

# Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times

Jonathan Benthall. *Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. 232 pp., paperback.*  
**Reviewed by Stephen A. Pierce, Indiana Wesleyan University**

Jonathan Benthall's 2016 compilation, *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times*, provides an invaluable service to an often misunderstood field by offering a lucid analysis informed by a social scientific approach. The book is best read as an anthology—a series of meditations from decades of anthropological fieldwork and scholarly reflections on Islamic charity. Chapters vary widely in length and geographic interest and bring together pieces published between 2005 and 2014 comprising book reviews, journal articles, and legal briefs, all tied together by an introduction and prefatory notes in each chapter.

The book's value stems in part from Benthall's sustained engagement with the field, having been the Royal Anthropological Institute's director prior to 9/11. His interest in Muslim NGOs was piqued first by conversations about research on the “disaster-media-relief chain” (Benthall, 1993, p. 2), and his close observation while early-21st-century transformations unfolded. As the Cold War fizzled in the 1990s and the U.S. embassy bombings and 9/11 consumed American attention, charges surfaced regularly that Muslim NGOs either explicitly funded or passively abetted terrorism. Among others, Al-Haramain and the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund (Interpal) found themselves under intense U.S. Treasury scrutiny. They were designated global terrorist organizations, and their assets were frozen. Responding in *The Charitable Crescent*, Benthall sought to “challenge naivety about all forms of organized charity” by contextualizing the historical “system of springs” that fed Islamic humanitarianism while also teasing out the fraught relationships between all (not only Muslim) charitable organizations and politics (Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2003, p. 156). *The Charitable Crescent's* judiciousness starkly contrasts with two highly publicized 2006 books by American foreign policy analysts released in prestigious academic presses—Matthew Levitt's *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* and J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins' *Alms for Jihad*—which have served as justification for much of the United States' subsequent actions. Benthall's contribution to *Understanding Islamic Charities* (Alterman & von Hippel, 2007), warned that arguments by Levitt and Collins lacked crucial context and assigned guilt by inference rather than scientific evidence and provided little service to academic understanding or political rapprochement.

Readers of *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times* familiar with these larger discussions will especially benefit from Benthall's intervention here, but even as an independent collection, it retains a conceptual coherence. It focuses on

the “humanitarian deficit”—almost unprecedented suffering and poverty experienced by Muslims . . . despite the potential of more materially fortunate Muslims to bring relief” (p. 4). Sadly, much of what is “troubled” here has become even more troubling; one need only consider the plight of an estimated 1.7 million internally displaced people in Gaza since October 7, 2023, to recognize the continuing challenge of humanitarianism in conflict zones.

The book’s two parts trace the problem’s distinct facets—Islamic Charities (Part I) and Islamic Humanism (Part II). Chapters 1 through 9 posit that the politically charged character (and legal context) of post-9/11 debates and the employment of secular post-Christian humanitarianism as an implicit baseline have obscured careful, scholarly understanding of the spectrum of actors, motivations, and functioning of Islamic charity. Chapter 1 provides a timeline for the development of Muslim NGOs along the pattern of Western NGOs in the 1980s, and then after 9/11, the impact of U.S. Treasury blacklisting. Chapters 2 and 3 follow case studies from Mali and Aceh, Indonesia, to assert that “cultural proximity” aids the efficiency of Muslim NGOs in Muslim-majority areas. As a result, Benthall concludes that the concerted campaign to delegitimize Islamic charity in the United States has directly and adversely affected the availability of humanitarian aid in Muslim countries. Chapters 4, 6, and 7 interrogate the claim that funding for Muslim NGOs implicitly supports terrorism, suggesting that in many cases, Levitt’s *etic* (outsider) pyramidal model of terrorist organization has passed for *emic* (insider) understanding. This pastiche fails to account for the complex historical development of zakat committees *prior to* Hamas, nor the fact that surveys indicate Palestinians express greater trust in zakat committees than they do in political parties, including Hamas. Although Benthall is sensitive to the concerns of the security community that some charitable organizations have operated unethically, he notes, “It should not be necessary to demonstrate that [Muslim NGOs] do *better than* secular or Christian agencies. It is surely enough that they do as well” (p. 55, emphasis mine). This critique is reiterated in Chapter 5, which chronicles the author’s involvement in the Swiss-backed Montreux initiative. Initially proposed by British humanitarian Hany al-Banna, the initiative sought to produce a set of best practices that would satisfy both security systems and NGO leadership, but he watched firsthand as the effort collapsed due to lack of U.S. interest and valid Saudi claims that such a certification process would create a double standard for Muslim and non-Muslim NGOs.

Chapters 9 and 10 act as a pivot between Parts I and II. In Chapter 9, Benthall suggests the exploration of “puripetal force,” asserting that the optic of purity, rather than sacredness, shines light on the shared interest of secular and Islamic humanitarianism in boundary-keeping. If contemporary Islamists are often accused of guarding sacredness by policing its boundaries, so too humanitarians try to “ring off” philanthropy from the taint of politics. Observers have widely debunked this fictional separation between humanitarianism and politics, but because it continues to have popular cachet, Benthall argues in Chapter 10 that toleration may also be located in the rich intellectual heritage of Islam. This notion of *insaniya*,

which in Arabic makes no distinction between humanity, humanism, and humanitarianism, forms the guiding question for seven final, short chapters—a series of book reviews dealing with religious persecution, the political element in Islam, Muslim public intellectuals such as Tariq Ramadan and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and Muslim views of Jesus and violence.

Almost a decade since its original publication, Benthall's thoughtful, fieldwork-informed analysis is more indispensable than ever. The book endeavors to thread a fine line between the naively "roseate view" (p. 1) of posterboard marketing and the cynicism of partisan policymaking. It admits, for example, that some NGOs were clearly fronts for terrorist activity, while also calling on Euro-American political actors, missionaries, and NGOs to recognize parallel examples of unethical activity from Christian NGOs, the emphasis Christian charities have placed on proselytization, and the role of interventionist politics in breeding mistrust in the Muslim world. Benthall is most compelling when explaining fine-grained nuance based on his decades of field research in Palestine. Some unevenness in the evidence across the book is thus unsurprising, as he notes in Chapter 8. Discussions of historical institutions of charity in both West and East Africa, for example, are spotty, and would have greatly enhanced his overall argument on the complexity of Islamic charity worldwide.

Africa, where Muslim charity operates on a small scale, also illustrates an overemphasis in Benthall's book on international aid agencies. Without necessarily denigrating local institutions, he notes with dismay that "it is hard to see any Islamic charity other than Islamic Relief Worldwide soon becoming a genuinely transnational NGO" (p. 35). He links this in part to an absence of clear leadership of the Muslim *umma* that could articulate a unifying philosophy of humanism satisfactory to both Salafist and modernizing elements. But, as Maria Rose Menocal's *Ornament of the World* observed, using F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous quip, "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (Menocal, 2002, p. 10). Menocal's book was also published just prior to troubled times, but it is a reminder that conflict and contradiction are as much a part of *convivencia* as consensus. Recently published studies suggest that vibrant iterations of Islamic charity have emerged not from the international aid economy, nor from a clearly articulated vision for reconciling giving and Islamic purity, but from local actors—such as a local resurgence of *waqf* endowments (Mittermaier, 2019)—often with tension between capitalist wealth-making and Islamic values; what Mona Atia has dubbed "pious neoliberalism" (Atia, 2013). There is reason for optimism, suggests Benthall: "Islamic NGOs have a potentially important contribution to make in helping to make life more tolerable for victims of conflict, oppression and economic stagnation in their home countries" (p. 193). The clarion call for more and better scholarship in *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times* will be an integral part of realizing that contribution.

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