

Exemplary Lovers:

Humanity and Hierarchy in Muslim Philanthropy

Abstract

Islamic charity is an increasingly well-charted field of study that encompasses Muslim institutions and practices of “doing good” across time and space. What is less well charted, though, is the study of how these institutions and practices become part of a broader sphere of civic engagement through contact with Muslim and non-Muslim actors, concepts and exemplary figures. This article analyses such contact, focusing on Muslim philanthropists who lead projects and trusts across a range of social and geographical spaces, and exploring the humanitarian examples they draw on and the hierarchies they reproduce and create through their engagement. With an emphasis on exchanges between Muslim philanthropists in England, Iran and Pakistan, the article follows the spiritual connections, pilgrimage economy and moral sentiments that inform the ways these philanthropists carve out spaces for themselves.

Keywords: philanthropy, humanitarianism, exemplars, Islam, globalization

Introduction¹

Western ideas of philanthropy have travelled a long way, from the ancient Greeks’ love of the principle of humanity to the Christian focus on benefaction to fading ties to religion and a more secular emphasis. Today, Jonathan Benthall reminds us, philanthropy has “come to be associated particularly with the munificence of the rich, and patronage of high culture,” as well as “with the promise of funding for development in much of the global South.”² These present-day associations of philanthropy often derive from the activities of donors based in Europe and the United States – a tale of business success, money, the search for purpose and, increasingly, wealth management. Yet if we step beyond the confines of this particular notion of philanthropy, its seemingly linear history begins to collapse: religious connotations

¹ This article is based on anthropological fieldwork that I carried out in England, Iran and Pakistan between 2014 and 2017, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grants P300P1_161161 and PZ00P1_174163). To protect my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms and omit the real names of their organizations. For comments on earlier versions of the article I am indebted to Brook Bolander, Brian Donahoe, Antonio De Lauri and the two anonymous reviewers.

² Benthall, J. (2017). Charity. In: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*
<http://doi.org/10.29164/17charity>

encounter development, humanity meets patronage, and munificence pairs with new forms of inequality.

Islamic organizations invested in philanthropic endeavours, spanning theologically prescribed charity and broader humanitarian appeals, offer important insights into how Islamic giving has changed over time.³ Studies of such organizations also demonstrate how Muslim practices are reshaping the landscape of global philanthropy.⁴ However, much less is known about how Muslim individuals who found, fund, manage, work and volunteer for Muslim NGOs and charitable trusts establish connections across vast geographical, cultural and economic differences. How do they engage with one another and envisage their roles? What are their conceptions of humanity? What hierarchies are at stake? And how do they manage, or fail, to overcome the global inequalities that mark contemporary philanthropy?

In this article, I explore these questions via the examples of Twelver Shia Muslims who pursue philanthropic projects that span England, Iran and Pakistan. In doing so, I analyse the tension that develops when one has the universal aspiration to address “humanity” at large, yet must operate within specific Islamic ethical frameworks.⁵ I employ a conception of humanity that focuses on its emergent character, as a category that remains always in a process of being produced.⁶ In a growing field of social scientific enquiry into Islamic forms of humanitarian engagement, scholars have highlighted the specificity and agency of Islamic charitable practices.⁷ These practices shape connections not only between people, but also between people, mediating figures, and God.⁸ Yet we have little information about precisely how Muslims reconcile the specificity of Islamic practices with other available repertoires of “doing good.”⁹ To account for transfers between these repertoires – e.g., Islamic notions of salvation, more secular understandings of charity, and the humanitarian discourse of suffering – in this article I frame philanthropy, charity, humanitarianism and development as profoundly interrelated phenomena. This framing comes closest to what Ludwig Wittgenstein

³ Fauzia, A. (2013). *Faith and the State: A History of Islamic Philanthropy in Indonesia*. Brill. Singer, A. (2018). The Politics of Philanthropy. *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society* 2(1): 2–20.

⁴ Benthall, J. and Bellion-Jourdan, J. (2003). *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*. I.B. Tauris. Iqbal, B. K. (2019). *Tribulation and Repair: Islamic Humanitarianism after the Syrian War*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵ Li, D. (2020). *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity*. Stanford University Press.

⁶ De Lauri, A. (2016). Introduction. In: A. De Lauri, ed., *The Politics of Humanitarianism: Power, Ideology and Aid*. I.B. Tauris, pp. 1–16, p. 2.

⁷ Taylor, C. B. (2018). Receipts and Other Forms of Islamic Charity: Accounting for Piety in North India. *Modern Asian Studies* 52(1): 266–296.

⁸ Mittermaier, A. (2019). *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. University of California Press.

⁹ Ticktin, M. 2014. Transnational Humanitarianism. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 273–289.

coined “family resemblance” in the sense of having a common descent and a clear correspondence.¹⁰ Stretching Wittgenstein’s definition of family resemblance, the Muslim philanthropists whose work I explore in this article go beyond similarity and kinship – they also operate via hierarchy and antagonism.

The protagonists of this article navigate the global territory of philanthropy by incorporating examples from Muslim and non-Muslim contexts alike. The ethical foundation on which they build their humanitarian endeavours is constituted of good and bad examples. They see common descent and correspondence with fellow philanthropists that they deem exemplary, and try to distance themselves from what they consider bad premises. This is particularly the case for social relationships that Muslim philanthropists build up amongst themselves. The “power of example,” according to Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak, shapes “behaviour, discourse and thought.”¹¹ Yet the sources of such modelling are diverse and are not limited to fellow Muslims and exemplary figures in Islam. Studies of exemplarity in Muslim philanthropy also resonate with research on humanitarian celebrities who have largely received attention in the context of “Western” humanitarianism.¹² Blurring global divides, my interlocutors draw on examples from a wide range of moral genealogies. As Alexander Gelley points out, such “imitative reproduction” is part of a longer interaction between multiple examples and exemplars that continues to keep in motion what being Muslim and being a philanthropist means. The coming together of the two quests involves “the recovery of a lost whole” and “the discovery of a new one” derived from these multiple examples and exemplars.¹³

The distinction between desirable and undesirable examples intersects with existing hierarchies, but also creates new ones. Ideas of an individual’s religious descent and merit merge with the unequal distribution of wealth and access in the North and South. These differences come to the fore during contact between philanthropists, donors, recipients of aid, spiritual authorities and more-than-human figures. In the first section of this article, I discuss these issues via the exemplarity of the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad and their

¹⁰ Sluga, H. (2006). Family Resemblance. *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71: 1–21. Wittgenstein, L. (1958 [1953]). *Philosophical Investigations*. Basil Blackwell, p. 32.

¹¹ Højer, L. and Bandak, A. (2015). Introduction: The Power of Example. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(1): 1–17, p. 14.

¹² Budabin, A. C. and Richey, L. A. (2021). *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development*. University of Minnesota Press. Kotilainen, N. (2020). Celebrities. In: A. De Lauri, ed., *Humanitarianism: Keywords*. Brill, 20–22. Richey, L. A., ed. (2016). *Celebrity Humanitarianism and North South Relations: Politics, Place and Power*. Routledge.

¹³ Gelley, A. (1995). Introduction. In: A. Gelley, ed., *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*. Stanford University Press, 1–24, p. 3.

transcendent presence in networks of Twelver Shia philanthropists. Specifically, I focus on the relationship between such philanthropists and Muhammad's daughter Fatima, who plays an essential role in establishing a connection with God. In the second section, I turn to the coalescence of economy, philanthropy and pilgrimage in Mashhad – the location of the shrine of Imam Reza and an important Shia pilgrimage site in Iran – and the importance of coffee in establishing philanthropic connections elsewhere. In the third section, I analyse the hierarchies that are reproduced as digital communications open up possibilities of interaction between formerly disconnected Muslim philanthropists. While providing new opportunities, this interaction also remains structured around longstanding ideas about who gets access to the revenue from religious taxes and voluntary donations, and on what terms. Finally, in the fourth section, I discuss how humanitarian celebrities serve as a point of orientation and support the public performance of legitimacy of Muslim philanthropists.

For example, Fatima

Muslim philanthropists are part of broader social networks in which they interact, build relations of trust and seek to attain a certain status. They also draw on exemplary figures located in other-worldly realms, outside the physical space of the social networks that the philanthropists navigate. In this section, I focus on these relationships with exemplars who act as “mediating points”¹⁴ through visions and divine guidance. Gaining ethical legitimation through interaction with transcendent exemplars who are often also the protagonists of moral tales is a central aspect of this relationship.¹⁵ Let me begin with an ethnographic encounter that resonates with broader processes that I have observed in my research with Muslim philanthropists working across Europe, the Middle East and South Asia.

In 2014, I met Azim, an Indo-Muslim British man in his sixties with origins in East Africa, a businessman and the founder of a charitable trust registered in the United Kingdom. During one of my visits to England that year, Azim and his wife Maryam took me to Windsor. They did not live far from the town west of London, and we strolled through Windsor, sat down in a café and watched the large groups of tourists surrounding the famous castle. Looking at people from all over the world passing by, we talked about Azim and Maryam's philanthropic work.

¹⁴ Mittermaier, A. (2011). *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*. University of California Press, p. 81.

¹⁵ Bandak, A. (2015). Exemplary Series and Christian Typology: Modelling on Sainthood in Damascus. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(1): 47–63, p. 56.

Maryam and Azim were both trustees of a philanthropic organization that they themselves had founded, and they kept busy administering and monitoring projects across vast areas of Asia and Africa. Through the trust they supported hospital projects in Iraq, educational enterprises in Pakistan, and the construction of drinking water facilities in various countries. They also raised money for scholarships for students and granted funds to cover the expenses of people requiring emergency medical treatment from India to Gaza and from Zanzibar to Afghanistan. In the course of their humanitarian work, which spanned nearly two decades, Azim and Maryam had also become part of a large network of friends, relatives and business acquaintances around the world with whom they interacted in order to raise funds. In these interactions, Maryam told me, she largely remained in the background, while Azim took care of the day-to-day aspects of administration, communication and direction. In this gendered distribution of labour, I would observe over the coming years, Azim was the public face of the trust, the one who visibly engaged in social interactions. Maryam took on the role of a translucent force that guided the endeavour from backstage, ideationally and behind closed doors. Because of this distribution of labour, I, as a man researching observable interactions, was able to garner much richer insights into the actions of Azim, while my conversations with Maryam often remained fragmentary. However, rather than merely viewing these gendered roles as a research obstacle, over time I also came to see them as closely linked to ideas of intermediation with God. Azim and Maryam – along with other Muslim philanthropists whom I encountered – conceptualized intermediation with God through exemplary female figures who broker spiritual merit. Like these figures, Maryam was somewhat removed from the visible, public world of male philanthropists and inhabited a realm of concealment.

Islam played an important role in Maryam's and Azim's lives and in their trust. They emphasized that they had founded the trust not just to serve Muslims, but all of humanity. At the same time, they also made it very clear that the larger inspiration and ethical underpinning of their humanitarian work derived from Twelver Shia Islam, a denomination with up to two hundred million members worldwide that is also the state religion of Iran. In Shia Islam, access to God is mediated by the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, in particular his daughter Fatima, her husband (and the Prophet's cousin) Ali, their sons Hasan and Husayn, as well as later imams.¹⁶ This genealogical connection also plays a crucial role in how the trust raises funds. The majority of donations come from a tax called *khums* that is

¹⁶ Momen, M. (1987). *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*. Yale University Press, p. 148.

specific to Shia Islam. *Khums* consists of one-fifth of a person's annual net savings. From this fifth, half (*sahm al-sādāt*) should go to proven descendants of the Prophet who are in need. The remaining half (*sahm al-imām*) is dedicated to a general category of people in need. In many Shia contexts, descendants of the Prophet are called Sayyids, and identifying them is a central aspect of Shia Muslim philanthropy. On a smaller scale, Azim and Maryam's trust also receives "voluntary donations" (*sadaqa*) that are not bound to such clear-cut distinctions and are more open to interpretation.

As we were talking about Islam and philanthropic work in the café in Windsor, Azim looked at me and Maryam and said, "We call upon the progeny of the Prophet to intercede between us and Almighty God." After a short pause, he proceeded: "If I want to get to somebody, I've got to go through someone to get a recommendation." "And to whom do you turn?" I asked. Azim replied, "In my life, I've always relied on Lady Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, to intercede on my behalf. In good times and in bad times. [...] Let me give you an example." While Maryam and I sipped our coffees, Azim launched into the story of a drinking water project that their trust had established in the Thar Desert in Pakistan a few years earlier. In collaboration with a local NGO, they had dug wells to provide a few villages with access to clean water. "In this project," Azim said, "the force of Lady Fatima was clearly visible. The trust was driven by her force." According to Azim, when the trust's workers had successfully completed the wells, a man from a neighbouring town arrived to inspect the construction site. The man had himself invested £25,000 in water exploration several years earlier, but the endeavour failed and he lost his investment. Thus, he could not believe that Azim and his friends had found water so easily, and with much less to work with in terms of financial resources. When Azim told us this story – in a boastful, yet serious tone – he repeatedly specified that the man whose exploration had failed was a "Sunni man" from the area. In doing so he emphasized that that man had not observed the Shia reverence for the progeny of the Prophet. He, on the other hand, had called for Fatima's help in bringing water to the Thar desert. "When the Sunni man asked me how we had found the water," Azim said, "I told him that it wasn't me or the trust who had successfully dug for water. I told him it was Lady Fatima who had given the water."

Over the years, Azim and Maryam regularly mentioned the significance of Fatima for their trust. In their view, Fatima received prayers and provided a form of spiritual guidance that has informed the organization's activities since its very foundation. In board meetings, she steered the trustees' decisions. In the field, she brought about miracles such as the

provision of water in places where it is scientifically impossible to find water. Fatima acted as a “spiritual force,” Azim and Maryam told me: “She lets ideas come to us.”

In the course of my research, I was often told that while Fatima reacts to specifically Shia frameworks of reverence and mediates between God and humans, she and her transcendent family do not limit themselves to helping a particular kind of people. Another of the many exemplary tales that Azim told me over the years features Fatima, Ali and their sons Hasan and Husayn showing their deep sense of humanity in the time of Ramadan. As the Prophet’s descendants were just about to break the fast one evening, Azim explained, a poor person knocked on the door, and they opened their home and shared their food with that person. The next day the same thing happened with a different poor person, and so on. “Did they ask this person if they’re Shia or Christian?” Azim asked. “No, of course not, they’re human beings.”

In her work on Shiism in Lebanon, Lara Deeb emphasizes the important role female descendants of the Prophet play in social mobilization. She points to Zaynab, Fatima’s daughter, as setting an example for women in the same way her brother Husayn sets one for men. In this regard, according to Deeb, women are not only “called on to ‘be like Zaynab’ but they also often describe themselves as striving to be like her or to behave like her.”¹⁷ While Fatima can play a similar role in certain contexts, the philanthropists with whom I met saw Fatima as a more-than-human figure residing in a transcendent realm who is exemplary, but who – by virtue of this exemplarity – is also superior to them. Her example is thereby difficult, if not impossible, to emulate successfully, and her role in philanthropy is thus to inspire and guide rather than to set an example that someone could actually imitate.

In the context of Azim and Maryam’s philanthropic activities, Fatima’s role is also one of mediation. She mediates connectivity to God and assures the accumulation of spiritual merit and reward for those she supports. Fatima is part of a hierarchical relationship that does much more than shape the ethical framework on which Azim and Maryam draw. They both attribute very tangible, material outcomes to this relationship. Azim drove this point home to me when he explained – in the transactional terms of a businessman – that without the “driving force” of Fatima, it would have never been possible to increase the trust’s annual funds from £10,000 to £4 million. Fatima’s mediation is thereby not limited to spiritual transactions, but sits at the nexus of cosmological, soteriological and economic considerations. Overlaps and synergies between these considerations are central to how Azim

¹⁷ Deeb, L. (2009). Emulating and/or Embodying the Ideal. *American Ethnologist* 36: 242–57, p. 250.

and Maryam's philanthropic engagement extends across vast social, political and geographical spaces.

The ethical merchant

Maryam and Azim were born in Tanzania, and their families are spread across East Africa, North America and Europe. Both are Khoja, a diasporic Indic Muslim caste with origins in Gujrat and Sindh.¹⁸ In the 1980s, they moved to London to provide their children with better educational prospects. As a businessman, Azim has drawn on a long family history of navigation between the Indian subcontinent in colonial times, East Africa and the Middle East. After the move to England, he began to build a coffee business and, when I met him in 2014, he was trading between Brazil, East Africa, Lebanon and Palestine. Azim no longer navigated the Indian Ocean trade that his ancestors had been involved in, but he held on to a powerful historical image of that trade as a physically and spiritually demanding, yet satisfying occupation. In this image, the figure of the pious, generous merchant played a pivotal role,¹⁹ and whenever possible Azim strove to become that figure. In his travels, he combined business deals with pilgrimage, and pilgrimage with philanthropic work. Because of the networks that he established over the decades, he would often make, for example, a trip to the West Bank and Beirut for his coffee business, and then carry on to Iraq and Iran for pilgrimage, business, and his trust's projects.

Mashhad in north-eastern Iran is an important node in this network. The city is a major pilgrimage site in Shia Islam, as it hosts the shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia imam. Every year millions of pilgrims from all over the world travel to Mashhad to visit the shrine, fostering a vast and vibrant economy at the intersection of ritual, tourism, religious education and charity. There are numerous enterprises that aim to partake in these fields and establish new connections, in Iran and abroad. For example, while visiting Mashhad in 2017 I met Farhan, a long-time friend of Azim's, who managed a hotel close to the shrine of Imam Reza. The hotel derived its revenue from visits of wealthy pilgrims from the Gulf. The profit fed into a project for orphans in Mashhad. He and Azim had long cooperated on the project, and whenever Azim visited, he brought along funds from donors abroad and stayed in the hotel himself to support the orphans.

¹⁸ Akhtar, I. S. (2014). Religious Citizenship: The Case of the Globalised Khoja. *African Sociological Review* 18(1): 27–48.

¹⁹ Osella, F. and Osella, C. (2009). Muslim Entrepreneurs in Public Life Between India and the Gulf: Making Good and Doing Good. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15(1): 202–221.

When I met Farhan in March 2017, the hotel, and thus the orphans project, were experiencing financial difficulties. More and more people in Mashhad were renting out their own apartments to pilgrims, thereby competing with the hotels around the shrine. The difficulties were also a result of the political tensions between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Visitors from these latter two countries, who make an important contribution to the pilgrimage economy in Mashhad, remained absent, as they found it increasingly burdensome to deal with the scrutiny of their own governments and the complexity of travel formalities. To counter these issues, Farhan told me, he and Azim hatched a plan: they would try to sustain the orphans project with the profit from a new coffee business.

Thus far, Azim had not traded with partners in Iran, as he was based in the United Kingdom. Sanctions against Iran made any transactions between him and businesses in Iran risky and costly because financial flows had to go through institutions in Dubai, Turkey or Kuwait, all of which charged hefty fees. However, working with Farhan on coffee, Azim told me, seemed like an exciting prospect. They shared a love of coffee – its taste and the tantalizing aromas emanating from the different kinds of roasting. Farhan explained that coffee had become a contested commodity in Iran. It sold well as it was labelled “Western” (*gharbi*) by the government and was thus subtly subversive. He, however, saw this in light of a different history. In Farhan’s view, Iran’s old coffeeshops (*qahwekhane*) had actually sold coffee before the British introduced tea, after which coffee largely disappeared from the menu.²⁰ Taking an anti-imperial stance, Farhan thought it was necessary to move away from the old tea establishment and the posh restaurants associated with it. Instead, Farhan wanted to work with outlets that specialized in different types of coffee, roasted their own coffee for sale, and carried only a small, select range of snacks (*qahwesara*). Through Azim’s connections to the African coffee market, they had begun to import coffee from Ethiopia and supplied a few smaller coffeeshops in Mashhad with beans for roasting. These deals, Azim later told me, were all entirely cash-based, thereby bypassing the international sanctions regime and incurring minimal tariffs and duties in the Iranian context. The profit from these transactions, overseen by Azim on his annual pilgrimages to Mashhad, fed into the support of their orphans project and slowly replaced Farhan’s pilgrim hotel.

²⁰ On this history, see Matthee, R. (1996). From Coffee to Tea: Shifting Patterns of Consumption in Qajar Iran. *Journal of World History* 7(2): 199–230. Matthee, R. (2005). *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1900*. Princeton University Press, pp. 144–74.

During my time in Mashhad, Farhan told me that his relationship with Azim, their common love for the unlikely commodity of coffee, and their eventual collaboration were not coincidental. He thought that this was all part of a larger plan, effected by the proximity of Imam Reza's shrine, their Shia piety and their sincere charitable intentions. As we were sitting in his office next to the hotel lobby, Farhan explained that the Shia imams – Imam Reza amongst them – and the progeny of the Prophet had the ability to mediate a state of well-being or happiness (*saadat*). In order to achieve this state one had to be patient, wait and engage in charitable causes with the purest of intentions. “If you feed the fish in the pond in your garden,” Farhan said, “then you, hopefully, won’t die of thirst in the desert. The soul of Imam Reza is alive and he can be contacted [through our] thoughts. Azim and I have been to the shrine so many times in our lives, and he must have realized our shared interests and passions.”

In the previous section, I analysed the philanthropic relationship between Azim, Maryam and the transcendent figure of Fatima. In a similar way, Farhan and Azim have been linked by the economy and aesthetics of coffee, mediated through the spiritual significance of Imam Reza's shrine in Mashhad. By no means, however, do these relationships play out on a level field; rather, they are structured hierarchically along a number of vectors, including class, wealth and origin. Viewed from my interlocutors' perspective, Fatima and Imam Reza – residing in a non-human realm – steer the actions of worldly philanthropists by means of the examples they have set. Azim, enabled by his economic success and expertise, shapes how such examples translate into exemplary practices.

In their study of the ethical engagement of Muslim entrepreneurs shuttling back and forth between India and the Gulf, Filippo and Caroline Osella argue that Muslim elites in Kerala put piety and economic calculation at the forefront of social concern. In fact, the two spheres reinforce each other, “combining material success with moral connectedness” as “the exemplary contemporary way of being a modern, moral Muslim.”²¹ Yet what is at stake here, too, is a kind of privilege that emerges from Azim's status as a self-styled ethical merchant who relies on his access to means of mobility and extensive networks in centres of commerce and pilgrimage. This privilege and the hierarchical relationship it implies extends to his interactions with Farhan as well. During my research I observed that Azim often carefully maintained and policed access to such networks. In this process, social relationships with people who could draw on genealogies reaching back to the Prophet Muhammad were of

²¹ Osella and Osella (n 19), p. 204.

particular importance for Azim. In the following section, I analyse how wealth and special religious status foster privileged philanthropic relationships from which those without the requisite connections remain excluded.

Finding the Sayyids

I stayed in close contact with Azim after I first met him in 2014. By “close,” I mean that Azim had an intense presence in my day-to-day life even when we were thousands of kilometres apart. Azim was online day and night. When I lived in Singapore and Hong Kong, he would send me WhatsApp messages when it was still the middle of the night in the United Kingdom. And when I replied to his emails after work, it would not take him long to get back to me while he was getting ready for the day. As my research progressed, I noticed that Azim’s communication with our common acquaintances in Pakistan, India and Iran was similarly intensive and embedded in a constant stream of messages and phone calls. When I would meet with my interlocutors in Islamabad, Delhi or Tehran, our conversations would sometimes get interrupted by the sound of Azim’s incoming messages, which we would then discuss.

Initially, Azim used WhatsApp and e-mail to send messages. However, as mobile phone technology developed and data allowances increased, he began to use voice messages and data calls. That way he could share a broad range of images, funding appeals, charity reports, daily news, jokes, memes, information on contemporary Shia Islam and pilgrimage, as well as updates on the state of the world. The latter became especially important as the Islamic State (*Daesh*) began to gain increasingly secure footholds in Iraq and Syria. As I met more and more Twelver Shias working in the philanthropic sector, most of whom were connected to Azim in one way or another, I realized that his tireless communication efforts were part of a larger endeavour to manage social relations with people who lived in different places and time zones around the globe. In this zone of “mediated time,”²² I observed new connections emerging between formerly disconnected philanthropists within the framework of existing Shia hierarchies. In the following, I discuss an example from Azim’s philanthropic work in Pakistan that illustrates how these hierarchies are continuously being reproduced and normalized in the context of online interactions.²³

²² Keightley, E. (2013). From Immediacy to Intermediacy: The Mediation of Lived Time. *Time and Society* 22(1): 55–75.

²³ On the hierarchies of online interactions, see Green, S., Harvey, P, and Knox, H. (2005). Scales of Place and Networks: An Ethnography of the Imperative to Connect Through Information and Communication Technologies. *Current Anthropology* 46(5): 805–826.

Azim had a longstanding collaborative relationship with partners in Pakistan. He would usually assume the role of fundraiser in the U.K. context, and his trust would outsource actual projects to organizations in Pakistan. In 2015 I got to know one of these local organizations, a charitable family trust that was based in Rawalpindi and organized educational programmes in northern Pakistan.²⁴ The main trustee of this organization was a wealthy man called Kabir, who lived a distinguished life moving between Rawalpindi and Islamabad, mingled with the capital's elite, and was a Sayyid – a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. In the many Twelver Shia settings that I have navigated over the course of my research, Sayyids often have a special status. They are favoured in charitable endeavours and have privileged access to funds. As previously mentioned, this privilege derives from the special Shia tax – *khums* – of which 50 per cent is dedicated to Sayyids in need. But it is also based on the fact that Sayyids who are not in need often know Sayyids who are. A significant proportion of the funds that Shia philanthropists receive is determined by the number of certified Sayyids they are able to identify and account for. This creates a competitive environment in which they scramble to register certified Sayyids. Men like Kabir are therefore well positioned to run charitable foundations in partnership with non-Sayyid donors. He mediated between Azim, who was looking for Sayyids, and Sayyid families, largely in rural and underprivileged locations in Pakistan. Kabir and Azim thus needed each other to fulfil their obligations to those who had paid *khums* while steadily increasing their reputations as benefactors.

However, their relationship also reinforced patterns of exclusion that were based on wealth and religious status. For instance, in 2015 – the same year in which I got to know Kabir – I also met Kazim, a young man from Gilgit-Baltistan in northern Pakistan who had established his own charitable trust. Having heard a great deal about Azim's support for projects in Pakistan, Kazim decided to contact him via e-mail. In the message, which he shared with me, he asked Azim for his generous support, emphasizing that, while not a Sayyid himself, he knew many local Sayyids in need. He wrote:²⁵

Dear Brother [Azim] Saheb

²⁴ Mostowlansky, T. (2020). Managing Karbala: Genealogies of Shia Humanitarianism in Pakistan, England and Iraq. In: G. Bolotta, P. Fountain, and M. Feener, eds., *Political Theologies and Development in Asia: Transcendence, Sacrifice and Aspiration*. Manchester University Press, 55–67.

²⁵ The following e-mail messages were written in English and are faithfully reproduced, as I believe doing so lends verisimilitude to the exchanges. I have made a conscious choice not to introduce silent corrections or to point out all instances of non-standard English usage. All emphasis (italics and capitalization) are in the original e-mails.

Salamun Aleykum

[...]

Our mandate [...] involved raising funds to support *impoverished students*, to provide *micro-grants for poor entrepreneurs* seeking to establish small businesses, to facilitate *patients* in financial distress and to oversee *emergency assistance* for poverty stricken individuals faced with challenges.

[The trust] is operating across Pakistan preferably Gilgit Baltistan Kurram Agency Southern Punjab and we wish to expand our operations to Baluchistan where many of our brothers and sisters of Hazara community are crying for help to contribute our efforts to minimize the poverty by providing education and small grants to enhance capacity building of deprived community. One village NARAN KAGHAN of KPK province where earth quake affectees of October 08, 2005 where many sadaat and Non sadaat families are still waiting for help as I have personally visited to the communities [and] found there are many families those have no any bread earner at their homes I observed that if they are provided small grants to those families they can easily earn for their daily basic necessities.

In his petition for support of his trust's activities in Pakistan, Kazim was operating on the assumption that it would be beneficial to mention the presence of Sayyid (*sadaat*) families in project areas. As he told me later, Kazim thought that this would lend credibility to his claim. However, as Azim's response shows, this emphasis actually raised suspicion and led him to question Kazim's legitimacy:

Salaaamun alaykum Dear Brother [Kazim] saheb

I acknowledge receipt of your email which I have read with great interest.

[...]

[Our trust] is shia charity. We have not restricted to support shias only. We have supported Sunni project, Christian projects and projects of humanity. People having Muslims names. We have never asked if they are shias or sunnis OR are they praying or fasting.

In your email you have mentioned many sadaat NARAN KAGHAN of KPK province. May I know how do you certify that they sadaat?

[Our trust] does not believe in hand outs [and] believes in micro finance whereby people should earn their living with dignity.

Taking this into consideration and based on the working media outset above please comment if you have any clarification required.

Even though Kazim argued in a subsequent e-mail that he could present *shajra-ye-nasab*, or genealogical charters, for the Sayyids he aimed to support in Pakistan, the collaboration between the trusts did not come to fruition. This was in part linked to the fact that the longstanding, intimate relationship between Azim and Kabir had provided Azim with access to someone who was – in his view – a “real and knowledgeable Sayyid.” As Azim told me in a later conversation, he trusted Kabir’s judgment on all matters related to the evaluation of Sayyids and philanthropic work in Pakistan. Apparently, Kabir had doubted the validity of Kazim’s claims – whether out of fear of competition or genuine doubts about the status of the mentioned Sayyids remains unclear.

As I suggested earlier in the article, Azim’s and Kabir’s relationship was not only based on inequality relating to religious lineage and authority; it was also fundamentally built on a certain degree of wealth, which is what enabled them to meet and socialize in the first place. While much of my research is based on personal observation of and participation in private conversations, negotiations and exchanges, Azim’s and Kabir’s interactions also featured public displays of financial prowess. This contrasted with the aspirations of Kazim, who sought to emphasize his humble background and locally grounded inspiration. While Azim organized gala dinners with humanitarian celebrities to raise funds, Kazim highlighted the importance of local activists and thinkers for his philanthropic work. In the next section, I analyse how this difference of moral sentiment is illustrated by the different ways these two philanthropists invoke existing philanthropic exemplars.

Rock star humanitarians and ambulance drivers

Azim’s gala dinner

In spring 2015, I arrived at a convention centre near Heathrow airport, put on a tie and entered the inconspicuous building, where Azim and Maryam welcomed me. In the course of the following few hours, I would shake the hands of countless men and greet numerous women with a slight bow and my right palm on my left chest. The event for which I had travelled to London was the annual gala dinner for Azim’s trust, at which some 600 guests had gathered to raise funds. The gala dinner provided an opportunity to showcase the

multimillion-pound achievements of Azim's trust, but it was much more than that. It was also an opportunity to bring together people from Twelver Shia communities from all over the United Kingdom and other parts of the world to celebrate, as Azim put it, "progressive" Islamic ideas as part of the larger philanthropic sphere and to put one's own financial standing and wealth on display by participating in auctions and pledges.

The vast majority of guests were Twelver Shias who had bought £60 tickets for the dinner. The evening programme was structured in a way that signposted that this was not an exclusively Muslim event, but also a humanitarian one. There were prominent guests who lent Azim's trust the legitimacy of a truly global philanthropic endeavour. The keynote speaker was Claire Bertschinger, the nurse and humanitarian who became internationally known through her work for the Red Cross in the 1984 famine in Ethiopia. As Azim proudly proclaimed to me, her public role had directly inspired Bob Geldof's Band Aid and Live Aid campaigns in the 1980s. Ang Swee Chai, the Singaporean human rights advocate and founder of Medical Aid for Palestinians, was prominently seated at the front of the hall. Next to her sat Ayatollah Sayyid Fadhel Hosseini Milani, an internationally known Shia cleric based in London whose books on Islamic jurisprudence are widely used in Shia seminars and were being sold at stalls dotted around the venue.

The gala event started with an exhibition of the trust's projects in Asia and Africa. Colourful posters were accompanied by demonstrations of water filters, solar cookers and sewing machines. Later, waiters served fruit juices and spicy Asian crackers, and the guests began to flock into a large dinner hall with a stage at the front. I was seated at a table with Azim's wife Maryam, some of the invited guests, and Kabir, who had come from Pakistan to join the event. From my seat, I looked around and observed a crowd of business people, medical professionals, professors and children mingling, chatting and laughing. One of Azim and Maryam's nephews opened the evening programme with a recitation from the Quran. After some speeches and the starters, the pledges began. Milani donated £10,000 for orphans, and the female moderator pushed other people to donate more and reminded them that through such pledges they could pave their way to paradise. A dozen men followed suit, pledging large amounts of money for the trust's projects. Then, in her keynote, Claire Bertschinger presented extracts from her biography *Moving Mountains*, which chronicles her humanitarian work, starting with the Ethiopian famine.²⁶ Towards the end of the evening the

²⁶ Bertschinger, C. (2005). *Moving Mountains*. Transworld Publishers.

Ayatollah climbed up to the stage and praised Azim's work and his intense dedication to charity. He also reminded him, jokingly, to spend more time with his family.

Most of the guests attending the gala dinner were wealthy British citizens from Twelver Shia communities around the country. They had come to support Azim and Maryam's trust and to showcase and publicly express their charitable intentions. They also used the opportunity to meet fellow businessmen and women, shaking hands, rubbing shoulders and sharing an affective space with people of comparable economic standing and privilege. There were also a few similarly privileged people from other parts of the world, such as Kabir, who had travelled to the event from afar at their own expense and in pursuit of maintaining relations with Azim and the trust. Kabir was in London just for the night to take part in the gala dinner and to meet relatives the next day. Being a Sayyid was no doubt an important aspect of his relationship with Azim. He could provide the trust with access to a group of "deserving subjects"²⁷ who are of vital importance for the legitimacy of Twelver Shia charity. At the same time, much of his standing within the trust was based on the ideal of the wealthy Shia humanitarian that Kabir embodied: pious, but a man of the world; rich, but close to the poor; humble, but in a distinguished suit; in Rawalpindi today, but in London tomorrow.

As became clear to me from the many meetings and interactions that I had with Azim in the years after the event, the exemplary guests at the gala dinner had not been randomly selected. Azim indeed aspired to be like all these people and what they – in his view – stood for: Claire Bertschinger, the international humanitarian with her global media presence; the pious, transnationally networked Ayatollah Milani, with his connections to the centres of Shia pilgrimage in Iraq and Iran; Ang Swee Chai, the dissident and activist who fought for the Palestinian cause no matter the cost; and Kabir, the wealthy Sayyid who was so firmly rooted in Shia circles in Pakistan. Azim's aspirations were not realistic, but achieving them had never been the point. Having such exemplars at hand seemed to create a form of stability in the face of the unruliness and contradictions that Azim experienced as he navigated different geographical, political and ethical spheres. Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak describe this ambivalence of the exemplar rather succinctly. They argue that the "exemplar may create stability by alluding to a larger whole that people (are made to) subscribe to," but add that "it may ... also contain within it a potential instability, a possibility for becoming something

²⁷ Fassin, D. (2010). Inequality of Lives, Hierarchies of Humanity: Moral Commitments and Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarianism. In: I. Feldman and M. Ticktin, eds., *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*. Duke University Press, 238–255.

else, either by ‘falling apart’ in other details/examples or by being made to stand for other wholes.’”²⁸

Kazim’s down-home exemplar

In 2016, as I continued to meet and converse with Kazim in Pakistan after his unsuccessful attempts to connect his trust internationally, I learned about the moral universe in which he positioned himself. Kazim hailed from Gilgit-Baltistan in northern Pakistan and grew up in a village that was part of an area in which projects of rural development and charitable endeavours had been present for many decades.²⁹ Coming of age in an environment of developmentalism, Kazim was surrounded by people who aspired to run their own NGOs. Local examples of philanthropy were many, and they were important. Yet living now near Pakistan’s capital Islamabad, Kazim also oriented himself towards prominent figures in global philanthropy. He had read books about Mother Teresa and Bill Gates, and encouraged me to do so, too. However, the longer we knew each other, the more it occurred to me that while these global figures had iconic status in Kazim’s mind, they also remained disconnected from his own philanthropic work. Bill Gates and Mother Teresa stood on a pedestal of exemplary philanthropists, but for Kazim the deeds of the Catholic nun and the American tech billionaire remained on an abstract level, far removed from his day-to-day work.

In March 2017, on a trip that we made to the Margalla Hills north of Islamabad, Kazim asked me if I believed that philanthropists like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet would make it to paradise (*jannah*). Not waiting for my reply, he then added that surely those who dedicated themselves to working for “humanity” (*insaniyat*) would come to a special place in paradise in which religious affiliation plays no role. In his opinion, this was also the place where the prominent Pakistani humanitarian Abdul Sattar Edhi, who had passed away the year before, resided. Quite different to the likes of Bill Gates, the figure of Abdul Sattar Edhi, a multiple Nobel Peace Prize nominee, played a central, exemplary role in Kazim’s identity as a philanthropist. When Kazim and I met in 2016, Edhi had just passed away, and Kazim gifted me his copy of Edhi’s autobiography *A Mirror to the Blind*.³⁰ I read the book and we discussed Edhi’s philosophy, which strongly resonated with Kazim.

²⁸ Højer and Bandak (n 11), p. 8.

²⁹ Mostowlansky, T. (2020). Humanitarian Affect: Islam, Aid and Emotional Impulse in Northern Pakistan. *History and Anthropology* 31(2): 236–256.

³⁰ Edhi, A. S. (2010). *A Mirror to the Blind*. Ilmi Printers.

One of Edhi's central claims is that he came from a humble background and built his foundation from there. Edhi did not, as wealthy philanthropists often do, aim to become rich before he became a humanitarian. This is not to say that there is no power or money involved in the Edhi Foundation, which has its headquarters in Karachi and numerous branches around the world, from Asia to Europe, the United States and Australia. However, in Kazim's view, Edhi was a man of humble origins who remained humble and modest even as he set out to become a larger-than-life figure. Edhi writes in his autobiography that he descended from a family in which such an attitude was deeply ingrained:

Once there was a village named Edhi *mohalla*, but that disappeared over time. Although Edhi in the Gujarati language means lazy, the tribe was vigilant, committed to hard work, and born with a spirit for humanitarianism.³¹

By virtue of this family spirit, Edhi tells us in his autobiography, he was able to defy elites of all sorts. Of the restrictions imposed by the Muslim clerics who wanted to dictate the terms of his philanthropic work, he wrote, "Beware of those who attribute petty instructions to God. His demands are all based on humanitarianism." Edhi also had a distinct distaste for Pakistan's rich and powerful: "Nowhere in the world do people exist like our upper classes." In Edhi's opinion, they had completely failed to understand that only with a degree of organized social welfare could a country progress without major frictions.³²

Kazim could very much identify with the idea that true philanthropy comes from those opposed to wealth and worldly possessions. Edhi epitomized this approach, having himself established and worked in a network of ambulances in Karachi when the state did not provide any such services. Kazim's origins in a village in Gilgit-Baltistan, raised in a family that never possessed more than their neighbours, gave him a frame of comparison to see what could be achieved without an abundance of resources. He once told me that perhaps he did not need wealthy philanthropists abroad, like Azim, or rich patrons in Pakistan, like Kabir. Perhaps it was time to orient towards examples of philanthropists born and bred in the villages and urban slums of Pakistan. Perhaps he did not need the other global philanthropists when there was one who had stayed in the country and had nevertheless been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

³¹ Ibid., p. 23.

³² Ibid., pp. 168–69.

Conclusion

Global philanthropy is a heterogeneous field. Yet Muslim philanthropy, too, consists of myriad different and competing projects. In the case of my Twelver Shia interlocutors, there were theological and practical religious elements that endowed their interactions with a degree of coherence, a common language. But these commonalities were swiftly overshadowed by considerations of class, wealth and origin. This is not to suggest that particular Islamic norms and practices play a subordinate role; rather, all these elements remain in constant interaction. They thereby co-produce competing, sometimes antagonistic, notions of philanthropy, as abstract aspirations and moral sentiments materialize in concrete philanthropic endeavours.

A focus on the examples and exemplars informing Muslim philanthropists highlights the specificity of Twelver Shia philanthropy, but it also sheds light on the transfers of concepts and practices that occur within Islamic charity as well as in broader spheres of philanthropy. The geographical and ideational connections that emerge in this process are vast. When we think, for instance, of Azim and Maryam's trust, registered in the United Kingdom and linked to an international trading business, it provides us with insights into philanthropy on a large geographical scale. With projects spanning three continents – Africa, Asia and Europe – and business income from another – South America – it also points to specific diasporic, economic, ethnic and religious connections on which this form of philanthropy is based. Azim's aspiration to be an ethical merchant is closely linked to his Khoja family's migration trajectory from East Africa to England, the business networks that he created in the process, and the emergence of a professional class of well-to-do Shias in the United Kingdom. In the case of Kazim, originating from and oriented towards an underprivileged region in Pakistan, the outlook is different. In the hierarchy of global philanthropy, as seen from trusts based in, for example, Europe or the Gulf, philanthropists like Kazim are on the receiving end of funds from wealthy diasporic communities. While donors need philanthropists in poorer countries to navigate unknown territory and establish local projects, the default approach is to work through those with economic and religious privileges. Access to funds from abroad is often policed by people who, like Kabir, know their way through rural Pakistan and are familiar with and comfortable using the social registers required at fundraising events in Europe. Nevertheless, the exemplars that inform the moral foundations of even such localized, financially less powerful trusts as Kazim's are inevitably global figures in their own right.

The progeny of the Prophet Muhammad play an important role through all these endeavours. While not all Twelver Shia philanthropists subscribe to the transcendent guidance of Fatima or other members of the Prophet's family, few can afford to ignore the rules set by Shia charity in which Sayyids – the living descendants of the Prophet – have inherited a privileged role. The share of *khums* not earmarked for Sayyids, along with voluntary donations such as *sadaqa*, is often entangled with humanitarian ambitions comparable to those of international organizations. Thus, even this highly specific form of Muslim philanthropy is marked by a plurality of approaches and guiding exemplars. These might be wealthy, widely promoted philanthropists without any known religious affiliation or agenda. Or they might be, as the example of Abdul Sattar Edhi highlights, pious Muslims whose work has deep roots in their surroundings, but who nevertheless manage to gain wide international recognition.