

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM PHILANTHROPIC NORMS IN LIGHT OF THE PROPHETIC MODEL

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This article examines who constitutes neighbors in Islam, the duties of Muslims toward their neighbors, and the role of philanthropy in public relations for American Muslims. At the same time, it is a strong argument that charity and philanthropy are deeply embedded in Islamic tradition and seen as a natural humanitarian behavior and an act of social responsibility. The historical and exegetical analysis used in helping the reader understand the Qur'anic and Prophetic practice that instructs Muslims to do good (ihsan) to their neighbor who is near and distant, regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious background, and charity is an excellent way to do good to both Muslim and non-Muslim neighbors.

Keywords: neighbor, Qur'an, hadith, charity, philanthropy, love

Introduction

In the Gospel of Luke, an expert in Jewish law is portrayed as having a conversation with Jesus. The legal expert begins by asking: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). Jesus asks the expert

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what is prescribed in the Torah and the latter responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18b.¹ When Jesus tells the expert that he has given the correct answer and tells him “do this and you shall live,” the latter asks the following question: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus narrates the parable of the so-called “Good Samaritan” in order to teach his followers that it is their responsibility to look after the well-being of *all* those they encounter, regardless of social, racial, or religious background. The message Jesus conveys is that the status of “neighbor” belongs not just to those nearest to oneself in group identity or social status, but rather to all those in need.² Acknowledging that similar ideals are not expressed in the Qur’anic revelation, how prevalent is the same notion in Muslim praxis. Who is considered their “neighbor?” Are Muslims also called to care for the stranger? What is the actual philanthropic practice of the US Muslim community and organizations?

In theory, Muslim teaching accepts (sometimes with certain emendations) the teachings found in the revelations given to messengers who preceded Prophet Muhammad, and whom the Qur’an recognizes by name as authentic recipients of God’s Word.³ These include *al-Tawrāt* (Torah) of Mūsā (Moses) and *al-Injīl* (Gospel) of ‘Īsā (Jesus). Rarely, however, is it the practice of Muslim jurists to consult a biblical revelation. The reason for this is the implicit assumption that because Prophet Muhammad is regarded as the perfect exemplar for all human behavior, authoritative interpretations of the Prophet’s Sunna or “lived example” based on the extensive written record of the Hadith literature provide ample resources for determining what constitutes morally normative human behavior. In fact, taken as a whole, the Qur’an and the Hadith form a source of revealed knowledge that includes, completes, and even perfects the wisdom of all previously revealed knowledge. Accordingly, this paper will draw on the Qur’an and especially on the Hadith literature pertaining to the concept, rules, and regulations of

¹ “And [the legal expert] answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself’ (Luke 10:27).

² Other related biblical passages include Leviticus 19:33–34 (treating the stranger/alien/sojourner as a neighbor and loving the person as oneself); Matthew 5–7; and Luke 6:27–36.

³ When speaking of Allah, Muslims traditionally follow with the Arabic “Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala” for “Glory be to Him, the Exalted,” abbreviated as SWT. They also honor Prophet Muhammad when mentioning his name by adding “‘alayhi’s salatu wa’s salam” (peace and blessing be upon him), abbreviated PBUH. I acknowledge those uses here and ask readers to assume their presence throughout the paper.

charity and philanthropy in Islam in order to offer a synthesis of normative Muslim teaching on the subject of the identity and rights of the “neighbor” within the broader context of examples of Muslim philanthropic practice in the contemporary US.⁴

Who Is My Neighbor?

If the recent COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it has reminded us of a simple fact: human beings are profoundly social. We depend on one another for our existence—not just for our physical survival but for our psychological and spiritual well-being. To a large extent, this is precisely Yuval Noah Harari’s point when he observes that the story of the evolution of physical organisms, including human beings, is called “biology” while the story of the evolution of the sociocultural dimension of human life is called “history” (2015, p. 3). To speak of human history is to speak of everything human beings have created to facilitate, regulate, and celebrate human relationality.

The Qur’an acknowledges that God designed human beings to be different from one another, principally by living in distinct social groupings such as different “ethnic groups and tribes” and at the same time emphasizing that all human beings are descended “from one male and one female” (Qur’an 49:13), implying that, despite their divinely ordained differences, human beings are all part of one family or one big neighborhood before God.⁵ In fact, the very same Qur’anic verse which speaks of these differences as part of the divine plan is quite clear that they are not to be a source of division but rather are to serve as the very media through which human beings “come to know one another,” and thereby come together as one meta-community of service to the one God (Qur’an 21:92) and one another (Kollar & Shafiq, 2014, p. 306). In addition, the Qur’an honors all the children of Adam (Qur’an 17:70) and affirms human dignity regardless of people’s religious, social, racial, and cultural affiliation.

In a well-known verse that implies a deep connection between affirming the oneness of God and meeting the needs of others, the Qur’an commands that the neighbor (*al-jār*) be treated with the same care as one’s closest relations:

⁴ This paper sometimes uses charity interchangeably with philanthropy, despite the fact that some researchers do not consider the two synonymous. See Payton and Moody (2008).

⁵ All English renderings of Qur’anic verses are taken from Ünal (2006), unless otherwise indicated.

*And worship God and do not associate anything as a partner with Him; and do good to your parents in the best way possible, and to the relatives, orphans, the destitute, the neighbor who is near, the neighbor who is distant, the companion by your side, the wayfarer, and those who are in your service. (Treat them well and bring yourself up to this end, for) God does not love those who are conceited and boastful.*⁶ (Qur'an 4:36)

According to this verse, it is important that those who believe in obeying and surrendering to God spare no effort in being considerate of and generous to their neighbors.

From an Islamic perspective, the inviolable rights of any one individual human being cannot be understood apart from the rights of others, especially one's neighbors. Doing so would be considered a type of *zulm* (injustice) for which the offender would be held accountable, both in this world and in the afterlife. That is why, when the Prophet Muhammad migrated from Makka to Medina in 622 CE, the concept of the neighborhood and healthy neighborly relations were among his main concerns. After the migration, he originated and signed a contract called the Covenant (or Constitution) of Medina. This covenant set out principles essential to the integrated peaceful coexistence of the different tribal and religious communities of the city, such that all of the inhabitants of the city were provided with equal protection in accordance with their shared human dignity. The Covenant of Medina was designed so that the various neighborhoods in the city could live according to the Islamic and universal human values of mutual respect, equality, generosity, and trust.

In accordance with Qur'anic teaching and the Prophet's own example, one of the central underlying concerns of this new social compact was the protection of the rights of the most vulnerable. Although the Covenant of Medina does not explicitly address this issue, the Hadith literature is filled with examples illustrating the importance the Prophet placed on social justice in this new Muslim polity. Echoing Matthew 25:31–45, a famous "divine hadith" (i.e., saying of the Prophet Muhammad in which the meaning is revealed by God and the wording is formulated by the Prophet) states:

Verily, Allah, the Exalted and Glorious, would say on the Day of Resurrection: "O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me." He would say: "O my Lord; how could I visit Thee

⁶ *Al-jār al-junub* (the neighbor who is distant) also means *gharīb* or stranger.

whereas Thou art the Lord of the worlds?” Thereupon [God] would say: “Didn’t you know that such and such servant of Mine was sick but you did not visit [them] and were you not aware of this; that if you had visited [them], you would have found Me by him? O son of Adam, I asked [for] food from you but you did not feed Me.” He would say: “My Lord, how could I feed Thee whereas Thou art the Lord of the worlds?” He said: “Didn’t you know that such and such servant of Mine asked food from you but you did not feed [them], and were you not aware that if you had fed [them] you would have found [them] by My side?” [The Lord would again say:] “O son of Adam, I asked [for a] drink from you but you did not provide [one to] Me.” He would say: “My Lord, how could I provide Thee whereas Thou art the Lord of the worlds?” Thereupon He would say: “Such and such of servant of Mine asked you for a drink but you did not provide [them with one], and had you provided [them a] drink you would have found [them] near Me.” (Sahīḥ Muslim 32:6232).⁷

This hadith is found in a section of *Sahīḥ Muslim* entitled “The Book of Righteousness and Ethical Behaviors [in the Context of] Social Relationships” (*Kitāb al-birr wa l-ṣīla wa l-ādāb*). The section begins with a hadith addressing the context of familial relationships—especially parents—and then moves on to broadening spheres of social relationships. Not only does this hadith appear with other reports that deal with broader social ties, but the text’s reference to “such and such a servant of Mine” (Ar. *‘abdī fulān*) strongly suggests that the uncompromising benevolence it enjoins applies equally to the stranger as it does the neighbor, both of whom are characterized as blessed by general immanence as well as a special intimacy between God and all those in need. To care for those in need is portrayed as an expression of loving God Himself. Furthermore, the hadith implies that, in attending to the needs of one’s fellow human beings, there is the hidden blessing of an encounter with God Himself, the real Caretaker (*al-Walī*): “Were you not aware that, if you had fed [them] you would have found [them] by My side?”

In response to the offense engendered by Pope Benedict XVI’s inept quotation of a 13th-/7th-century Byzantine emperor who defamed

إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ يَقُولُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ مَرَضْتُ فَلَمْ تَعُدْنِي . قَالَ يَا رَبِّ كَيْفَ أَعُوذُكَ وَأَنْتَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ . قَالَ أَمَّا عَلِمْتَ أَنَّ عِبْدِي فَلَانًا مَرَضُوا فَلَمْ تَعُدَّهُمْ أَمَّا عَلِمْتَ أَنَّكَ لَوْ غَدَيْتَهُ لَوَجَدْتَنِي عِنْدَهُ يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ اسْتَطَعْتُكَ فَلَمْ تُطْعِمْنِي . قَالَ يَا رَبِّ وَكَيْفَ أَطْعَمُكَ وَأَنْتَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ . قَالَ أَمَّا عَلِمْتَ أَنَّكَ لَوْ أَطْعَمْتَهُ لَوَجَدْتَنِي عِنْدِي يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ اسْتَغْنَيْتَكَ فَلَمْ تَسْقِنِي . قَالَ يَا رَبِّ كَيْفَ أَسْقِيكَ وَأَنْتَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ قَالَ اسْتَغْنَاكَ عِبْدِي فَلَانًا فَلَمْ تَسْقِهِ أَمَّا إِنَّكَ لَوْ سَقَيْتَهُ وَجَدْتَنِي ذَلِكَ عِنْدِي

the Prophet Muhammad in the former's now infamous "Regensburg Address" of September 13, 2006, a group of 38 Muslim scholars representing a variety of different expressions of Islam signed an "Open Letter to the Pope." In this letter, they gently but firmly took the Pope to task for his use of this quotation. They also pointed out numerous errors in the Pope's use of Muslim sources in the address. Roughly one year later, 138 Muslim scholars of equally diverse backgrounds issued a much longer document titled (in reference to Qur'an 3:64) *A Common Word between Us and You*.⁸ The document focuses largely on the commitment, shared by Muslims and Christians alike (as well as Jews), to the two so-called "greatest commandments": love of God and love of neighbor.⁹

With respect to the second of these two commandments, *A Common Word* underscores the ways in which the biblical commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," is embodied in several of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad such as "None of you has faith until they love their brother"—or he said, "for their neighbor" (Ar. *jār*)—"what they love for themselves" (*Muslim* 1:45).¹⁰ Another well-known hadith embodying prophetic teaching on the duty of loving one's neighbor engages hyperbole so as to collapse any functional difference between the duty to love one's neighbor and the duty to love the members of one's own family: "The Messenger of God said: 'Gabriel impressed upon me [the kind treatment] towards the neighbor (Ar. *jār*) [so much] that I thought as if he would soon confer upon him the [right] of inheritance'" (*Muslim* 45:184).¹¹

The Arabic word *jār*—most often translated as "neighbor"—is derived from the triconsonantal root *J-W-R*, a root, the derivatives of which appear, with different shades of meaning, a total of 13 times. One basic meaning of the root in verbal form is to "deviate from the right course" and another is to act "wrongfully, unjustly, injuriously or tyrannically" (Lane, n.d.). The third and sixth verbal forms of the root mean "to live close, repair to (a place), protect, rescue, live near together" (Omar, 2010, p. 109), while the fourth form has the distinct connotation of granting protection and/or providing shelter and the tenth form denotes seeking protection or asylum. The Qur'anic attestations of the root basically center around two meanings of the nominal form at focus here: *jār*. In this sense *jār* may refer either the asylum seeker, the one

⁸ "O People of the Book, come to a word common between us and you, that we worship none but God, and associate none as partner with Him, and that none of us take others for Lords, apart from God."

⁹ For a detailed analysis of *A Common Word*, see Volf (2010).

¹⁰ لَا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّى يُحِبَّ لِأَخِيهِ - أَوْ قَالَ لِجَارِهِ - مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ

¹¹ مَا زَالَ جَبْرِيلُ يُوصِيَنِي بِالْجَارِ حَتَّى ظَنَنْتُ أَنَّهُ سَيَرُدُّهُ

who is sheltered from harm, *or* the asylum granter, the one who provides such shelter and thus is helper or companion to the former (Parwez, 2015, 1:208). In anticipation of our examination of the meaning of *jār* as “neighbor,” it is worth pointing out that this dual meaning around the seeking and granting of shelter, asylum, protection, or aid implies the *mutuality* of neighborly relations.

An example of the Qur’anic use of the tenth verbal form of *J-W-R* (Ar. *istajāra*), to denote asylum-seeking, is Qur’an 9:6: “And if any of those who associate partners with God seeks asylum of you (Ar. *istajāra*) [O Messenger], grant him asylum (Ar. *fa-ajirhū*), so that he may hear the Word of God.”¹² Here the root acquires an important theological connotation: namely that the ultimate “other” for the early Muslim community in Medina—indeed the ultimate *enemy* (i.e., the pagan Makkans)—can and ought to be offered asylum and thus the opportunity to become a “neighbor.” The theological connotation of this hadith for the understanding of the concept of *jār* resonates deeply with that of another locus classicus of the use of the noun *jār* in the Hadith literature: “The Prophet said, ‘By Allah, he is not a believer! By Allah, he is not a believer! By Allah, he is not a believer.’ It was asked, ‘Who is that, O Messenger of Allah?’ [The Prophet] said, ‘One whose neighbor does not feel safe from his evil.’”¹³ Here we have yet another significant theological implication for the understanding of *jār*: neighbors are those who rely on one another for safety and security necessary for the fulfillment of one of the main purposes (Ar. *maqāṣid*) of the divine law (Ar. *sharī‘a*)—the preservation (and flourishing) of human life.

The theological implication of solidarity that the Qur’anic usage of *jār* carries is so thorough that it has a distinctly dark side. Q 8:48 portrays Satan as seducing the Makkan oligarchy into thinking that they would be victorious over their Muslim opponents at Badr because he himself would be their *jār* (neighbor/protector): “Today, no power among humankind can overcome you, and for sure, I am your *jār*!” (Qur’an 8:48). Ibn Kathir (d. 1372) interprets the verse literally and offers the exegesis that “[Satan] appeared to [the elders of Quraysh] in the form of Suraqa b. Malik b. Ju’sham, the leader of the Banu Madlaj”—an non-Qurayshi *jār*, i.e., “neighbor” of the Qurayshi leadership and ally in their objective to eliminate the Muslim “threat” to their hegemony.

What makes someone a neighbor? Muslim scholars vary concerning the definition of neighbor. Some suggest that people who regularly frequent the same mosque or who live in the same town or

وَأِنْ أَحَدُ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ اسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ حَتَّى يَسْمَعَ كَلَامَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ أَبْلِغْهُ مَأْمَنَهُ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: " وَاللَّهِ لَا يُؤْمِنُ، وَاللَّهُ لَا يُؤْمِنُ، وَاللَّهُ لَا يُؤْمِنُ! " قِيلَ: مَنْ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ؟ قَالَ: " الَّذِي لَا يَأْمَنُ جَارَهُ بَوَائِقِهِ! "

geographical district of a larger municipality are “neighbors” to one another. Other scholars have taken a more restrictive view: the neighbor is the nonfamily member who lives in closest proximity. Still others, including the modern scholar Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), have affirmed that there is no specific definition of neighbors; rather the matter should be referred to custom (*urf* in Arabic).¹⁴ The most expansive interpretation—one held by many scholars both medieval and modern—is based on an important prophetic tradition. According to this interpretation, the “neighbor” is anyone who lives “forty houses in each direction.” The interpretation goes on to maintain—based on the original Medinan context of this hadith and in light of the comprehensive symbolism of the number “forty” in the late Antique Mediterranean world—the Prophet was employing hyperbole to imply that no absolute limitation should ever be placed on who can possibly qualify as one’s “neighbor.”

Rights and Roles of the Neighbor

In *Kitāb al-jār* of his *Al-adab al-mufrad*, Imam al-Bukhari (d. 870) devotes an entire section to cataloging 26 different canonical hadith narratives that focus on the subject of the “neighbor,” specifically the characteristics of the neighbor and/or the proper attitude toward one’s neighbor.¹⁵ As part of a conventional strategy to create an implicit narrative arc for the section, Bukhari places as the lead hadith the report narrated by ‘A’isha (quoted above from Muslim) in which the Prophet refers to just how relentless the Archangel Gabriel is in emphasizing the importance of benevolence toward one’s neighbors. Not only does he place this report at the head of the section, evoking a sense that all the subsequent reports are to be interpreted through this lens. He also includes three variant recensions of this prophetic report attributed not to

¹⁴ Al-Hasan al-Basri was asked about the neighbor and said, “The term ‘neighbor’ includes the forty houses in front a person, the forty houses behind him, the forty houses on his right and the forty houses on his left” (Bukhari, Book 6, Hadith 109). See also, “The rights of neighbors apply to forty houses like this and like this and like this”—and he pointed to the front, to the back, to the right, and to the left (Abu Dawud, Book 6, Hadith 100). The first hadith implies 40 houses from every direction, in which case one’s neighbors will amount to 160, and the second hadith denotes 40 in total, that is, 10 houses from each direction. In his concluding remarks on these hadiths, Albani writes: “Everything attributed to the Prophet (pbuh) as regards limiting the neighborhood to forty (houses) is weak (*da’if*) and erroneous. Thus, it is evident that such a limitation is rather on the basis of certain customs (*urf*)” (1985, 1:296).

¹⁵ *Al-adab al-mufrad* is a topical collection of canonical hadith having to do with proper ethical behavior (Ar. *adab*).

`A'isha, but one to the Companion Ibn `Umar and the other two to the Companion `Abd Allah b. `Amr. By doing so, Bukhari accomplishes at least two things. The first is to underscore the extraordinary probative status of this report as multiply transmitted (Ar. *mutawātir*). The second is to add an important element to the implicit narrative arc of his entire section on “The Neighbor” by a) placing one of the two variants attributed to `Abd Allah b. `Amr—and its distinguishing reference to “our Jewish neighbor” (*li-jārīnā l-yahūdī*)—in the subsection (Ar. *bāb*) entitled “Beginning with the Neighbor” and b) by placing the other variant attributed to `Abd Allah b. `Amr (with a parallel reference to “our Jewish neighbor”) in a special subsection “On the Jewish Neighbor” (Ar. *bāb al-jār al-yahūdī*), which closes the entire catalogue of hadith on the subject of the neighbor.¹⁶ This closing report reads as follows:

Mujahid said, “I was with 'Abdullah ibn `Amr while his slave was skinning a sheep. He said, ‘Boy! When you finish, start with the Jewish neighbor.’ A man there exclaimed, ‘Jewish? May Allah correct you!’ He replied, ‘I heard the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, command that neighbors be well cared for [to such an extent that, had we failed to do so,] we feared he would order us to make them our heirs.’” (Bukhari, n.d.).¹⁷

The significance of Bukhari’s implicit narrative arc in his section devoted exclusively to the hadith concerning the neighbor can scarcely be overestimated. As unquestionably tragic as the unfolding of the story of the Jews of Medina turns out to be, it is fair to say that the portrayal of the Jewish constituency of the Medina *umma* in the Hadith literature echoes that of the Qur’an, namely, that they are a sub-community that, for whatever set of reasons, is never fully integrated into the larger polity coalescing around the authority and persona of the Prophet Muhammad. This is at once the most likely interpretative cue for the apparent shock and perhaps even indignation of the unnamed bystander: “Jewish? May Allah correct you!” Likewise, it is an indispensable data point for appreciating the import of this hadith for an overall understanding of the ethical centrality of benevolence toward one’s neighbors—even, and

¹⁶ “Our Jewish neighbor,” i.e., `Abd Allah b. `Umar and his servant also referenced in the report. “Beginning with the Neighbor,” presumably means as one moves to the very next sphere of obligatory benevolence beyond the family sphere.

¹⁷ كُنْتُ عِنْدَ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو، وَغُلَامُهُ يُسْلَخُ شَاةً، فَقَالَ: يَا غُلَامُ، إِذَا فَرَغْتَ فَأَبْدَأْ بِجَارِنَا الْيَهُودِيِّ، فَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ: سَمِعْتُ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يُوصِي بِالْجَارِ، حَتَّى خَشِينَا أَوْ رُئِينَا أَنَّهُ سَيُؤْزَرُهُ. الْيَهُودِيُّ أَصْلَحَكَ اللَّهُ؟ قَالَ: إِنِّي

perhaps especially, toward those from whom one may feel most estranged.

Although not found in any canonical Sunni Hadith collection or *sīra* compilations, there is an apocryphal story about an old Jewish neighbor of the Prophet who did her best to irritate him by throwing garbage in his way every single day in defiance of his message.¹⁸ One day she fell sick, and when the Prophet walked out of his home there was no garbage. Upon noticing the absence of her ritualized attempt to offend him, the Prophet grew worried about the old woman's well-being and decided to visit her (Hamid, 2004, p. 204).

As illustrated above, two of the most important teachings running through the Hadith literature—and thus the prophetic Sunna—regarding benevolence toward one's neighbor are a) it is not an option and b) social conventions, personal perceptions, or even deep-seated feelings of alienation are no excuse for failing to fulfill this sacred duty. In another well-known hadith, the Prophet is portrayed as saying: "Anyone who believes in God and the Day of Judgment should be good to his neighbors. Anyone who believes in God and the Day of Judgment should be generous to his guest...." (Bukhari, Hadith 102). According to another canonical hadith:

The Prophet was asked about [a] certain woman who prayed in the night, fasted in the day, and gave charity, but offended her neighbors with her tongue. The Prophet described her as being one of the people of Hellfire. He was also asked about a woman who prayed [only the minimum of] the prescribed prayers, gave a little bit of charity, and [yet] refrained from speaking harshly to her neighbors. The Prophet described her as among the people of Heaven. (Bukhari, 1997, p. 119)

In the broader context of the other canonical hadith discussed above, these two hadiths clearly indicate that a critical touchstone for meritorious ethical behavior and true faith itself is the degree to which an individual practices *benevolence toward one's neighbor*—the Greek rendering of which is the etymological basis for the word "philanthropy."

Philanthropy and the Neighbor

The Prophetic Model in Medieval Muslim Jurisprudence

¹⁸ Sunni Hadith collection or *sīra* compilations, i.e., "Life of the Prophet" literature.

Any attempt at mapping some of the more salient connections between what the prophetic model has to say about benevolence toward the neighbor, on the one hand, and actual contemporary Muslim philanthropic norms (and practices), on the other, would be remiss without at least a minimal acknowledgment of the mediating role of the long and rich tradition of Islamic jurisprudence (Ar. *fiqh*). Although it is not within the scope of this paper to conduct anything approaching an adequate summary of Sunni jurisprudence, a brief look at the work of at least one influential medieval jurist should suffice to illustrate the type of synthetic thinking that serves as a foundation for a great deal of contemporary Muslim reflection and teaching with respect to prophetic teaching about the neighbor and philanthropy.

To refer to Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) as “influential” is an understatement. It may be no exaggeration to say that no single Muslim scholar has had a greater impact on the thinking of subsequent generations of Muslim thinkers as he. In his *Alchemy of Happiness* (Per. *Kīmīyā-yi Sa`ādat*) Ghazzali methodically outlines a set of prescriptions for social interaction in the context of which he enumerates the duties associated with neighborliness.¹⁹ One of the features of these prescriptions is that, in unsurprising fidelity to the prophetic model, they do not apply only to Muslim neighbors, while simultaneously asserting that Muslim neighbors must take precedence over their non-Muslim counterparts. In support of this ranked system of precedence, Ghazzali adduces the following hadith:

The Messenger (pbuh) said, “There is a neighbor who has one right: he is an unbeliever. There is the neighbor who has two rights: he is a Muslim. There is the neighbor who has three rights: he is a Muslim relative,” (al-Ghazzali, 2002, p. 57)

Despite this ranked system, however, Ghazzali is clear that Muslims are not to usurp unjustly anything from any of their neighbors; nor are they allowed to deny their neighbors any of their rights. Here again he adduces another hadith:

... And [the Prophet] said: “A person is not a Muslim whose neighbor suffers or is not safe from him.” And he said: “The first of two judgments at the Resurrection shall be with the

¹⁹ It should be noted that the authenticity of *Kīmīyā-yi Sa`ādat* has been contested for decades, with some scholars convinced that it belongs to a group of pseudonymous works in the Ghazzalian tradition.

neighbor.” And he said “Whoever throws a stone at his neighbor’s dog gives offense to him.” (2002, p. 57)

Ghazzali offers similar prescriptions in his magnum opus, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (Ar. *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*), where, among other things, he quotes the following hadith summarizing the duties owed to one’s neighbors:

Do you know about your duties towards your neighbor? Help him if he seeks your help, give him [a] loan if he wants it, remove his wants if he is in want, follow his bier if he is dead, join him in joy if he gets good news, show him sympathy and express sorrow if he is in danger, don’t raise up your building so high without his permission so as to obstruct his air, don’t give him trouble. If you purchase some fruit, give him something. If you do not do it, take them secretly to your house. Don’t allow your children to come out with them as it may cause displeasure of his children. Don’t give him trouble by the smoke of your cook-shed. There is no harm in sending food cooked in your cook-shed to your neighbor’s house, (1982, 2:165)

The Prophetic Model and Contemporary Muslim Thought

The second section of *A Common Word* is dedicated to “Love of the Neighbor.” It begins with the unequivocal declaration that, in Islam, without love of neighbor there can be “no true faith in God and no righteousness,” and goes on to warn that, by themselves, “empathy and sympathy for the neighbor—and even formal prayers—are not enough. They must be accompanied by generosity and self-sacrifice” (cf., Volf & Muhammad, 2010, p. 44). As if to draw a thoroughly unambiguous connection between the centrality of benevolence toward the neighbor—so clearly articulated in the prophetic model—and an uncompromising commitment to philanthropic praxis, the document adduces the following two Qur’anic verses:

Godliness and virtue is not that you should turn your faces in the direction of the east and west; but [one] is godly and virtuous who believes in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, and gives away of [one’s] property with pleasure, although [one] loves it, to relatives, orphans, the destitute, the wayfarer, and those who have to beg (or who need a loan)... (Qur’an 2:177; emphasis added)

You will never be able to attain godliness and virtue until you spend of what you love (in God's cause or to provide sustenance for the needy). Whatever you spend, God has full knowledge of it." (Qur'an 3:92)

In Islamic tradition, one's assets are not entirely one's own to spend freely. The rights of God, one of whose "beautiful names" is *Mālik al-Mulk* (The Owner of All), in fact, supersedes the rights of the human. As the divine owner, God has established a non-negotiable condition that must be met before human owners are permitted to exercise their own discretion in the use of what they possess. The condition is as unambiguous as it is absolute: the basic needs of all members of the community must be met. As Fr. Thomas Michel (2010) writes, charity in Islam is "an obligation that corresponds to a divinely acknowledged right of the poor" (p. 64). All possessions are conditional gifts from God. Failure to pay one's fair share in support of the needy is a failure to meet the conditions of the gift, thus transforming the receiver of what God offers from a grateful recipient to an ungrateful thief. Thus, from an Islamic perspective, philanthropy is not construed primarily as an act of kindness toward the needy, but rather part of one's response in obedience to the commands of the Creator. This is why *ṣadaqa* (charity), in general, and *zakat* (minimum obligatory almsgiving), in particular, are construed as acts of righteousness in direct service to, and in the cause of, God.

The Qur'an orders a certain amount of property to be spent "as a sign of caring for the dependent and helpless segments of society" (Lieberman & Rozbicki, 2017, p. 67). The key Qur'anic passage designating the eight groups of the recipients of *ṣadaqāt*—acts of "righteousness"/charity understood to include, but not necessarily be restricted to, *zakāt*—declares:

The Prescribed Purifying Alms (the Zakā[t]) are meant only for the poor, and the destitute (albeit, out of self-respect, they do not give the impression that they are in need), and those in charge of collecting (and administering) them, and those whose hearts are to be won over (for support of God's cause, including those whose hostility is to be prevented), and to free those in bondage (slavery and captivity), and to help those overburdened with debt, and in God's cause (to exalt God's word, to provide for the warriors and students, and to help the pilgrims), and for the wayfarer (in need of help). This is an ordinance from God. God is All-Knowing, All-Wise. (Qur'an 9:60)

One group of people receiving zakat are *mu'allafat al-qulūb* (those whose hearts are to be won over). Although it's not entirely clear precisely to whom this category refers, a majority of interpreters have argued that these could be either non-Muslims whose hearts may be open to conversion or who harbor hostilities toward the Muslim community and yet, at the same time, whose hostility or animosity may be avertable. In a wide variety of historical and cultural contexts, Muslims have deployed this category either as a way of ensuring the general welfare of non-Muslim minorities living in their midst, or more recently, as a way of contributing to the welfare of the larger societies in which they themselves are minorities (Senturk, 2007, p. 119).

In fact, despite a prevailing consensus of jurists based on the dicta of the Companion and second "Rightly Guided" caliph Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 644) that after the time of the Prophet Muhammad it was no longer a necessity to pay zakat to the *mu'allafat al-qulūb*, many contemporary Muslim scholars have argued for a renewal of the relevance of this important category of zakat recipient. To those who might object that such an approach deviates from the Sunna as interpreted by one of the Prophet Muhammad's closest and most trusted Companions, there is clear precedent for Muslims giving charity to people of other religious traditions. There are notable stories that the Prophet and his Companions shared their food with their non-Muslim neighbors. There is even a hadith wherein the Prophet is portrayed as sanctioning charitable giving to the very pagans who were persecuting the umma:²⁰

[Asma bint Abu Bakr narrates] My mother came to me during the lifetime of [God]'s [Messenger]—and she was a mushrikah (polytheist, pagan, idolatress). I said to [God]'s [Messenger] (seeking his verdict), "My mother has come to me and she desires to receive a reward from me, shall I keep good relations with her?" The Prophet said, "Yes, keep good relations with her." (Bukhari, 49:801)

Scholars also remind us that Umar b. al-Khattab himself issued an edict to sustain non-Muslims in their old age and that Ibn Qudamah (d. 1223), the 13th-century Syrian jurist, declared that non-Muslims are entitled to any type of non-obligatory charity (Bensaid, 2013, p. 178).

Another key category of legitimate charitable giving in Qur'an 9:60 is "in God's cause" or "in the way of God." The phrase "in God's

²⁰ See Albani (2000) for the commentary on the hadith.

cause” means every deed intended completely to serve the cause of, or be for the sake of, God. Presumably this includes all good actions, personal and communal. Yusuf al-Qaradawi states that some Muslim “jurists allow spending charity on all kinds of good deeds, including supplying coffins for the deceased and building fortifications ...,” since “in God’s cause” covers all these (Qaradawi, 2000, pp. 57–65).

Among the terms used in relation to charity in Islamic tradition is *infāq*, which literally means “spending.” When used in a philanthropic context, it refers to giving for the benefit of society and its members. For example, in *Surat al-Baqara* we find the following verse:

The parable of those who spend [yunfiqūna] their wealth in God’s cause is like that of a grain that sprouts seven ears, and in every ear, there are a hundred grains. God multiplies for whom He wills. God is All-Embracing (with His mercy), All-Knowing. (Qur’an 2:261)

In other words, spending “in God’s cause”—especially on behalf of the needy—bears much social fruit by building social bridges between various classes in society. It creates a strong connection between members of different walks of life and is thus critically important for establishing and maintaining social cohesion, stability, and collective harmony. In this regard, the Qur’an teaches that charitable giving is an act of social responsibility and integrity. It guards against the dangers of overweening individualism and greed and helps affirm important norms of social responsibility, interdependence, and justice (Lieberman & Rozbicki, 2017, pp. 70–71). As Muhammad Shafiq writes, earning money through hard work—not through unlawful ways—and sharing it with one’s own family and those in need was unquestionably encouraged.²¹ He especially places emphasis on neighborhood, stating “taking care of one another and even sharing with neighbors what one cooks or brings home were” genuinely promoted (Kollar & Shafiq, 2014, p. 27). This essential connection between charitable giving, on the one hand, and important Islamic social norms, on the other, is perhaps nowhere better encapsulated than in the following prophetic hadith: “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever” (Bukhari, 32:6258).

Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) asserts that Islam is a way of life that combines belief, worship, and morals, including extending kind

²¹ Muslim scholars agree that charity cannot be given from *haram* (unlawful) earnings, such as usury, selling alcohol, gambling, or even stealing.

treatment to certain groups of one's immediate family and of the human family at-large. In his commentary on Qur'an 4:36, Qutb explains:

[The] orphan[s] and [destitute] are given precedence over one's neighbors because their need may be more pressing and they must be looked after more immediately. Kindness is then urged towards a neighbor who may be a relation, and so to any other neighbor. Both take precedence over friends, because a neighbor always remains next to us. We meet our friends intermittently. (3:123–125)

Muslims all around the world consider the Prophet Muhammad a perfect role model to follow in their ritual and worship and also in their dealings with others. As seen above, when one looks at the teachings of the Prophet, one finds that the Islamic tradition instructs Muslims to be kind and considerate toward their neighbors, who deserve decent treatment and respect regardless of their gender, race, or religion. When A'isha, the wife of the Prophet, asked him about to which neighbors to send her presents, he replied, "To the one whose door is closest to yours" (Bukhari, 47:767).²² As Spahic Omer (2011) maintains, "the prioritization on the basis of proximity and the intensity, as well as frequency, of communication is as pertinent." Moreover, taking into consideration how much emphasis Islam places on the significance of the house and family, the rights of individuals, and mutual understanding and cooperation, Omer writes, it would not be difficult to grasp why the nearest neighbors, exclusively due to their closeness, enjoy more rights than anyone else.

And yet, even though one's geographically closest neighbors are the ones for whom people should be primarily concerned, the prophetic model clearly takes a maximalist rather than a minimalist approach to answering the question with which this article began—*who is my neighbor?* It indicates that one's behavior should not extend only to one's immediate neighbors, but also to the rest of the community. The prophetic model, along with centuries of precedent and, in particular, contemporary praxis all point to the fact that, while maintaining certain important priorities, the objectives of Islamic philanthropy ultimately exceed cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries.

As discussed above, loving God and loving your neighbor are very strongly interconnected and almost inseparable. In a description of

²² In another occasion, Abu Hurayra, one of the close companions, was reported to have said, "Do not begin with your more distant neighbors.... Rather begin with your nearest neighbors before the most distant ones" (Bukhari, 6:110).

“the truly virtuous” (*al-abrār*), the Qur’an insists that they are those who “give food, however great be their need for it, with pleasure to the destitute, and to the orphan, and to the captive, (saying): ‘We feed you only for God’s sake; we desire from you neither recompense nor thanks (we desire only the acceptance of God)’” (Qur’an 76:8–9). In order to be regarded among the *abrār*, the faithful must have acquired the spiritual maturity and discipline that enables them to spend in God’s cause and to give others not only out of one’s excess, but even out of one’s own need—to “give,” as Nobel Peace Prize winner Mother Teresa of Calcutta was fond of saying, “until it hurts.”

US Muslims as Good Neighbors

One of the first lessons of Islamic ethics is embodied in the famous hadith of the Prophet: “A man is not a believer who fills his stomach while his neighbor is hungry” (Bukhari, 6:112). This hadith is literally about ensuring that one’s neighbors have their basic needs met. But metaphorically, it has always been understood as an Islamic version of the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It teaches that communal life depends on a commitment to sharing that goes beyond the basic necessities and involves an unwavering commitment to an ethic of kindness to all. Especially after the 9/11 terror attacks, Muslims in the US have, in some ways, rediscovered the importance of this ethic as a means of encouraging society at-large to abandon tribalism and embrace inclusivity as a cardinal religious as well as civic virtue.

Focusing on the lived experiences of Muslims, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri (2017) shows how, both before and especially after the experience of increasing Islamophobia in the post-9/11 US, American Muslims have not only built mosques, organizations, and institutions to serve the Muslim community as well as to contribute to the fabric of American society, but a large percentage of Muslims choose career paths that, in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, have been deemed “essential” and “frontline” (p. 17). Muslims insist that “American and Islamic values can intertwine” and that American Muslims should see it as their civic and Islamic responsibility to use their unique “opportunities of freedom and success to help the needy and poor in the United States and other countries” (Ameri, 2004).

GhaneaBassiri (2017) also underscores the fact that American Muslims spread their charity by giving not only to massive local Muslim nonprofit organizations or to smaller regional aid organization in their native countries, but also *non-Muslim* charities and rights organizations

in US (p. 16). According to the Gallup Search in 2011, one third of American Muslims report working to solve a problem or improve the social conditions in their community. Seventy-five percent of Muslims in the US have donated to or assisted local charities. Engy Abdelkader (2016) coined the term “humanitarian Islam,” which refers to the fact that American Muslims have responded to violent extremism, anti-Muslim sentiments, and negative stereotypes with philanthropic acts consistent with foundational philosophies of their religion. The following local and national efforts are only a few examples of Muslim philanthropy in America.

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, several Muslim aid organizations came together to form the Muslim Hurricane Relief Taskforce, which raised about \$10 million for Katrina victims. These Muslim organizations also underscored their relations to fellow Americans and the US as fully American citizens (Islamic Horizons, 2005a, pp. 1–2, 4). The ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) Secretary General Sayyid Syeed, who was recently elected again as the ISNA President, stated, “It is a national and Islamic obligation to assist one’s neighbors when they are in need” (GhaneaBassiri, 2017, p. 35).

In Flint, Michigan, the city switched its water source to the Flint River in April 2014 as a money-saving measure. Soon after, Flint’s drinking water was found to be contaminated. American Muslims responded to this water crisis by donating more than \$300,000 and 1 million bottles of water. Furthermore, though it was the Holy Month of Ramadan when they were completely abstaining from any food or drink in observance of the required fasting, Muslims volunteered their services at local food banks and collected dry food at their local worship centers (Hall, 2016).

Various American Muslim institutions replied to the terror attack in San Bernardino in 2015 with a fundraising campaign collecting more than \$200,000 within seven days (Chan, 2015). In the wake of the Orlando terror attack in Florida in 2016, several American Muslim organizations, including CAIR-Florida, Celebrate Mercy, and Islamic Relief USA, also held a fundraising campaign for the victims and their families. Like in Flint, Michigan, while fasting, American Muslims donated blood to relieve the pain and suffering of the injured in the violent attack (Rinkunas, 2016).

When 9/11 rolls around each year, Muslims in Louisville, Kentucky, create a narrative showing themselves to be good citizens and grateful for their public servants. Each mosque in the city adopts a fire department and brings them a meal on 9/11. One local Pakistani physician, Muhammad Babar Cheema, organized his friends to respond in a spectacular way. Like many cities, Louisville has a public gathering

on 9/11 each year to honor their firefighters, EMS, and police. Dr. Babar contacted the mayor's office and arranged a catered lunch for all of the firefighters and policemen that attended that day. He and his friends bought lunch for about 250 people.²³

However, it is important to note that the philanthropic acts of Muslims in the US are not only manifestations of the aftermath of disaster or terrorist attacks. They also demonstrate the humanitarian aspect of their religion by organizing large *iftar* (the fast-breaking meal) dinner gatherings and distributing sacrificial meat to the poor and needy families on the festival of sacrifice, known as *'Īd al-Adhā*.²⁴ The Pakistani doctor, mentioned above, started a nonprofit called Muslim Americans for Compassion (MAC). MAC teams with Interfaith Paths to Peace, an interfaith organization in Louisville, to host the area's largest catered iftar meal. A Presbyterian church has hosted the event for the last several years. The event attracts between 500 and 600 people of all faiths as well as atheists and agnostics. It has been an opportunity for Muslims to show their solidarity with their non-Muslim neighbors.

The Compassion Action Foundation, an African American organization inspired by the late Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (d. 2008), served the orphans in Haiti during the *'Īd al-adhā* in 2018. In commemoration of Abraham, an animal is sacrificed and divided into three parts: one third is kept by the family, the second third is given to the poor and needy, and the remaining third is given to neighbors. The organization continued this tradition by organizing campaigns to distribute meat in order to help, especially, the orphans.²⁵ Another example is the Islamic Food Bank of Toledo, Ohio, which distributed more than 2000 pounds of meat to both Muslims and non-Muslims again in 2018. Keeping their distribution local, Mohamad Orra, the food bank's treasurer, stated, "We want to take care of our neighbors first" (Gorny, 2018).

As for recent examples during the COVID-19 pandemic, members of the Muslim community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, have done their part to help their neighbors. Muslim-owned pharmacies used

²³ The information is based on a conversation I had with the regional director of Peace Catalyst International (PCI).

²⁴ *'Īd al-Adhā*, known as the "Festival of Sacrifice," is the second of two Islamic holidays celebrated worldwide each year. It honors the willingness of the patriarch Abraham to sacrifice his son as an act of submission to God's command. According to the tradition, with such a command, Abraham's obedience and piety was put on trial, and eventually before he could carry out the sacrifice, God provided an animal as an offering.

²⁵ <http://thecompassionaction.org/>

drive-thrus at various locations to distribute more than 3,000 free masks and gloves. A Muslim-owned restaurant provided weekly lunches to healthcare and other frontline workers. The owner, whose restaurant was closed during the pandemic for the duration of Wisconsin's stay-at-home order, stated his feelings, referring to the Qur'an, when he said, "your wealth will never decrease if you are giving charity because God will bless you multifold. The blessing comes from God, the family, [and] the community" (Both, 2020).²⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Muslim medical workers continued to provide essential services in the US—even while fasting in the month of Ramadan. Shoaib Malik, a physician of internal medicine in New Jersey, fasted during the day and worked the night shift this year in Ramadan. Missing the *iftar* dinners with his loved ones, but at the same time giving back to his community, Malik almost exclusively worked with COVID-19 patients. Adhering to the prophetic practice of giving and helping others, especially during holy days, Malik said: "Everybody has a role to play, and I feel like that is in line with Islam and in line with just being a decent human being.... Do your part in whatever your circle is—whether it's your family, friends, coworkers, strangers or neighbors. That is the way to be a Muslim" (Abdelaziz, 2020).

Conclusion

American Muslims are active contributors to society, and by the means of many philanthropic acts, they have shared their grief with the rest of America in the wake of a violent attack, natural disaster, or pandemic. The Muslim community in the US has done many acts of kindness and compassion for their neighbors. They have built houses with Christian and Jewish communities through Habitat for Humanity. They participated in disaster relief efforts, participated in service projects for refugee children to aspire to higher education, and so on. Their practices include generosity toward their neighbors, both the neighbors they know and those who seem foreign to them. Following the prophetic model, American Muslims are striving to be like the Good Samaritan who gives help when help is needed. Although there is no "Who is my neighbor?" story in the Qur'an, Muslims assuredly have an excellent example in Prophet Muhammad to follow in regard to their neighbors and their rights.

²⁶ See Qur'an 2:245, 261, and 30:39.

Evidently, strong ties need to be forged before unpleasant events and catastrophes happen. In the US, because of the compassion shown by the Muslim community, there is mutual respect and support between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, not in all, but in some cities. While there remains a number of people who do hateful things and commit heinous acts, there is also a solid core of people who are actively working to make our neighborhoods more compassionate, more welcoming, and more vibrant.

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