

THE CARE OF ORPHANS IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITION, VULNERABLE CHILDREN, AND CHILD SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMS

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One of the most favored areas for Muslim charitable works is the care of orphans. The Prophet Muhammad was an orphan himself: his father died either just before or just after he was born, his mother died when he was only six, and he was taken in by the family of his paternal uncle. Several passages in the Qur'an condemn those who misappropriate orphans' property. The result is that there can be few Islamic welfare organizations that do not include orphans among their beneficiaries, and emotive appeals on their behalf are disseminated to the public. Muslims generally define "orphan" as a child who has lost his or her father, i.e., the family breadwinner. The term "orphan" is held to include foundling infants and street children as well as those with known relatives and is also, in practice, sometimes used as a euphemism for a child born out of wedlock who is rejected by a family. The last few years have seen a flowering of research on Muslim philanthropy as one

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aspect of a broader research interest in charity and humanitarianism. This article confines itself to some programmatic suggestions, juxtaposing the Islamic predisposition to care for orphans with current trends in child-focused research, thereby revealing what could be a fruitful field for empirical enquiry. The practice of international one-to-one “child sponsorship,” now a staple of many Islamic charities, brings to a head some key issues relating to the care and protection of vulnerable children, which have been widely debated by social researchers but so far almost entirely in the context of Christian and secular institutions.

Keywords: Islamic charities, orphans, vulnerable children, child sponsorship programs, child-focused ethnography

The Muslim Tradition and Child-focused Research

Have you considered him who calls the Judgment a lie? That is the one who treats the orphan with harshness. (Qur’an 107:1–2)

One of the most favored areas for Muslim charitable works is the care of orphans.¹ It is grounded in theology, for the Prophet Muhammad was an orphan himself: his father died either just before or just after he was born, his mother died when he was only six, and he was taken in by the family of his paternal uncle. If one speaks of orphans to a pious Muslim, he or she is likely to make a gesture of crossing two fingers, which alludes to a saying of the Prophet that whoever looks after an orphan will be “like this” with him in Paradise. The Prophet also said, “I am he who takes care of the orphan.” Several passages in the Qur’an condemn those who misappropriate orphans’ property (e.g. 93:9, 107:2). The motif of the just treatment of orphans receives much attention in both the ethical-legal and the narrative parts of the Qur’an and hence “has had a long-term impact on later Islamic ethics, law, and practice” (Giladi, 2007, p. 22). The outcome today is that most Islamic welfare and humanitarian organizations include orphans among their beneficiaries, and emotive

¹ For examples, see Sabra (2000, pp. 80–81); Ginio (2003); Singer (2008, p. 87 and passim); Ener (2003); Baron (2008); Schaeublin (2009), Derbal (2014), Kaag (2014), Mittermaier (2019).

appeals on their behalf are disseminated to the public.² For instance, the British-based charity Islamic Relief Worldwide now supports some 57,000 orphans around the world: an expansion since its small beginnings in the 1990s. (As well as sponsoring orphanages in Sudan and Albania, it embarked from 1992 on one-to-one sponsorship schemes for orphans in Bosnia, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.³) Issues relating to international one-to-one orphan sponsorship will be a principal focus of this article.

Muslims traditionally define “orphan” as a child who has lost his or her father, i.e., the family breadwinner, which seems to have been also a dominant concern in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the Qur’an.⁴ The loss of a mother in patriarchal societies is not seen as so disastrous, though passages in the Qur’an, such as the story of Moses (Mūsā) in Surahs 20 and 28, vividly evoke maternal values of tenderness and solicitude. The term “orphan” is often held to include founding infants and street children as well as those with known relatives, and is also, in practice, sometimes used as a euphemism for a child born out of wedlock who is rejected by a family.⁵

The last few years have seen a flowering of research on Muslim philanthropy as one aspect of a broader research interest in charity and humanitarianism. It may even be claimed that the step of taking seriously the Islamic traditions has helped to decenter the study of “Western” humanitarianism and to draw attention to its religious and philosophical

² Quantitative information is sparse, but a survey of Islamic philanthropy in Indonesia conducted in 2003–2004 (Fauzia, 2013, p. 296) found that 71.7% of Islamic philanthropic organizations supported orphans—the third kind of activity in order of popularity after “distributing *zakat* money to the poor” (92.8%) and “distributing *sedakah* money to the poor (84.1%).

³ Dr. Hany El Banna, founder of Islamic Relief Worldwide, personal communication, May 2018.

⁴ A child who has lost his or her father is called in the Qur’an *yaṭīm* (plural *aitām*). In later usage, a child who has lost his or her mother is called *munqaṭi*; a child who has lost both is called *laṭīm*. See Chaumont (2012); Giladi (2007, pp. 20–21); Baron (2008, pp. 13–14).

⁵ Yusuf Al-Qaradawi states that the Qur’anic term *ibn al-sabil*, “child of the road,” one of the eight categories of *zakat* beneficiaries, “perfectly describes foundlings” (Qaradawi, vol. 2, p. 80). Classical Muslim jurists use the term *laqīṭ* (foundling) to refer to a minor child with unknown parentage. Their care is generally deemed to be a communal rather than an individual obligation (Fadel, 2018).

In Aceh, Indonesia, according to Silvia Vignato’s (2017) fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2010, “any child was seen as a sort of orphan after she has entered charity or charity-like *pesantren* [Islamic residential schools]. ... [In] common language, all the boarders of a *panti* [institutional home for the needy] or a *dayah* [Acehnese *pesantren*] are *yatim*, ‘fatherless’” (p. 69).

underpinnings.⁶ A comprehensive overview of research to date on Islamic philanthropy would now be welcome. All I propose here is to make some programmatic suggestions, juxtaposing the predisposition in favor of orphans, an undisputed core of Islamic teaching, with current trends in child-focused research and thereby revealing what could be a fruitful field for empirical and collaborative enquiry.⁷ Though there must be other equally promising lines of possible investigation with regard to orphans and vulnerable children in the Islamic context (some of which will be hinted at in this article), I shall focus on the specific problem of one-to-one child sponsorship. I shall follow a principle favored by many (though not all) anthropologists: the assumption that though there are important specific differences between cultural practices and institutions—in this case, between the tradition of Islamic care for orphans and its Christian and secular homologues—a comparative approach is nonetheless possible and indeed necessary for rigorous social research (van der Veer, 2016).

The Islamic Tradition and its Manifestations Today

Quantitative evidence on present-day projects to care for orphans in the Muslim-majority world or among Muslim minorities is lacking, but it is certain that they are both extensive and varying widely in scale and character. To take one example at the grassroots level, I recall visiting in 2006 a meeting in Bamako, the capital of Mali, of ALOVE, the Association Locale des Orphelins et Veuves. This was a voluntary association of 60 women, nearly all widows. In Mali, as in most Muslim societies, widowhood is still explicitly accepted as a “marked” social condition rather than played down. They met most afternoons to read the Qur’an together with an imam and to help each other. They also helped other widows who were worse off and managed a small kindergarten for orphans. This was subsidized by Islamic Relief Worldwide, which also sponsored many of the orphans as part of its program designed to help

⁶ Apart from the initiatives of the University of Indiana, see, for instance, the platform MUHUM (Muslim Humanitarianism) run by Till Mostowlansky of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, University of Geneva (<http://allegralaboratory.net/a-note-on-muhum/>). See also Singer (2008); Juul Petersen (2015); Benthall (2017); Tittensor & Clarke (2014); Mittermaier (2019).

⁷ To do justice to the topic, a thorough knowledge of Islamic law and social history would be necessary, as well as familiarity with the extensive literature on aid and development, with special reference to children. The present article merely suggests some pointers for future research in a seemingly virgin field of enquiry.

the poorest communities. To raise funds for the kindergarten, the association bought honeycombs locally and converted them in a workshop into three products with separate markets—honey, soap, and skin cream.

Residential orphanages are often built in Muslim-majority societies, and I have visited some small ones for infants in Jordan and in Mali, and large orphanages in Indonesia, including ones set up after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.⁸ There must be many hundreds of orphanages in Indonesia, especially those run by the Muhammadiyah and by the Rumah Zakat (Latief, 2012). There is no tradition in Islam of so-called “closed” or plenary adoption, that is to say raising children exactly as if they were one’s own, naming them after the adoptive rather than the biological father, and granting them inheritance rights.⁹ Indeed this was prohibited by classical Sunni jurists (cf. Qur’an 33:5), though recently the possibility of more flexible rulings has been debated (Kutty, 2014, pp. 15, 42–44).¹⁰ Fostering is encouraged, however, known as *kafāla*, rooted in the law of contracts rather than family law: it leaves

⁸ Care for orphans in premodern Egypt was included in the services provided through religious endowments (*waqf*, plural *awqāf*) (Baron, 2008, pp. 15–16) and orphanages were established later (Rugh, 1995). Christian missionaries were prominent in running orphanages in modern Egypt, but Muslim organizations reacted during the first half of the twentieth century by founding their own schools and homes for orphans (Baron, 2008, pp. 23–32). Christians established about half the orphanages between 1910 and 1969 (Rugh, 1995, pp. 131–132; referring to statistics prepared by the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs, *Guide to Nursery Schools and Orphanages for Socially Vulnerable Children*, 1969–70).

Common usage in Egyptian Arabic shifted in the mid-nineteenth century from *takṭyya*, i.e., general hospice, to *malga* (*malja*), i.e., refuge, catering for specific groups in need, including children (Baron, 2008, p. 33).

Three general types of orphanages in the wider Islamic world may be distinguished: state-run, those run by religious foundations, and those run by individuals or as a communal activity (Sonbol, 1995, p. 59).

⁹ Adoption (*al-tabannī*) is said, according to Islamic sources, to have been practiced in the Arabian Peninsula until it was abolished in the year 5/627 and classed as a prohibited act. Muslim jurists soon developed alternative mechanisms to regulate the care of orphans and children of unknown parentage (Powers, 2008).

¹⁰ The Edhi Foundation in Pakistan reportedly placed 22,000 children in adoptive homes between 1949 and 2012, despite there being no formal adoption legislation in place in that country (Kutty, 2014, pp. 41–42). In most Muslim-majority countries today, the legal institution of adoption is banned; but informal adoption, especially within extended families or among close friends, is not uncommon, especially in the Maghreb (Büchler & Kayasseh, 2018, pp. 35–39). In Indonesia it has been quite common for childless couples, or those with daughters only, to adopt a child of friends or relatives and bring the child up as their own (Martin von Bruinessen, personal communication, July 2018).

untouched the legal relationship between the actual parents and the child (Büchler & Kayasseh, 2018, p. 41).¹¹ This teaching, it seems, has legitimated Islamic charities' adaptation of their policies to follow the precedent of international one-to-one child "sponsorship" at a distance, made possible by communications technologies, whereby financial donations are solicited for regular maintenance payments to assist named children in poor countries, with the cooperation of their families when that is possible. This system had already been established over many decades by Christian and secular aid agencies. Islamic charities have mobilized, as powerful fundraising tools, the power of Qur'anic injunctions to give *zakat* and *sadaqa* (Benthall, 2016, pp. 15–16, 18, 119–121).

The History of Orphanhood(s) Worldwide

The history of orphans in general, whether "double orphans" or those in the Islamic sense, deserves some attention. Orphans, like widows—both frequently the innocent victims of conflict—have always been objects of piety and compassion, but both have been subject to demeaning treatment in practice, no doubt because they are perceived as threatening to the social order. Despite the emphatic defense of their rights in the Qur'an, orphans in the Muslim world can in practice be stigmatized as much as elsewhere, not least because of the financial outlay normally expected for marriage (Baron, 2008, p. 34; Rugh, 1995, p. 126).¹²

Erica Bornstein (2012) devotes a chapter to the humanitarian politics of orphanhood in her study of charity and volunteering in India. Kristen Cheney and Stephen Ucembe (2019) diagnose an "orphan

¹¹ In June 2018, the Muslim community in Tampa, Florida, offered to take care of the 2,300 or more migrant babies and children forcibly separated from their families at various US government detention centers until they could be reunited with their parents (<http://pkonweb.com/muslim-community-in-u-s-offer-to-host-migrant-children-separated-from-families-at-no-cost-to-govt/>). Kristen Cheney comments that such an offer has advantages over comparable initiatives by evangelical Christians, since Islam forbids adoption (outside *kafāla*), whereas there is a history of coercive adoption of migrant children by Christian adoption agencies (personal communication, July 2018; Cheney & Rotabi, 2018).

¹² In Western imaginative literature, the rich orphan has been glamorized as an exotic outsider, whereas orphans of the poor have inspired factual and often polemical reporting. Orphanhood is typically stigmatizing, resulting in emotional deficits no less real for being invisible, though it can also be a spur to achievement—for there is a rollcall of celebrated historical figures who were orphaned. In Britain some celebrated charities for orphans and foundlings were set up, but others were forced into the Navy or transported to the colonies (Seabrook, 2018).

industrial complex.” They argue that programs designed by charitable organizations to care for orphans are based on the stereotype of orphans as the quintessential children in need. They go so far as to claim that the targeting of orphans for “rescue” is counterproductive in that it can actually result in child exploitation and trafficking and weaken the ties between families and communities. Tatek Abebe (2009), in a comprehensive review of global policy trends relating to the care and protection of orphaned children, draws on Judith Ennew’s (2005) analysis of the multiple roles fulfilled by children in the cultural history of the West. He concludes that any selective support of orphans in economically vulnerable communities is bound to be resource-intensive and can amplify inequalities.¹³

One-to-one International Child-Sponsorship Programs

I focus in this article on one-to-one international sponsorship since it brings out in a concentrated form many of the issues to do with caring for vulnerable children today. Passing over here the consensus among historians and anthropologists that the definition of childhood (as of orphanhood) is highly variable in time and space, I shall assume for this purpose the definition as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, i.e., everyone under the age of 18 unless “under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (1989, Article 1).

The long-distance pairing of individual children with international donors was initiated by the UK-based Save the Children Fund and the Society of Friends in post-world war Austria in 1919. However, early programs focused on short-term feeding and service provision for famine and war-affected children and on avoiding dependency. The longer-term model that prevails today appears to have been initiated in the USA in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Watson, 2015). One of the largest NGOs in this field is ChildFund International USA, originally known as Christian Children’s Fund but now non-confessional, which supports 440,000 sponsored children in 26 countries worldwide and declared revenue of US\$234 million for the year that ended in June 2017. The world’s largest child sponsorship program is World Vision, the multinational Christian NGO, which claims to be

¹³ The emotional attraction of orphanhood for welfare reformers is far from new. In nineteenth-century London, as shown by Lydia Murdoch (2006), many of the children housed in state or charitable institutions, depicted as barefooted and dirty, were neither orphaned nor deserted: there was a kind of compatibility between poor families’ strategic use of welfare services and the paternalistic motives of the welfare providers who sought to remove poor children from parents depicted as unable to raise them properly.

responsible for nearly half of the world's sponsored children, 3.2 million children in 56 countries. The global annual revenue for child sponsorship programs was estimated at US\$3.2 billion in 2011. A typical one-to-one sponsorship scheme costs the donor about US\$32 per month or a little more.

Child sponsorship is controversial. In May 1982 the British magazine *New Internationalist* published a withering editorial, "Please Do Not Sponsor This Child" (Stalker, 1982). I shall summarize here the substantial objections to one-to-one child sponsorship, followed by some of the arguments that have been advanced in its defense, before reverting to the special situation of Islamic charities that have borrowed the tradition and made it their own. This analysis is indebted to Willem van Eekelen (2013).¹⁴

Objections

1. One-to-one sponsorship is divisive within communities, generating envy.
2. It is also divisive within families, when one child is singled out for treatment against siblings. Sometimes the sponsored child acquires undue power within the family if he or she gains leverage from being the reason for funds coming in.
3. There is no clear contribution to community development.
4. All charity has the potential to wound, as Marcel Mauss taught us (Mauss, 1925/2016). But it is especially demeaning when a child is obliged to write or dictate thank-you letters and receives letters in return that draw attention to the difference of living standards between donor and recipient. For instance, the donor may refer to expensive holidays, whereas the recipient's family never takes holidays.
5. Such schemes are costly to administer (especially in communities far from an NGO's local office), since they require identification of suitable children, constant monitoring, travel, and communication with sponsors with photos and other documentation.

¹⁴ Van Eekelen's paper is based partly on open-source literature and partly on research that Islamic Relief Worldwide commissioned him to complete in 2010–11, which included the comparison of the sponsorship programs of 30 NGOs in the UK, USA, Belgium, Germany, and France; a review of eight previously conducted evaluations of IRW child sponsorship country programs; focus group discussions and interviews with IRW employees; a survey of 115 sponsors selected through proportionate systematic cluster sampling; further country evaluations; and consultations with peers in other NGOs.

6. There is no automatic benefit in “development education,” i.e., helping the donor to understand issues of poverty alleviation better. One NGO (ChildFund) that facilitates visits by a donor to a recipient—after due clearance of child protection issues—tells the donor to “expect a celebration.” This is contrary to the experience of the young Canadian sponsor of a child in Tanzania (under a World Vision scheme described by Erica Bornstein), who visited his sponsored child, naively expecting to be welcomed as a hero, and found the experience deeply unsettling and embarrassing (Bornstein, 2005, pp. 73–77).
7. There are sensitivities relating to the religious motivations of donors and tensions with the religious aspects of recipient communities.
8. Child protection issues present a significant risk, especially in conditions of crisis and disaster.
9. Some NGOs still offer a kind of internet supermarket enabling donors to choose their child for sponsorship from photographs. Save the Children USA will even indicate how long the child has been waiting to find a sponsor.
10. Many NGOs, including Save the Children and World Vision, in fact apply the donations to community development projects, the named child being what Save the Children calls a “child ambassador” rather than receiving funds individually. This may be thought to be lacking in transparency.
11. Fundraising publicity for one-to-one sponsorship is often particularly sentimental and has been especially criticized by exponents of semiotics and media studies.
12. Such schemes encourage dependency: families are not incentivized to seek other sources of income and may play the system by receiving sponsorship from more than one NGO.
13. There is a risk of local cronyism on the part of NGO employees, even occasionally of corruption.
14. Summing up, the advantages seem to be mostly from the donor’s point of view rather than the recipient’s.

In the face of all these objections, the following *defenses* have been advanced:

1. The directness of the link as seen by the sponsors is an unbeatable fundraising device.
2. Unconditional cash transfers to individuals in suffering populations are now quite an approved, indeed fashionable, means of providing aid (Unicef-ESARO/Transfer Project, 2015).
3. The element of arbitrariness is not so different from other contributions to family budgets from well-off relatives, micro-enterprises, and state welfare services, etc.
4. Social workers can identify the poorest and most vulnerable children in communities and recommend them for sponsorship. The ubiquity of the cellphone, and in some regions electronic banking, have cut down on traveling and other administrative costs.
5. Before a child reaches the legal age of majority (when the sponsorship ends), steps can be taken to facilitate his or her pursuit of an educational program or an apprenticeship.
6. Sponsored children are brought up in their families and local communities, reducing the need for residential orphanages. Residential orphanages raise different problems and can too often become opportunities for the systematic abuse of children. Another alternative, transnational adoption, is also contentious in that it uproots children from their cultural heritage.
7. Although in mixed-religious societies, where the injection of a religious ethic can aggravate tensions, in societies that are religiously homogeneous, or where religious differences are relatively uncontentious, there is arguably a potential added value in enabling a child to feel a part of the global community of Christians or Muslims.
8. As regards development education, such schemes engender loyalty and can stimulate donors' interest in international aid with a cross-selling multiplier effect.

Islamic Charities and Orphan-Sponsorship Schemes

These objections and defenses apply to Islamic NGOs as much as to Christian and secular ones, but we must remember the extra stigmatization to which children designated as orphans are often vulnerable. As popular as one-to-one child-sponsorship programs are with Christian and secular NGOs, they are no less favored in the Muslim world for the theological reasons summarized above. Some Muslim NGOs have moved to devise schemes that answer some of the

objections. For instance, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the market leader, has published its Child Protection Policy as an impressive 36-page leaflet (2018).¹⁵

Unlike Islamic Relief Worldwide (total expenditure c. £124 million p.a.), which supports about 50,000 orphans, the London-based Muslim Aid (total expenditure c. £32 million) no longer emphasizes the orphan aspect but seeks to fund any vulnerable children. They supply cash transfers on condition that the child sponsored has to attend school. The money goes directly to families. The scheme is called the Rainbow Family, with about 5,000 children sponsored, one third in the Middle East, one third in South Asia, and one third in Africa and Southeast Asia. Muslim Aid's main donor base is Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Britain. They are straight with donors, and the deemphasizing of orphanhood has not affected the attractiveness of the scheme. Many of their donors are not well-off and the average length of sponsorship is only 3.5 years. But some sponsor more than one child and they have eighty well-off donors who sponsor more than five children at one time. Donors are not allowed to select individual children though they may state a preference for country and for a boy or a girl. Muslim Aid takes child protection very seriously. It is considering the possibility of moving to a community-based scheme later.¹⁶

Interpal, a smaller London-based charity (total expenditure c. £6 million) that is devoted exclusively to helping Palestinians, supports about 6,000 orphans and vulnerable children and also runs a more loosely defined Children's Fund. They have never allowed sponsors to choose a child. Child protection is also a priority. They say they give priority to the neediest children, including those with disabilities and special needs, and the many children injured during the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014 who have lifelong disabilities. Because of the special political difficulties besetting Interpal, they have to undertake an exceptional amount of "compliance" to convince the Charity Commission and UK Inland Revenue that the money is going where they say it is going.¹⁷ Thus there is a heavy bureaucratic load, but they

¹⁵ As well as conforming to UK law, international standards and good practice, IRW's guidelines also draw on specifically Islamic teaching on the care and protection of children and other vulnerable individuals: for instance, the prohibition of *khatwa* ("isolation") which occurs when one man or more than one man is alone with one woman or child in a place where no-one can see them or enter.

¹⁶ Interview with Muslim Aid officers, London, April 18, 2018.

¹⁷ Interview with Interpal officers, May 4, 2018. Interpal was last subjected to investigation by the English charity regulator, the Charity Commission, in 2009 in response to allegations that it was too close to Hamas. Since then it has been in good standing in the

consider the benefit great. Unlike most other NGOs, Interpal allows sponsors to send presents in addition to basic sponsorship, and £182,000 was declared in 2016.

To summarize, child sponsorship in general is evidently highly popular with donors in general and at least as popular among Muslims on account of the special care for orphans enjoined in the Qur'an. For the reasons summarized above, it is not a system that anyone would choose if they merely had development goals in mind. But it is evidently not going to disappear. We may predict that the existing policies and practices will continue to evolve in response to changes in professional and public opinion.

A Proposal for Dialogue

I began when I approached this topic by thinking that Islamic charities could have a great deal to learn from the experience and professionalism of their Christian and secular counterparts on such topics as children's rights and child protection. Yet recent sexual scandals affecting some of the most blue-chip international NGOs (see e.g., Quinn, 2018) must make one pause before claiming their superiority—let alone the infamous sexual abuses carried on by certain clergy under the protection of the Anglican and, especially, the Catholic Church. There is, however, an impressive trend in child-focused ethnography, which has been built up over the last thirty years or so, insisting on treating children as complete human beings who can be coproducers of scientific evidence, rather than being merely receptacles for what used to be called "socialization," or trainee adults. Received ideas on child soldiers, street children, trafficking "victims," and child handloom weavers are held up by ethnographers in a not always flattering light to aid agencies (Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998; Gozdziaik, 2016; Sweis, 2017; Cheney & Sinervo, 2019).¹⁸ This line of thought includes a recognition

UK as a registered charity. The US Treasury, however, has maintained its designation of Interpal as a "terrorist entity" (Benthall, 2016, pp. 7, 32–33). The issue of orphans is especially contentious, in that Interpal, like some other charities working in the Middle East, has sometimes been accused of giving preference to the children of suicide bombers. It asserts however that, consistently with International Humanitarian Law and with British charity law, it has always assisted orphans on the basis of need exclusively, irrespective of the cause of death of the father.

¹⁸ A foundational text for child-focused ethnography, provocatively titled and now somewhat dated, is Lawrence Hirschfeld's article "Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?" (2002). See also Benthall (1992). Heather Montgomery (2009) provides a useful overview of the anthropology of childhoods. Catherine Allerton (2016) explores

that the Western middle-class ideal of the nuclear family, with individualized care for children, is at odds with the reality of family structures in most of the global South (Bolotta & Vignato, 2017, pp. 7, 12–13). Child-focused ethnography has, as far as I was able to determine, barely touched the otherwise burgeoning field of research on Islamic philanthropy. One exception is a fine-grained ethnographic account by Silvia Vignato (2017). She explains how children in Aceh, Indonesia, who were left without at least one parent after the long civil conflict and the 2004 tsunami (estimated at about 20% of the Aceh population aged between 0 and 19), were provided for, both by traditional Islamic residential schools and with funding from international humanitarian interventions. She gives special attention to the way such children experienced and shaped the construction of affective ties (Vignato, 2017).

It is easy to condemn the photographs, especially popular in the Gulf states, of grateful orphans lining up during Ramadan to receive their gift parcels of food and clothes from self-important dignitaries. The British Islamic charities mentioned above are not so crude. But their fundraising literature, like that of World Vision, lays itself open to critical analysis. I made a contribution myself to study the visual imagery of fundraising campaigns that rely on emotive images of children (Benthall, 1993, pp. 177–186). Such analysis runs the risk of becoming a too familiar and easy exercise.¹⁹ It is more illuminating to think of charity as a chain of relationships and, in particular, of international aid as a holistic system whereby representations of misery are circulated from the global periphery to the North as consumables, filtered by an oligopoly of media organizations and reciprocated by aid flows.

A strong religious compulsion encourages Muslims to make private donations from disposable income to sponsor orphans, just as a

some of the methodological and ethical challenges presented by the idea of child-friendly ethnography, which requires special skill and sensitivity. Other relevant publications include Allison James (2007), who also explores methodological issues raised by “giving voice to children,” and Jo Boyden (1997).

Meanwhile, historians of the Middle East have taken a lead in turning attention, since the 1980s, to the themes of childhood and youth (Georgeon & Kreiser, 2007). For instance, Margaret L. Meriwether (1996) described the detailed provisions for the custody, maintenance, and overall well-being of children as laid out by law in Ottoman Aleppo, 770–1840.

¹⁹ But for a sophisticated analysis of the growth of children’s charities, see Hart (2006). Save the Children (UK) has published an analysis of images of children in need that includes recognition of the views of children themselves as contributors to the image-making process. The research took place across four countries: the UK, Jordan, Bangladesh, and Niger (Warrington, 2017).

similar compulsion gives a special place to children in Christian moral theology—Jesus’s sympathy with children being so clear from the Gospels (e.g., *Matthew* 19:14). The ensuing dilemma is a constant for bureaucratized aid organizations: how to mitigate the alienation of the donor. The charitable impulse is at its most basic a bodily act—extending a hand to a stranger in trouble, giving the first fruits of agricultural labor to local people in need. How can some element of this personal relationship be maintained in an NGO if it appears to be mainly interested in increasing its “market share”? Child sponsorship is one attempt to resolve the problem, despite the further issues that it raises—which NGOs such as Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid have tried to alleviate through adapting their policies. A research program on orphans and Islamic charities could be productive if it were to examine all aspects of the chain of charity, for which Erica Bornstein’s (2012) study of Protestant NGOs, *The Spirit of Development*, provides a methodological precedent. Such a program would draw on the now established subfield of child-focused ethnography, while also respecting the Islamic conception of children’s rights as derived from Qur’anic provisions and from the Muslim tradition of holding the family as the focal unit within communities, based on the sources of the Shariah (Monshipouri & Kaufman, 2015, pp. 10–11; Arfat, 2013).

Care for orphans is a moral commitment—like care for the elderly—where the Muslim tradition can claim a special distinction. Admittedly, the huge variety of social systems across the Muslim world must not be underestimated. The conclusion reached by Silvia Vignato (2017) on the strength of her research among the Acehnese, where Islamic institutions are deeply entrenched and where the whole population had suffered terrible trauma, is explicitly not representative of the whole *ummah*. But it has resonance with observations of some other Muslim-majority societies under acute stress, such as the Palestinians of the West Bank, and it calls for respect from “Western” humanitarians²⁰:

At the time of my fieldwork, many of those who worked in panti asuhan (“homes”) were volunteers, as besides one’s duty as a Muslim, the willingness to look after orphans is more specifically seen as an Acehnese characteristic. “We, the Acehnese, we care for our children” people often said. Acehnese children were said to belong to Aceh and it was the

²⁰ Including my own visit to the Islamic Charitable Society of Hebron (Al-Khalīl) in June 2011. See also a report by an Israeli journalist after a raid in Hebron by Israel Defense Forces in 2008 (Levy 2008).

adat (custom or tradition) not to fail them when they are in need. Children seemed to embody an idea of collective wealth, and the orphans looked like a shared resource transcending each kinship group. (Vignato, 2017, p 68)

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