

Continuities and Departures in the Study of Muslim-Led Charity

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Since I began to study charity and aid in general in the early 1990s, and then Islamic charity in particular, there have been immense advances in the serious study of these subjects. Aid organizations are subjected to the same level of scrutiny as medical and health services. Social scientists have developed new analytical approaches.³ Now, however, I find that two of the positions that I have adopted with regard to Muslim-led charity are regarded in some academic circles (which include some brilliant intellects) as superseded. I would defend these positions while accepting that the explanation may be merely a hardening of intellectual arteries with age. As regards a third issue, one of considerable delicacy, the terms of the debate may be shifting as a result of new publications. My worry is that there is a risk of unintended negative consequences if a view now advanced by some innovative researchers becomes mainstream.

The first argument raised by some, which I question, is that the principles of Islamic charity are qualitatively unique and superior to others. There are indeed some differences from other traditions, but in my view (as a non-Muslim working from a social science perspective) they are relatively minor. The important point today is that the Christian and post-Christian “West” has unjustly tended to claim humanitarianism as its monopoly. For historical reasons, dating back in particular to repercussions from the Soviet–Afghan war, on which more below, Islamic charity has been disparaged and even suppressed by powerful interests, and it deserves its place in the sun. It should not have to prove that it is *more* effective than non-Muslim traditions, merely that it can do as well, with a special potential to succeed in some contexts that have come to be known as “cultural proximity” (De Cordier, 2009a; Palmer, 2011; Benthall, 2012; Tittensor & Clarke, 2022, pp. 174, 184).

There is no doubt about the Qur’an’s insistence on the recognized right (*ḥaqq ma`lūm*) of those who ask, and of the excluded, to have their share in wealth (Q 51:19; 70:24–25). This has been an undoubted spur to Muslims to fulfill their *zakat* obligation. But there are equally strong texts in the Christian Gospels, such as Jesus’s suggestion to a rich young man that if he wished to receive eternal life he should sell all his possessions and give to the poor (Matthew 19:16–30). Any competition for superior merit between these two scriptural authorities seems an irrelevant response to, for example, the current crisis in Sudan—a country shaped historically by both Christian and Muslim

³ In common with many other researchers who adopt a comparative approach, I regard terms such as “charity,” “humanitarianism,” “philanthropy,” etc., as belonging to a lexical bundle in the English language, bordering on other terms such as “aid” and even “development”—terms that do not have exact equivalents in other languages such as Arabic and may best be summed up by such blanket expressions as “doing good” (Mostowlansky, 2022, p. 6; Benthall, 2019; Davies, 2012; Ruiz de Elvira, 2020).

interventions—where at the time of this writing some 12 million people are displaced and some 30 million people are in need of humanitarian support.

The most comprehensive treatise on zakat is that published by Al-Qaradawi (1926–2022) in Arabic in 1973 and later in English translation. He insisted on the clear-cut right of poor people to zakat, who should thus be independent of the whims of the rich (Al-Qaradawi, n.d., p. 9).⁴ Mittermaier (2014)—a professor of cultural anthropology highly respected for her immersive ethnography in Egypt and for her theoretical originality—accepts the proposition that the *haqq* guaranteed to the poor distinguishes Islamic giving from the condescension that disfigures other manifestations of charity. She has also seen revolutionary potential in the culture of Islamic giving in Egypt (Mittermaier, 2014, p. 528, 2019, pp. 24, 100). Mittermaier is mainly concerned with giving by individuals in Egypt rather than with associational life. It is not in her agenda to evaluate the social impact of patterns of donorship that she interprets as motivated primarily by service to God, rather than by the identification of needs that demand to be satisfied. She admits that in some Christian contexts devotion to God is equally salient, and also that she excluded the charitable practices of Copts from her monograph in order to sharpen the distinctiveness of her Islamic case studies (Mittermaier 2019, p. 188). But that distinctiveness is the gist of her findings, on the strength of which she has set out to hold up to the light the whole “Western” tradition of charity, to its disadvantage.

Mittermaier’s work is influenced by Fassin’s (2012) groundbreaking *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Fassin is one of a line of social-cultural anthropologists who have had hands-on experience with organized humanitarian work, adding a down-to-earth quality to their academic publications. (He had some managerial responsibilities for Médecins Sans Frontières over four years.) One feature among many others in this book is Fassin’s linking of the ideological principle of compassion with actual repression and domination; and that principle he sees as deeply embedded in the history of Christianity and post-Christian secularism. Fassin’s argument has chimed with long-standing critiques of humanitarianism as addressing symptoms rather than causes. In my view, however, it is simplistic to associate any single motivation with a particular religious tradition—whether Christian compassion or Muslim devotion to God. Other powerful motivations include emulation of the founder of a religion (Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad, or the Buddha), expiation, self-denial, and selfless love. So argues Silber (2002), detecting subtle “echoes” of sacrificial ideologies and practices that still reverberate across long stretches of time. Likewise, Mostowlansky (2022) argues against Fassin that “ideas of humanitarianism, development,

⁴ Al-Qaradawi’s treatise was influenced by the eloquent explanation of zakat as “the outstanding social pillar of Islam” published by Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), the “second founder” of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Qutb, 1949/2000, pp. 162–167). Qutb’s principal posthumous reputation is that of an influential political revolutionary, but it is reasonable to postulate a break in his career as a result of his imprisonment and torture, 1954 to 1964, before which he was inclined to social reform, though some continuities must also be noted (Shepard, n.d.).

philanthropy and charity are continuously remade in interactions across vast geographical and social spaces and with reference to a multitude of historical influences” (p. 30). Robinson (2024) suggests, to my mind convincingly, that our understanding of caring in Muslim societies should not be limited to scripturally authorized ideals, but should also take account of the “ethical reasoning [that] has been the defining feature of modernist Islamic political intellectual movements”—emphasizing “justice, compassion, and equity...” (p. 532), to which we must add the anticipation of personal rewards for the donor, whether in temporal prestige or spiritual merit. Moreover, by the last quarter of the 20th century, when Islamic NGOs in the modern sense began to grow, they began to emulate techniques of campaigning, fundraising, and institutional positioning already established in the non-Muslim mainstream.⁵

The second argument that I wish to question holds that Islamic voluntarism, grounded in religious obligation, is a precious heritage that should not be thwarted or distorted by bureaucratization and State regulation. Rizvi (2024) brings to the fore the powerful Qur’anic concept of *iṣlāḥ*, which can be translated as repair or restitution, giving a specific coloring to Islamic principles of caring and giving. Interestingly, she interprets *iṣlāḥ* “neither as a principle to be applied nor as an ideal awaiting expression in the world,” but as demarcating “a space of conversation, one transmitted intergenerationally and inhabited sometimes unknowingly” (Rizvi, 2024, p. 493).⁶ She defends (with some practical qualifications) the Muslim aid convoys that traveled from Britain to Syria between 2012 and 2019, in support of the opposition to Bashir Assad’s regime, many of which fell foul of the British security authorities. Moreover, the convoys were deprecated as amateurish by the leading British Muslim international charity, Islamic Relief Worldwide. Rizvi’s article is sharply critical of the Charity Commission as nominally independent but actually, according to her, an arm of the British security state.

The UK Charity Commission has deserved some criticism in the recent past, but on the whole, it has had a good record of encouraging the Islamic charity sector in a context of international hostilities that spill uncontrollably into domestic politics (Benthall, 2024, pp. 68–70). There is also the question of scale. Schaeublin (2023) has given us a vivid description of a medium-sized, socially encapsulated town—Nablus in the Palestinian West Bank—where the

⁵ In my book *Disasters, Relief and the Media*, first published when I knew nothing about Islamic charities, I explored relationships between various aid organizations and the media, including the design of logos and marketing techniques (Benthall, 1993). In a new edition I refined the analysis to argue that there is a “stable system,” whereby representations of disaster are “exported” from aid economies to the North, through an oligopoly of media organizations, as consumables in return for donations, though these tend to dry up when multiple major disasters compete for attention (Benthall, 2009, pp. x–xvi). If this admittedly bleak interpretative model has any validity, it would be worth exploring in detail to what extent international Islamic charities are trapped in such a transactional system and to what extent on the contrary they are able to subvert it.

⁶ This may well be an important new contribution to the study of Islamic “good works.” I am familiar with the term *iṣlāḥ* used for informal justice committees in the Palestinian Territories, and as a name chosen for charities and political groups in various countries, also with the term *muṣliḥūn* to mean peacemakers, but Rizvi introduces it as a broad-based animating concept.

distribution of zakat (when not harassed by the Israeli occupation forces and sometimes by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah) has been to a great extent self-regulated through what he calls “lateral disciplining.” But this is not conceivable in an industrial country such as Britain with a population of nearly 70 million. Scams and phishing are pervasive. The nonprofit sector is particularly vulnerable in that it is based on trust.⁷

There is no law in the UK (or in the USA) inhibiting the formation of faith-based charities with the aim of benefiting only co-religionists, nor of combining the provision of material aid with religious aims (for Christians, missionary work; for Muslims, *da`wa*). However, there is a marked trend toward acceptance of the principles of impartial humanitarian neutrality and nondiscrimination, principles that Rizvi (2024) deprecates as secular and at odds with *işlāh* (p. 496). As an observant Muslim, Rizvi has every right to hold this view. However, I would argue that the commitment to neutrality and nondiscrimination made by “market leaders,” the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), though it has never been perfect in practice, is an indispensable ideal that faith-based organizations can do well to follow.⁸ Some UN and governmental agencies, and major NGOs such as Save the Children Fund and the (Roman Catholic) Caritas network, have built up immense practical and diplomatic experience (including learning from many mistakes). It was thanks to such experience that in 2025 a rigorous report could be published by the IPC⁹ Global Famine Review Committee, funded by a consortium of major international donors, on the extent of the politically induced famine in Gaza (IPC, 2025; see also Dannenbaum & de Waal, 2025). Hopefully in time Muslim-led charities will form international alliances and confederations to take fuller advantage of the worldwide weight of the *umma*, since the importance of charity is one point on which all Islamic religious authorities agree. Freelancing initiatives to deliver aid goods in trucks or boats, whether by Muslims or others, should not be disparaged but they can only have a limited impact and inevitably result in tensions with political authorities, when they are not totally blocked from reaching their destinations.

A comparable argument is advanced in a challenging and well-sourced article by Tittensor and Clarke (2022). According to them, charities such as Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), which they take as a case study, have been victims of “epistemic violence”—a term coined by Spivak (1998), the Indian literary theorist, to criticize the devaluation of “subaltern” or marginalized

⁷ The risks of fraud are of great concern to charities in Britain (BDO, 2024, based on a survey of registered charities only). I am by no means suggesting that the Islamic charity sector is more affected by episodes of dishonesty than others. See Imtiaz (2019/2020).

⁸ Nondiscrimination as usually conceived should not inhibit an NGO from concentrating on giving aid to Muslim-majority communities on a basis of need, but in mixed religious contexts, such as parts of the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, discrimination is prohibited, e.g., by the ICRC and UN agencies.

⁹ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.

knowledge systems by the colonizing or postcolonial West. Instances of such ideological manipulation are the suppression of indigenous medical practices, and colonial boarding schools. IRW is, according to Tittensor and Clarke, a “pseudo-secular” faith-based organization in that it has made compromises with “the normative Western secular aid discourse that regards impartiality as sacrosanct.”

Like many others who work in the social sciences, I am attracted by eye-catching theoretical formulations, but surely the tensions within IRW can be explained in simpler and less confrontational terms? Tensions between religious values and professional rationalization are common in the administration of faith-based organizations. The British-based evangelical overseas charity Tearfund has, according to its ethnographer Freeman (2020), been split between “mainstreamers,” aiming at meeting the needs of poor people as efficiently as possible, and “transformationalists,” stressing its Christian distinctiveness (p. 113). Staff in the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), the English member of the Caritas Internationalis network, are enjoined to be “bilingual,” fluent in the idioms of both development and Christianity (Benthall, 2012, pp. 69–70). Tittensor described the Gülen movement as having used a “dual discourse strategy” (Tittensor, 2014, pp. 144–149; Tittensor and Clarke, 2022, p. 182). Faure (2024) writes that French branches of UK Muslim NGOs “seem to navigate in a permanent recalibration of their religious identity in order to accommodate and adapt to the French sociopolitical context.... Muslim NGOs are confronted with a dilemma: *being Muslim but not too much*” (p. 68; emphasis added; see also Faure, forthcoming). This last formulation in six words sits neatly in the linguistic register of applied social science.¹⁰

Nothing in what I have written above is intended to belittle local charitable endeavors as part of “civil society,” broadly defined as all associational forms in society other than the state and the market. My own contribution to the study of Islamic community-based organizations has been to suggest retrospectively a positive interpretation of the zakat committees of the Palestinian West Bank, each a local focus of urban loyalties and funding before the crisis in 2007 that resulted in the secession of Gaza under Hamas (Benthall, 2008/2016, pp. 57–80)¹¹; Schaeublin 2009). At the time they were also succeeding in raising funds from international donor agencies—benefitting from the policy of USAID and others of constructive engagement with local community organizations. As I wrote in 2008, “Zakat committees are exactly the kind of grass-roots, community-based, voluntary institution that many international donors now look to as an alternative to the waste and corruption that often accompany aid flows through large bureaucratic institutions” (Benthall, 2008/2016, p. 69). As chair of the trustees of the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) in Oxford from 1998 to 2003, I was aware of the groundswell of accusations that many international agencies were

¹¹ I took issue with the contention of Levitt (2006) that these committees were merely facades for Hamas, questioning the quality of his research while stressing that these were matters of interpretation.

stuck at the time in the top-down colonial relationships of the past. I had also been impressed by Sullivan's (1994) monograph on contemporary Egypt that concluded that "the evidence demonstrates overwhelmingly" that Islam, like Coptic Christianity, had made a positive impact on welfare and development in that country (p. 153).

More recently, the theme of "vernacular humanitarianisms" has gained traction (Brković, 2017; Osanloo & Robinson, 2024). This is entirely to be welcomed and may result in something tangible and realistic emerging from the UN's theme for World Humanitarian Day 2025: "Strengthening global solidarity and empowering local communities." However, I question whether in complex industrial societies it is realistic to think that bureaucratic systems of regulation, auditing, and monitoring should be avoided, rather than designed to be as sensitive as possible to all forms of humanitarian endeavor, including those that challenge, explicitly or implicitly, the oligopoly of government-approved aid agencies.

The third issue I want to take up is allied to my second argument above, but with a sharper focus on the categorization of different forms of associational life. I would defend the notion of charity as a domain that should be ringfenced as far as possible from commercial, military, and political interests. Is this, as some would suggest, merely an illusion that obfuscates power relations? Bellion-Jourdan and I (2003) addressed the problem in our introduction to *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*:

We would start from the premise that the act of charity, whether based on some religious precept or merely on the human recognition of another human being in need, is best characterized as a bodily act: the offering of firstfruits from an orchard to hungry people, or the extending of a hand by the Samaritan to a stricken traveller. Such acts do not result in the foundation of organizations, and they are therefore immune to political analysis. However, they are realities only in a utopian sense. Even the existence of an orchard implies territorial rights, while the story in St Luke's Gospel about the Samaritan conceals a latent message of anti-Jewish sentiment. Great efforts have been made to ring-fence areas of charitable activity as being distinct from political activity: examples are the Charities Acts in England, the French Law of Associations of 1901, and the development of Geneva Law since the foundation of the Red Cross.

These efforts at boundary maintenance aim to give charitable and philanthropic institutions a kind of secular sanctity. However, it has become uncomfortably clear to the managers of international aid agencies that they are often viewed from outside, and specially by

their recipients or presumed beneficiaries, in different ways: as agents of Western power and influence, as providers of enviable employment opportunities, sometimes as carriers of Christian evangelism or post-Christian godlessness.

One response has been to recognize that no charitable organization is in fact immune to political analysis, and that humanitarian and development aid in particular has an inescapable political dimension. What Alex de Waal¹² has called the “humanitarian international” has begun to be subjected to searching examination in recent years. ...

...In a well tried manoeuvre of anthropology, and increasingly one of political science as it seeks to reduce its tendency towards ethnocentrism, we offer the results of our research in no spirit of apologetics either for Islam or for any other religion or ideological system, but in the hope that these results will supply a fresh perspective for considering the politics of global humanitarianism through the exercise of “decentring”, or unsettling of prior assumptions. (p. 4)

We presented the ring-fencing of charity as an essential principle underpinning civilized life, albeit nowadays subject to some strain. Even to question this principle would have been almost blasphemous in feudal times. In the 17th century, the philosopher Hobbes’s objection to private charity in *Leviathan* was that it was unreliable—the remedy he proposed being the State’s commitment to social welfare.¹³ Outright opposition to private charity became more thinkable by the 19th century, especially in the radicalism of Marx and Engels, who actually condemned it as postponing the proletarian revolution.¹⁴ Today, private charity is routinely disparaged by various intellectual factions, including the heirs to social Darwinism—proclaiming “the survival of the fittest”—and by market fundamentalists.

To this we must add the position taken by some contemporary social scientists. Li (2020) is factually irrefutable in his questioning of the distinction between humanitarian and military support given by certain Muslims to Bosnia during the ex-Yugoslavia civil war of the 1990s. He writes of a Kuwaiti former veteran of the 1990–1991 Iraqi occupation, Kulayb Al-Mutayri, who was killed

¹² De Waal (1997).

¹³ “And whereas many men, by accident unavoidable, become unable to maintain themselves by their labour; they ought not to be left to the Charity of private persons; but to be provided for, (as far-forth as the necessities of Nature require,) by the Lawes of the Common-wealth. For as it is Uncharitableness in any man, to neglect the impotent; so it is in the Sovereign of a Common-wealth, to expose them to the hazard of such uncertain Charity” (Hobbes, 1651, ch. 30.).

¹⁴ From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Address of the Central Committee of the League of Communists to its members in Germany, 1850: “It [the democratic petty bourgeoisie] hopes to bribe the workers more or less through indirect alms, and to break their revolutionary energy by momentarily rendering their situation bearable” (p. 463).

by a landmine in Vitez in 1993, “the first Kuwaiti martyr in Bosnia.” For him, “charity and combat were merely two ways of supporting Bosnia’s Muslims... regardless of personal choices, the distinction between the humanitarian and the military—a product of long histories of state formation and the rise of regular armies—is at best blurry and historically contingent, not a self-evident or eternal truth” (Li, 2020, p. 139). Likewise Rizvi (2004), in her hard-hitting critique of what she portrays as the hypocrisy of the United Kingdom’s political class, defends British Muslims who defied the Charity Commission’s restrictive rulings on interventions in Syria during the Bashar Al-Assad regime: “...the temporality of *iṣlāḥ* [repair or rectification] is one of continual ethical striving rather than progress. And this striving can entail a wide variety of actions—rebuilding after obliteration, biting one’s tongue, giving charity, halting violence, and, at other times, performing it” (p. 496).

The ethnographic empathy with which Li and Rizvi, respectively, describe Muslim volunteering in these two contexts is indeed challenging to the principle of ring-fencing charity. Tittensor and Clarke (2022) follow a similar line. This reflects in particular the complex politics radiating from the Greater Middle East since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the consequent Global War on Terror, and the recent extreme intensification of the Israel-Palestine conflict after Hamas’s exorbitant attack on Israelis in October 2023. These scholars will almost certainly be followed by others, and the eventual result may be a major change in public opinion questioning the whole basis of Euro-American charity law and of fairly unassailable¹⁵ agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. For the purpose of interpreting such shifts in educated opinion we may adapt the concept of the “Overton window,” originally formulated to outline the slow transformation of political norms from unthinkable through radical to mainstream.¹⁶

But academic writers of this persuasion should be careful what they wish for. Are they aware of the wider implications of the position they take? I attribute much of the cloud that has overhung Islamic charities since the 1990s to repercussions from the Soviet–Afghan war in the 1980s, when the United States—its sights firmly set on winning the Cold War with the Soviets—uninhibitedly mingled humanitarian aid with military support for the Afghan mujahideen. A salient episode in retrospect was its setting up of a kind of shell charity with governmental funds, American Friends of Afghanistan, to carry out various programs, including subsidy of a magazine, *Afghan Jihad*, published in Peshawar with the aim of encouraging the setting up of an Islamic republic based on Sharia.¹⁷ Is it surprising that, in the decades that followed, certain Arab and Muslim volunteers and charity organizers seem to have perceived this

¹⁵ Notwithstanding some historical revisionism (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Dromi, 2020) and in particular criticism of the ICRC’s passivity as a Swiss institution during the Second World War, in the face of the worst Nazi atrocities (Favez, 1999).

¹⁶ “The Overton Window,” <https://conceptually.org/concepts/overton-window>.

¹⁷ The magazine was published from 1987 until 1992, well after the Geneva Accords of 1988, to which the US and the Soviet Union were parties, but not the mujahideen (Benthall, 2021, pp. 187–189).

casual approach to charity regulation as a natural way of giving support to what they saw as oppressed populations? The unintended consequences of a superpower's flouting of established criteria for charitable status seem to me to have been far-reaching. One of them has been a weakening of the entire sector of Muslim voluntarism, regularly accused of the same kind of blurring of categories that the US government had indulged in. A manifestation of this weakening has been some recourse to inactivity with the aim of self-protection.¹⁸ In the Gulf states, few internationally oriented NGOs seem to have been active in the very recent past, as opposed to government agencies and the various National Societies of the Red Crescent, which are always close to their respective governments (Benthall, 2018). Partial exceptions are the United Arab Emirates (Almezaini, 2012; Pericoli, 2026)¹⁹ and Kuwait (Mostowlansky & Toktogulova, 2026). Yet the ethical-religious motivation and the resources available offer huge potential.

In the 2020s we are witnessing a shameless disregard by powerful states for the traditional humanitarian values of neutrality and impartiality. The world is fractured today by contempt for the rule of law in some of the most untrammelled centers of power. Humanitarians alone have no strength to overturn the principle that might is right and are well advised to abandon past pretensions to moral impregnability; but the principle of ring-fencing seems to me one that should be preserved and defended. Charitable activities in favor of a particular section of society do not offend in themselves against this principle, though they can put it in jeopardy when they come to dominate. On the last page of our book *The Charitable Crescent* we drew attention to the dangers of a "communitarian approach to aid" becoming widely accepted (Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2003, p. 156). Such dangers have not receded in the last two decades.

The range and depth of published social research on organized Islamic philanthropy are now impressive. There are intensive field studies by researchers such as Atia (2013), Derbal (2022), Taylor (2018, 2019), and Kayikci (2020), in addition to those cited above. These, and the influential overview studies from different disciplines by Singer (2008), Petersen (2015), Fauzia (2013), Barzegar and El Karhili (2017), Borchgrevink (2017), May (2021), and Siddiqui and Campbell (2023) constitute a tradition that can be built on. The small number of case studies evaluating the practical performance of Muslim-led charities in specific crises (Palmer 2011, De Cordier 2009b) is now gradually being supplemented (Robinson 2024). We have yet to see, however, the various findings of these scholars disseminated in the media by responsible popularizers, which could radically change the humanitarian landscape.

¹⁸ In my view, the US objective to win the Cold War was morally sound. In retrospect, the problem was that the danger of inflaming violent Islamist extremism, through strong support of the mujahideen, was overlooked. I conclude my analysis by quoting the French railway warning sign: "Un train peut en cacher un autre" (One train may hide another) (Benthall, 2021, p. 199).

¹⁹ One of the most active UAE charities is Dubai Cares, committed internationally to breaking the cycle of poverty through education. For a freewheeling anthropological interpretation of charitable giving in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, based on fieldwork between 2007 and 2010, see Parkhurst (2014).

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These are my reflections, but perhaps, like Eliot's (1920) *Gerontion*, I am succumbing to "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season."

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