Muslim Humanitarianism: An Afterword

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What kind of practices, forms of moral reasoning and ethical orientation does Muslim humanitarianism entail? In what contexts and in response to what social problems does it arise? Is the expression even appropriate to describe socially and culturally embedded forms of compassion and benevolence?

As Benthall argues in this series of posts, there is no direct equivalent to 'humanitarianism' in Arabic even though the term *al-insāniya* expresses a similar

idea of 'humanism'. But thinking of Muslim humanitarianism as a "problem space" or a conceptual-ideological ensemble, as [Till Mostowlansky](#) suggests in his introduction, offers interesting possibilities for studying forms of aid, welfare and care that derail artificial boundaries established between charity, development and humanitarianism.

It is with this objective in mind that the authors of this thematic thread explore case studies of philanthropic, charitable and solidarity projects, which brought together, provide us with a mirror image of more hegemonic forms of humanitarianism, embedded within the North Western protestant tradition. Brought together, these case studies disrupt the dominant categories of thought mobilised to describe humanitarianism.

What emerges is a picture of humanitarianism drawn from the perspective of its "margins" or rather from the perspective of its alter ego, where surprising assemblages of actors, practices and ethical inclinations collide and compete against each other in an attempt to realize a distinct version of "the good".

This mirror image challenges dominant representations of humanitarianism as a primarily Western, secular, universal and apolitical enterprise grounded on principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality: a mythical representation that always fail to reflect the empirical reality of practices observed "on the ground".

In this sense, Muslim humanitarianism appears as neither less biased even when it is explicit about its religious roots nor more inclusive in its goal to serve the disenfranchised. Through the case of AKDN health care programs in Gilgit, Pakistan, introduced by [Emma Varley](#), for example, we see that Muslim humanitarianism presents the same exclusionary dynamics and forms of "triage" that exist in its Western version.

An ethical dilemma which then emerges for the researcher is: How to articulate such a critique without reinforcing the perception that Western humanitarianism would be the only credible form of principled engagement with the suffering of others? How to account for such local forms of exclusions while remaining equally

concerned with the power imbalances and ideological hegemonies that cut across the field of humanitarianism at the global level?

The place of Islam in Muslim humanitarianism

Islam provides an ethical framework for action but a framework that is also reconfigured as a result of its encounter with other normative and moral principles available in Muslims' direct environment. Islam informs actors' moral sentiments, but such sentiments are not all encompassing or fixed but rather subject to constant negotiation and contestation. What Filippo Osella, drawing inspiration from critical culture theory, calls "l'islam mondain" or "everyday Islam" provides interesting theoretical avenues for considering the moral universe of Muslim humanitarians less as a reflection of norms imposed by religious institutions than the product of cultural interactions and ordinary forms of sociability. Indeed, observing Muslims' lived religion through the prism of their "humanitarian" practices enables us to trace how their moral reasoning becomes "commonsense" as a result of the "contemporary circulation of practices, aesthetics and theologies not only within and between religious traditions, but also across different social fields" (Osella).

These dynamics are particularly noticeable in the contexts of Saudi Arabia, Northern India and Kerala where processes of borrowing and circulation enable intersectional exchanges, provide opportunities for collective practices and reconfigure the ritual of zakat toward the achievement of development goals and poverty alleviation (Taylor).

Derbal argues, for instance, that Saudi humanitarianism is often demonized for its supposed religious indoctrination and the spread of an intolerant and misogynist version of Islam. These orientalist representations contradict the fact that far from being a monolithic project controlled by a hegemonic state, Saudi humanitarianism entails numerous actors, from private donors to individual

members of the royal family. Derbal's research in the charity sector also highlights a wide range of practices, from traditional almsgiving and food banks to sophisticated training programs, medical facilities and rehabilitation centers. Some of these programs follow the model of social entrepreneurship in the name of greater efficiency instead of more classic forms of religious giving.

In the [case of Lucknow](#) in North India, Zakat charities reinvent the meaning of zakat, moving away from a focus on the purification of the giver toward a focus on long-term vocational development, social solidarity and the establishment of a system of wealth redistribution. These charities and the volunteers who run them revisit Islamic scriptures and embrace the managerial ethos of development so as to make Islamic prescriptions respond to the specific needs of their communities. The bureaucratization of zakat via this unique form of "obligated voluntarism" does not involve the abandonment of a pious inclination, Taylor argues, but on the contrary, goes hand in hand with spiritual revival.

Hence Muslim humanitarianism opens up a space of conversation around what giving should be about, what *waqf* or charitable foundations should look like and whom they should serve in priority.

The international, the national, the transnational and the post-colonial

This series also highlights the complex relationships between the local, the international, the transnational and the postcolonial. Humanitarianism is sometimes mobilized strategically to achieve other goals than those it explicitly pretends to have as ultimate target. In the [case of the Egyptian Red Crescent](#), humanitarianism was initially embedded within a pan-Islamic anticolonial movement and was mobilized as a means to claim national sovereignty and independence. Interestingly, the inclusion of the Crescent within the Red Cross movement also transformed the public image of the ICRC, increasing its

legitimacy when engaging in negotiations with Islamic political interlocutors such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

In the [case of Shi'i philanthropy](#) in Mumbai, humanitarianism acts as a "weapon of the weak", a "theatre of collective empowerment" to use Leela Gandhi's expression, i.e as a means to resist marginalization. Communitarian philanthropy is an "ethics of survival" which enables Muslims to circumvent State attempts at erasing Islam's presence in public by re-inscribing it in the urban landscape. Defining the sphere of Shi'i philanthropy in Mumbai as a "postcolonial civic", Gupta demonstrates how such charities seek to fulfil some of the civic responsibilities abdicated by the state in a divisive postcolonial context.

Finally, in the [transnational space of Islamic charities](#) Basit Kareem Iqbal studied in Jordan, Muslim humanitarians establish equivalence between the discursive tradition of Islam, notably Islamic law and international humanitarian law, to articulate a form moral reasoning based on righteousness and repair that can provide guidance for humanitarian action. This moral economy challenges the normative secular basis of international humanitarianism, reconfigures the relationship between the beneficiary and the benefactor and offers opportunities for a different kind of moral economy, one with the potential to overcome the limitations of disenchanted modernity embodied in international humanitarianism. Drawing inspiration from Charles Hirshkind's theorization of the deliberative space created via the circulation of cassette-sermons in Cairo, Iqbal defines this form of humanitarianism as an "Islamic counter-public".

Pure altruism vs self-interest

Thinking about Muslim humanitarianism invites us to further reflect on the meaning of 'giving' as an activity that is not necessarily driven by pure altruistic sentiments and that may involve a certain degree of self-interest. Indeed, giving is a fundamentally ambiguous practice that creates hierarchy between the giver and

the receiver, and that triggers some level of dependence. If Islam does not see any fundamental contradiction between giving and self-interest, Western humanitarianism is built on the myth of pure altruistic compassion. A potentially interesting future agenda of research could involve tracing the religious genealogy of such a moral sentiment and observing how it is reconfigured when Muslims claim humanitarianism for themselves.

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