

## BOOK REVIEW

### GIVING TO GOD: ISLAMIC CHARITY IN REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

Mittermaier, A. (2019). *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. ISBN: 978-0520300835.

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Amira Mittermaier's book, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*, examines Islamic charity in Egypt over eight years, beginning in 2011. Mittermaier volunteered at charity organizations, Sufi khidmas (soup kitchens), Ramadan tables, and Muslim shrines. The book consists of four sections: the preface, an introductory chapter, a major section on the giving of charity, and a final section on the receipt of charity. The preface provides a transliteration guide and discusses Mittermaier's methodology. It also relates her experience shadowing Madame Salwa, who provides food for the poor. Salwa does so as a religious duty, although she told Mittermaier she doesn't care for the poor. Mittermaier, as a secular Westerner, engages in charity for humanitarian reasons.

The introductory chapter, "Revolutions Don't Stop Charity," begins with the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Mittermaier watched the revolution from Germany and arrived in Cairo four months later. She discusses the Muslim Brotherhood, the NGO from which Mubarak's successor, Mohamed Morsi, emerged. She explains how the detention of Morsi not only led to a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, but other NGOs as well. In this chapter she quotes activists, self-proclaimed revolutionaries, friends, and others—specifically their views on the poor

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and charity. She puts what she terms the “divine ethics of charity” into the context of the Quran, prophecies, Egyptian traditions, and Arabic linguistics and asserts that charity and giving efforts never halt, even during upheavals.

The second chapter, “Divine Minimum Wage,” begins the first major section of the book, “Giving,” which covers donations. Mittermaier narrates her experiences at a *khidma*, run by a Sufi Imam, Salah al-Din Nafari Muhammad (typically referred to as Shaykh Salah). Shaykh Salah’s *khidma* serves food to hundreds daily without judgment. He considers food a divine minimum wage, as he believes it is a basic God-given right. He divides people there into three categories: “...the poor, those in need, and travelers, all of them listed in the Quran as deserving of alms [charity]” (p. 60). He cooks and distributes food every day beginning at 4 AM. He runs this *khidma* from donations given for a variety of reasons, but distributed according to Quranic precepts.

The third chapter, “Caravan to Paradise,” shifts the focus to Resala, which translates as “the message,” an established NGO with over 60 branches. Resala also serves food to the poor, but on a much bigger scale. Mittermaier cautions the reader not to confuse this with *da’wa* (strengthening religious practice) (p. 87). Resala is a youthful NGO, but attracts volunteers of all ages and backgrounds. Mittermaier observes that Resala revolves around “going to paradise.” It is their belief that volunteering at Resala is their path to Jannat (heaven). Some join initially because of Resala’s advertising or mission statement, and experience renewed dedication because of the heart-wrenching conditions in which its clients live. She quotes several conversations about volunteers’ motivations. Some believe this is the way to pave their path to heaven; for others, it is the right time to serve God’s creation; and still others wish to see the poor smiling.

The second and final major section, “Receiving,” focuses on charity recipients. In chapter four, “Performances of Poverty,” she records her experiences with those receiving charity through NGOs like Resala or Shaykh Salah. Mittermaier begins by describing another experience with Madame Salwa during Ramadan in 2014. Her first subject is Amal, a single mother of five, a volunteer as well as a registered client at Resala. Amal only seeks help from Allah after being turned down by several other NGOs and believes most people NGOs serve are needy and the “forgotten lot.” The post-revolutionary government cannot help them and they have no other options. Mittermaier also shares other recipients’ stories and experiences in this chapter.

Chapter five, “All Thanks Belong to God,” opens with Shaykh Mahmood, a dervish who spends time at saint’s shrines and their khidmas, who feels entitled to aid. Mittermaier’s encounter with Mahmood happened at a khidma run by Nura, a mother with children. Nura thanks God for helping people while people thank God for getting help through her. She then talks about how people say thanks for the help they receive. Sometimes they thank khidma staff; other times, God. Mittermaier notes that the most pious giving is that where the donor expects nothing in return, either from God or man—not an ideal often reached.

The final chapter, “Tomorrow Is Better,” focuses on charity in post-revolutionary Egypt. Mittermaier recalls Morsi’s short-lived presidency and the killing of 800 Muslim Brotherhood supporters. This was when Morsi’s successor, El-Sisi, stated that, “Tomorrow is better. Tomorrow is more beautiful.” Mittermaier was inspired that the revolution didn’t stop charity. She credits El-Sisi’s words as having a positive impact. During this time, El-Sisi’s government appealed for donations to Long Live Egypt, a fund for a new Suez Canal. People and organizations responded—including the Coptic Church. Mittermaier specifically mentions those with very limited resources who sacrificed to contribute—out of hope for a “better tomorrow—whom she calls the “noble poor.” Madame Salwa also supported President El-Sisi’s call for sacrifice as the “call of the time.”

Mittermaier discusses the pros and cons of the “give a man a fish versus teach a man to fish” analogy (a common Western analogy when discussing helping others). This is a meaningful dichotomy in a Western worldview, but not the God-centered Muslim one. Serving God’s creation—Man—serves God; and that is the supreme end for those grounded in Islam.

Madame Salwa’s charitable giving cannot be properly understood outside the concept of God and her faith in God. Mittermaier elaborates on this in the introduction: “Madame Salwa’s continuous orientation toward God (and, by extension, toward the Prophet Muhammad and his saintly descendants) shapes who she is in the world, and how she is in the world.... Because she gives to God, she addresses immediate needs and responds to hunger and poverty. But equally, because she gives to God, her giving is not organized around the poor’s suffering, the donor’s compassion, or the hope for a better tomorrow” (p. 6). She ends the last chapter describing an incident where bulldozers smashed many street vendors’ carts adjacent to Tahrir Square—possibly as a part of El-Sisi’s plan for remodeling Cairo. Shaykh Salah later

informed her that the vendors around his mosque were given a month to leave—meaning he would have to prepare and serve more food.

This book does well combining a discussion of Islamic charity and the Egyptian revolution. Amira Mittermaier engages the reader with an ethnographic approach, and her prose and storytelling prowess draws the reader in with an “I was there” sensibility. The book delves deeply into the opportunities and limitations of the ethics and politics of poverty in the contemporary Middle East and beyond. She compares the familiar Western paradigms of humanitarian care while offering a glimpse of alternatives animated by concepts such as a “divine minimum wage” and others. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested to learn about charity in the Islamic world and how charity giving and receiving processes are affected during turbulent times. The book is also a good read for people interested in street-level philanthropy in the Middle East.

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