Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts

Michael Bonner, Mine Ener, and Amy Singer, eds.
Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. 345 pages.

This volume, written by scholars in Middle Eastern history, addresses the history of charity in the Middle East, including its meanings, conceptions,

practical patterns, motivations, and the ways of institutionalization and identifying its "deserving" beneficiaries throughout the last 14 centuries. It is addressed to academic readers interested in Middle Eastern history or in charity in a universal sense.

One aspect of charity dealt with throughout the book is that of motivation. It turns out that besides adhering to general Islamic principles, motivations of enhancing one's prestige and social clout have played an important role as well. Michael Bonner points out in his chapter, "Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam," that generosity in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia was clearly linked to competition for political and social prestige among tribal leaders. However, he does not adequately clarify these practices' role in the emergence of the Islamic charitable tradition. In "Charity and Hospitality," Miri Shefer describes how prominent individuals in the Ottoman Empire enhanced their own prestige by founding hospitals through the establishment of *awqaf*. Likewise, Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II sponsored numerous charitable projects in order to enhance his own public image as a caring and fatherly benefactor toward his subjects, as Nadir Özbek describes in "Imperial Gifts and Sultanic Legitimation during the Late Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909."

Beth Baron and Kathryn Libal, authors of "Islam, Philanthropy, and Political Culture in interwar Egypt," and of "The Child Question," respectively, shed light on the emergence in Egypt and Turkey, during the first half of the twentieth century, of motivations informed by various philanthropists' (either Islamist or secular) ideological commitment to the well-being of the nation as a whole. They also describe how this commitment translated itself into civil society activism and public debates in both countries.

Another relevant aspect is institutionalization. Possibly, the earliest form of institutionalized charity in Islamic history is the collection and distribution of *zakat*. Timur Kuran distinguishes, in his "Islamic Redistribution through *Zakat*" (see the section "Instrument of Modern Redistribution?") the "proceduralist" from the "situationist" approach toward this basic Islamic duty. The former approach denotes a strict application of specific rules from the Islamic sources, regardless of the concrete situation at hand, while the second refers to a flexible implementation of general religious principles based on the current situation.

Another institutional form was the establishment of *awqaf*. Illustrative examples of this widespread phenomenon are given by Yasser Tabbaa in "The Functional Aspect of Medieval Islamic Hospitals"; by Miri Shefer in "Charity and Hospitality"; by Miriam Hoexter in "Charity, the Poor, and

Distribution of Alms in Ottoman Algiers"; and by Amy Singer in "Charity's Legacies, A Reconsideration of Ottoman Endowment-Making." Charitable institutions in medieval and early modern times were largely individual initiatives to serve needy individuals, rather than society at large. This pattern changed during the nineteenth century, when the modern nation-state brought with it an increased concern with the general population's public health and productivity. Mine Ener illustrates this in "The Charity of the Khedive" (see the section "The Centralization of Poor Relief"), where she explains how centralized state-run institutions in nineteenth-century Egypt provided assistance to needy applicants. On the discursive level, the new approach toward public welfare was reflected in the social thought of Egyptian Muslim thinker and reformer Rifa`ah Rafi al-Tahtawi (1801-73), as described by Juan R. I. Cole in "Al-Tahtawi on Poverty and Welfare." In Adam Sabra's "Prices are in God's Hands" (see the section "Public Policy in Mamluk Cairo"), we find that the medieval Muslim state sometimes interfered on an *ad hoc* basis in social welfare through price-control measures and aid distribution in times of crisis.

The question of institutionalization is closely related to that of eligibility for charity. In "Status-Based Definitions of Need in Early Islamic *Zakat* at and Maintenance Laws," Ingrid Mattson describes the legal discourse of medieval Muslim jurists on defining a person's need and eligibility for receiving *zakat*. Mattson, like Sabra, gives an interesting account of Islamic medieval legal discourse on issues related to poverty. However, the contributions of both could have been made more insightful if they would have involved the socioeconomic status and interests of the Islamic jurists themselves.

Mark R. Cohen highlights, in "The Foreign Jewish Poor in Medieval Egypt," the importance of social connections regarding eligibility for aid in the case of foreign visitors. The contributions by Hoexter and Eyal Ginio, both dealing with eighteenth-century Ottoman society, point out the traditional inclusion of religious scholars and students in the category of needy recipients of aid. Ginio, in "Living on the Margins of Charity" (see the section "The Limited Scope of Institutional Charity for the Poor"), analyzes this in the case of Salonica and shows that being part of a solidarity network, such as a neighborhood or guild, often proved indispensable to being eligible for aid on a regular basis. Nonetheless, the impact of belonging to certain social networks or religious status-groups on eligibility is not dealt with in the chapters dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The contributions represent concrete and illustrative case studies, as well as meticulous historical analyses. At the same time, the chapters' chronological order and the way they relate to one another gives one the sense of a coherent volume. Readers interested in the present upsurge of Islamic voluntary welfare activism could use this work in conjunction with anthropological and political science studies written by such authors as Dennis J. Sullivan, Janine A. Clark, Quintan Wiktorowicz, and Jonathan Benthall. Such an endeavor enables the reader to analyze this activism in its historical dimensions. We can think here of aspects like personal motivations; political or social agendas behind welfare initiatives; gender issues; the interrelationship between disciplining, empowerment, and dependency; and the role of religious discourse in all of this. The work could be equally used for the sake of comparison across cultural regions and religions. In spite of some gaps and shortcomings noted above, I would recommend *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts* as a well-written and insightful book to anyone interested in the topic.

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