



Introduction: Humanitarianism

Muslim

written by Till Mostowlansky
July, 2019



Muslims around the world partake in comparable practices of aid, welfare and care that have received a wide range of different labels depending on place, time and observer. In the case of emergency relief such practices are sometimes subsumed under “humanitarianism”, if NGOs with long-term perspectives come into the picture “development” appeals as label, and smaller-scale initiatives with minimal institutional embedding are often referred to as “philanthropy” and “charity”.



Yet none of these labels are neutral: they have histories, imply political and ideological positioning and are linked to colonialism, Cold War and geo-politics as much as to the language of administration in mainstream international organizations.

For instance, the fact that “Islamic charity” has frequently invoked (largely unfounded) allegations of funds for militants in a post-9/11 world serves as a not so subtle reminder that such labels are deeply political (Benthall 2016).

In May 2019, the authors of this thematic thread met for a workshop in Geneva, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, to explore the challenges around practices of aid, welfare and care in Muslim settings. As the organizer of said workshop, I put forward the idea of Muslim humanitarianism as a central point of discussion; not as a means to refer to Muslims’ roles in activities related to a singular, everyday understanding of “humanitarianism” as short-term relief in times of war and disaster. But instead with the intention of stirring debate. For this reason, I suggested a notion of humanitarianism that reaches further back in history (Fassin 2012), casts a deliberately wide net and builds on Calhoun’s (2008: 76) observation that “humanitarianism took root in the modern world not as a response to war or ‘emergencies’ but as part of an effort to remake the world so that it better served the interests of humanity.”

Such an approach, I argue, reflects that research on the broader field of humanitarianism, development, philanthropy and charity stands at a turning point. For decades – fuelled by categories that emerged from colonial and Cold War discourses – many scholars carefully distinguished between humanitarian institutions providing short-term aid, development agencies fostering economic and social modernization, and charitable and philanthropic endeavours encompassing smaller, individual and often religiously inspired aspirations. Sometimes this aptly reflected actors’ self-perceptions and emic categories, particularly within large-scale international organizations. However, a growing number of studies on various forms of aid, welfare and care around the world has



shown that the boundaries between such pre-conceived categories are blurry, often dissolve in practice and are sometimes openly contested (e.g. Bornstein 2012, Benthall 2015, Brkovic 2017, De Lauri 2016, Mittermaier 2019, Redfield 2013).

To make sense of and pay tribute to this juncture in research I propose to think about Muslim humanitarianism, drawing on Scott (2004), as a “problem-space” – a conceptual-ideological ensemble which is defined by an object that comes with specific questions. Accordingly, this thematic thread discusses the historical and contemporary depth of Muslim humanitarianism in the sense of “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological political stakes) hangs” (Scott 2004: 4). The reconfiguration of such a “context of disputes” requires new angles with questions that “bite” and revive the object.

The eight contributions to this thematic thread seek to achieve this goal by critically investigating the very possibility of thinking with the category of Muslim humanitarianism.

They do so, for instance, on a very fundamental level by scrutinizing the vocabulary of humanitarianism (Jonathan Benthall) or by establishing a critical angle on existing approaches to the legacy of theology and Muslim religiosity (Filippo Osella). They participate in the larger endeavour of *decentring* humanitarianism that has defined the field in recent years, but also avoid creating unnecessary modes of *disconnection* between Muslim humanitarians and mainstream humanitarianism. For instance, in her critical take on studies on Saudi humanitarianism Nora Derbal argues against strategies of exoticization and demonization and instead proposes pursuing more detailed and fine-grained research about this still relatively unknown topic. In her contribution on the Egyptian Red Crescent Esther Moeller shows how the alleged “margins” of humanitarianism can have a strong impact on processes in perceived “centres” (here the International Committee of the Red Cross). And in his article on the



purist and the developmentalist ethos of zakat Christopher Taylor points to “an inherent civil-political dimension” of Islamic almsgiving.

As the authors of this thematic thread – some explicitly, some implicitly – emphasize, the broader endeavour of decentring humanitarianism is always a tightrope walk between universalizing and particularizing aspirations.

Radhika Gupta notes in her contribution that the installation of a “postcolonial civic” through Shi’i organizations in Mumbai goes hand in hand with the marking of communal space and access. In her study of healthcare provided by an NGO in northern Pakistan Emma Varley observes how universal aspirations diffuse into particularising processes of sectarian exclusion in practice. In conclusion, however, she makes the important point that such processes of exclusion are not limited to this particular NGO – or Muslim humanitarianism at large, one might add – but that they are a central feature of humanitarianism around the globe.

There is ample evidence that humanitarian organizations in the Global North have neither managed to free themselves from their particularity, and the specificity of the contexts of which there are part, nor have they been able to escape their own history of political theology. In fact, Agrama (2014) argues that Western humanitarians have over time created their “own version of Christianity” to which they constantly relate themselves. In response, the contributions to this thematic thread deal with an adapted version of this question and ask how Muslim humanitarians are creating “their own version” of Islam. In Basit Iqbal’s entry this becomes perhaps most apparent through his analysis of a Power Point Presentation of an organization caring for Syrian refugees in Jordan that offers an explicit theorization of humanitarianism. Such formulations, or “mirror images” as Julie Billaud calls them in the thread’s afterword, hold the potential of shattering the myth of a unified humanitarian government that has its genealogical roots in “Christianity” or “the West”.



References

- Agrama, Hussein Ali. 2014. "Comments on Talal Asad's 'Reflections on Violence, Law and Humanitarianism'." Presented at the *Critical Inquiry* Public Seminar on Humanitarian Violence, 16 May, online: http://www.academia.edu/10333669/Comments_on_Talal_Asads_Reflections_on_Violence_Law_and_Humanitarianism (accessed 19 June 2019).
- Benthall, Jonathan. 2015. "Religion and Humanitarianism" In: Roger Mac Ginty and Jenny H. Peterson (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action*. London and New York: Routledge, 279-289.
- Benthall, Jonathan. 2016. *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bornstein, Erica. 2012. *Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brkovic, Carna. 2017. "Introduction: Vernacular Humanitarianisms." *Allegra Lab*, online: <http://allegralaboratory.net/vernacular-humanitarianisms/> (accessed 19 June 2019).
- Calhoun, Craig. 2008. "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action" In: Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (eds.). *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 73-97.
- De Lauri, Antonio. 2016. "Introduction" In: Antonio De Lauri (ed.). *The Politics of Humanitarianism: Power, Ideology and Aid*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1-16.
- Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mittermaier, Amira. 2019. *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*.



Berkeley: University of California Press.

Redfield, Peter. 2013. *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Scott, David. 2004. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Featured image by [Jonathan Takle](#) on [Unsplash](#)