Muslim philanthropy: living beyond a Western definition

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The commonly used definition of philanthropy used in Western scholarship excludes many Muslim acts of philanthropy. This definition privileges Western scholarly framing of philanthropy, which has been heavily informed by scientific approaches to philanthropy. This article argues that this framing of philanthropy limits our understanding of Muslim philanthropy and should not be privileged over other cultural and religious traditions' notions of philanthropy. Muslim philanthropy is explored by examining theological and cultural sources in order to point towards a broader conception of philanthropy within an Islamic context. It illustrates the challenges of strict adherence to the Western definition of philanthropy for scholars of Muslim philanthropy. Ultimately, the article suggests a framework that the field of philanthropic studies can use to go beyond its Western-centric definition to be more inclusive of other cultural and faith perspectives, and proposes that Muslim philanthropy should be interpreted as a discursive tradition.

Key words Muslim • philanthropy • Islam • religion • indigenous traditions

To cite this article: Siddiqui, S. (2022) Muslim philanthropy: living beyond a Western definition, Voluntary Sector Review, 13(3): 338–354, DOI: 10.1332/204080521X16366613535698

Introduction

Philanthropy is trending. It has captured the imagination of people across all spectrums of society. But our modern understanding of philanthropy is consumed by the very wealthy, such as Bill and Melinda Gates and institutions like the Ford Foundation. Missing from this discussion are the ordinary people, such as parents, grandparents, elders and friends, who seek to help their communities become better places. This is because the modern definition of philanthropy is very Western-centric and non-Western communities and scholars do not identify with it. Furthermore, philanthropic studies as a field has largely developed drawing on Western-centric scholarship, as much of the foundational research that is building this field has been largely situated in the West. While the scientific philanthropy movement has sought to look at charity as being distinct from philanthropy, for reasons that will be explained later, the terms ‘philanthropy’ and ‘charity’ are used interchangeably in this article.

The commonly used or adopted definition of philanthropy in Western scholarship – voluntary action for the public good – excludes many acts of Muslim philanthropy. This
framing of philanthropy (which has Greco–Roman origins and has been transformed by the scientific philanthropy movement) tends to ignore the humanistic side and prioritise a social-scientific definition (McCully, 2012).

The definition needs to be reframed and adapted in order to account for what we consider Muslim philanthropy. Research exploring Muslim philanthropy in the past has tended to look for practices that fit within this Western-centric definition. Similarly, scholars of Islam have focused their understanding of Muslim philanthropy largely on waqf (religious endowments), Zakat (obligatory giving) or Sadaqah (optional religious giving), or a combination of these. These scholars have seemingly accepted the Western definition of philanthropy and sought to examine Muslim practices that fall within that definition of philanthropy. These scholars’ acceptance of the definition has resulted in their concluding that certain Muslim charitable acts are not philanthropy. The issue is not that there is a ‘Western’ and a ‘Muslim’ practice of philanthropy. Such practices are informed by local culture and tradition. The challenge is the privileging of the Western scholarly framing of philanthropy, which has been heavily informed by scientific approaches to philanthropy.

Unperturbed by the scholarly debate over the definition of philanthropy, Muslims have for centuries practised charitable, humanitarian or social acts that can be described as philanthropy. Muslims draw on the Quran (the holy book of Islam), Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) and local customary practices to influence their charitable acts. Philanthropy in Islam is understood to mean the Muslim’s moral obligation to do good for God (McChesney, 1995). While scholars have focused on the Islamic practices of waqf, Zakat and Sadaqah as examples of Muslim philanthropy, an examination of Muslim practice suggests that academic studies have remained interested in understanding Muslim philanthropy through textual analysis or archival analysis, but have not paid enough attention to those customary practices that fall in the gap and thus are often unrecognised in the scholars’ discussions. Further complicating the study of Muslim philanthropy lies the fact that many schools of thought within Islamic law permit Muslims to assimilate local practices into Muslim religious practice, allowing regional variations in Muslim philanthropy. Placing Muslim philanthropy in a self-contained box therefore fails to provide us with a deeper understanding of Islam.

This article argues that a Western scholarly understanding of philanthropy limits our understanding of Muslim philanthropy and should not be privileged over other cultural and religious traditions’ notions of philanthropy. It explores Muslim philanthropy by examining theological and cultural sources in order to point towards a broader conception of philanthropy within an Islamic context. It illustrates the challenges of strict adherence to the Western definition of philanthropy for scholars of Muslim philanthropy. Ultimately, it suggests a framework that the field of philanthropic studies can use to go beyond its Western-centric definition to be more inclusive of other cultural and faith perspectives.

Khan and Siddiqui (2017) propose that Muslim philanthropy should be interpreted as a discursive tradition. Talal Asad (1986) says that:

An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular practice in the present. Clearly, not everything that Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition. Nor is an Islamic tradition in this sense necessarily imitative of what was done in the past.
The discursive tradition allows scholars to treat Muslim philanthropy as a non-homogenous tradition that is dependent on reasoning and argument. This approach treats Muslim philanthropy as a practice-oriented religious tradition.

Definitions and terminology vs tradition and practice

Philanthropy has captured the imagination and spotlight of scholars, policy makers, the media and the public (Thelin and Trollinger, 2014). In the past 50 years, scholars have sought to define, identify and classify this human behaviour, which is arguably as old as humanity. In an effort to define the behaviour, scholars looked into the past to find a term that could best encapsulate it. This important trajectory of growth has resulted in my alma mater establishing the world’s first undergraduate, Master’s and doctoral programmes in philanthropist studies as well as a School of Philanthropy. The word ‘philanthropy’ has provided a focus on action for the social good that goes beyond what we would call basic charity and volunteerism. However, I am constantly reminded that the term ‘philanthropy’ means something different in the West than in my parents’ native Pakistan or India.

Consider my parents as a case study. My parents have been very social people and have lived incredibly civically engaged lives. My father refers to their civic activities as ‘social work’. My father, a haematologist who has also been a haemophiliac for much of his life, takes great satisfaction in volunteering for the Fatimid Foundation in Pakistan every time he visits the country. My father is not a licenced, trained or aspiring social worker in the contemporary sense of the word. Nor is my father contemplating a career change in retirement from physician to social worker. Social work, to him, includes helping indigent children suffering from blood disorders as well as his role as president of the Zambian–Pakistani Friendship Association. In essence, he has placed all voluntary and civic activity in the ‘social work’ bucket. He comes from a long line of physicians and it may be natural to confine such activity to social work rather than medicine. Remarkably enough, for much of the 20th century, what we call philanthropy was studied within the academic discipline of social work (Marx, 2020).

My mother has never considered this activity social work. Her perspective on this work is derived from three of the most influential people in her life: her parents and her maternal grandfather. Her father was an editor for the Pakistan Times newspaper and a lifelong member of an Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan. Her maternal grandfather was a lifelong socialist/communist. Her mother was the matriarch of the family. In a very male-centred world, my grandmother was the one to whom the family and friends went for the resolution of problems. Some of these issues were resolved through wisdom, some through voluntary action and some required philanthropy. It is not surprising that my mother sees voluntary action as community service. Whether it is community service as envisioned by her socialist grandfather or her Islamist father is hard to determine, although both have been clearly influential. But it is clear that an obligation to family is at the centre of her charitable worldview because of the influence of her mother.

While there may not be any unity between my parents in what to call this human activity, there is clear unity on what informs this action. My parents are devout Muslims, and their faith provides context to why they promote social work or community service. It would surprise them if someone would tell them that there
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are scholars (Mattson, 2010) who would argue that their annual charitable tithing, Zakat, would not be included in what we define philanthropy today. For example, Robert Payton (1998) coined the definition ‘voluntary action for the public good’ to help break ground on disciplinary research on philanthropy. Payton considered that certain religious giving, such as tithing and Zakat, were excluded from his definition of philanthropy as they were not voluntary and were instead religious obligations. However, his later work (Payton and Moody, 2008) suggests that he may have reconsidered that position.

I use these as examples to illustrate how definitions of key terms that we use are subject to the time, context and discipline that seek to frame them. This framing can sometimes exclude important cultural, religious and societal frameworks.

The premise of this article is that Muslim philanthropy exists and is grounded in faith, tradition and cultural practice. Furthermore, I argue that faith is grounded in both theology and practice. Because faith is dependent on human beings living in disparate communities, societies and at different times, this definition of philanthropy is constantly evolving. Finally, I argue that Muslim philanthropy should not be constrained by Western-centric or modern definitions of philanthropy. When scholars explore philanthropy by Muslims in Muslim societies/communities, they should try to understand it in Muslims’ own terms. In order to do so we need to understand Muslim cultural practices and conceptions regarding philanthropy. I suggest that rather than defining philanthropy, we should adopt frameworks that allow us to examine Muslim philanthropy despite its changing and evolving nature.

Development of the modern definition of western philanthropy and philanthropic studies

There are important contemporary academic definitions of philanthropy, including work by Marty Sulek, Lester Salamon, Jon Van Til, Robert Payton, George McCully and David Billis among others.4 One commonly accepted definition is ‘voluntary action for the public good’, which was coined by Robert Payton of the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy in an effort to promote the establishment of an academic disciplinary subject, as alluded to earlier in this article (Hall, 1999). He argued then, as I argue today, that the philanthropic sector’s greatest challenge is not the lack of best practice but the need for an interdisciplinary embrace of the meaning of philanthropy. The word ‘philanthropy’ is derived from a noun in ancient Greek, translated into Latin, meaning ‘love of humanity’ (Sulek, 2005). Another popular academic definition was developed by Salamon (1992), who defines philanthropy as ‘the private giving of time or valuables (money, security, property) for public purposes’. Van Til (1990) defines philanthropy as ‘the voluntary giving and receiving of time and money aimed (however imperfectly) towards the needs of charity and the interests of all in a better quality of life’. All of these definitions tend to privilege money and wealth as a dominant aspect of philanthropy (Sulek, 2010). McCully (2008, 2012) seeks to broaden this definition as ‘private initiatives for the public good, focusing on quality of life’. However, his synthesis is very United States-centric, focused on formal organisations. Meanwhile Billis (2020) added community and family attempts to make our understanding of philanthropy inclusive of non-Western traditions and culture.

The field of philanthropic studies is an interdisciplinary field that initially grew out of the humanities and liberal arts. More recently, it is largely situated in the interdisciplinary field of public affairs. Indiana University is currently the only
university in the world with a school of philanthropic studies. Its faculty includes scholars from the humanities, social science and public administration.

The search for a definition of philanthropy reaches out to the playwright Aeschylus in ‘Prometheus Bound’ (5th century BC), to describe Prometheus’ character as ‘humanity loving’ (philanthropos tropos), for having given to the earliest proto-humans, who had no culture, fire (symbolising technological civilisation) and ‘blind hope’ (optimism). This connection to an ancient Greek play, which is then transformed by a Western-centric scientific philanthropy movement, provides a distinctly anti-faith and indigenous cultural connection to the modern definition of philanthropy. While Muslims also inherited and preserved ancient Greek traditions, our modern conception of philanthropy has taken those ancient ideas and transformed them using a Western-centric, scientific philanthropy lens that can exclude certain cultures, traditions and religions – such as Islam.

Through this embrace of a Greek and a Roman tradition, philanthropy became part of ‘civil religion’ discourse. The actions became about the honour and dignity of the community. Historian Paul Veyne (1990) uses the Greek term ‘euregetism’ to refer to the expectation that rich people contribute from their wealth to help their community for the sake of prestige and honour. Similar to the religious practice of tithing, euregetism was an established practice until it was replaced by more formal taxation. Euregetism tended to perpetuate inequalities of wealth and power (Isin and Lefebvre, 2005; Nicholls, 2020).

The historical analysis of philanthropy then moves to the late Middle Ages and the economic transformation of Europe and rise of the cities. The so-called Poor Laws and the Statute of Charitable Uses of 1601 are considered a watershed moment in legislating philanthropy. It is considered the first time ‘poverty was addressed in an organized and official way’ (Payton and Moody, 2008). The modern charitable law is considered to have been created in this era.

The study of philanthropy then transitions to early America. American colonies relied on the English model of governance and organisation (Phillips and Jung, 2015). An analysis of religiously grounded concern for the community in John Winthrop’s sermon ‘A Model of Christian Charity’, written in 1630, Benjamin Franklin’s support of community institutions through philanthropic contributions and then the famous description of voluntary associations as a fixture of American civic life by Tocqueville help further frame the analysis of philanthropy (Hall, 2006).

This is brought to the modern era through the ‘scientific philanthropy’ movement, which was promoted by people such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller (Bremmer, 1988). Missing from this historical exploration and development are other religious and cultural traditions such as Islam. In the period between 2010 and 2021, the leading journals in the field, such as Nonprofit Voluntary Sector Quarterly, Nonprofit Management and Leadership and Voluntary Sector Review had no articles that referenced Islam or Muslim. VOLUNTAS was one of the few journals in the field that had articles related to Muslim or Islamic philanthropy, charity, civil society or non-profits.

Islamic notions of philanthropy

As we discussed earlier, philanthropy in Islam is understood to mean the Muslim’s moral obligation to do good for God (McChesney, 1995). For Muslims this moral obligation has been defined by Islamic sources of law (Fauzia, 2013). There are two major or primary sources of Islamic law: the Quran and the Sunnah. In the Quran,
some terms that infer philanthropy include *Zakat, Sadaqah, birr* (righteousnous), *amal al-salihat* (good deed), *khayr* (goodness) and *ihsan* (virtuous) (Fauzia, 2013). For example, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims adopted aspects of Sassanid law to help define religious endowments known as *waqfs*. Philanthropy has been incorporated as a central feature of the Islamic faith through *Zakat*, which is one form of Muslim philanthropy. *Zakat* is considered one of the five pillars of Islam. Both primary sources of Islam have many examples that promote philanthropy.

As noted earlier, scholarship generally points to three examples to illustrate different forms of Islamic philanthropy: *Zakat, Sadaqah* and *waqf*. The *Quran* defines *Zakat* to mean purification and growth (Singer, 2008). The first meaning suggests that by giving a fixed proportion of one's surplus, we purify the remainder of the wealth. Growth signifies God's promise to multiply the giver's generosity many times over. There are those who question whether *Zakat* is a philanthropic instrument. For example, Ingrid Mattson (2010) argues that *Zakat* is a tax and not a philanthropic obligation. She argues that in the past the state collected and distributed these funds. Similarly, Robert Payton argues that since tithing is obligatory it does not fall within the voluntary nature of philanthropy. He argues that as one of the five pillars of Islam, it is not voluntary for Muslims and that Muslims are required to pay 2.5 per cent of their surplus income and assets towards specific causes. While the *Quran* provides eight specific categories of recipients of *Zakat*, in closer examination these categories are very broad: *Zakat* can be used for people in poverty, people in need, for employees of the *Zakat* administration, in evangelising Islam, to free slaves, to free people of debt, for the cause of God and to help travellers.

Similarily, Singer (2018) argues that *Zakat* is misunderstood as philanthropy as it is not voluntary or benevolent. However, she concedes that historically there is little evidence that *Zakat* was paid or apportioned by any premodern polity, thus distinguishing it from a tax levied by the state for the functioning of the said state.

While scholars such as Singer and Mattson dispute that *Zakat* is charity, the consensus among Muslims is that it is a form of charity that has been institutionalised into the Islamic faith (Ba-Yunus and Kone, 2006). Very few Muslim-majority nations have systems where the state attempts to collect *Zakat* (Kuran, 2003). Some argue that this has largely been due to the failure of the state to institutionalise *Zakat* and the lack of trust within the state. Kuran (2003) argues that there has never been consensus on how *Zakat* should be paid or collected. While in the past, Muslims may have been held accountable for their non-payment of *Zakat*, scholars note that today most Muslims do not pay *Zakat* through government and in fact use it to further their charitable interests (McChesney, 1995). Abraham argues that *Zakat* has long been practised as an individual act and seen as a companion of ritual prayer by Muslims (Abraham, 2018). Rashid et al (2017) argue that it is an individual Muslim obligation to pay *Zakat* and develop a system to distribute this *Zakat*. It is clear that there is a disconnect between the scholarly understanding of the theology of *Zakat* and the practice of *Zakat* by Muslims. The misunderstanding that Singer alludes to goes beyond scholarship as Muslims across the world embrace *Zakat* as a philanthropic act. The taxonomy 'voluntary/involuntary' does not help us understand charity as an ethic rooted in Islam. If philanthropy is defined in such stark terms then it is indeed something other than philanthropy. But if philanthropy's definition can be enlarged, *Zakat* clearly has an overlap with the notion. *Zakat* is both individual and institutional. It is obligatory, but how it is given and distributed is very open. Most importantly, it
straddles the line between religious obligation and social transaction because it does in that it is both part of worship (ibadat) and a benevolent action.

The second form of philanthropy in Islam is Sadaqah. Sadaqah is considered to encompass all forms of Muslim philanthropy. It is voluntary charitable giving as compared with the obligatory Zakat (Singer, 2018). The Hebrew term ‘sedaka’ is cognate with the Arabic word and both derive from the Semitic root /sdk/ meaning right, privilege, grant or gift (Singer, 2008). Arabic and Hebrew are different languages but have shared roots and there are grammatical similarities (Bird, 1982). Both in Arabic and Hebrew the word has a strong connection to justice, or adl. Sadaqah can be for formal giving (to institutions) or informal giving (to individuals). And Sadaqah (like Zakat) can be given to family members in need. Muslims who fail to give Sadaqah are not committing a sin. However, they are promised great religious rewards if they engage in this voluntary practice. There are no limitations on Sadaqah, and it is presumed that most non-Zakat charity giving by Muslims falls within this category. This includes both required and voluntary forms of philanthropy. It is in this realm that even a smile, intended to do good with the intention to show devotion to God, would be considered to be philanthropy. As a child, I would routinely be encouraged by family to smile when I was upset about something, with the statement: “Remember smiling is Sadaqah [charity].”

The third form of philanthropy is the waqf, or endowment (Lev, 2005). The waqf is a religious endowment for charitable purpose in devotion to God. The waqf originates from a hadith when Umar ibn al-Khattab acquired a property and asked the Prophet whether he should donate it for charity (Garcia, 2007). The Prophet replied: ‘Encumber the things itself and devote its fruits to pious purposes.’ Umar instructed that the property could not be sold, and its income was to be donated for specific charitable purposes. Thus, a waqf is a form of charity that is designed to give, long after the initial act of donation takes place. Waqfs are another example of how Muslims transform and institutionalise prevailing cultural traditions within Islamic law and practice (Cizakca, 2000). Muslims have borrowed from Sassanid traditions and re-gift this idea to the modern world in the form of the modern philanthropic endowment and foundation (Adam, 2020).

These scholarly debates seek to either define Islamic scripture or to capture Muslim practice over time. As we have discussed, scholars and Muslims may disagree about how some of these religious requirements, like Zakat, are to be practised. In addition to looking to the Quran, Muslims also look to stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad for guidance on how to live their lives charitably. From Islam’s inception, we have scripture and stories that suggest Muslims are seeking to understand their philanthropic obligations and the corresponding impact in both their current life and afterlife.

In Muslim philanthropy, intention is awarded central importance. Focusing on intention means that charitable acts are not assessed by their efficacy alone, but rather by the intention of the giver. An example from the life of the Prophet illustrates this point. Promoting the benefits of charity is illustrated in a Sunnah of the Prophet regarding a man who sought to give charity (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1355, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1022). The man went to the Prophet asking for a pathway to heaven. The Prophet suggested to the man that he did acts of charity. The first day the man accidentally gave charity to a man who was a thief. When he found out that he had given charity to a thief he decided to give charity again to earn the blessings of God. This time he accidentally gave charity to a rich undeserving man. On learning of his mistake, he
Muslim philanthropy sought to correct the mistake by giving charity to a woman! This time he accidentally gave charity to a prostitute. When he found out that the woman he gave charity to was a prostitute, he was devastated. In despair he went to the Prophet. He was told that his charity was still important as the charity he gave to the thief may prevent him from stealing, the prostitute from selling her body while teaching the rich man to give charity himself. From this story we learn an important element of Muslim philanthropy. The intention to do good is more important than the eventual success of the charitable act. Unlike the story of Prometheus, God here is seen as a partner in voluntary good. Furthermore, unlike the Payton definition, the purpose of Muslim philanthropy is demonstrating one’s love of God rather than a utilitarian emphasis on the public good.

The following injunctions in the Quran also stress the importance of charity. ‘Allah tells us that “Those who spend in charity their properties by night and by day, in secret and in public, have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.”’ Again, this injunction opens up the possibility that giving of charity is about the relationship with God rather than the public good. Furthermore, that charity, whether done publicly or privately, will be rewarded by God. ‘And spend in the way of Allah and cast not yourselves to destruction, with your own hands, but do good; for Allah surely loveth those who do good.’ Intentionally doing good is a way to earn God’s love. Muslims are tasked with intentionally doing good. This may include the giving of money, volunteering time, lending their voice for social justice or stopping themselves from doing harm. ‘The parable of those who spend their funds in the way of Allah is that of a grain: it groweth seven ears and each ear hath a hundred grains.’

Muslim philanthropy is not selfless and accepts that the giver receives benefits from their giving. However, the primary intent of the gift is to receive the blessings of God and not fame, glory or tax benefits. Ample research suggests that, among other benefits, giving results in better health outcomes (Heng et al, 2020), improves mental health, results in stronger personal relationships and increases social standing (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). ‘Behold, ye are those invited to spend in the way of Allah: but amongst you are some that are niggardly. But any who are niggardly are so at the expense of their own souls.’ While philanthropy is loved by God and benefits the person practising it, the opposite hurts the person. Muslim philanthropy is in partnership with God, places emphasis on the individual’s intentional acts and inaction, and suggests that it is in the self-interest of the individual to practise philanthropy.

The Prophet stated: ‘The upper hand in charity is better than the lower hand: begin with your dependents [sic]; the best of charity is that which is given after one is satisfied …’ (Siddiqui, 2010). This is why many Muslim-majority countries report high levels of informal giving. This informal Muslim philanthropy includes giving to help needy family members.

A Muslim notion of philanthropy is that the best form of giving would be the kind that is given at the right time, for the right reason (loving God), for the right cause (doing good). The Prophet echoes this when he states: ‘There is no envy except in two things: a person whom Allah has given wealth and he spends it, all, in the proper way, and a person whom Allah has given wisdom and he uses it in judgment and teaches it’ (Siddiqui, 2010).

A Muslim conception of philanthropy suggests how one can give charity to obtain approval from God. ‘If ye disclose acts of charity it is well but if ye hide them and give them to the poor that is best for you and will remove from you some of your
stains of evil. And Allah is well acquainted with what ye do.” A Muslim notion of philanthropy amplifies the importance of a person’s intent. If the sole motivation or intent behind giving is glory or material gain, it defeats the spiritual purpose of the gift. The primary intent is to please God by doing public good. The fact that a person receives additional benefits shows how God asks Muslims to do things that create benefit for the world and themselves.

The perception of philanthropy today is very different from its historic roots. Today it is understood in terms of money and volunteerism. However, classical Muslim definitions of philanthropy are more expansive. “But forgive them and overlook their misdeeds: for Allah loveth those who are kind.” To forgive another for their misdeeds is considered a charitable or philanthropic act in Islam. Muslims’ notion of philanthropy does not limit one’s charity to the amount one can give.

The Prophet states:

Every Muslim has to give for charity. They asked: O Prophet of Allah, how about one who has nothing to give? He said: He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity. They said: If one cannot do even that? He replied: He should help one who is eager to have help. They said: And if he couldn’t do that? He answered: Then he should do good action and abstain from evil, this is a charity for him. (Siddiqui, 2010)

Thus, all Muslims can participate in the benefits of philanthropy. Those who can afford it can give of their wealth and those who have nothing can give charity by refraining from doing evil deeds. Therefore, Muslim notions of philanthropy include voluntary inaction for the public good as well as action. Modern Western definitions of philanthropy therefore emphasise the giving of time and money. While Muslim notions of philanthropy emphasise limiting or doing no harm in addition to proactive actions that do good.

Philanthropy in Islam is not just about the benefits that society gets from charity but also the development of a compassionate, caring, engaged human being. Just as important as the giving is the effect that giving has on the donor. The acts seek to draw the individual closer to God through their own transformation and by transforming those around them.

**Muslim philanthropy: tensions and challenges**

Muslim philanthropy has been shaped by the location and historical period in which it was practised. For example, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, all Muslims within the kingdom governed by him were required to pay Zakat. However, waqfs were not administered by the state. During the time of Muslim rule in Spain, waqfs had become an important instrument of political legitimacy and power (Garcia, 2007). Waqfs, while endowed by private individuals, were under the control of an administrator who was named in the waqf deed, and was given legal status by the approval of the judge. Despite this political gain, scholars have argued that the primary reason for these forms of religious endowments was personal salvation (Lev, 2005). While philanthropic foundations such as the waqf were considered an important tool of the state administration of wealth and land use, they were also vital for Muslim civil society. It is because of this latter role that the British and French colonialists of Muslim lands treated this form of Muslim philanthropy with hostility (Cizakca, 2000).
Philanthropy has been equally important to men and women. However, philanthropy provided Muslim women with a rare vehicle to participate in public displays of power during the Ottoman period (Singer, 2008). For most of Muslim history, philanthropy has remained in the realm of private individuals. These acts can be seen through the *waqfs* that have been established across the world where Muslims have lived. Since the 20th century, Muslims have adopted associations in their philanthropic acts to help attain social justice. Examination of Muslim voluntary action has helped understand freedom movements that resulted in independence for many Muslim countries, the fight for civil rights and social justice among Muslim minorities and the quest for a more just society. A famous 12th-century Islamic scholar and philosopher, Imam Ghazali, suggests that Muslim philanthropy, if done properly, has the dual effect of making for a more just society while deepening one’s devotion and indebtedness to God. The focus on strategy over injustice is an important difference in notions of Muslim philanthropy. Muslim philanthropy relies on God for impact, as illustrated in an earlier story of the Prophet. However, it seeks to further a just society. As Mittermaier (2019) points out through her interviews, there are real concerns about the structural challenges of an uneven distribution of power and resources. Mittermaier (2019) reminds us that [Muslim donors and volunteers] ‘don’t care in the way we might want them to care, but they give continuously … with profound devotion … [with] an orientation to God’.

In the modern world, Muslims are faced with two competing arguments related to Muslim philanthropy because of the complex interaction of colonisation, state control and a search for religious identity and definition. The first considers philanthropy to be a personal matter and rejects state control or influence. Atia (2013) points out this tension between Muslim individuals and the state in Egypt. In a forthcoming volume on Muslim philanthropy across 20 countries, one clear commonality across those populations is the emphasis on and strong embrace of informal philanthropy over formalised philanthropy. This expression is generally embraced by traditionalist Muslims. Traditionalist Muslims are those who accept the four Sunni Schools of law (Fauzia, 2013). The second considers that this aspect of the faith should also be endorsed by the state. This expression is embraced by modernists and revivalists. Modernists and revivalists seek guidance directly from the *Quran* and *Sunnah* and reject the four Sunni Schools of law (Fauzia, 2013).

These two expressions have resulted in Muslims largely falling within three separate groups (Fauzia, 2013):

- those who favour state control over faith;
- those who are against interference and institutionalisation by the state;
- those who want to keep philanthropy in the hands of non-state actors but demand mutual support from the state.

As discussed earlier, these positions are further complicated when we try to fit the Muslim practice of philanthropy within the confines of the Western definition of philanthropy. For example, on Thursday, 25 March 2010, Dr Ingrid Mattson delivered the seventh annual Thomas H. Lake Lecture (Mattson, 2010). Mattson served as the first female president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and is a noted Islamic scholar. Mattson argued that *Zakat* was in fact a wealth tax that fell outside of the definition of philanthropy. However, she suggested that in modern United States,
Zakat could be used to balance the needs of struggling Muslims. Mattson viewed the institution of Zakat through two lenses. First, through the perspective of a revivalist who sought to define the practice through the Sunnah of the Prophet. During that period Zakat was collected by the state. Second, through the modern Western-centric social-scientific definition of philanthropy (voluntary action for the public good), which considers obligatory giving as involuntary, discounting the agency each person has in making a choice to tithe or pay Zakat. The fact that Zakat is required or that government may play a role in this act of charity excluded it from the definition of philanthropy. Unfortunately, both positions are in contradiction to a large proportion of the Muslim world, which treats Zakat as an act of personal charity (Fauzia, 2013). As discussed earlier, Mattson is not alone in this position. Singer (2008), and Payton (1998) have argued similar positions on Zakat.

The tension between the role of the state and religious philanthropy is best illustrated through the example of Muslim American philanthropy after increased government scrutiny after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001. By focusing on a philanthropy as it is defined in the West, Muslim Americans did not address the main threat to Muslim American philanthropy in a post-9/11 context.

**Philanthropy versus charity**

There has long been a debate about the difference between philanthropy and charity. Philanthropy scholars have long sought to define philanthropic acts as the preferred or higher forms of acts of social good. The common refrain is that charity is alleviating hunger by feeding someone a fish while philanthropy is teaching someone how to fish. As Payton and Moody (2008) suggest:

> The common usage of charity versus philanthropy can be confusing. … [P]hilanthropy is used primarily as an umbrella term for the entire spectrum of voluntary actions for the public good, while charity – which was at one time the umbrella term for the field – is used more narrowly. … [T]he two terms are differentiated according to the two broad objectives of voluntary action mentioned earlier: philanthropy for acts to improve the quality of life versus charity for acts to relieve suffering. … [I]f charity is a matter of bringing blankets and medicine and food to refugees, is a matter of getting the refugee back home and putting their society back on the road to social and economic recovery...

This worldview further complicates a Muslim’s understanding of philanthropy. Think of the man who sought guidance from the Prophet Muhammad on how to earn a place in heaven. He unwittingly gives charity to a thief, a prostitute and an undeserving man. The Prophet suggests that the man must have faith in God in terms of what the final outcome of these acts may be. Each of the final possible outcomes the Prophet talks about could be defined as ‘development’ rather than alleviating suffering. A thief may stop stealing, a prostitute may stop selling herself and a miser may become a generous. This transformative impact, within a Muslim lens, is in God’s hands, not in the giver’s. Therefore, in this particular story, charity and philanthropy would have the same meaning as they will both, through God’s intervention, result in the transformative development that some scholars (such as Payton and Moody) require.
The additional challenge is that sometimes the alleviation of suffering leads to what we consider an improvement in the quality of education. Take, for instance, the work of the Indianapolis-based non-profit Global Interfaith Program. It sought to help orphans and vulnerable children by feeding them lunch. But it quickly discovered that this act of alleviating suffering resulted in the children’s test scores and overall academic success increasing.

The distinction between charitable and philanthropic acts is problematic when most of the religious (especially Islamic) literature uses the term ‘charity’ rather than ‘philanthropy’. I argue that this distinction seeks to exclude religious action and privileges secular forms of kindness. As I have stated earlier, for the purposes of this study, I use the words ‘charity’ and ‘philanthropy’ interchangeably.

Inclusion or exclusion?

‘Prometheus Bound’ (5th century BC), a description of Prometheus’ character as ‘humanity loving’ (philanthropos tropos), is an intoxicating symbol of what we may hope to achieve in human engagement for the social good. After all, Prometheus’ blind optimism in donating the technology of knowledge (fire) to the earliest proto-humans who had no culture pushes our conceptions of what deliberate, tested interventions can ultimately measure. However, this allegory is challenging for Muslims (and people of faith) because Prometheus has to steal the fire from Zeus in order to help the proto-humans. Thus, it is Prometheus’ compassionate defiance of his selfish god that leads to the positive developments among proto-humans through scientific discovery. Missing from our public narrative is Zeus’ eternal punishment of Prometheus for his compassionate defiance. This narrative is troubling for a person of faith who seeks to make the world a better place through a partnership with God.

Philanthropy scholars have pointed to the involuntary nature of Muslim charitable acts (and in particular Zakat) to suggest that such acts should be excluded from the definition of philanthropy. However, a more fundamental challenge for religious philanthropy is the secular expectation that these acts must be done independently of God.

Islamic scholars such as Mohammad Iqbal have suggested that ‘Prometheus Bound’ should be taken for what it is – an allegory. He suggests in his poem ‘Mohabbat’ (divine love) that rather than excluding religious acts of charity from philanthropy, we should simply construct better allegories (Mir, 1990). Iqbal’s poem may be a better framing of Muslim notions of philanthropy. It illustrates how Khidr takes a formula from the throne of God, with God’s permission, and then uses that formula to transform a desert into an oasis. Unlike Zeus, God is a partner in Khidr’s journey to make the world better; Khidr is a mythical figure that is part of ‘Sura Kahf’ in the Quran. Sura Kahf is recited by many Muslims every Friday as a continuation of a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. ‘Mohabbat’ embraces some important elements of Muslim notions of philanthropy, including: partnership with God or a leap of faith; intentional action as well as intentional inaction; and humility. In ‘Mohabbat’, Iqbal brings together not just the real and scientific (as the alchemist) with the mystical and magical (glitter from the stars, glow from the moon) with a reminder of worldly limitations (humility from the angels, self-abasement of the dew) to creating an oasis in the desert, his purpose is the ‘glorification of God’. This poem is particularly important because it emphasises the environment (Khidr means...
‘the Green One’). More than a 100 years ago, Iqbal was emphasising the importance of inaction and divine partnership in the hope to save our environment from the ravages of Prometheus’ worship of scientific innovation.

**Conclusion**

Western scholars have sought to define philanthropy in a way that makes it difficult for religious and Eastern traditions to have a more comprehensive self-examination of their own charitable or humanitarian acts. A focus on Greek and Roman origins creates a framework that at times excludes both religion and non-Western traditions. However, it is critical that we interrogate these notions to understand their limitations in understanding Muslim philanthropy. Furthermore, the attempt to differentiate charity from philanthropy can further exclude non-Western and non-religious acts. Having a definition may be a useful starting point for scholars of philanthropy. However, the Western definition should not inhibit scholars to constantly re-evaluate our understanding of philanthropy when examining norms or traditions that fall outside of the Western conception of philanthropy. Developing a framework to examine philanthropy in a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary manner will help us make the field more vibrant. Talal Asad’s (1986) discursive tradition, rather than definitions of philanthropy (Van Til, 1990) and Iqbal’s alternate to Prometheus Bound, may be useful mechanisms for updating outdated frameworks to understand philanthropy in general and Muslim philanthropy in particular. The lack of best practices, measures of accountability or management techniques is not the principal challenge to the field of philanthropy. In fact, the field of philanthropic studies has been too ready to embrace scientific philanthropy to better express impact. The real danger to the field is the need to quickly define and limit philanthropy.

For centuries, Muslim philanthropy has lived well beyond the narrow scope of a Western definition. Lately, some attention has been paid to Muslim philanthropy using Western definitions of philanthropy as central frames. But there is a need to examine Muslim philanthropy from beyond a Western-centric framing of it. Smiling with the intent to do good opens up interesting research questions to be explored using ethnographical, social science and psychosocial research methods. Similarly, intentional inaction for the social good opens up interesting research questions related to climate change and environmental sustainability in Muslim contexts. Do climate change activists use religious framing when encouraging inaction to further their mission? How does smiling and intentional inaction impact on individuals’ monetary and voluntary contributions? Can a broader understanding of philanthropy from a Muslim perspective open up new and innovative ways to include more people within the social good? A recent report found that Muslim Americans give at much higher rates than the general American population, to religious and non-religious causes (Noor et al, 2021). However, this report uses the frames of monetary giving and voluntary hours. Exploring the use of other tools of Muslim philanthropy would help us better understand the contributions of Muslims to philanthropy.

Muslim scholars, practitioners and policy makers need to step up and explore their own cultural, religious and historical traditions to develop a constantly evolving definition of philanthropy.
Notes


3 Indiana University established, initially, the Center on Philanthropy and then later the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in Indianapolis. The school offers a Bachelor’s degree, a Master’s degree and a PhD in philanthropic studies.

4 See: Sulek (2010).

5 For these definitions of philanthropy, see: Van Til (1990), Salamon (1992), Payton (1998), McCully (2012) and Billis (2020) Americans give at much.

6 Previous work by the author including: Konrath et al (2021), Noor et al (2021), Khader and Siddiqui (2018), Siddiqui (2013) and Siddiqui (2010).


8 Source: discussions with Robert Payton during an Ethics, Philanthropy and Religion doctoral seminar in the spring of 2006.

9 Quran II: 274.

10 Quran II: 195.

11 Quran II: 261.

12 Quran XLVII: 38.

13 Quran II: 271.

14 Quran V: 13.


16 Love / Muhabbet /

‘The tresses of the bride of night were still uncurled / The stars of the sky knew nothing of the joy of travel / The moon in its new apparel looked strange, / And was still ignorant of the iron law that makes it revolve / It was not long since the world had emerged From the dark chamber of possibilities; / The vast universe had no appreciation of life. / One could say that the order of existence / Was in the first stages of perfection: / The eye of the ring had an evident desire for a stone. / It is said that high up in the world / There was an alchemist [رگایمیک], / And the dust under his feet as he walked / Was purer than the cup of Jamshid. / On one of the uprights of the Throne was inscribed / The recipe of an elixir which the angels kept hidden / From the eye of Adam’s soul. / But the alchemist was always on the lookout; / That recipe was worth more to him / Than the Most High Name. / He moved towards the Throne, / On the pretext of glorifying God, / And finally, through resolute effort, / He obtained his heart’s desire. / The search for ingredients / Made him roam the field of possibilities — / How could anything stay hidden / From a confidant of the Court of God! / From the star he borrowed some glitter, / From the moon the scar in its heart / From the night’s ruffled tresses / He pulled out some black hairs / From the lightning he took its flash / Chastity from the houri / And warmth from the breath / Of Jesus the son of Mary. / Then from God he took / A pinch of sublime unconcern / He took humility from the angels, / And self-abasement from the dew. / All these ingredients he dissolved / In the water of the fountain of life. / From the Grand Throne / The compound received the name Love. / The alchemist sprinkled this water / On the new and fresh order of existence. / It was as if his skill was untying the knot / Of the world’s affairs. / Movement appeared: / The atoms gave up the joys of slumber / And got up and began to embrace each other / The suns and the stars
received their proud gait / The buds learnt how to bloom / And the tulip-beds acquired their scars’ (Mustansir, 1990: 112–13).

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References
Muslim philanthropy


