A note on humanitarian terminology

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This article reviews the lexical field associated with "charity," "philanthropy," "humanitarianism" and similar terms in English, and concludes with a brief account of comparable terms in the Islamic and Arabic traditions.

The lexical field associated with charity, philanthropy, humanitarianism and their congeners in English and associated languages has been subjected to some analyses which ought to be common ground for the comparative study of

Since the sixteenth century, European almsgiving has been overlaid with the religious connotations of "charity" in the sense of the highest Christian virtue, spiritual love. This was one of the words used to translate into English, via the Latin *caritas*, the Greek New Testament word *agapē* – as in the famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13 that extols it: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of Angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal" (King James Bible or Authorized Version). In modern translations, "charity" is always replaced by "love," which the first English translators may have used sparingly because of its sexual connotations. At about the same time in England, "charity" began to acquire a restrictive legal definition as a result of a decision by Parliament in 1601 to regulate the system of private funds devoted to good causes. "Charity," over four centuries since, retains a Christian aura – to the extent that some Christian apologists are happy to conflate the two senses of the word. But the legal definition allows for some surprising activities to be deemed to be charitable – often resulting in exemption from certain state taxes – such as, in the United Kingdom, promoting "the efficiency of the armed forces of the Crown."

A distinction is often made in European languages between charity and philanthropy. *Philanthrōpia*, for the ancient Greeks, was "love of the principle of humanity." Sir Francis Bacon revived the term in his essay "Of Goodness, and Goodness of Nature" (1612), which begins: "I Take Goodness in this sence, the affecting of the weal of Men, which is that the Grecians call *Philanthropia*; and the *Word Humanity* (as it is used) is a little too light to express it." Later, in the century of the Enlightenment and the Rights of Man, this concept was fused with the idea of public benefactions – no doubt with the aim of establishing a philosophical basis for "charity" in humanism, shorn of religious connotations. However, even in the United States, where the concept of philanthropy was especially important to the thought of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers, it never replaced "charity." It came, however, to be associated in

particular with the munificence of the rich, monumental benefactions, and patronage of high culture. All attempts so far to study our topic comparatively have dispensed with the charity/philanthropy distinction at an analytical level, one good reason being that it has no parallels in major non-European languages such as Arabic or Hindi. (It is, however, legitimate and necessary to indicate how these and similar concepts are used in specific ethnographic or historical contexts.)

Aid and welfare workers frequently insist on dissociating themselves from charity, but this may be interpreted as a result of cultural conditioning or déformation professionnelle unless the recipients of their assistance have legally enforceable rights.

The most neutral term available for cross-cultural analysis is probably "good works," though this too has some Christian connotations (*kala erga*, Matthew 5:16).

The word *humanitarianism* is more complex in its connotations as *charity*. "Humanitarianism" is sometimes taken to encompass all forms of philanthropic and altruistic action. In everyday usage today it can mean no more than "compassionate" (e.g. "The British government decided to release General Pinochet on humanitarian grounds"). The earliest humanitarians were those at the beginning of the nineteenth century who either believed that Jesus was only human rather than divine, or else supported the "religion of humanity" promoted by Auguste Comte and others. But it can be defined more narrowly as an ideological movement traceable to the late nineteenth century (Davies 2012). The word "humanitarian" was often used derisively, to connote an excess of sentimentality (as was also "philanthropic"). But in the twentieth century, "humanitarianism" came to represent the aspirations of the industrialized world to relieve suffering in societies facing acute crisis.

An even tighter definition is reserved for the rules, known as "international humanitarian law," intended to limit the effects of armed conflict. Among aid professionals, "humanitarian" action usually implies response to short-term

emergencies, as opposed to "development," which aims at long-term improvements to life chances – a concept that has stimulated its own extensive body of research by social scientists. An academic bifurcation has grown up that runs in parallel with the operational and budgetary arrangements laid down by aid donors, though there is no sound reason for the two practical approaches not to be more integrated.

The term "humanitarian space" has gained some currency: this refers primarily to safe zones and corridors, and by extension to the scope for action, based on impartial and independent principles, to bring relief to affected populations. More contentiously, the principle of "humanitarian intervention" (the use of military force in response to grave violations of the laws of humanity) has been partially accepted by lawyers in Western states and has been strengthened by the endorsement of Responsibility to Protect by the UN World Summit in 2005. But application of the concept has been widely criticized as inconsistent and opportunistic.

Rony Brauman, a former president of Médecins Sans Frontières, has averred that there is a philosophy of humanitarianism: "To the question 'What is man?', humanitarian philosophy replies simply 'He is not made to suffer'." (The disparity between this view and Buddhist teaching is an indication of the difficulty of arriving at a cross-culturally applicable definition.) Peter Redfield has argued that the tradition of Western humanitarianism since the nineteenth century includes a striving towards a better world which is perhaps more than merely charitable. Brauman has also remarked, however, that if the Auschwitz camps were to be constructed today, they would be described as a "humanitarian crisis." Alex de Waal was the first social scientist to note, in 1989, the exchange of personnel between NGOs and state-funded agencies which he called the Humanitarian International. Didier Fassin, Michael Barnett and others have more recently sparked off speculative debate on the nature of "humanitarian governance."

For the study of humanitarianism in the Arab and Islamic world, Jasmine Moussa's essay (2014) is authoritative. Arabic lacks an equivalent to the English -

ism suffix that denotes an ideology, so that *al-insāniya* can mean "humanity," "humanitarian," "humanitarianism," and "humanism," and the word came late into common usage through translation. This should not be taken to imply any lack of words in Arabic through which the historical evolution of a strong tradition of benevolence and compassion can be traced. *Karam* and *jūd* (generosity) have been identified with pre-Islamic Arab tribal values. Apart from *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf*, defined in all introductions to our subject, there are the ancient terms *an-najda* and *al-is`af* (help or rescue) as well as *ighātha* and *musā`ada* (among others) with overlapping meanings. *Khayir* means someone who favors the public good and social reform, while *muhsin* means someone who provides *ihsān* or good deeds. *Birr* and *mabarra* are close in meaning to "good works."

> *In both the languages discussed above, the lexical field varies in time and space.*

Moreover we must take account of interactions with other languages and cultures. In India, for example, as notably argued by Erica Bornstein, a different lexical field centered on *dharma* (duty), *seva* (service) and *dān* (giving) interacts with European and Islamic traditions.

References

Davies, Katherine. 2012. "*Continuity, Change and Contest: Meanings of 'Humanitarian' from the 'Religion of Humanity' to the Kosovo War.*" HPG Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, London. Open access online.

Moussa, Jasmine. 2014. "*Ancient origins, modern actors: defining Arabic meanings of humanitarianism.*" HPG Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, London. Open access online.

The paragraphs above on "charity" and "philanthropy" are based on the author's article "Charity," in Didier Fassin, ed., *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*

(Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 359–375.

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