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## Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism

Erkan Toğuşlu, Johan Leman

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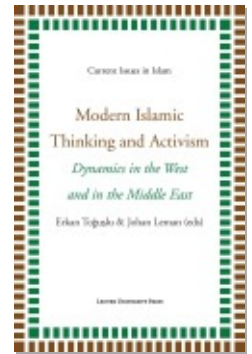
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CHAPTER 8

Social Work, Poverty, Inequality  
and Social Safety Nets: Voluntary  
Welfare Organizations

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*Jonathan Benthall*

### The Islamic tradition

Voluntary welfare provision by Muslims has much in common with other charitable traditions, though with some differences relating especially to Qur'anic doctrine. All Islamic authorities agree on the vital importance of charity.<sup>1</sup> *Zakat*, the Islamic tithe, is a major support in the standard Islamic case against the evils of both capitalism and communism. It draws the sting of Marxism, depriving it of a legitimate argument against private property, and property of any objectionable features; it turns the main contradiction in capitalism into a virtuous spiral of redistribution, and it lucidly answers the communist refusal of the right to possess. It solves the problem of poverty with the consent of the rich, and punishes those who hoard and monopolize and try to corner markets. Under the ideal scheme that wide observance of *zakat* would make possible, the rich do not become poor, but the poor are poor no longer. *Zakat* is a reminder that all wealth belongs to God (as in Judaism and Christianity); but there are several verses in the Qur'an that tolerate economic inequalities even though the dignity and fundamental equality of all human beings as children of Adam are also recognized. Islam accepts – so the argument runs – that there are inevitably differences among human beings that will in every society result in economic inequalities. Wealth ought to be cherished in moderation, but not to be (as we might say today) fetishized. The Qur'an condemns the competitive multiplication of wealth, and deprecates ostentation. Provided that believers obey the rules enjoined, there is

no need for them to feel guilty about their inability to measure up to an ideal morality: there is no need for the well-to-do either to give away all their wealth or to feel guilty about not being poor. Nor would Islamic teaching commend, as does the Christian Gospel, the widow who gives away her last farthings.

The Christian concept of charitable action bears connotations of spiritual love that are absent in the Qur'anic terms *zakat* and *sadaqa*.<sup>2</sup> *Zakat* bears lexical connotations of both purity and growth. The meaning is taken to be that, by giving up part of one's wealth, one purifies that which remains, and also oneself – through a restraint on one's selfishness and indifference to others' privations. The recipient, too, is purified – from being jealous of those who are well off. *Sadaqa* – optional almsgiving over and above what is mandatory – bears connotations of justice, but is so closely associated with *zakat* that the key verse in the Qur'an that defines the purposes of *sadaqa* (Q 9:60) is treated as referring also to *zakat*. *Zakat* is closely linked in Islamic teaching with prayer, held to be ineffective if the *zakat* obligation is not met, and with sacrificial offerings.

Though *sadaqa* is also an important principle today, especially because it is less rule-bound, *zakat* is the third of the five pillars (*arkān*) of Islam. Muslims are enjoined to donate about one-fortieth of their assets, after deducting the value of their homes and working necessities, to a list of eight categories of people. These are (to borrow the most usual descriptions): the poor; the destitute; those employed to administer the *zakat*; those who might be converted to Islam, or assist in the cause; slaves; debtors; those committed to the 'way of God'; and travellers in need. Theologians have debated the interpretation of this list. For instance, 'slaves' may include prisoners of war, or the subjects of oppressive regimes. The 'way of God' is taken to mean the same as *jihad*. *Jihad* is an elusive concept whose nearest equivalent for Christians is the idea of the Church Militant warring against the powers of evil. *Jihad* can have warlike connotations in some contexts,<sup>3</sup> but can also mean a spiritual commitment to master one's weaknesses and lead a better life. Effective compassion for the disadvantaged is one important expression of this commitment.

The Qur'anic injunctions on *zakat* have much in common with Hebraic tithing – the obligation to give a tenth of annual agricultural produce – which, though replaced in early Christianity by the idea of freewill offerings, was later revived in various forms by some Churches. Some denominations, such as the Mormons, still practise strict tithing in the same way as devout Muslims. The Qur'an not only urges generosity, but also tells Muslims that they should encourage others to be generous. *Zakat* with its purifying power is specially

enjoined, and bestows special merit, during the holy month of Ramadan, which has become the major fund-raising season, similar to Christmas. Alms given discreetly rather than publicly are best. Those whose personal wealth is below a fixed threshold are exempt from almsgiving.

At various points in Islamic history, *zakat* became a mere vehicle for extracting taxes. In no present-day state is *zakat* organized exactly as Islamic teaching prescribes. However, great efforts have been made to explain how the original injunctions should be interpreted in response to economic and political realities. It is used as a fund-raising device by charities both in Muslim countries and among Muslims resident in Western countries. Such charities often supply their supporters with printed tables to enable them to calculate their *zakat* liability. *Zakat* is one of the two major Islamic institutions adapted for modern fund-raising. The other is the *waqf*.

The institution of *waqf*, the Islamic equivalent of the charitable trust or foundation, known alternatively as *hubs* (Arabic plural *abbas*, French *habous*) in North Africa, dates back virtually to the founding of Islam. With its legal status consolidated in the eighth century, it spread over almost the whole of the Islamic world, so that, for example, between a half and two thirds of the lands of the huge Ottoman Empire were *waqf* at the start of the nineteenth century. The great exception was sub-Saharan Africa, in whose history *waqf* is mentioned only in a limited area around certain cities such as Timbuktu: west African largesse tended to be personalized in prestigious individuals, and wealth was concentrated in moveable property such as cattle. During the nineteenth century, centralizing states were already chipping away at the independence of local *waqfs*. In Egypt and some other countries, all *waqfs* have been nationalized as state assets and the term is often popularly understood as referring only to mosque properties. Since the 1960s the institution has been given new life in some jurisdictions, partly as an Islamic response to the worldwide upsurge of voluntary organizations, but sometimes with a strong admixture of political motivation.

Another term that needs explanation is *da'wa*. *Da'wa* in Arabic means the call to Islam, missionary activity, and sometimes by extension the provision of religious education and practical social services with a view to reviving the faith of a community. It is part of Islamist ideology that politics, religion, economics, morality and charitable works form a seamless whole – *shumuliyat al-islam*. There is scope for debate as to how much this is a pious ideal; how much a strategy for domination in some circumstances and survival in others; and how much it should make us reflect sociologically on the interconnectedness of these spheres

in every society, though it is normal in the West to try to segregate them. While this ideal of seamlessness has contributed to the success of Islamist organizations, it has also exposed them to substantial trouble in some political contexts. Whereas *da'wa* is a spiritual and moral principle, not an institution, Israeli and American counter-terrorist experts used the term to signify a range of Islamic charitable organizations in the Palestinian Territories as allegedly fronts or façades for Hamas (during the period 1994–2007), on the grounds that the social services they provided were the base which supported all of Hamas's military and political operations. I and others have argued that this is an unconvincing interpretation of the reality in Palestine, since the principle of *da'wa* is much wider and has been accepted by many Palestinians who do not endorse Hamas's political and military aims but attach great importance to the principles of *da'wa* and *zakat* as means to sustain the steadfastness and solidarity of the Palestinian population at times of acute stress.

## Donors and recipients

One feature common to all religious traditions of charity is that donors gain spiritual merit by their beneficent acts – laying up treasures in Heaven, as the New Testament Gospel puts it. Through some theological lenses, the poor can be seen as essential to the salvation of the well-off. This was true of the medieval Church, as described in Bronislaw Geremek's history of poverty: God could have made all men rich, but He wanted there to be poor people in this world, so that the rich might be able to redeem their sins (Geremek 1994). Thus there is only a limited incentive for the well-off to abolish poverty. That this theological assumption is by no means obsolete today is shown in an article by two Dutch anthropologists, comparing the impact of Pentecostal Christian and Sufi Islamic charitable networks in two African countries, Ghana and Senegal (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2009). In both their case-studies, it seems that charity and beneficence neither aimed at nor resulted in reducing the vulnerability of the populations, since individual salvation of the donor was the main goal. Many contemporary Faith Based Organizations, however, work hard to rebut by their policies and actions the objection that charity, including charity inspired by religion, has the effect of consolidating inequality. Moreover, political campaigns to abolish poverty through the introduction of communist or socialist systems are today more or less defunct, so that – though it can be always be argued that charity tends to

address the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty and distress – voluntary personal donations are now widely seen again as essential to the promotion of social cohesion, which is in keeping with the Islamic texts. I have argued that government aid from North to South should be seen as an institutional form of charity (*pace* many development experts), insofar as it is voluntary rather than an entitlement that the beneficiaries can enforce (Benthall 2012).

Much attention has been given by scholars, especially historians but increasingly social scientists too, to the study of charity as an ideology and as a practice. Research on charity tends to stress the perspectives of donors. It is also possible, however, to give a counterbalancing weight to the recipients' point of view, in terms of an expanded concept of social security, defined by Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann as 'the dimension of social organization dealing with the provision of security not considered to be an exclusive matter of individual responsibility' (Thelen et al. 2009: 2). The von Benda-Beckmanns have identified five 'layers' of analysis and I will look at these briefly in turn with special reference to the Muslim world.

First: ideological, that is to say cultural and religious, notions with regard to risk and caring. In addition to the overarching Islamic concepts of *zakat*, *sadaqa*, *waqf*, and *da'wa*, we may single out the emphasis on orphans in the Muslim world – defined as children without a father or breadwinner, as opposed to the West where the term is generally reserved for 'double orphans'; but the category may also include children born out of wedlock. Orphan programmes are a popular, almost universal feature of Islamic charities. The Prophet Muhammad was an orphan. For a Muslim, the gesture of crossing two fingers alludes to a saying of the Prophet that whoever looks after an orphan will be 'like this' with him in Paradise. Islamic charities provide a wide range of services, from residential homes and day-care centres to individual sponsorship, and paying for school uniforms, textbooks or special clothes for festival days. Islamic charities are also specially focused on widows and on refugees. As well as these religious predispositions, cultural norms in traditional societies impose webs of obligations on relatives and patrons that are more binding than for most northern Europeans.

Second: institutional (often legal) provision, based on clearly defined rights. Where these are extensive and enforceable, as in our Welfare State, private charity becomes of relatively minor importance; though it follows that when the Welfare State comes under threat, as in most of the industrialized world today, private charity has to fill the void. In most Muslim-majority countries other than the petrodollar states, government provision is quite inadequate, and inevitably

the private charities that substitute for it can become vehicles for political contestation, so that the government tries to control them.

The third level is actual social relationships between providers and recipients, as opposed to what these relations should be in an ideal world. The American anthropologist Erica Bornstein's studies of Christian and Hindu charity are a benchmark for ethnographic research which has not yet, as far as I know, been carried out in such depth with regard to Muslims (Bornstein 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, concrete social security actions. There are various ways in which these can be described and evaluated, with the constant risk of rhetorical distortion and unconscious observer bias. In politically charged regions, it is common for painstaking reports to be compiled and then shelved because the conclusions are inconvenient to those in power. For instance, in the early 2000s the United Nations Development Programme prepared a comprehensive study of social welfare provision, the Poverty Participation Project, for every governorate of the Palestinian Territories, for the benefit of the Palestinian Authority and funded by the British Government to the extent of about £600,000. The distinctive aim of the project was to document the views of poor people rather than administrators. It revealed a wide dissatisfaction with the integrity and effectiveness of the welfare services provided by the Palestinian Authority; the much smaller Islamic charity sector came out on the whole rather better (UNDP n.d.). Corroborating evidence from other sources suggests that the extent of corruption during this period was very high, including abuse of the voluntary sector by means of fabricated NGOs set up to siphon funds from international donors. Unsurprisingly, the report has been more or less ignored despite the deepening welfare crisis since 2005, when the study was completed, whereas such an exercise ought to have been seen as a baseline for future research on welfare provision.

The fifth level of analysis is the social and economic consequences of social security practices for both providers and recipients. As regards the providers, we may include here, for example, the political advantage gained by charity entrepreneurs who in some cases use their local reputation to stand for elective office and/or build up commercial networks for their own benefit. As regards the recipients, we may note the creation of 'aid economies' such as Jordan or, to take a more extreme case, the Gaza Strip, which result in excessive chronic dependency.

I believe that the style of analysis proposed by the von Benda-Beckmanns and their Dutch- and German-speaking anthropological colleagues has the potential to introduce a new rigour into reflection about these problems, because the concept of 'social security' as refined by them is as near value-free as we are

likely to get, whereas concepts such as ‘charity’, ‘*zakat*’, ‘aid’, ‘development’ and ‘humanitarianism’ are all highly contentious.

## European Islamic charities

One of the focuses of this book is on Europe. It is clear that networks of voluntary assistance among European Muslims do exist, but mainly at a local or informal level – and they have so far attracted little attention from researchers. Nearly all the research effort to date has focused on international charities operating *from* Europe,<sup>5</sup> rather than for the benefit of populations *in* Europe. This is justified because Muslim populations in Europe generally prioritize charitable giving to the South, on the grounds that ‘real’ poverty hardly exists in Europe because of welfare safety nets. One example is a charity called Al-Muntada Al-Islami, ‘the Islamic Foundation’, originally founded by Saudi students in Britain, which runs in west London an unusually enterprising mosque complex, with a primary school attached and a range of varied social, sports and educational facilities. It has been active and successful in mediating between disaffected young Muslims in London and the police. But all its publicity is focused on its overseas relief and development work in Africa. The recently founded Muslim Charities Forum, an umbrella group, is restricted to British Islamic charities that work overseas. Such charities may be seen as organized in parallel with diaspora remittances (financially much larger but generally restricted to particular nationalities or ethnic groups).

Very recently, however, the economic crisis since 2008 has impelled Muslim Aid, previously concentrating on overseas aid, to launch its Warm Hearts Winter Campaign which distributes ‘keep warm kits’ to homeless and other vulnerable people in Britain itself; and this is a trend likely to intensify as the gap between rich and poor in Britain increases. There are also many charities founded in Britain by groups of Muslim women to confront problems such as domestic violence.

A rare exercise in scholarly analysis of ‘domestic’ Muslim charity in Britain has been undertaken by Sufyan Abid in his research on Muslim businessmen and entrepreneurs in Birmingham. Common to their local and very public charitable giving is the conviction that by doing so they purify their profits and ensure their future commercial success; but the choice of charitable organizations is determined by their particular religious affiliations – Barelvi, Deobandi or Salafi,



with subdivisions within each group (Abid 2013). As well as remitting funds overseas, these Birmingham Muslims are committed to such local services as Muslim funerals, day care centres, radio transmissions, vocational courses and anti-narcotics programmes, as well as assisting poor communities with their access to state benefits.

By contrast with the Islamic charities that were built up from the Arabian heartlands since the late 1970s, forming a parallel system of foreign aid hardly mentioned until recently in the analysis of international aid flows,<sup>6</sup> European Islamic charities, especially from Britain, have been much influenced by the 'aid culture' of present-day Europe – with its emphasis on professionalism, transparency, accountability and non-discrimination. They have joined the international aid system, while skilfully making use of Qur'anic injunctions (such as the need to care for orphans), the religious calendar and visual symbols, to appeal to their Muslim donors. Efforts are also made to address the causes rather than the symptoms of poverty, in common with other agencies that are committed to longer-term development as well as immediate relief for victims of disasters and conflicts. Older interpretations of *zakat*, which insisted that only Muslims could be beneficiaries, have been dropped in favour of a commitment to bringing aid to the poorest whoever they are. There is an emphasis on working in Muslim-majority countries, but in defence of this practice they argue that the extent of need and deprivation among Muslims is undeniable.

The success in Britain of NGOs such as Islamic Relief Worldwide and Muslim Aid not only has benefited their recipients overseas but also (it will be argued here) is a major factor for integration of Muslims in Britain itself. As in the Christian world, it may be that a measure of authority is moving away from traditional religious office-holders to new humanitarian bureaucracies. The rise of Islamic Relief Worldwide is especially impressive. Founded by some Egyptian medical students in Birmingham in 1984, it is now the largest Islamic NGO in the world – unless you count the Aga Khan Foundation, which is a special case – and it has steered its way with assurance through political minefields. It has a fundraising branch in Belgium. In the UK, for some years it has been a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee, the elite grouping of 13 leading British overseas NGOs which combine their efforts to raise funds through the media and the banks on the occasion of major disasters. I felt that Islamic Relief had really gained acceptance just after the Kashmir earthquake of 2005, when the general manager of Islamic Relief fronted an appeal on television on behalf of all the British aid agencies – evidently because Islamic Relief was better placed to

coordinate practical assistance in Pakistan than any of the secular or Christian aid agencies.

Whereas in some respects the European Islamic NGOs are strongly secularized – for instance in providing medical or disaster relief services directly – they also work through local Islamic organizations and individuals in developing countries. Here lies perhaps their greatest potential contribution, in that such partnerships are able to cut through government welfare structures which are often corrupt and ineffective. In several countries, domestic Islamic charities have helped preserve the cohesion of local populations during periods of great stress.<sup>7</sup>

### The Egyptian case

Understandably, Islamist movements of this kind are accused of making political capital by their charitable activities. When the state fails to provide, however, it is normal that the dominant religion will muster its resources to fill in the gap, just as in 2012 and 2013 the Orthodox Church in Greece was feeding many thousands of citizens suddenly impoverished as a result of the economic crisis. Let us consider the case of Egypt. After a serious earthquake in Cairo in 1992, killing some five hundred people, the Muslim Brotherhood took a leading role. Again, when Egypt was hit by serious floods in November 1994, the government's response was slow and ineffective. It was the Muslim Brotherhood and similar organizations which gave refuge in the mosques to families who had lost their roofs. In the late 1990s, at least half of all welfare associations in Egypt were Islamic in character, often based on mosques built and controlled by the people rather than the state, providing services to millions. It is widely agreed that such Islamic community activities often outdo their secular counterparts, as well as stimulating other voluntary organizations and the state sector to do better. Yet after a national disaster in February 2002 – a serious railway accident at Al-Ayatt, 70 kilometres south of Cairo – the Muslim Brothers were reportedly forbidden by the Egyptian government to raise funds or organize help for the victims.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher opposed to European colonialism and the Westernization of Islam. It has always pursued a dual goal of socio-economic development and political campaigning. In 1945, at the height of its success, it was required by the Egyptian government to split into two: a section concerned with politics and a section concerned with welfare. It was for many years denied registration

either as a political party or as an NGO, but it continued to enjoy popularity under the Mubarak regime, and in 2012, after the popular uprising, succeeded in winning – together with the more conservative Salafis – a majority in the Egyptian Parliament. In an astonishing turn of events, the disastrous twelve-month presidency of Mohamed Morsi resulted in his removal from power in July 2013 and later to the banning of the Brotherhood as an allegedly terrorist organization. Among its traditional roles were public health and responding to crises such as epidemics. Although the movement has been compared to Latin American liberation theology, it was not based on any belief in liberating the poor, but aimed rather to ‘reislamize’ the whole of society. It was generally paternalistic, supported by politically marginalized professionals as much as by the poor.

In 1966, the Muslim Brothers had acquired a martyr in the intransigent, charismatic Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian intellectual who travelled to the US in 1949 and returned with a contempt for what he saw as Western racism and sexual permissiveness. Imprisoned as a subversive by the Egyptian government and finally hanged, Qutb left behind him militant tracts urging violence against infidel governments and commending *zakat* as the basis of an ideal Islamic state. He condemned Muslims who refused this challenge, as well as the whole of the West, as belonging to the *jabiliyya*, the ‘time of ignorance’ before the Islamic revelation. Qutb’s influence pervades Islamist extremism to this day but is widely rejected by more moderate Islamists. More than in Egypt, the Muslim Brothers in Jordan have earned a reputation for moderation, constituting a kind of ‘loyal opposition’ to the Hashemite monarchy while adhering to the principles established by the Egyptian founders, which include deep-seated hostility to Zionism and building up effective welfare services as an adjunct to their political commitment. In Syria, the organization was violently suppressed in the early 1980s and mere membership became a capital offence. The Muslim Brotherhood is a loosely knit international organization, Egypt remaining (at least until 2013) its centre of gravity, which has meetings in different cities and regular elections; but the weighting given to political, religious and welfarist goals differs in different countries. One of the founding principles of the Muslim Brothers was ‘avoidance of the domination of notables and important men; since rising movements attract them and mean riches and benefits for them’. The organization remains opaque at the international level.

The voluntary sector in Egypt is huge and complex. The American researcher Mona Atia has shown how during the Nasser period an extensive Welfare

State was built up, including education, housing, employment and health care, but this began to contract after the 1980s as a result of Structural Adjustment programmes. Diminished state funding was unable to keep up with the needs of an increased population. Atia comments that she has found Islamic charitable associations to play a far deeper role than providing services: writing before the so-called Arab Awakening in 2011, she wrote that ‘they provide developmental, personal and communal growth. They are also important because they are a few of the only spaces left where people can safely articulate a desire for social change, particularly one that incorporates the institutionalization of Islamic values’ (Atia 2008: 246). In common with the rest of the voluntary sector, the Islamic associations had moved away from traditional ideas of welfare to development through programmes of training, income generation, microcredit and the like. Until 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt was split between those who continued to be committed to the ‘social question’ and a wing that was more aligned with the interests of the middle class. It was already argued by Janine Clark in 2004 that the Muslim Brothers of Jordan had swung very much in the direction of providing services for the middle class rather than the poor (Clark 2004).

Let us consider two examples of voluntary institutions in Egypt at opposite ends of what one could call the media spectrum. At one end: the Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque Complex in Cairo, whose founder, a medical doctor, became what one might call (borrowing the Christian term) a ‘born-again’ Muslim and a highly successful interpreter of Islam for a scientific age. Though lacking theological qualifications, Mustafa Mahmoud, who died in 2009 in his late 80s, gained such a personal following by means of television and cassettes that he became one of the most important moral authorities in Egypt. The mosque complex is highly professionalized and is focused partly on health services but also on human development, with an emphasis on helping the poor to lift themselves out of poverty. The preacher and his work have been extensively documented by Western social scientists (e.g. Salvatore 2000).

At the other extreme is a huge organization, the biggest in Egypt, about which practically nothing is known outside the country: the Gamiya Shariya or Islamic law association. Founded by Sheikh al-Subki in 1913, it has about 450 branches and is responsible for some 6,000 mosques, with between 2.5 and 5 million adherents. It shuns publicity to the extent that practically nothing is known about it by researchers: one paper by an otherwise well-informed Egyptian scholar consists of little more than a reflection on the difficulties of researching it (ben Néfissa

2007). It has received large donations from wealthy Egyptians that enabled it to found clinics and other welfare institutions which make no charge to those using them. During the Mubarak era, it seemed that both the Government and the Muslim Brothers tried to get control over it, but that it managed to play the various parties off against one another and to remain relatively independent.

The voluntary sector in Egypt has been highly politicized for many years, much penetrated by the intelligence services, and in 2013 was embroiled in the trial of strength between the Army, the Islamists and the mainly secular revolutionaries, while measures taken against foreign NGOs generated major tensions with the country's principal benefactor, the United States.<sup>8</sup> As this book goes to press, the future of Islamism and the voluntary sector in Egypt is impossible to predict.

## The Palestinian Territories

In the Palestinian Territories, where I have concentrated my own research, it is easier to read the political fields of force. Since 2007, after the Hamas takeover of Gaza, it has been agreed by all observers that the *zakat* committees and other Islamic charities have been politicized by both administrations: the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas de facto government in the Gaza Strip. What is more relevant to the future of the voluntary sector, in the event that Palestine will finally gain the full status of a nation, is to try to reconstruct analytically in retrospect the true nature of the *zakat* committees during what has been called the 'Oslo period' between 1994 and 2007.

I have already mentioned that the Israeli and US governments hold that during this period the Palestinian *zakat* committees were fronts or façades for Hamas. It is conceded even by the sternest critics of these committees that they had a high reputation for financial probity and cost-effectiveness. Emanuel Schaeublin's work and mine have been associated with the Islamic Charities Project, sponsored by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs between 2005 and 2013,<sup>9</sup> and we have arrived at the hypothesis that, on the contrary, the principle of *zakat* was, on the whole, one that persuaded the various factions to form 'social coalitions' to administer welfare and health services based on *zakat*, consisting of some individuals who were politically active but also independent Islamists not affiliated to any political party, as well as the pious middle class, and practical businessmen such as you would find running charities in medium-sized towns all

over the world. Until 2007, these were beginning to tap into the international aid system for funds, while also remaining close to their communities and earning considerable popular trust – unlike the officials of Fatah; also responding to local priorities rather than the agendas of international aid agencies. Compared to the extensive services provided by the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), those for which the *zakat* committees were responsible were relatively small in scale, but they had an iconic value for the beleaguered and stressed population, standing for the Islamic values of solidarity and compassion (Schaeublin 2009, 2011). Fatah and Hamas declared in 2011 that regularizing the position of charities would be one of their goals in seeking political reconciliation. This seemed still elusive in early 2014, but it is possible that all those concerned in the Palestinian Territories will eventually see value in negotiating a ‘political hands-off’ so that Islamic charitable principles can be put into practice with as little interference as possible.

When Islamic charities from Europe or North America seek to engage with local intermediaries of this kind, they often attract political controversy because of the shadow that has fallen on Islamic charities since the attacks on the USA on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, as a result of allegations that some Islamic charities were implicated in terrorist financing. This has applied particularly to local Palestinian charities (and European and American charities remitting funds to them) which have become embroiled in the conflict with Israel, especially because of Hamas’s policies (now apparently abandoned) of suicide bombing attacks against Israelis.

## Islamic charities today

All Islamic charities based in the Gulf, which have tended to form a kind of parallel structure of aid very little connected to the rest of the international aid system, have fallen under suspicion. By way of background, we must recall the history of the Afghan war of the 1980s, when Western and Gulf-based organizations were united in supporting the *mujahideen* in order to bring down the Soviet empire. US regulation of its overseas aid charities did not set a rigorous example (Benthall 2011). Since 2001, the Gulf-based charities seem to be slowly moving away from their traditions of secrecy to submit to the kind of public monitoring and regulation that are taken for granted in the West, so as to reduce the risk of abuse of the privileges of charities for nefarious purposes (Juul Petersen 2014, Lacey and Benthall 2014).

Where government policies are relatively uncontentious, it is possible for transnational Islamic aid to make progress at the grassroots without much difficulty. This was the case in Mali when I undertook fieldwork there in 2006 (Benthall 2006), but six years later the whole country was destabilized as a result of a revival of civil unrest in the north and a military coup in the South.

To conclude by bringing the discussion back to Europe: at the risk of seeming to be chauvinistic, it is Britain that has led the way in encouraging international Islamic charities, thanks to a constructive and sympathetic approach on the part of the Charity Commission, which is the national regulatory body appointed by the Government but acting independently. It has done much to stimulate not only Islamic but all diaspora-based charities, for instance Hindu and Sikh, to grow in compliance with the principles of accountability and non-discrimination. Early in 2011 the major Islamic charities met in a committee room of the House of Commons for a public discussion of relief aid following the massive flooding in Pakistan, for which the UK Islamic charities had raised some 20 million pounds. In the United States, where there was an equally buoyant Islamic charity sector before 9/11, a much more repressive policy with regard to charities has set in because of the threat of terrorism (ACLU 2009). Many people working in the humanitarian field, however, hold that there should be no incompatibility between security and humanitarian concerns. If a 'humanitarian vacuum' is allowed to form because of repressive policies, there is a danger of that vacuum being penetrated by extremists, as it has been already to some extent in some countries such as Pakistan stricken by disaster, poverty and civil strife; also most notoriously during the terrible civil war in Syria.

A buoyant and carefully regulated Islamic charity sector is in everyone's interests – all the more so because of the pressures on traditional (non-Muslim) aid budgets since 2008, which are impelling the international aid bureaucracy to reach out for funding shortfalls to be met by so-called 'new humanitarian donors'. It is often forgotten that Islamic humanitarianism has a long history – a tradition that should be treated with guarded respect rather than with opportunism.

## Notes

- 1 For further commentary on Islam and charity, see Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003, Benthall 2012.

The present article is concerned only with Sunni Islam. Shi'a Muslims are obliged to pay a religious tithe known as *khums* to an imam, amounting to one fifth of their annual

income after deduction of expenses. The imam is responsible for distributing the funds for religious teaching, education, welfare and relief aid. Through this mechanism, networks of Shi'a charity have developed internationally.

- 2 Another key concept in Christian moral theology is service – in Greek, *diakonia*. The social teaching of the Gülen Movement, which has been realized in such organizations as the Istanbul-based international aid organization Kimse Yok Mu ('Is there anybody there?'), is consistent with modern interpretations of the Qur'anic *zakat* prescriptions, but gives much more emphasis to the concept of *hizmet* – a common Turkish word meaning 'service', used in both secular and religious contexts – which is indeed an alternative name for the Movement (Harrington 2011: 11-13). Arabic Bibles translate *diakonia* as *khidma*, which does not appear in the Qur'an (unlike the term 'abd, 'slave', which is used to signify devotion to God). As far as I know, the question of a possible influence of Christian moral theology on the Gülen Movement has not yet been studied.
- 3 Some scholars have argued that there is an important difference between traditional Christian charity and *zakat*, since a proportion of the funds raised by *zakat* could legitimately be spent not only on 'good works' but on various other authorized purposes including the military defence of religion (Kuran 2004). But current English charity law, like the historic Islamic *zakat* rules, accommodates military objectives to some extent in that one of the charitable purposes permitted under the Charities Act 2001 is 'the efficiency of the armed services of the Crown'.
- 4 There are, however, published papers by Victoria Palmer, on Islamic Relief's work in Bangladesh with Muslim refugees from Burma (Palmer 2011), and by Bruno De Cordier of the University of Ghent on the work of Islamic aid agencies in Pakistan and central Asia (De Cordier 2009).
- 5 For instance, the part of Marie Juul Petersen's monograph that deals with British Islamic charities (Juul Petersen 2014).
- 6 For discussion of this sector, see Lacey and Benthall 2014.
- 7 I have analysed the role of Islamic charities in Algeria, from the pre-independence period to the present day, in Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003, pp. 93-98.
- 8 Since 2013, Saudi Arabia has provided massive funding for the post-Morsi government, reducing Egypt's dependence on US aid.
- 9 Formerly known as the Montreux Initiative.

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