

Managing Karbala: Genealogies of Shia Humanitarianism in Pakistan, England and Iraq

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic fieldwork among charitable trusts in Pakistan and England, this chapter explores the complex genealogies of contemporary Twelver Shia humanitarianism. Moving away from the notion of linear genealogical connections between specific theologies and contemporary humanitarian practices, this chapter argues that the political theology underlying contemporary Shia humanitarianism is informed by the entanglement of diverse genealogical strands. These include reformulations of the ‘Muslim liberal’, the concept of ‘meritocracy’ deriving from managerial discourse, and the Battle of Karbala as an inherently political-theological event. In sum, this chapter purports that – to do justice to the complexity of Shia humanitarianism – it is useful to move away from the notion that an a priori theological foundation underlies contemporary humanitarian work, and instead to think through multipolar and multidirectional interactions.

Keywords: genealogy, political theology, Twelver Shia Islam, humanitarianism

Starting with the seminal work of Carl Schmitt (1985[1922]), scholars of political theology have always been interested in the examination of the religious roots of modern secular formations.¹ For instance, most recently, Wydra (2015) argues that ‘transcendence’ has had a continuous historical presence in political processes up to the present day. Applying this

observation to the study of humanitarian reason, Fassin (2012) frames humanitarianism as a political theology that is historically rooted in Christianity. He situates his argument in a genealogical approach to humanitarianism as a global phenomenon, thereby seeking to identify the fertile ground – if not the origins – that enabled its rise. Based on ethnographic research on Twelver Shia² humanitarian networks since 2012, this chapter explores two questions that such a genealogical approach triggers: first, how far does the linearity of this approach take us in understanding the certainties that inform the present and, second, what alternatives do we have?

Fassin's genealogical take on humanitarianism has a lengthy prehistory, with forefathers ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to Martin Heidegger to – now most prominently – Michel Foucault (1984). This approach has also emerged from a weighty history of foregrounding European or Western history and the role of Christianity in this regard. Yet, in Fassin's framework, Christianity remains an underdefined historical force, implicitly fixed to 'the West' as a cultural space, whose legacy has globally emanated in the form of humanitarianism. In contrast, in Talal Asad's genealogical study *Formations of the Secular*, which highlights the powerful transformation that secular differentiation has brought to Muslim thought, the author reminds us that 'the important thing ... is not [these concepts'] origin (Western or non-Western)'; rather, emphasis should be put on 'the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or enable' (2003: 17).

Asad's reminder is an important call to resist the temptation to identify singular points of origin such as those that surface not only in Fassin's work, but also in studies of Islamic humanitarianism that sometimes mirror Fassin's genealogical and spatial linearity (Fauzia, Mostowlansky and Yahaya, 2018; Mostowlansky, 2019). Much of the literature that examines the social practices and institutions of Islamic humanitarianism within a global context has been shaped by two main lines of investigation. The first approach has focused

on the historical examination of Islamic ideas of charity and philanthropy as providing the foundation for contemporary processes in the Muslim world (e.g., Bonner, Ener and Singer, 2003; Fauzia, 2013; Singer, 2008). The second approach, while often acknowledging the historical depth of Islamic concepts of philanthropy, has particularly highlighted the role of humanitarianism in today's Muslim societies (e.g., Atia, 2013; Benthall, 2016; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdon, 2009; Lacey and Benthall, 2014; Petersen, 2015). In both strands of research, the idea of a common Islamic core around which specific modes of humanitarian practice are formed remains pervasive. Despite efforts to problematise the modern distinction between religious and secular realms, this approach opens the door to old forms of cultural essentialism in new clothes. For instance, Petersen (2016: 17) observes an 'Islamic aid culture' that runs 'almost parallel to the institutionalisation of development aid'. In her view, Muslim NGOs are simultaneously rooted in both religious and secular contexts, move between the two and 'mix' elements from both. Inevitably, such frameworks propel long-lasting, critical debates about the meaning and value of syncretism (Leopold and Jensen, 2004) onto the humanitarian stage. Furthermore, Benthall (2016: 115) sees 'puripetal forces' at work in Islamic aid, using this neologism to describe the active pursuit of purity and distinction that some Muslim organisations have put forward under the conditions of contemporary humanitarianism and international development. As this chapter argues, there is much to be gained by critically assessing such processes of alignment and distinction, particularly when following Fountain's (2013) musings on the 'allergic' reactions that large-scale international institutions have to engaging with so-called 'faith-based' organisations. At the same time, the messiness of actual day-to-day humanitarian practices, which can only be captured through in-depth historical and ethnographic research, remains underexplored (Osella, 2019).

Reiterating Asad's (2003: 17) suggestion to look at the 'forms of life' that inhabit this comparative conundrum, this chapter takes an ethnographic approach to Shia humanitarian networks in order to revisit a set of salient questions for studies in political theology and Islamic humanitarianism. These questions problematise ideas of linearity and chronology between specific theological and political forms and scrutinise the meaning of genealogy when social actors simultaneously employ fragments of theological discourse, economic practice and political activism to justify their means and realise their agendas. Thus, in this chapter, I ask: How can we frame expressions of humanitarianism that are nurtured by the vocabulary of managerialism? And what are we meant to do when the genealogy of the theological lies in the political rather than vice versa?

In the following, I address these questions through an ethnographic exploration of Shia humanitarian networks that span Asia, Europe and Africa. I seek to do so by looking at these networks as being formed through the entanglement of discourses and practices that are constantly adapted and reworked. I thereby follow a notion of 'entanglement' (German: *Verflechtung*) that has gained much prominence in recent scholarship on global history (Conrad and Randeria, 2002): *Verflechtungsgeschichte* ('entangled history') analyses the emergence and intertwinement of networks whose very point of departure is a matter of debate. Rather than highlighting an essentialised genealogical origin, this approach is designed to investigate the intersecting and competing genealogies that make the present appear whole and certain. On the one hand, it opens up a take on political theology that allows one to think with and through the inherent messiness of ethnographic practice. At the same time, it goes beyond the notion of a priori defined political-theological forms whose boundaries are drawn according to their links to assumed traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) or their many denominations.

Against this backdrop, Shia Islam has gained particular prominence in our geopolitical present, despite the fact that Shias only make up 10 per cent of the world's Muslim population. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, much literature on transnational Shiism has focused on Shia politics as infused with revolt and protest against Western modernity (e.g., Cole and Keddie, 1985; Louer, 2008, 2012). From this vantage point, political action in Shia contexts has been predominantly framed as based on theological principles, thereby constituting a counterforce to the ideal of secular statehood. At the same time, increasingly violent sectarian encounters between Shia and Sunni factions in Pakistan (e.g., Fuchs, 2019; Khan, 2012) and many other places around the world have contributed to the image of Shias as a socially, politically and theologically 'beleaguered' minority (Rieck, 2015). In this narrative, Shias are victims who nevertheless have a clearly set political agenda and defend their claims militarily – if necessary, with support from the state of Iran.

In the following, I seek to ethnographically work through these complex genealogies using the examples of representatives of two charitable trusts that are part of Shia humanitarian networks. I will first focus on an organisation in Pakistan and its humanitarian work as embedded in the vision of Muslim liberals. I will then discuss the trust's transnational links to England and the binding concept of 'meritocracy' that – as a derivative from managerial discourse and 'neoliberal culture' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001) – has transformed humanitarian work and practices of giving. Finally, I will turn to the idea of political action as a foundational moment of Shia humanitarianism. I will attempt to show that this foundational moment is rooted not only in the politics of the modern nation-state, but that it goes back to early Islamic history and the Battle of Karbala, which provides a continuous source of inspiration for Shia humanitarianism.

Humanitarian aspirations and the Muslim liberal

On a hot summer day in 2015, I was sitting in Kabir's office in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Kabir volunteers as the managing trustee of one of the country's numerous family-run charitable trusts. Kabir's trust – his wife and mother are also among the trustees – emerged when his late father donated a piece of land for charitable purposes. After registering the endowment around fifteen years ago, it took some time to construct the facilities and make the trust operational. Since 2008 Kabir's trust has been active in healthcare projects, education and the provisioning of humanitarian aid.

Kabir is an eloquent elderly man. He is a Twelver Shia Muslim and a Sayyid – progeny of the Prophet Muhammad's family – and thus enjoys particular respect in the Shia community. On that hot afternoon, we sat in his office and drank tea, the fan purring loudly from the ceiling. I began the conversation by asking why he and his family had started the trust, which now has several employees who work on projects in different parts of the country. Kabir responded that his late father had always seen Islam as being intimately linked to gaining knowledge and helping the needy. He then explained:

One of the Prophet's titles is 'City of Knowledge' ..., and he taught his followers that, to gain knowledge, they should go as far as China. In those days, China was considered the other end of the universe. China was not a Muslim country back then. ... The very fact that he ordered his followers to do that was a reflection of the belief that knowledge should not be bound by religion, ethnicity or geography and that it is a global phenomenon. ... The lesson from that is that, as Muslims, we have to be liberal minded when it comes to the spirit of helping other human beings.

During our conversation Kabir used a variety of examples to illustrate his humanitarian work and what he meant by 'the spirit of liberalism'. For instance, he told me that a few years ago, when the region of Sindh in southern Pakistan had again experienced devastating floods, his trust was active in distributing food rations. After Kabir's arrival in Sindh, a local volunteer

addressed him, pointing to the long queue of people in front of the provisioning stations, and expressed his concern about the presence of several Hindu families waiting among the Muslim majority. According to Kabir, he replied: ‘In my communication with you have I ever said to you that these donations are only for Muslims?’ Backed by donors in England – whom he contacted via mobile phone on the spot – Kabir said that he insisted on the distribution of aid to the Hindu families and that, shortly afterwards, the Hindu families received their rations.

Kabir’s charitable work and the ‘moral economy’ (Fassin, 2009: 2012) that underlies it shed light on a form of legitimacy that I have encountered in many other Shia charitable trusts in Pakistan and elsewhere. In this regard, the categories ‘humanity’, ‘humanitarian’ and ‘liberal’ have often been of central importance. These categories, however, cannot be taken as given or assumed to be self-explanatory, nor are they necessarily linked to ‘Western sociodicy’ (Fassin, 2012: 248). Consider, for instance, Kabir’s attempt at genealogical channelling – and here I mean the act of crafting the historical roots of the present – which drew on three central arguments.

First, he invoked the lengthy history of Islam as both a global and a charitable force. Referring to Islam’s earliest sources, Kabir explained that Islam embraces all human beings. This contradicts Fassin’s (2012: 248) notion of humanitarianism as *originally* sourced in ‘the Christian World’, with non-Western traditions as historical appendices. Instead, it recentres the pronounced importance of charity and alms-giving in the long view of Islamic history and theology (Singer, 2008).

Second, Kabir’s understanding of being ‘liberal minded’ is closely linked to specific Twelver Shia interpretations of charity. Here, ‘liberal mindedness’ is not a matter of economic or political liberalism; it is an attitude towards and interpretation of Islamic law. Most of my interlocutors who run or work with Shia-inspired charitable trusts and position

themselves as ‘liberals’ read the rulings of alms-giving in a way that allows them to distribute a portion of the donations to non-Muslims. Among the Shias I have worked with, the predominant way to donate is to give *khums*. *Khums* is a tax that is calculated on the basis of one-fifth of a person’s annual net savings. Fifty per cent of this amount should go to proven Sayyids – progeny of the Prophet Muhammad – in need. The other 50 per cent is dedicated to the ‘non-Sayyid needy’, a formulation that offers room for interpretation. Depending on the degree of ‘liberal mindedness’ among donors and trustees, these ‘needy’ can be seen as part of a larger category of people that transcends religion and in which shared suffering uncovers basic humanity. As Kabir explained to me, this is a matter of ‘philosophy’, and it allows him to organise financial transactions according to both the requirements of Shia law and the reality of trans-sectarian suffering in many parts of Pakistan.

Third, in this framework the genealogy of Islamic giving and its ‘liberal’ positioning in the Shia present are intricately interwoven with the political. Many of my interlocutors among Shia charity volunteers and donors explicitly expressed the hope for a return on their gift in the form of a positive assessment of their deeds on the Day of Judgement. At the same time, they also sought impacts in the present. On that sizzling afternoon in Rawalpindi, Kabir told me that he expected his charitable work and ‘liberal’ approach to contribute to ‘national stability’, to a politically more stable and less fragmented Pakistan that would be able to prosper. Such a state should be achieved by abandoning pre-defined labels of sect and ethnicity. Instead, within the framework of Shia charitable principles, he sought to select people based on need and merit. Kabir called this ‘ideal’ intermingling of charity and the national-political ‘meritocracy’ – the merit-based fostering and empowerment of those who are able.

Kabir does not stand alone in his take on merit and the political. The transnational charitable networks that nurture his trust and its interventions have emerged from that very

political-theological thought and the managerial spirit of competition, excellence and talent that Kabir described to me on that afternoon in Rawalpindi. In the next section, I seek to follow these conceptual categories – meritocracy and the political – along connections of Shia kinship linking Pakistan and England.

Giving, need and merit

I met Kabir for the first time in London in the spring of 2015. We both participated in a fund-raising event organised by a major UK-based Shia charitable trust that supports many of his activities in Pakistan. We sat at the same table in a convention centre near Heathrow airport, watched the gala dinner performances, the auction and the pledges, and chatted about Pakistan over dinner. The event was professionally organised, structured and polished, and Kabir's projects were represented in the exhibition hall, where colourful poster boards described how educational stipends improved children's lives, free-of-cost cataract surgery gave 'the gift of sight', and microfinance loans fostered women's entrepreneurship in various parts of Asia and Africa. Kabir called the event, in which around 600 people – women, men and children – had gathered under one roof, an 'eye-opener' that would not have been possible in Pakistan because of gender segregation and security concerns.

Many of the participants in the gala event were part of a wealthy class of UK citizens with Shia backgrounds. They were businessmen, medical doctors and religious scholars, pledging hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of pounds for projects in, among other places, Gaza, India, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and Tanzania. In some of these places, Shia Muslims are the beneficiaries of these donations, but in many others they are also Christians, Hindus and Sunni Muslims.

Azim, founder and trustee of the UK trust, and Kabir met via the Internet several years ago. As they emphasised in our conversations, the emergence of the Internet, with e-

mail and smartphone apps, has fundamentally altered the mechanics of charitable work. Individual trusts in Pakistan and other places in Asia used to be rather disconnected from wealthy charities in Europe prior to the advent of the Internet. Today, donations are submitted online and bank transfers made via apps. Application procedures and collaboration agreements between trusts are also dealt with via e-mail and WhatsApp. Azim, who is a successful businessman involved in trade between Brazil, Europe and west Asia, sees himself as his trust's professional manager. He is proud of his organisation's zero administration costs and the fact that he himself carefully examines every application for support that his partners in sixteen countries submit to him. He looks out for flaws in the project descriptions, emphasises sufficient textual and visual documentation, and checks the accounting details. Since the trust always receives more applications than it can fund, he attempts to sift out and choose those applicants that are – in his view – the 'best'. During an interview in 2014, he told me that only those who are truly needy and promising can be considered.

Azim and Kabir both agree on the principle of 'meritocracy'. By the term, they mean a calculative, rational assessment of need and suffering that is supposed to neutralise any potential bias introduced by Shia kinship, local nepotism, or deceptive applications.³ In their view, those with the greatest potential for success among the needy should receive charitable support. In many ways, this resonates with recent research on the entanglement of economy and Islam in Egypt (Atia, 2013), India (Taylor, 2015) and Indonesia (Rudnyckyj, 2010) that highlights the influence of 'neoliberal' discourses and practices. As Taylor (2015: 13) argues with respect to Muslim charity in the city of Lucknow, India, this process has had a transformative impact on the very concept of giving:

Islamic scriptures have represented alms-giving as a purificatory ritual focused on the *donor*. ... I term this orientation the 'purity ethic' of Islam. In contrast, reformers ... are invoking different sets of Islamic scriptures and moral concerns that reorient the

focus of *zakat*-giving from donors to *recipients* – according to a ‘developmentalist ethic’. These developmentalist Muslims in Lucknow are less vocal about their own spiritual transformation through philanthropic giving, instead inquiring about the life of the gift *after* it is given.

Taylor’s observation – which is based on research among Sunni institutions in Lucknow – also contributes to an understanding of the everyday mechanics of Shia charity. It highlights how ‘the culture of neoliberalism’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001) has not only reshaped the rhetoric of Islamic trusts, but altered a core focus of giving. While this ‘neoliberal culture’ has infused the charitable work of Azim and Kabir conceptually – through an altered relationship between donor and recipient and a new language of administration – we must take care not to confuse this process with Weberian presumptions of rationalisation, disenchantment or even secularisation. Rather, being itself based on a political-theological ontology and the belief system of money (Goodchild, 2009), this ‘neoliberal culture’ is linked to a broad range of religious movements and ideas of economic magic on a global scale (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001: 19).

In the case of Azim’s trust, such processes are reflected in the forms of spiritual guidance that have informed the organisation’s activities since its foundation. In various conversations with Azim over the past few years, he has repeatedly told me about the ‘driving force’ of Fatimah, the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who steers the trustees’ decisions and effects miracles in the organisation’s projects throughout Asia. For instance, wells can be built where no scientist would have thought it possible, and when the trustees and volunteers face major difficulties and decisions, she acts as a ‘spiritual force’ and ‘ideas come to us’, as Azim told me during a conversation in London in 2014.

Considering the complex interaction of norms of Shia giving, economic concepts and a global discourse of humanitarianism, it seems appropriate to speak of several genealogical

strands informing charitable practices. This goes beyond the mere transformation of religious principles, entailing the entanglement of these different strands which – ever-evolving – change each other’s shape and content. In addition to the strands already mentioned, political aspirations play an important role – both historically in Shia Islam and for the trusts with which I have worked. In the following section, I seek to explore the political in contemporary Shia humanitarianism as both a starting point and an ending point.

The politics of bread and water

As mentioned earlier, Kabir’s humanitarian work out of Rawalpindi is motivated by his desire to bring ‘national stability’ to Pakistan. For him, to go beyond sectarian boundaries and distribute food rations to *all* starving people affected by floods in Sindh is an act that contributes to such stability; it prevents discontent and represents Pakistan as a nation unified by a loosely defined and inclusive Islam. In my research on Shia humanitarian networks navigating between central, south and west Asia and Europe, I found such concerns with the national order of things to be an important factor. From struggles for religious land endowments (*waqf*) in India to malnourished babies in sanctioned Iran to the plight of Iraqis under the conditions of dictatorship and war to targetted killings in Pakistan, the politics of the nation-state were one important concern for my Shia interlocutors, but not the only one. The data also reveal an emphasis on resisting oppression and ‘inhumane’ behaviour as related historically to the events of Karbala. In the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, Imam Husayn – grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Shia imam – was slaughtered along with his companions by the Umayyad caliph Yazid I, and women and children were taken into captivity. Today, Karbala is often remembered as a major injustice on which the foundation of a distinct Shia identity is built, and it is still commemorated annually during Ashura in the month of Muharram. A great deal of literature has been published on the politics of Ashura,

the aesthetics and performative variations of the rites, and their role in Shia community formation around the world (e.g., Aghaie, 2004; Ayoub, 1978; Deeb, 2005; Korom, 2003). At the same time, little attention has been paid to the complexity of the political-theological legitimacy that Karbala offers to Shia humanitarian practice.

Ashura is followed by a forty-day mourning period, at the end of which the Arba'een pilgrimage to Karbala is undertaken. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the pilgrimage was banned, although local Shias still performed it in secrecy. Foreigners were barred from participating in this event and only began doing so again after the US invasion and Saddam's fall in 2003. Today, like all public Shia rites, Arba'een is threatened by Islamic militancy, and violent incidents have become normalised. Nevertheless, Azim and his friends from various places across Asia have regularly participated in the pilgrimage in order to raise money for aid and development projects in southern Iraq. Much like a sponsorship run, they find donors who are willing to donate money for each kilometre walked.

When I met Azim in London in the spring of 2015, he showed me pictures of himself sporting an event t-shirt that he had printed for the walk. He described the initiative as having emerged from the historical 'spirit of Karbala', which acknowledges human suffering, sacrifice and concerns for humanity. Then he said to me, 'Look, Till, I might be a follower of world politics, but I'm not interested in the politics of the world.' On a number of earlier occasions he had emphasised that, when looking at the world today, his main question was, 'Where is humanity? Where has it gone?' Azim never denied being political in his actions, but he placed importance on the fact that he did not support (nor was he supported by) any national government – not that of Iran, nor of Iraq, nor of the UK. At the same time, he made clear that his interest in humanitarianism and the very foundation of his charitable trust are rooted in the coming together of the historical experience of Shia suffering and the political event, both of which are intrinsic to the Battle of Karbala.

Aghaie (2004: 87) argues that the Battle of Karbala went through a period of reinterpretation in the 1960s and 1970s during the build-up to the Iranian revolution in 1979. In this reinterpretation, Iran's Pahlavi regime was equated to Caliph Yazid I, and ordinary Iranians were assigned the roles of the martyrs of Karbala (Ram, 1994). Much literature on this so-called 'Karbala Paradigm' has focused on the shift from ritualistic quietism to the revolutionary zeal that continues to this day (e.g., Aghaie, 2004; Deeb, 2006; Gilsenan, 1982; Keddie, 1983). In contrast, Szanto (2013) maintains that one should avoid looking at this process through the prism of linearity. Instead, she argues in favour of a more complex picture that allows for past, 'quietist' renderings of Karbala to be interpreted as political, and for contemporary ones to be seen as not necessarily inherently revolutionary. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that Karbala has served as a trigger of political action – from everyday resistance to martyrdom in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that this discourse has also been closely linked with universal ideas of mourning, humility and humanity.

Against this backdrop, the very foundation of Azim's charitable trust is embedded in complex genealogies that defy the notion of monocausal origins and straightforward rootedness. This is exemplified in the act of formation: the moment in which Azim decided to form a charitable trust and to dedicate himself to humanitarian work, which he described to me as a 'Karbala moment'. During the month of Ramadan in the late 1990s, a religious scholar in London informed him that there were villages in southern Iraq where the oppressed Shia minority under Saddam's regime had to break their fast with bread and water instead of with the traditional dates. This news outraged and horrified Azim, and he began to develop an idea of how to support those people without raising the suspicion of the authorities. Through trusted Shia networks, he established a system of vouchers that were distributed secretly among the population, allowing them to shop at selected grocery shops and butchers that

could later cash in the vouchers to avoid interference by the state. Ever since, Azim's motivation and dedication to his trust have emanated from the idea of a specifically Shia form of suffering that represents all deprived and oppressed humans around the world.

Over the years, Azim shared with me not only his thoughts about his humanitarian work, but also various books that inspired him to pursue these projects. In this regard, the religious scholar Ayatollah Sayyid Fadhel Hosseini Milani – born in Iraq and now a resident of London – has been of particular importance. In the course of my fieldwork, Azim gave me a series of books that had influenced him (e.g., Milani, 2011, 2016; Mahdi, 2016[1985]). He pointed to Milani's sections on charity in Islam, which provide insights into a way of reasoning that both follows Shia theology and aspires to include all of humanity. Referring to charity in Islam, Milani, who is connected to the religious establishment in Iran and Iraq as well as to academic and philanthropic circles in London – thus writes, 'Giving and caring for others is an elemental characteristic of Islamic behaviour' (2011: 42). He then quickly moves on to the universal act of giving, from environment to the human body:

Indeed, everything around us is a manifestation of giving. The sun has provided light and heat for millions of years, and continues to do so, for without it life on earth would not be possible. Forests provide the oxygen that sustains us in addition to the material with which to produce the millions of publications that educate and inform us. Our hearts beat to supply life – sustaining blood to other organs. All these manifestations demonstrate the significance of giving. (Milani, 2011: 42)

Milani's argument and, equally importantly, the humanitarian actions of my informants point to alternative ways of thinking about humanitarianism and its genealogies. Yet, how do these relate to existing reasoning on the genealogies of contemporary humanitarianism? In his examination of Médecins Sans Frontières' intervention in post-US-invasion Iraq, Fassin (2007) emphasises the central role of sacrifice in humanitarian work. In this regard, he

underlines the enduring importance of ‘the system of Christian values’ and the notion of the gift of life that derives from it (Fassin, 2007: 512). From this perspective, the very exchange in which this gift is embedded is shaped by the tacit fragment of a religious past that has found an afterlife in contemporary humanitarianism – a turn that we might call, given the academic weight of the argument, the ‘Fassin moment’. In contrast, Azim’s ‘Karbala moment’ is based on the continuous reinterpretation of an event of suffering in which the interaction between politics, theology and ethics constitutes the very foundation for action. Revolutionary Shia nation-state politics, most prominently promoted by Iranian political actors in the second half of the twentieth century, are only one part of the story. My Shia interlocutors working for charitable trusts often attempted to distance themselves from such a nationalising revolutionary stance. Rather, they sought to emphasise silent resistance – embodied in irreproachable work ethics, scrutiny and transparent professionalism – against what they perceived as regimes of oppression that formed a common link throughout history, from Caliph Yazid I to famines and from Saddam Hussein’s rule to income inequality.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I proposed two questions to guide my analysis of Shia humanitarianism as shaped by people and institutions in Pakistan, England and Iraq. The first addressed the extent to which the notions of foundation and origin that underlie much of the literature on political theology – including on Islamic humanitarianism – are useful to understanding our present; the second entailed exploring alternative ways of looking at Shia humanitarianism through the lens of political theology.

The first question has been addressed at length in historiography – most prominently in strands of global history – albeit not in research on political theology. While scholars have addressed non-linear, transnational entanglements, from the global power of sugar (Mintz,

1985) to German-Japanese nationalism (Conrad, 2010), little work has been done on the intricate nexus of theology, politics and the legacy of religious traditions. In this chapter, I have argued that – in order to do justice to the complexity of Shia humanitarianism – it is useful to move away from a genealogical approach that assumes that an a priori theological foundation underlies contemporary humanitarian work.

Instead, and with respect to the second question asked in the introduction to this chapter, I suggested decentring the genealogical framework by moving away from linear connections and towards the notion of entanglement. From this point of view, genealogical connections are not monocausal and unilinear; they are, rather, multipolar and multidirectional. For instance, when promoting a distinct Muslim liberal view, Kabir bundled the genealogical strings of Shia tradition and giving, global humanitarianism and managerial discourse, thereby weaving together their contents beyond chronological recognition. In a similar vein, Kabir and Azim employed the concept of merit and a calculative vision of development, which have – as in many parts of the Muslim world – considerably altered the ways of giving. In this regard, we see elements of ‘neoliberal’ economic practice seeping into and taking root in ideas of Shia charity.

Finally, leading back to the basics of political-theological reasoning, I discussed the event of the Battle of Karbala – and its constantly evolving reflections and reproductions in the present – as a central means by which Shiites translate mourning into humanitarian action. A remarkable aspect of the Battle of Karbala is that – as an inherently political encounter – it gave way to the formation of Shiism as a separate Islamic denomination. As the founding moment of a common identity, the battle and the practice of mourning the suffering of those who participated in it have shaped how my Shia interlocutors view all of humanity’s grievances today. Continuously reproduced in the ever-transforming commemoration of the political-theological event, their concern for humanity does not have a

linear genealogy. Instead, through its ambivalent nature, Shia humanitarianism provides points of connections to a broad range of ideologies and practices in past and present.

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Notes

¹ This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in Pakistan in 2015 and in England 2014–15, as well as on continuing interaction (phone, e-mail) with representatives of the NGOs under study since 2012. I have used pseudonyms in place of my interlocutors' real names in order to protect their identities. For comments on earlier versions of this chapter I would like to express my gratitude to the editors and to Brook Bolander and Brian Donahoe.

²In the following, I will focus exclusively on Twelver Shia Islam, which is by far the largest denomination within Shia Islam. For the reader's convenience, I will use to the shorthand 'Shia' throughout the chapter, but always with reference to the specificity of Twelver Shia actors and contexts.

³ It is worth noting that the Latin-Greek hybrid term 'merito-cracy' itself is a creation of the twentieth century. While now prevalent in various managerial and political formations around the world, the term was coined half a century ago by Michael Young in the context of his sociological satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1961 [1958]), in which he takes the role of a narrator who looks back in history from the year 2034. Young depicts a dystopian society that has fully embraced calculative merit in its mechanics of rule and is thus predestined for destruction.