

Reflections on Session I

Framing Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society

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It has been a tremendous privilege to host an entire symposium dedicated to the understanding of Muslim philanthropy. This opening panel was a wonderful place to start, as these scholars truly engaged the title of the session, “Framing Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society,” and opened up multiple ways to frame Muslim philanthropy and its role within civil society. These papers held together well despite the diversity of angles and disciplines from which they addressed the issue: history, ethics/philosophy, sociology, and current polling data. What struck me from these papers is the authors’ success in expanding our field of vision – reminding us that the study of philanthropy, particularly religious philanthropy – is never simply measuring dollars, cents, and donor intent. Religious philanthropy, Muslim philanthropy in particular, can serve as an entrée into much broader and deeper questions about how individuals, institutions, and communities engage with one another. In this reflection piece, I will offer brief thoughts on each individual paper in hopes of opening up a conversation with you, the reader, to engage these scholars’ good work.

Dr. Amy Singer’s paper, “The Politics of Benevolence,” begins by reminding us of the descriptive task of the historian, noting that these questions surrounding philanthropy have existed for centuries. The role of historians, as she remarked, is to “interrogate the past to enhance the present and the future.”<sup>1</sup> In defining her terms, Singer framed benevolence as including a broad definition of philanthropy; she also named what she means by politics. Politics are not good or bad; they are simply a part of life – the nature of living in relationship with other human beings. Singer rightfully focused on these politics, group dynamics and individual

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations cited in this reflection piece are from working papers presented at the Symposium that we hope to publish in a future issue of *JMPCS*.

relationships (think donor/recipient), as well as issues of power, which are so often at the heart of the gift exchange in societies.

Not only was I struck by the initial broad framing of Singer's article, I also found her particular historical examples instructive. The public kitchen in Jerusalem allowed the Ottomans to find a way into the city's landscape when traditional religious institutions (such as imperial mosques or madrasahs) were not allowed. The multiple forms of philanthropy in Istanbul offer a contrast (from markets and mosques to hospitals and fountains). She noted that, in some sense, these philanthropic legacies dotting the landscape can be interpreted like a text. I think that point is worthy of us stopping to ponder.

Philanthropy is not only reactive, called upon to meet needs when other sectors fall short; in fact, the more modern notion of three sectors did not even really translate into Singer's story. Philanthropy is often intertwined with politics and power, creative in the ways in which it take shape, and visual markers of how cultures develop. This is all the more interesting as Singer made the interpretive move from past to present – connecting the prevalence of neo-liberal economic policies worldwide. Many have argued, like Singer, that neoliberalism and the contraction of state welfare systems have made the need for philanthropy more necessary. The additional twist Singer offered, however, is the question of whether the prevalent forms of Islamic philanthropy found in the Middle East historically have made it easier to adapt to these new contexts. In some sense, yes, these forms of elite philanthropy and endowments have a long tradition. In other ways, cultural norms have not caught up to match new political and economic conditions.

This led to a host of intriguing questions – not only for Singer's particular historical examples but also for religious philanthropy broadly. How do we think about the role of

traditional religious practices in new forms? What is the role of theology, interpretations of sacred texts, and evolving practices on cultures and communities? Contemporary analysts of philanthropy and fundraising miss the textured traditions and practices involved. As Singer noted, these questions across religious traditions, cultures, and societies is worth comparative study. The question of moral paradox that Singer left us with is intriguing. How do we begin to ask these questions? What is the role of scholarship in addressing morality and ethics within philanthropy? It is worthy of discussion and a question that Fady Qaddoura opened up in our second paper.

In “Strategic Muslim Philanthropy: A Vision for Societal Reform and Social Justice,” Fady began with an even broader definition of philanthropy: a philosophy of life and a clear ethical position that philanthropy must accomplish for a just society. This is a clearly proactive view of philanthropy and its goals. Fady forced us to consider the role of philanthropy and the philanthropist. I heard echoes of Aristotle and his notion of the magnanimous donor. Let me be clear: I welcome Fady’s question and his insistence in taking philanthropy and its work so seriously that we must consider the work in some sense as a higher calling. With that said, however, I do want to ask how we are to measure what is just and good philanthropy? Who is the arbiter? Is philanthropy necessarily an unquestioned good? In addition, is political and civic engagement the right way or necessary way to engage? How we define philanthropy, its work, and its purpose are key questions I would encourage Fady to develop even as he pushes philanthropy to follow a higher calling. As Fady turned to Muslim philanthropy, I was struck by how he capitalized on the religious tradition to root his call for reform and social justice. In the relationships between giver and recipient, and through the non-negotiable protection of human life, Islam and all of the Abrahamic traditions agree in liberation and justice as key for

philanthropy. This type of analysis within a tradition and comparatively across traditions was very helpful. As Fady encouraged us in his conclusion, we must move from the tools of philanthropy to its objectives. Rooting Muslim philanthropy in its texts, traditions, and practices is a vital way to delve into the larger questions Fady sought to explore.

Dr. Sabith Khan, like his fellow panelists, sought to reframe Muslim philanthropy through multiple lenses in his paper “A Kinder, Gentler Islam?” First, he critiqued the over-politicization and over-securitization of Islamic Studies. While this might not be the case so much in Religious Studies, this is true in many other disciplines. His suggestion that Islamic praxis is actually depoliticized is an interesting one. If that allows for an entrée into studying global Islam outside the overly political, then practice is a great place to study Muslims and their daily lives. The addition to this line of reasoning, which I find helpful and innovative, is to see NGOs and humanitarianism as the locus of this Muslim praxis. In first focusing on community, Sabith noted the various connotations of this concept. For Muslims, it is the global ummah. What does that mean for Muslims in non-Islamic states in the West and their philanthropic expectations at home and abroad?

Quite effortlessly, Sabith brought in multiple academic debates (notions of bureaucratization of NGOs, questions of the secular and notions of public religion, institutional isomorphism among organizations and how that might affect FBOs) and then applied these larger debates within Muslim humanitarianism. There is much more to be said here than Sabith had time to cover, but I believe this is an extremely fruitful line of inquiry. Do Muslim FBOs professionalize in the same way as Christian ones? What does that mean for their religious identity? Sabith highlighted the multiple tensions within these questions. One thing I hope we came away with from our two days together is that there are no easy answers to the many

questions that were posed. Sabith noted that Islamic praxis of philanthropy is “evolving under the influence of the relations of political power, theological interpretations, and also institutional discourses of Muslim groups.” Narrowly focusing on a single variable or approach does a disservice to the complexity of these traditions and cultures. I commend Sabith’s attention to practice – and to note that belief and practice matters for humanitarian organizations and individual donors – but in attending to these matters, we must realize we are entering a living tradition with multiple interpretations. In turning to Muslim philanthropy as a factor worth exploring, how one defines oneself as a Muslim or an American Muslim or a practicing Muslim or perhaps even a “good” Muslim is a fascinating set of questions worthy of exploring further.

Finally, our last paper “American Muslim Poll: Participation, Priorities, and Facing Prejudice in the 2016 Elections” presented by Meira Neggaz of The Institute For Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) left us with a contemporary snapshot of American Muslims. I do not have much to add here because the presentation was quite straightforward. However, the need for such work should go without explanation. Dispelling myths, uncovering the diversity of American Muslims as well as how they are alike and different from their fellow Americans is a worthy project. I was struck by the correlation of religious identity with American identity, as well as continued clarity that religious attendance and engagement are important measures of the role religion plays in people’s lives.

These four papers, individually and together, have really opened up the framing of Muslim philanthropy and civil society. Through these multiple vantage points, they have pushed us to consider questions from within specific academic disciplines. Nevertheless, each paper also made the turn to ask bigger questions of how we might study Muslim philanthropy more broadly

and what these questions mean for our contemporary context. I look forward to our continued discussion.