examples include witchcraft among the Azande and the human-spirit economy in Willerslev’s work.
21. I base this on a telephone survey conducted by Louis Weeks, former president of Union Presbyterian Seminary (Virginia) and on ChildFund’s Board of Directors. In the weeks after the name change, he personally called about a hundred sponsors who had withdrawn or lodged complaints. While I was able to interview Dr. Weeks about the responses, and secure a list of his questions and one interview transcript, the remaining notes (which he put in CCF possession in 2010) seem to be lost.
22. Louis Weeks, *Personal Interview*, December 15, 2014.

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On the third day of a weeklong service-learning trip to New Orleans, I joined a group of student volunteers from Ivy League U. at the Rebuilding Together warehouse where they were preparing salvaged construction materials for reuse. The warehouse, which serves as the rebuilding agency’s field headquarters, is located to the East of the French Quarter in the St. Claude corridor, an area that has experienced significant gentrification in the years following Hurricane Katrina.<sup>1</sup> The student volunteers were working in an open-air courtyard flanked by large industrial steel frame shelving units similar to those one might encounter in the lumber section of a home improvement store. Cecily, an AmeriCorps volunteer and the site supervisor, instructed us regarding how to strip nails from wall and ceiling board so that these materials could be reused. Throughout the morning, the sounds of chatter alongside the creaking of nails leaving wooden boards punctuated the calm spring air.

This particular trip had emerged through the collaborative efforts of two on-campus Jewish groups: a Jewish social justice organization called Jewish Funds for Justice, and Repair the World, a recently formed agency devoted to promoting service within the American Jewish community. The trip included three men and seven women, eight Jews and two non-Jews, and a

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