

## FAITH-BASED ACTION IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN WORK

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### Introduction

Should humanitarian action be focused on helping victims of wars and conflict or pay more attention to resolving the root causes of violence and attempting to contribute to building long-term peace? (See Calhoun 2008: 73–4.)

Some emergencies, such as natural disasters, cannot be completely avoided and do require direct humanitarian action, whereas alleviating poverty is indeed a long-term cause that should be dealt with accordingly. Dealing with emergency food crises and hunger, for example, needs immediate action through humanitarian work that cannot wait for policy makers to deal with root causes. But hunger itself can be eradicated only through a multi-level approach to the structural causes of this scourge. However, there is no clear distinction between these two categories of aid, as the poor (who require a long-term strategy) are often the first to suffer from natural disasters (which require immediate humanitarian action). In other words, humanitarian aid needs to build strategies that can efficiently manage both immediate emergencies and long-term charity and development projects. It is clear that poverty is at stake whether in emergencies or in long-term efforts to develop charitable action and sustainable development projects.

A further concern in the present context is this: if humanitarian work is now to cross boundaries and to become global in a world that is growing more and more interlinked, and if it is to go beyond emergency aid to contribute to sustainable development based on notions of charity as well as progress, how it can become a genuine component of global civil society if it is rooted in religious conviction – as a large segment of humanitarian action indeed is? And can organisations that maintain a religious world view with a universalistic aspiration share and serve a humanist rationale that transcends solidarity with members of the same faith to serve those in need irrespective of colour, race or faith?

These are complex questions and concerns that this chapter will try to address by focusing on the role of Islamic organisations in fighting poverty and hunger.

This is no easy task. In such a topic religion, social/humanitarian work and political factors are closely interwoven. The problem in this context is that the social sciences are not well equipped to adopt such a complex approach in dealing with the role of religion either in the public domain and social life or in developing societies (see also Box 6.1). It is not the fact that religion has re-emerged as faith but that it has become more visible and more politicised that has attracted attention. The study of the sociology of religion has witnessed a paradigm shift and the whole theory of secularisation has been criticised and revisited.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Berger noticed that the focus of study was on the role of fundamentalist groups in international relations and issues of war and peace, but less on their role in the domain of human rights and social justice. The religious resurgence was approached as a political challenge to modern democracy rather than a potential force for social solidarity and economic development. More should have been seen in this zeitgeist of de-secularisation. Within this context it was a serious error to see the Islamic upsurge on the global religious scene only through a political lens rather than as also an impressive revival of an empathetic religious commitment. Most of the research was concerned with the challenge these movements pose to the legitimacy of the nation state and the still fragile notion of citizenship in many Third World countries. The role of this religious commitment in fostering safety networks or strengthening the social texture by providing welfare services was seen as a political attempt to challenge the state, which was withdrawing from its welfare role and shifting to open market policies in many Islamic countries. Even relief work in areas of war and crisis was seen as serving only a political agenda, and the overlap of the humanitarian, political and 'missionary' agendas of some Islamic relief

<sup>1</sup> *The dominant humanistic approach was highly secular and modernist in its philosophical underpinnings, which allowed neither an understanding of the continuity of traditional forms of religiosity nor the ability to predict the return of religion in such a massive form, whether in its individual or its collective form. See the classic writings of Peter Berger (1963; 1969).*

organisations contributed to the dominance of such an approach (Berger 1999: 6,7,12, 16–17).

Within the Muslim world the crisis of democracy and falling electoral participation, combined with a failure to achieve the goals of development and failing economic policies, led to a revisionist approach amongst Muslim scholars in the fields of political and economic development (Aref 1998: 45–59, 158–61, 383–90). There was a sense that the modernist paradigm had to be revised since it undermined the organic model of society and overlooked the socio-cultural dimension in building institutions.

Revisiting traditional organisations and forms of social and economic engagement that were historically efficient in addressing socio-economic needs resulted in a wave of studies that introduced fresh approaches to institutions like *Waqf* (religious endowments, which were the foundation of redistribution of wealth and its allocation to public goals) and *Zakat* (Islamic obligatory alms-giving). These institutions once again became the focus of attention of Muslim scholars, who saw them as vehicles for social justice and a source of funding for civil society to enable it to finance its work as well as secure its relative independence from the hegemonic nation state (Sulayman 1998; Mash'hour 2007; Hammam 2007). This was paralleled by a shift in the study of economic development in the Third World. The centrality of economic factors proved to be inadequate for planning for change, and new concepts, such as 'social capital' and 'human development', emerged to introduce a complex approach to development. Economists started investigating the role of 'safety nets' and developed indicators for the 'quality of human life' (Sen 2005), and even in the domain of democratic theory one can find now a rising awareness of the role of the family and religion in economic and in democratic life that was completely absent in the last few decades both in development studies as well as in political development research (Ringen 2007: 1–12). Hence the role of religious norms and institutions in modernising societies was reintroduced into social sciences and the 'faith factor' could no longer be ignored.

### Islam and poverty, religion and history

Islam considers both humanitarian actions and the duty to help those in need to be religious obligations by which all Muslims, rich and poor, are bound. The English 'charity' might not be the best word to translate

the Arabic words used in the *Qu'ran* that indicate the obligatory nature of such humanitarian actions. Quranic texts and Hadiths (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) sometimes have an exhortatory tone encouraging works of social solidarity and acts of giving. 'The nearest to entering Paradise are those who do good works...' (Krafess 2005; El-Zemaly 2006: 43).

Non-Muslims are not excluded from benefiting from this obligation, and humanity is a sufficient reason for extending help and support. Clear *Hadiths* also encourage respect for animal rights and welfare, and being aware of the environment. In the early years of *Hijra* (the emigration from Mecca and establishment of the early city state of Madina) the Prophet Muhammad organised a humanitarian convoy to relieve a famine in the desert area of Modar. At that time, these tribes had not yet converted to Islam (El-Zemaly 2006: 43).

The Muslim religion insists on the translation of intent and conviction into concrete actions in all areas, including the humanitarian. Whenever faith is evoked in the *Qu'ran*, an injunction to react immediately follows, and charitable acts are especially encouraged. The expression 'those who believed and who performed deeds of goodness' is frequently repeated in the *Qu'ran*.

Humanitarian acts are an essential element of religious practice for the Muslim. The Quranic and prophetic texts calling for, defining and ordering humanitarian action are numerous. They are either of an obligatory or an encouraging nature, and do not exclude the non-Muslims from becoming beneficiaries of such aid. For the Muslim, to undertake a humanitarian act is a way of receiving help from heaven, of erasing sins, and of meriting Paradise.

The act of giving money or helping someone in distress is not left to the voluntary choice of the believer, but is instead a religious obligation that is as sacred and central as prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca. *Zakat* is a religious obligation and is the third pillar of Islam. The seven channels of spending *Zakat* money are set out in the *Qu'ran*, and their aims can be extended to emerging causes that fall under the same category: serving the poor, those who have no income, those who are fully devoted to working within the realm of collecting and distributing *Zakat*, new converts who are readjusting their lives in a new community of faith, and those who suffer from debt freeing slaves; serving the path of Allah; as well as aiding travelling strangers and peripatetic seekers after knowledge. The Quranic



texts and the Prophet's sayings call for generous donations and giving beyond the obligatory amounts due (Al-Qaradawi 2006).

One central aim of Islam is to fight poverty, which is seen as a malaise. This also includes emphasising work (employment) as a right and a duty, fighting consumerism and holding the individual morally responsible for the money he or she spends on unnecessary goods while others are starving or suffering. The religious and moral obligation to support and sustain the poor members of one's family is also an important issue in Islamic teachings; it is linked to the system of inheritance and can have legal consequences in Islamic law. Hence, fighting poverty is not only a matter of charity but is a highly complex system of moral, legal, religious and social mechanisms (Al-Qaradawi 1995). Hence social justice at large is the core socio-logic of Islamic teachings.

Acts of humanitarianism, whether limited to a donation in money or in kind or of a more practical nature, such as distributing aid, should be an essential element of religious practice for the Muslim. Two seasons of goodness witness greater allocations of resources for public collective causes of social solidarity and offering food to the poor: the Ramadan month of fasting and the Kurbanî feast (Eid Adha), which coincides with the days of pilgrimage every year.

The diversity of the texts motivating humanitarian work has had the effect of encouraging a variety of actions in different domains: food aid, expansion of the educational system and healthcare, water supplies, generating income, sustaining orphans and women-headed households, and relief work in crisis. The different causes can be 'translated' into more contemporary goals. Islam encourages providing safe roads for people and clearing any obstacles or threats from the pathway. This can be stretched to mine-clearing operations. It also encourages the freeing of slaves, and this can apply today to serving the cause of liberating the victims of trafficking and providing humane working conditions for suffering slave workers in many parts of the world. Hence religious donations can and should be directed to causes that are now of a global nature.

Historically, the expression of social solidarity, individual choice of wealth redistribution and the sense of civic engagement were manifested in the Islamic *Zakat* and endowment systems that were civil in nature and humanist in approach. *Zakat* was collected by the

governing bodies to fund different welfare services, but it was also spent individually by Muslims on their relations and to address the needs of local communities.

The *Waqf* system has provided further institutions to endow civil society with additional funding. It sponsored schools, hospitals, public services, communal entertainment activities, animal care centres, and so forth. It became a framework for cooperative interactions among citizens. *Waqfs* covered infrastructure projects, including drinking fountains, digging wells and operating them, building canals, paving and maintaining roads, lighting and cleaning the streets, establishing shelters and hostels for the travellers, as well as many institutions providing basic services. All spheres of public good were funded by *Waqfs*, voluntary donations by Muslims beyond the obligatory *Zakat* (alms).

Numerous structural factors have enabled the *Waqf* system to survive and to continue its role and activities up to the present. There are two basic elementary rules in this regard: a) respecting the individual will and encouraging the public engagement of citizens in addressing public issues; and b) sharing a notion of the common good and public choice through the free will of citizens, reflecting their sense of obligation towards the community.

The most decisive features of the social role of the *Waqf* system were threefold. The first was institutionalisation, as a structure of the Islamic social system itself. Various *Shari'a* interpretations by scholars provided the *Waqf* system with a set of rules, measures, procedures and criteria, ensuring the best protection of donations for public purposes. *Waqf* contracts were registered in the courts and the system enjoyed a legal status.

The second feature was financial independence from the state. This independence was even more strongly emphasised by the judicial authorities, which had the upper hand in regulating the legal affairs of the *Waqf* system. The ruling authority had no right to make any use of *Waqf* money for another public service or cause.

The third feature was decentralisation, which was strongly in evidence in the Islamic *Waqf* system. No single body governed *Waqf* entities, which addressed the respective needs of each community according to their own norms, unhampered by any sort of integration into the government administration (El Bayoumi Ghanem 2001; 2003). Under colonial rule, *Waqf* institutions managed to survive and were seen as providers of funding for public causes, unsupported by the colonial powers.<sup>2</sup>





After independence, ministries of *Waqfs* were established throughout the Muslim world. By the mid-twentieth century all *Waqfs* had come under the control of governments. The real purpose of such ministries was to ensure that the huge funds of the *Waqfs* were integrated in national treasuries and the *Waqfs* moved from the public social sphere to the hegemonic authority of the nation state (El Bayoumi Ghanem 1998).

The logic of the present-day non-*Waqf* faith-based Islamic NGOs is rooted in the teachings of Islamic texts, and is inspired by their wisdom when various humanitarian programmes are launched in different domains. Muslim civil society continues to draw on the religion of Islam and the historical experience of Islam-based organisations and relief actions.<sup>3</sup>

There is increasing concern that modern capitalist models of development have their own philosophical underpinnings and biases, which explain their inability to achieve the promised progress to which Third World nations aspired after achieving independence. Between colonisation and globalisation, the definition of development changed substantially, to make room for 'non-Western' perspectives and to focus on the role of culture rather than purely economic mechanisms. This was manifested in the emergence of notions such as human development and social capital. (See Sen 1988: 30–53; 1999.)

Muslim societies have witnessed attempts to develop the traditional *Waqf* institutions that in their traditional form were superseded by the nation-state apparatus after independence. There has also been an increasing awareness that management of *Zakat* money and the solidarity forms set out in the *Qu'ran*, such as the 'loan of goodness' (*Qarrd Hassan*), could be reinvented to develop into new organisational forms that can fulfill the proclaimed ultimate causes of Islam of protecting human dignity, alleviating suffering and struggling for social justice.

The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh might be the best-known example of a new mechanism for alleviating

poverty that is rooted in Islamic notions yet without any noticeable religious rhetoric. The bank adopted a strategy of empowerment through micro-credit to allow the poor, especially women, to engage in income-generating activities. The core passion inspiring Grameen was described by its founder, Muhammad Yunus, in his writings, as spontaneity, as opposed to the dominant economic approaches to growth that do not really address the needs of community or include people in a participatory form. His path-breaking model was born in the 1970s at a moment when Bangladesh faced a famine and the economic theories he used to teach did not help address the real problems of poverty he grappled with as an economist in his own society (for more on Yunus' vision, see Box 1.4 in the introduction to this volume).

The essence of the Grameen Bank approach is the small scale of its projects and the direct engagement with the poor and vulnerable, consulting them and addressing their needs as a starting point to allow the moral and human virtues to nurture and develop a sense of ownership on the part of those who are served, namely, the poor. The participatory approach that adopts consultation as a decision-making mechanism is foundational. The goal is to reduce inequality and build a more humane world, a world without poverty.

Yunus stresses in his books the virtues he cherishes: pride and dignity, trust and social solidarity, and empowering the poor. He says he had a sense of innocence dealing with the established banking systems, and his endeavour to transform capitalism started by revising the dominant assumption that every business should seek financial profit maximisation regardless of the social and human consequences. This offered a vision of human moral responsibility for economic actions, which is the deeply rooted socio-logic of Islam.

The shift from the Grameen Bank model and its small credit projects into diverse companies with different health, education, communication and innovation goals, and then into Grameen Danone in 2005, was a qualitative shift to the notion of social business. It was established as a joint venture with a multinational capitalist entity to improve nutrition standards for poor children based on the notion of investment that does not pay dividends but is rather self-sustaining and growing. The stakeholders (shareholders) get back the amount they have invested over a period of time but without interest. All projects stay within the business to finance expansion and to create new products or services and do more good for the beneficiaries.

2 Yale University's School of Law runs a programme in the study of Islamic law. In recent years it has held three conferences on *Waqf* under the colonial powers.

3 'Humanitarian action' in this chapter refers to humanitarian assistance directed to meet the basic physical needs of the victims of armed conflicts, natural disasters and severe poverty, and to alleviate suffering and save lives. 'Islamic organisations' are all relief organisations that are based on and motivated by an explicit Islamic drive or orientation in their activities.





Yunus repeatedly stresses that the philosophical underpinning of his projects in association with the poor and with the corporate world is the conviction that the human being is multi-dimensional. Such an approach should encourage investment in projects that would alleviate poverty, and uncontrolled growth should be tamed by social goals that provide economic man with a sense of motivation, satisfaction and happiness. It is an approach that aspires to humanise the capitalist economic mindset (Yunus 1999; 2007).

Though Yunus does not explicitly say so, the Grameen approach, whether in small credit programmes or in social business, is the closest approach in modern society to the implementation of the 'loan of goodness', which is an Islamic way of lending to the needy without expecting any interest (as Islam strictly forbids usury). The lender is encouraged in the *Qur'an* to be patient and not pressure the borrower, even if the amount owing is due for repayment according to the agreement, which should be written down as stated in the longest verse in the *Qur'an* (verse of debt). The lender is even praised if the amount lent ends up being left, in whole or in part, to the borrower as a sign of charitable solidarity that would be rewarded by Allah.<sup>4</sup>

The outstanding impact the ideas and projects of the Grameen Bank have had on alleviating poverty in many Third World countries, and even the adoption of the model in 100 countries in five continents, including the United States, shows how a humanistic, inclusive approach, similar to the one advocated by various Islamic economists, can render it global. We will see later how this impact was not anticipated by Yunus when he founded the bank.

The example of Grameen should remind us that welfare is still a societal activity in the Muslim world, due to the failure or the withdrawal of the state in Muslim societies. However, some debates that are common in the study of faith-based organisations are not very relevant to the Islamic context. An example would be the debate about the access of faith-based NGOs to public funding, and the conflict between their dependency on public funding and their obligation to be a 'witness' and speak truth to power (see, for example, Saperstein 2003).

<sup>4</sup> *On the debate among Muslim activists applying the Grameen Bank model to the percentage of administrative fees paid for each micro-credit operation and on how to estimate the fees so that would not count as banking interest, see Magdi Said (2007: 114–16).*

In the Islamic context the opposite is the case. It is the level of trust the average citizens have in Islamic organisations, in contrast to their lack of trust in official bodies, that is driving the authorities to place limitations and restrictions on faith-based NGOs addressing issues of poverty. The authorities always fear that these faith-based organisations support an alternative political legacy, especially if they have some links with opposition social movements that aspire to political change.

These informal social policies that are paralleled by informal economic policies of survival in many Muslim societies are in need of innovative approaches of study in the absence of empirical data. Though little is written by humanitarian workers and activists, one can see that the vision behind the Islamic relief and social work is basically that of realising the 'common good' as a pillar of the social norms inspired by the strong notion of social justice in Islam. As mentioned, this cannot be separated from the political implications of empowering the people.<sup>5</sup> Islamic NGOs are reshaping the public sphere, and play a role in redefining agendas of change (see Salvatore 2007: 133–72).

The question then would be how this fruitful basis of social solidarity, development and empowerment in social initiatives shifted with the move towards globalisation, extending its work beyond the boundaries of the nation state to places of conflict where the humanitarian dimension overlapped with political factors.

### **Humanitarianism between faith communities and humanity**

The moral drive for solidarity and cooperation among human beings is shared by faith-based and secular organisations alike. The secular frame of reference is rooted in notions about the minimal entitlements of every human being to life and dignity. This is embodied in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The religious frame of reference for humanitarian action draws on a functional approach where this action is seen as a tool for obeying God and implementing religious teachings, as well as spreading the religion itself through approaching the poor and the needy. Many of the modern non-religious or secular organisations emerged

<sup>5</sup> *See, for example, Shokr (2004). Compare this with the parallel rising interest in liberal democratic theory with its issues of common good, morality and society; see, for example, Brettschneider (2007: 29–44).*







in principle as religious ones or had some religious basis, and then became more inclusive and humanist.

Yet humanitarian action in the modern world cannot be based solely on moral motivations, whether religious or secular–humanist. Modern humanitarian action is inevitably linked with the political and economic interests of governments, multinational corporations and international organisations. It has surely turned into an industry. These new connections have influenced the motivations and direction of humanitarian action. Moreover, the explicit aims expressed at the establishment of any humanitarian organisation are usually mixed up with the desire of these very organisations to perpetuate themselves, even if the purpose they intended to serve diminishes over time.

All religions, especially monotheistic ones, strongly relate charity to the correct practice of the faith (see Box 6.2) Helping others becomes part of the religion's practice as well as a tool to attract new believers. In the colonial era religious work served political and economic interests when the missionaries started working closely with the colonial authorities. Such a connection has been symbiotic between Christian missionaries and the colonial armies, not to mention the example of the Crusades. Many Christian missionaries are still active in the fields of agriculture, education and health in different African, Asian and Latin American countries. In the post-colonial era certain ideological connections have acquired new dimensions, as in the example of the Christian Right's influence on American foreign policy over the past two decades.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, on the Islamic front a trilateral relationship appeared in the 1980s among the preacher,

the militant and the politician in the Afghan *Jihad* against the Soviet occupation of that country.

Despite the religious name or origin of many organisations, numerous humanitarian institutions were secularised over time, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC),<sup>7</sup> Catholic Relief Services and Islamic Relief Worldwide. The secularised nature of such organisations is evident when they make the important distinction between their religious or sectarian background and the equitable, non-discriminatory allocation and distribution of humanitarian assistance to those who need it.

No matter how relatively small in number, some religious relief organisations still practice proselytisation or *Da'wa*.<sup>8</sup> Some even support actions that can be deemed violent (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 1).<sup>9</sup> This by no means is limited to Islamic organisations. For instance, a Zionist organisation was listed in the United States and a Hindu one in Britain, as both were abusing the humanitarian relief claims for collecting money to support extremist or terrorist activities (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 155). (See also Box 6.3).

However, the abuse of humanitarian relief to further ulterior goals is not limited to religious organisations, but can be found as well in some aid programmes implemented during the Cold War. This is also applicable to the relation between humanitarian organisations and governmental policies. These political factors (including the direct intervention of politics in certain cases) have very much increased since the early 1990s, when NATO established functional and operational links with humanitarian organisations in Kosovo.

Two difficulties confront the systematic study of the relation between faith and humanitarianism. First, classifying humanitarian organisations as either religious or secular is highly simplistic and somewhat ambiguous. There is no clear-cut separation between rescuing people in need as a step to please God and undertaking such action as an expression of a commitment to high humanitarian principles. In the end, both approaches reflect an ideology that belongs to certain cultural and socio-political structures. Second,

6 *The Christian Evangelicals have re-emerged very strongly on the American and international scenes with the coalition between the Republican Party and the Christian Right. Many US administrations have adopted policies that are clearly supportive of faith-based Christian organisations in the field of social services. These organisations provide services to the poor, yet at the same time either preach the faith or at least work to spread Christian faith and values, focusing on themes such as banning abortion and opposing the teaching of Darwin's evolutionary theories in schools.*

7 *The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), established in 1863, represents the first case of organised humanitarian action that became based – at a later stage – on international laws, treaties and conventions. The ICRC is the origin of all the principles of understanding humanitarian action as a goal in itself (that is, the principles of humanitarianism, neutrality, independence and the humanitarian imperative). The concept of the founder of ICRC, Henry Donan, a Swiss national, was to assist the victims of wars, that is, the wounded and prisoners of war.*

8 *We use the term 'proselytisation' to refer to efforts to spread Christianity, while limiting the term 'Da'wa' ('the call' in Arabic) to activities to spread Islam.*

9 *Many organisations of Christian origin fall into this category, and probably have the same identity today. Examples include the Salvation Army, Oxfam (established by the Quakers), Caritas, World Vision and Christian Aid.*



## Box 6.1: Religion and development

Issues relating to religion and associated matters have been largely ignored in much of the international literature on development. This is, in part, because liberal and radical thought had for long ignored religion and its institutions as actors in modernity. The former grounded in the principle of secularity and in the separation of state and religion, tended to either prioritize the market as an agency in development, or the state in the case of its social democratic variant. Radical thought not only focused on the state as the agent of progressive development, but also seemed to be blinded to the developmental virtues of religion either by the violent history of religious persecution in Europe and the Middle East, or by the complicity of its institutions in Europe's colonization of the rest of the world. The architect of the Russian revolution, Vladimir Lenin, who maintained that religion is merely the opium of the masses, perhaps best summed this skepticism of religion by radical intellectuals.

In the decades that followed, religion was unable to rehabilitate its image in the eyes of Europe's liberal and radical intellectuals even though it spawned quite an impressive set of progressive credentials in the developing world. Liberation theology's emergence in Latin America was accompanied by at least some religious institutions and leaders challenging military rule and bureaucratic authoritarianism, even though some of their predecessors in the 1960s supported the rise of these very institutions and processes. The churches, mosques, synagogues and temples were at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid. Yet, despite all of these progressive accomplishments, religion did not emerge on the developmental landscape as a serious agent of change (Ver Beek 2002).

Only now is this being given consideration. Two reasons underlie this. First is the rising prominence of civic action and the increasing recognition that civil society is a necessary actor in successful development. This view is advanced by both state elites of a neo-liberal bent and progressive activists and intellectuals. For the former it is hoped that non-profit activity in the developmental arena may reduce the social burden on the state and thereby enable its partial withdrawal from economic life (Van Rooy 2002). The latter envisage that civil society's involvement in development would not only lend it a participatory character, but also facilitate it in the direction of the particular country's most dispossessed and marginalized citizens (Clark 1992). Either way, significant support exists for civil society's involvement in developmental activities, and since religious institutions comprise a significant component of the civic universe, it is natural that greater attention is paid to these institutions and their developmental mandate.

Second, empirical research on the non-profit sector and philanthropy over the last decade or two has categorically demonstrated that religious institutions are the dominant players in the sector. Similarly in South Africa, the first survey of individual giving indicated that a massive 80 percent of financial giving from citizens is directed through religious institutions. It does seem as if citizens across the globe tend to feel more comfortable with directing their philanthropic impulses through the medium of religious institutions. These institutions are, then, the recipients of significant resources, a fact that necessitates their consideration as players in the developmental equation.

A number of private foundations and official development agencies, have targeted for research and study the relationship between faith based communities/institutions and development. South Africa's political elites have similarly been moved to consider these issues. President Mbeki, for instance, has established a multi-faith leadership forum to advise him on developmental activities. These initiatives suggest that there is an increasing need to understand the engagement of these institutions in the developmental enterprise. Not only is this necessary to gain a better understanding of what is going on in the arena of development, it may also enable researchers and development practitioners to professionalize the engagements of religious institutions in the sector with the hopeful result that it would lead to a better impact and improve the lives of poor and marginalized citizens.

But how do these religious communities deploy the considerable resources they mobilize? Broadly speaking their giving activities can be described as taking two distinct forms: poverty alleviation and development. The former focuses on alleviating the consequences of poverty and marginalization through the disbursements of cash, goods, and services. The latter is directed towards institution-building and the establishment of an infrastructure that enables the development of a more human oriented society. A poverty alleviation programme can of course involve very different types of activities. All the religious groups were also involved in philanthropic activities that were more developmentally orientated, with a focus, on training, empowerment and sustainability, and the beneficiaries were not necessarily from their faith. There is an increasing tendency for such giving activities to transcend religious boundaries, especially in the post-apartheid era.

It is evident that religious inspired giving is extensive in South Africa. And it is the essential fiscal foundation on which the activities of faith based communities and institutions are founded. Religious institutions not only ensure their own reproduction through this giving, but they are also enabled as a result to undertake socio-economic support for marginalized and disadvantaged members of the community. Poverty alleviation included feeding schemes (food hampers, and meals in schools), blankets in winter, responding to disasters, and providing welfare support like counseling (including HIV/AIDS), addressing alcohol and drug abuse, medical attention, and assisting with emergency accommodation. Such services were initially offered to members of congregations, but are increasingly being extended to anyone in need.

Development initiatives included the building of schools, skills training and empowerment. There was an increasing focus on rural areas, and especially the empowerment of the youth and women. Women have always played an active role in mobilizing resources for giving, but because of the prevailing patriarchal systems in all the faiths, were not allowed to actively participate in decision-making, which determined allocation priorities. However, women are beginning to play a more important role in such procedures.

It needs to be borne in mind that these support activities are not simply of a charitable orientation as is commonly believed. Rather, as the analysis of the initiatives of faith based institutions in the preceding pages demonstrate, religious institutions are as much involved in developmental initiatives – the building of schools, the teaching of skills, the establishment of old age homes – as they are in poverty alleviation ones – the feeding schemes, and the provision of social welfare. There clearly can be no false divide between poverty alleviation and development. Both are clearly required in South Africa, and for that matter in much of the world. Moreover, poverty alleviation and developmental initiatives are mutually supportive of each other. It is as essential to provide a child with a plate of food, as it is to build him a school so s/he can develop the required skills to change the circumstances of their life. Without the former the latter is unlikely to have the desired effect. Religious institutions in the main tend to recognize this. Of course the balance between poverty alleviation and development differs among these communities and between their institutions. And, as has been argued earlier, this balance is determined by a variety of variables including religious traditions, spatial location, political pressures, and wealth endowments. But overall there are indications that many of these religious institutions are beginning to professionalize, and as a result understand the mutually reinforcing effects of poverty alleviation and development initiatives.

Despite this positive analysis of religious institutions and their philanthropic interventions, we would be remiss if we at least did not recognize the limits of these institutions and their potential negative consequences. Two such consequences immediately come to mind. First, is the traditional concern of liberal and radical intellectuals that religious institutions' engagements in public life tend to result in societal fissures, producing tensions which have the effect of polarizing citizens. There is of course much historical evidence to support their concern. And recently this concern was raised by no more a notable and religiously persecuted literary figure than Salman Rushdie who expressed concern about the increasing involvement of religion in the public life of the United States and Britain, and warned that political elites in both societies would rue the divisive consequences of their appeasement of these religious institutions and communities (*Sunday Times*, 27 March 2005).

Could the philanthropic intervention of religious institutions not have the same effect? After all these interventions are often targeted at addressing public concerns like poverty and underdevelopment. There is of course a real danger that Rushdie's fears could materialize. But averting this outcome would require a much more engaged response than Rushdie seems to realize. The problem lies in his historically decontextualized analysis of political elites and their behavior in the United States and Britain. After all, these political elites and their behavior are a reflection of the distribution of power among social actors in these societies. It is no using bemoaning the presence and strength of religion in public life. Rather the task is to recognize this reality and manage it so that the societal fissures and political polarization produced by more extremist religious interventions, can be avoided. This is even more necessary in a context like South Africa. The under-development heritage bequeathed by apartheid is enormous and the post-apartheid regime cannot on its own address the racially constructed historical backlogs. If religious institutions are generating the scale of resources, suggested in the analysis of the preceding pages, then, is it not legitimate that they be engaged to assist in addressing the developmental challenges of post-apartheid South Africa?



This, then, raises the second potentially negative consequence of religiously inspired philanthropic engagements, emanating mainly from the character and intentions of these interventions. Much religious giving is directed within communities rather than across them. Moreover, even when they are directed across religious boundaries, their intention is often the recruitment of new people to the faith. Both the parochial intra-community focus of religious institutions and their intentions when this is transcended could skew the developmental agenda in dramatically negative ways. This of course would provoke the kind of societal fissures and political tensions that Rushdie warns of. But, again the answer to this dilemma is the public management of, and engagement with, religious institutions and communities.

At one level this seems to have been recognized by some political elites. As was indicated earlier, President Thabo Mbeki has already established a multi-faith forum of national religious leaders with whom to engage on poverty alleviation and development. Initial indications suggest that Mbeki's immediate interest in engaging these religious leaders is not on coordinating their own resources, but rather on using their grassroots institutional expressions – local parishes, mosques, synagogues and temples - as mechanisms for the dissemination of public social welfare grants and other funds. This is because the apartheid legacy has ensured that state institutions are often not present in areas where the most marginalized and dispossessed citizens reside. Using the religious institutions thus enables the state to get resources where it is most needed without waiting for the establishment of the necessary public institutional infrastructure.

There is much that is positive in this proposal for it creates the possibility of a more equal partnership between the state and one significant expression of civil society. But care must be taken to ensure that this initiative does not run aground on religious turf wars. The forum must continue to have a multi faith character, and institutions must be monitored to ensure that these state resources are not disbursed in a religiously parochial way. Moreover, the forum must transform from being a dissemination agent to an institutional expression, which informs the character of the national development agenda, and enables coordination between religious institutions and the state on the disbursements of their respective developmental resources. This will not only allow for the necessary coordination that is required in a successful development enterprise, but it would enable the disbursement of resources by religious institutions in a socially responsive way. The net effect would hopefully be a more efficient and effective development undertaking that reinforces the common bonds of brotherhood among South African citizens, rather than the divisions bequeathed to them by their apartheid past.

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**Source: Brij Maharaj et al., 'Religion and Development: Reflections on the South African Experience', in Adam Habib and Brij Maharaj (eds), *Giving and Solidarity: Resource Flows for Poverty Alleviation in South Africa*. Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2008, pp. 79–120.**



it is also important to bear in mind that the separation between state and religion (the church) is a characteristic feature of the West European and North American socio-political social history as it evolved through numerous religious wars and political conflicts over centuries. Many people active in Islamic organisations or studying them believe that the organisations have no relationship whatsoever to such an idea of secularism. Some go so far as to describe it as a crime against Islamic humanitarian action to deprive it of its religious identity (Al-Salloumy 2005: 209).

Even some Western literature sees this religious motivation as social capital that facilitates the work of such faith-based organisations in their communities in times of crisis, where they are more efficient in dealing with social problems than the international organisations, especially in times of disaster (Ferris 2005). Other analysts stand firmly against this argument and claim that one of the problems with Islamic relief or development organisations is their strong belief that they are in the right in a religious sense while followers of other religions are not (Holstein 2006: 43). Certain analysts believe that this would open the gate wide for abuse of religious enthusiasm and drive, especially in relation to human rights and women's rights. Still, the problem lies in these very specific issues as they are not still recognised as universal references for all cultures (Al-Salloumy 2005: 227).

One should not assume that Islamic organisations would evolve in a similar fashion to Christian ones, becoming increasingly secular over time while maintaining only an Islamic name, title or symbol. Christian and Islamic organisations have different evolutionary histories. This is elementary because the secular points of reference for most of the activities of Western relief organisations have not yet become universal norms, including notions of human rights as set out in international documents, declarations and conventions. But this does not mean that Islamic organisations have no alternative courses of evolution towards humanism, as we will see.

We should always remember that the religious factor is more established in the domain of charity and relief work. Except for the ICRC, secular international organisations did not have a strong presence in the field of relief till after the Second World War, when dozens of international organisations (many were inter-governmental ones under the umbrella of the United Nations) as well as private non-governmental

philanthropic foundations started to operate on an international scale.

Most of these organisations when first launched focused on handling the aftermath of the Second World War in the defeated countries. Soon afterwards, they started to pay attention to the African continent, evolving into the permanent organisations we are familiar with today such, as UNICEF and UNHCR, thus converting themselves from temporary programmes whose mandates would have ended when poverty, famine or displacement had disappeared into permanent agencies of humanitarian work.

In the first half of the 1990s, and with the rise of globalisation, international humanitarian organisations turned into large scale entities with a universal identity, working within the largely hegemonic market economy and liberal (or neo-liberal) capitalist frame. Humanitarian organisations even started to compete with each other to obtain funding from governments and private donors. Governments, for their part, started to allocate parts of their assistance budgets to different NGOs and humanitarian organisations (De Waal 1997: 79).

The media played an important role in portraying a clear distinction between Western humanitarian organisations (whether religious or secular) and Islamic ones, as if the latter had a completely different logic and nature. This role of Western organisations was strongly highlighted by the end of 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, as it focused global attention (which was very much distracted by the huge influx of information) on the humanitarian tragedies resulting from conflicts and natural disasters. Some photographs of the famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s, for example, ignited the efforts that led to an unprecedented flow of international assistance and donations to that country.<sup>10</sup> Islamic humanitarian organisations on the other hand had a very low profile, extending services quietly and without too much media coverage.<sup>11</sup>

There has been recently a remarkable shift in the

<sup>10</sup> For more details see Benthall (1993).

<sup>11</sup> In the Hadith of the prophet Mohamed, the Hadith Narrator Abu-Hurayrah said that Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) said: 'Seven people would be sheltered by the shadow of Allah, in a day when there is no shadow but His'; and he set out seven examples of good deeds including a man who gave to a charity hiding from the eyes of others to seek the bounty of Allah so that his left hand would not know what his right hand had spent. However, the Qu'ran also states the importance of setting a good example in doing goodness, to encourage others to do the same.





techniques of Islamic humanitarian organisations as they became more interested in the media and appointed media consultants as well as producing flyers and pamphlets. They are also working on improving their websites and digitally documenting their work, as well as attending international conferences of relief organisations worldwide.

The role of Islamic humanitarian organisations has become much more prominent at the national level in the past three decades as the state started to abandon its central role in providing health, education, employment and social services.

Certain Islamist political organisations, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, started to play a growing social and charity role, beginning at the domestic level but then spreading across international borders in the 1970s as surplus oil revenues became available for *Da'wa* and relief activities in Asia and Africa. Islamic international relief organisations dramatically accelerated their presence and activities with the onset of *Jihad* in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

This vacuum, which was partly filled by Islamic charities and NGOs, came also at a time when huge financial surpluses became available due to rising oil prices. It was also the period of the emergence of the so-called Islamic financial institutions (such as the Islamic Monetary House, Al-Baraka and Darul Mal Al-Islami), where classical forms of bank interest (seen to be usury or *Riba*) were forbidden (*Haram*). The interest that unavoidably accrued from dealings with non-Islamic financial institutions and other sources was then redirected into charity. New organisations were set up with the specific purpose of collecting *Zakat* from account-holders in Islamic banks.

These structural changes coincided with the growing need in Africa (especially Somalia and Sudan) and in Afghanistan for humanitarian aid.<sup>12</sup> The civil war in Bosnia provided one more very important field of action for these organisations.<sup>13</sup>

Islamic humanitarian action organisations have been experiencing various degrees of restriction and close supervision since the 1990s. This situation was intensified by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Islamic organisations became generally subject to more scrutiny under the 'War on Terror'. Various accusations have been made to the effect that a number of these organisations have been providing financial assistance to terrorist actions or to Islamic organisations that have political agendas or military

wings. In response, many Islamic organisations claimed that the assault on them was part of a crusade against Islam. Yet somewhere between allegations of terrorist links on the one hand and the assumed conspiracy against Islam on the other, many Islamic humanitarian organisations in fact started introducing some reforms in their organisational structures and adopted more transparent programmes and annual auditing reports, clearly separating their humanitarian work from any political affiliations. A universal humanitarian discourse started to emerge, which draws a clear distinction between *Da'wa* on the one hand and activities carried out for purely humanitarian reasons on the other.

Many Muslims believe *Da'wa* can not be separated from humanitarian and charitable activity, since both involve worship in which the donor is seeking God's mercy and blessing. As far as motivation is concerned there is a certain deal of overlap between the two as they are rooted in notions of goodness. Hence, some Islamic organisations relate these notions to one another, bringing them comfortably under the banner of *Da'wa* (Yousef 2006; Yousef is a manager of the Islamic Association in Bahrain).

Most Islamic charity organisations claim that they do not discriminate between Muslim and the non-Muslim beneficiaries, but it is clear that almost all of them operate more often in predominantly Muslim crisis areas, either due to geographical proximity or because such areas are more in need. Many of these organisations focus on building mosques and establishing schools and clinics that are attached to mosques. Gulf-based charity institutions are reported to have built more than 127,000 mosques at a total cost in excess of USD 126 million (Al-Salloumy 2005: 47–57).

<sup>12</sup> *The organisations that were providing support and assistance to the Afghans and the Mujahideen were The Committee for Supporting Afghanistan, sponsored by the ruler of Riyadh, Prince Salman Bin Abdel-Aziz; the International Islamic Relief Organization, affiliated to the League of the Muslim World; the Islamic Relief Committee affiliated to the Egyptian Doctors' Syndicate; and the Islamic Advocacy Committee, affiliated to the Kuwaiti Social Reform Society (the latter two organisations are closely related to the Muslim Brothers group).*

<sup>13</sup> *The Islamic international humanitarian organisations that played a prominent role in this regard include the Islamic African Relief Organization established in Sudan in 1981, the International Islamic Relief Organization established in Jeddah in 1979, affiliated to the League of the Muslim World, as well as a number of small organisations that operated in Afghanistan and provided assistance to Afghan refugees in north-west Pakistan.*





Islamic organisations with a long history, such as the Lebanese Islamic Charity Goals Association, and other transnational ones, such as Islamic Relief, adopt a very different viewpoint. The Islamic Goals Association is 'an Islamic organization but neither political nor sectarian in the narrow sense...but rather in the sense that it draws its values, ethics and charity goals from Islam. Still it attracts efficient Christian instructors, and it is keen to build good friendly relations as well as launch cooperation programs with all schools in Lebanon.' The association even tried to attract non-Muslim students to its schools; it has always 'been open to receive all groups without any discrimination' and applies the same principle to providing health and social services (Nashabah 2006). Hani El-Banna, founder of International Islamic Relief, says that working on the basis of addressing needs alone is the best approach for any humanitarian organisation. He claims that the organisation 'provides assistance regardless of ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, sectarian affiliations' (El-Banna 2006).

The fact is, however, that most of the Islamic relief associations mix *Da'wa* with relief. Some even have worked closely with militant *Jihadi* organisations at a certain moment in time, especially in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when the Afghan *Mujahideen* launched their guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation with American, Saudi and Pakistani support. Such cooperation between relief workers and the jihadists did not come to an end until the Afghan *Mujahideen* started their fratricide after they entered Kabul in 1992. This internal conflict weakened the relationship between the humanitarian organisations and the *Jihadi* movement, as the former became disenchanted. A former relief worker in these associations once said that the relationship between the doctor, the sheikh and the *Mujahid* was severely affected by this internal conflict. Prior to this chasm, the sheikh encouraged the *Mujahid* while the doctor took care of his physical wounds. Military action (better known in this episode as the Afghan *Jihad*) was the ultimate project, to which everything else should be subservient, including humanitarian action.

The professional standards and accountability of the Islamic humanitarian organisations operating in the 1980s did not receive much attention from the aid workers or managers who staffed and ran them. A bigger cause was out there. To avoid rampant duplication they established the Islamic Coordination Council in order

to coordinate tasks and missions. However, the Islamic Advocacy Committee, whose main job was *Da'wa*, went ahead in building hospitals, while the infamous Office of Services, which organised support for the armed Afghan militias, intervened directly in relief operations.

In Bosnia, a decade later, a remarkable transformation happened as many Islamic relief organisations adopted more rigorous professional standards and operational criteria, which brought them closer to other humanitarian organisations that operate on the assumption that humanitarian action is the goal in and of itself (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 70).

During the 1990s growing pressures from the governments of some Muslim countries, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, led at the national level to limitations and restrictions on the operations of the Islamic humanitarian relief organisations that largely worked abroad, especially those related to Islamic political groups. Such organisations were accused by these governments of supporting terrorism, and some professionals working in relief organisations were subject to detention and sometime imprisonment due to the fear that they had been trained to use arms in zones of conflict or were members of militant groups.

The expertise gained in Afghanistan and Bosnia as well as the restrictions imposed by the national governments drove some organisations to adopt a secular discourse and to isolate their activities to a great extent from any political groups. In this respect they were following other organisations which broke their bonds with the militant *Jihad* and *Da'wa* activities. Therefore, the publications of such Islamic organisations became much more focused on development and relief, using the terminology of the 'international humanitarian' and avoiding words like '*Da'wa*' or '*Jihad*' (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 77–8).

Many relief organisations have been working on adopting a code of ethics for their activities, the most important of which is the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief (URL), as well as the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (The Sphere Project URL). Some 427 organisations signed the Code of Conduct document, 11 of which were Islamic organisations registered in Britain, the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada and Germany (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies URL). The Code of Conduct





states that assistance should be extended without any discrimination on the basis of race, belief or nationality, without bias of any kind, and on the basis of need only.

The drafting and negotiation process for the Sphere humanistic charter started in 1997 as an effort of the International Federation of the Red Crescent and Cross Associations as well as other public organisations to agree on minimal operational criteria that should be met before, during and after humanitarian intervention in the fields of water supply, sewage, nutrition, food supplies, shelter and health services. Among the principal voluntary criteria is the necessity of involving the affected societies in assessing the needs, and designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the relief operations. More than 400 organisations from 80 countries have participated so far in setting these criteria and updating them.

While the Code of Conduct acts as a broad general reference for operations, the Sphere charter provides in a detailed manner the criteria for the actual intervention and ways to evaluate it. For example, Islamic Relief Worldwide, after adopting the Code of Conduct, used its criteria in evaluating programmes and staff performance to assure a 'higher quality of services' (El-Banna 2006: 32).

Until the 1990s Islamic relief organisations did not pay much attention to collaboration with other organisations. There has been even some animosity between Islamic organisations and 'Western' ones in Afghanistan, where the Islamic organisations accused their international or Western counterparts of adopting Western cultural agendas and working to convert Muslims to Christianity. There has been only limited cooperation between the rich Relief Committees in Kuwait and the Afghan Relief Coordination Corporation (ACBAR), which acted as a coordination office for the activities of almost all NGOs in Afghanistan. Many years later, many Islamic organisations acknowledged the high level of professionalism and neutrality or impartiality of certain 'Western' NGOs such as Médecins sans Frontières (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: 75).

By the end of the 1990s most of the Islamic relief organisations, especially those that operate outside their original geographical or national borders, started seeking 'an equitable partnership among all, in addition to exchanging expertise, whether in the field operations or regarding the common ethics' (Yousef 2006: 32).

If we consider all these developments integrating Islamic NGOs within the global sphere of humanitarian

action as one track of the ongoing process of organisational complexity of these NGOs, the other track would be the increasing field-level cooperation between Islamic and non-Islamic organisations. There are actual existing relations between both types of organisations in the fields of distributing aid and assessing needs and surveys, in addition to monitoring performance in collaboration with the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

### 9/11: The aftermath

Various accusations have been made against Islamic NGOs and their alleged links with terrorists or terrorist activities, especially after the tragic attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington DC. Many of these organisations were subject to harsh restrictions in various parts of the Muslim world and investigations in many countries. Some were banned and their chapters closed, bank accounts were frozen, and they were sued, especially in the United States. Other restrictions took the form of new financial and administrative laws and regulations that prevented the organisations from dealing freely with the international relief system (Al-Salloumy 2005: 7).

Allegations were broadcast in the media. For example, the US General Wesley Clark, who led NATO forces in Kosovo, told *The Times* of London, on 3 April 2003, that Iraq would become fertile soil for recruiting people into Al-Qaeda through Islamic relief organisations immediately after the war had begun. Shiite and Sunni extremists, Clark claimed, would be planted inside international Islamic relief organisations, and some of them would carry out recruitment operations. He called for scrutinising and investigating the backgrounds of these relief organisations and monitoring mosques closely (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: xii).

Some aid workers in these organisations were arrested, whether in Afghanistan after the US-led invasion in 2001 or in Iraq in 2003. Arab human rights activist, Haytham Manaé, says that 'eight workers from Arab or Islamic relief organizations were held in US Guantanamo base in Cuba and in Bagram base prison in Afghanistan'.

Christian evangelicals, especially from the United States, started to prepare for 'emergency' intervention operations, including their core business of proselytisation, to follow the US-led military invasion







in Iraq and Afghanistan, around the same time as Clark was making his allegations. These organisations include the Southern Baptists Convention and the Samaritan Fund (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003: xii).

Islamic relief organisations were unable to transfer payments to contractors, and their services were badly affected. The increasingly complex newly introduced regulations governing charity activity halted or severely slowed financial transfers, thus delaying or stopping regular payments such as aid workers' salaries as well as financial support sent to orphans, poor families and students (Al-Weheiby 2006; Al-Weheiby is the Secretary General of the World Assembly for Muslim Youth (URL) in Saudi Arabia).

Many of the instructions and conditions imposed by the US Treasury (including writing long reports and filling many forms to be approved by US authorities) overwhelmed or exceeded the limited administrative capacity of many of these relief NGOs. These new rules were 'ridiculous and demeaning', according to one of the founders of an American Islamic relief organisation (Al-Salloumy 2005: 88). Many new restrictions and regulations were imposed in Gulf countries as well as in other Muslim states placing limitations on bank accounts held by these NGOs. In some countries the charity organisations were even unable to deposit or withdraw cash from their bank accounts without detailed official scrutiny. Some Islamic organisations and associations in the United States and the UK were thoroughly investigated and finally closed down, being accused of transferring money to Palestinian Hamas-affiliated organisations, though these organisations claimed the transfers were to serve humanitarian purposes and were separate from the Hamas political agenda. The government of Saudi Arabia decided in 2002 to force the charity organisations to report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs all the details of those of their projects that were being funded abroad. The government also established the Saudi Public Authority for Relief and Charity Abroad as an entity dealing exclusively with all aspects of humanitarian assistance outside Saudi Arabia. This new governmental body was assigned the responsibility of distributing the *Zakat* and *Sadaka* (non-compulsory alms) paid by Saudi citizens dedicated to communities outside the kingdom. For some time all financial donations were brought to a halt in Kuwait, as was the collection of *Zakat* money in mosques, even during the month of Ramadan. The Kuwaiti Central Bank was authorised to approve all

financial transactions from charity organisations going abroad (Al-Salloumy 2005: 76–84).

The Islamic relief NGOs that especially suffered from all these measures – whether in their countries of origin or abroad – were Al Haramain Charity Organization, the International Direct Aid, the Holy Land Fund, the International Islamic Charity Organization (the latter three had their assets frozen for a while in the United States), Qatar Charity, the World Assembly for Muslim Youth (WAMY), the International Islamic Relief Authority (the latter two are Saudi organisations which were investigated by the US Congress), and Revival of Islamic Heritage (a Salafi Kuwaiti organisation). Other organisations also suffered in other parts of the Muslim world; they include Al Rashid Association in Pakistan and Al Mujahedeen Movement (an Islamic militia active in relief work in Kashmir). Some of these organisations did indeed have good relations with their governments, yet the 'War on Terror' had a highly negative effect on the willingness of such governments to defend them. As an example, Saleh Aal El-Sheikh, the Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs, was the board chairman of Al Haramain Foundation (which came under scrutiny) as well as the head of the WAMY. The International Islamic Relief Organization, for example, has received more than USD 1.33 billion from the Saudi government since its inception in 1962.<sup>14</sup>

Some governments seized this opportunity to settle scores with certain NGOs affiliated to the opposition Islamic movements by putting more restrictions on them.

The United Nations established a committee for combating terrorism in implementation of Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999), which established a sanctions regime to cover individuals and entities associated with Al-Qaida, Osama bin Laden and/or the Taliban. The committee has produced a regularly updated list of individuals and organisations accused of aiding terrorism. The list has included ten Islamic organisations, including the Kuwaiti Association for Reviving the Islamic Heritage and the Saudi Al Haramain Foundation.

The reactions of the Islamic relief NGOs to these restrictions varied. Some even claimed that they had an indirect positive impact. For example, Hani El-Banna,

<sup>14</sup> Al-Salloumy (2005: 199). WAMY was initially called the Humanitarian Organization for the Muslim World League. Its headquarters is in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and it was established to counter growing Arab nationalism.



## Box 6.2: Society and charity among Mormons in Russia: is this global civil society?

The religiously informed dimensions of poverty relief among adherents of the Mormon Church in Russia may be considered an aspect of global civil society. (By 'Mormon Church' I mean the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, LDS.) As Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor (2001) suggest, there are a number of contested approaches to the definition of global civil society, ranging from various material and psychological markers to operational attributes. For example, the authors write, 'One thing that helps to explain the present universal popularity of "civil society" is its very fuzziness: it can be all things to all people' (2001: 15). They also point out that for some authors civil society represents 'a commitment to common human values that go beyond ethnic, religious, or national boundaries' (2001: 15). Religion, however, like global civil society, can itself be a fuzzy category. It can subsume whole economic models (such as Islamic banking) or influence national interest. Garrard and Garrard (2008) argue that the Orthodox Church is the hidden force behind Russia's contemporary domestic and foreign policies.

Here I wish to make room for even more 'fuzziness' via the consideration of ethnographically informed points of view and the so-called in-group perspective by way of attempting to find out what global civil society means to Mormons in Russia. During, and as a result of, an individual's conversion or enculturation into the Mormon Church, the individual's conceptions of society can change, as can his or her willingness and ability to tackle poverty. Thus, the development of global civil society can be seen as a process of individual enculturation. As such, attitudes toward global civil society cannot easily be disentangled from other factors, such as religious doctrine or the process of religious conversion. This approach may question whether it is possible, or even desirable, to maintain prescriptive definitions of global civil society. I suggest that in-group perspectives may be helpful to attempts to frame policy or poverty intervention that impinge on specific populations.

According to the Church's promotional materials in Russia, Joseph Smith (the founder of Mormonism) sent two missionaries to Russia in 1843 – 13 years after the Church was established. However, it is unclear whether the men actually reached Russia, as the mission was cancelled when Smith died in 1844. It was not until 1895 that missionary activity resumed in Russia, when a native of Sweden was sent to St. Petersburg and baptised the family of Johan M. Lindel. Throughout the early 1900s the family was occasionally visited by Church members from outside Russia. In 1959, Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (a leadership unit in the Church that serves the president/prophet of the Church) preached in Moscow's Central Baptist Church (Benson was US Secretary of Agriculture at the time of his Moscow visit).

In September 1989 a US embassy worker in Russia and member of the Church was allowed to begin holding group meetings in his apartment, thus founding the Leningrad congregation. Four months later missionaries arrived in Leningrad to expand the congregation. Within a month they had founded a second congregation in Vyborg. Membership in the Leningrad congregation reached 100 in about half a year, and the Vyborg congregation reached 25. Russian membership was at 750 in February 1992, and the Church was recognised by the government of St. Petersburg.

According to the Cumorah Project International LDS database ([www.cumorah.com](http://www.cumorah.com)), Church membership in Russia exceeded 9,000 at the end of 1998. By the late 1990s LDS branches had been established in almost all Russian cities with a population of 1 million or more. I conducted research between 2004 and 2006 at the Samara mission, which includes much of the middle Volga region. It was created in 1993 from part of the Russia Moscow Mission. In 1999 Samara membership was estimated at over 1,600, though fewer than a third may be regularly active in the Church.

As this history suggests, the Mormon missionary effort has been a global project since its early days. There are currently more than 50,000 LDS members serving missions around the world. Missionaries can be single men between the ages of 19 and 25, single women over the age of 21 or retired couples. Young men serve missions for two years and women for 18 months. In Samara between 2004 and 2006 the majority of missionaries came from the United States. The young men and women spent most of their time contacting and teaching prospective converts, while the retired couples organised charitable programmes – in this case, the donation of wheelchairs to disabled people in Samara. Additionally, missionaries and members participated in a monthly fast and donated money worth a day's food to the local branch of the Church.

In interviews missionaries and converts maintained that their church was active in poverty relief on a large scale. One missionary cited LDS involvement in disaster relief in Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami, adding that the Church not only successfully partnered with an organisation called Islamic Relief but was also recognised by the Red Cross for its sustained level of support. Other members cited the LDS's own Relief Society organisation. The Relief Society comprises single women aged 18 years or more and married women of any age. In addition to helping female members to 'become full participants in the blessings of the priesthood' it attempts to 'exercise charity and nurture those in need' (The Relief Society URL). Finally, several individuals spoke of the capacity of the church to deliver social welfare to members and non-members through a variety of programmes, such as Bishops Storehouses (for use

by poor members, or the general public in times of crisis), redistribution of the collections from 'fast offerings' and the maintenance of many large-scale agricultural projects, including ranches, dairy farms, orchards and canneries.

Recent converts to the Church in Samara point out that very few of these programmes exist as yet in Russia. Nonetheless, when we compare pre-conversion and post-conversion narratives of Mormon converts, we find a variety of changes in notions of society and poverty.

In early interviews one member compared social welfare in Russia to poverty relief in Africa, since both were ruined by external intervention – from the mafia in the former case and warlords in the latter. Several months after the member was baptised I replayed the recording of her interview. She said that while it was still true that tyrants and corruption operated in Russia, she felt that the doctrine of the Church had brought into being a growing group of trustworthy people. As Latter-day Saints they could take it upon themselves to deliver charity directly to anyone, particularly because, as an organised group, the Church members could trust one another to purchase and organise supplies. She pointed to instances where the local Church membership had been mobilised to rebuild damaged and uninhabitable dwellings for a group of non-members. She related details of Church doctrine as the basis for her shift in opinion: each individual on earth is literally a son or a daughter of 'Heavenly Father', who has propagated billions of spirit children in heaven. Each spirit is awaiting a body to inhabit here on earth so that its faith can be tested before returning to Heavenly Father, after which it will hopefully mature to greater levels of divine power. Part of this test, the member suggested, was to understand one's role in the divine plan and to help others achieve the same understanding. So a Mafioso, for example, regardless of his sins, remained a spirit brother and so it was the duty of the Church is to help organise his successful return to Heavenly Father. She said that as a result of her baptism and growth in the Church it was no longer possible for her to ignore the conditions of those around her.

Another member, prior to conversion, suggested that charity in Russia was not possible due to corruption at all levels of politics. He claimed, for example, that Mikhail Khodorokovsky, the billionaire founder of Open Russia, which campaigned for human rights and political freedoms in Russia, was arrested and incarcerated in 2003 precisely because his charitable work was undermining the government's effort to maintain a corrupt status quo. The same member later described to me that goodwill could emerge in post-Soviet Russia once people learned the reality of 'Heavenly Father's plan', which was a stronger guiding principle than was the previous, Soviet, plan, particularly because it provided people with important 'freedoms' – such as freedom from sin.

Based on the brief examples detailed above, can any correlation be detected between an individual's religious conversion and his or her notions of social responsibility? Theory in religious economics suggests that stricter religious organisations experience more long-term sustainable growth than do organisations that provide too much 'free-riding' (Iannaccone 1994). Any organisation, religious or otherwise, that provides copious amounts of charity may encourage free-riding to the point where it destroys itself. The Mormon Church provides charity but also makes substantial demands on a members' time through extensive social or religious activities, and in Iannaccone's typology is thus considered to be a 'strict' church. While it appears that there is a threshold below which an organisation can provide charity and still sustain itself, it is not clear how perceptions of trust between group members may raise that threshold.

To my informants, it appeared that the process of religious conversion also produced intra-group trust which, as mentioned specifically by one member, allows small scale projects to go forward with ease – individual members can be trusted, for example, to procure the necessary materials and tools with Church funds. Such trust may be related to the level of social commitment demanded by a strict church. Thus, it is more difficult for a group member to steal from the group when members have an intimate knowledge of one another's private lives. Indeed, they may have little private life to speak of; missionaries, for one example, are required to spend every day of their mission with a fellow missionary – including living together in a shared room.

From these examples we can see shifts in convert attitudes from society as beyond salvation to society as a heavenly test. Individual Church members expressed a desire to engage non-members through charitable works. Can this be considered an aspect of global civil society? Certainly, the Church itself operates on a global scale, and the process of an individual's conversion often begins with the arrival of a missionary from a foreign country. There is evidence that the Church involves itself with non-LDS organisations (such as Islamic Relief and the Red Cross) and also distributes its resources to non-members during major disasters (such as Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005) – action that might be considered civil. If we accept that the charitable behaviour of Latter-day Saints is an aspect of global civil society, then we might argue that Mormon religious conversion is itself a process of enculturation *towards* a global civil society – recognising that members and non-members may have different conceptions of 'society'.

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believes that the post-9/11 world negatively affected many Islamic organisations, but ‘we overcame the wave of suspicion and proved our true and genuine humanist spirit which gave us much more credibility in our activities among other international organizations’ (El-Banna 2006). However, the majority of aid workers in these NGOs believe that the restrictions were deliberately meant to cripple their activities.

Dr Al-Weheiby, who runs the WAMY, believes that deliberate prejudice has been displayed against the Islamic charity organisations working in the field of relief assistance. Adnan El-Basha, Secretary General of the International Islamic Relief Assembly, concurs and claims further that the Islamic charity movement posed a strong challenge to ‘superpowers working to undermine the foundations of the Third World or the South in general... [They] have invented and established secret evidence to counter what is basically our work of charity. The American Treasury is providing secret evidence to American judges and the defendants cannot confront this evidence.’ If the judge is convinced by the secret evidence, the issue of labelling the organisation as terrorist is transferred from the Treasury Department to the United Nations, where the decision is made by the Terrorism Combating Committee without investigation or sound evidence being submitted.<sup>15</sup> Al-Salloumy is much more vehement, and claims that many Islamic organisations believe that they are being targeted within the framework of an overall campaign against their humanitarian activities and against Islam. These restrictions and close monitoring are aimed at scaring people away from volunteering to work for these organisations or making donations to them.

*This campaign is part of the strategic framework of the new world order, which considers Islam and its institutions as new competitors or enemies who are uncontrollable as the United States claims. These institutions with their Islamic ethical agenda and intellectual and financial independence constitute a very strong competing force against the fanatics in the West, whether individual institutions or states.* (Al-Salloumy 2005: 23)

Despite the freezing of the financial assets and

<sup>15</sup> Based on notes taken by the author at the conference of the International Bureau for Humanitarian NGOs, Istanbul, 8–9 September 2007. For more details on this organisation and its activities, see IBH (URL).

restrictions on the activities of many of these relief NGOs, not many indictments were issued, and most of the allegations evaporated, or investigations found no evidence of any wrongdoing. However, the financial burden imposed by the restrictions and investigations led to the closure of many smaller organisations and of some programmes of certain larger ones. This is why some commentators such as Al-Salloumy claimed that restrictive financial decisions and measures ‘could have never achieved the declared goal which is drying up funding for terrorist activities, but they indeed ensured financial bankruptcy of Islamic charity organizations and made them very preoccupied defending themselves instead of acting in the humanitarian sphere and fulfilling their initial mission’ (Al-Salloumy 2005: 23).

Some Islamic NGOs concluded that the only way to distance themselves from the stigma was to engage with international organisations and NGOs, including the United Nations. Al-Weheiby has called for a mechanism supported by the United Nations in order

*to set the record straight and pave the way back for these charity organizations to go back to normal business. This mechanism should determine the violating organizations, and encourage cooperation with the rest which follow the set rules and regulations. We also need a counter-media campaign to make up for the defamation campaigns against the Islamic organizations in addition to programs to enhance the capacity building of the individuals active in the Islamic charity sector to acquaint them with various rules and institutionalize transparency.* (Al-Weheiby 2006: 28)

El-Banna (2006) is definitely right when he points that the 9/11 attacks forced the Islamic organisations to become more ‘professional’ in their activities, especially in their financial transactions, using external auditors and providing detailed annual budgets in addition to relying on standard accounting guidelines and enhancing the quality of the regular reports they forward to governments and donors.

After 9/11 many Islamic organisations started to apply very strict rules of accountability and transparency. Islamic Relief Worldwide (URL) stresses this on its website, as well as established Islamic charities in the Gulf States like the International Islamic Charitable Organization (URL). In Egypt, many relief and development Islamic organisations have been







recently established. Egypt Food Bank (URL), which does development as well as relief work within Egypt and has the aim of fighting hunger, has appointed an international auditor of its work. The same applies to the umbrella organisation Misr-el-Kheir (URL), which has received millions of Egyptian pounds in *Zakat* donations following its launch in Ramadan 2007.

Complying with international standards of accountability and developing the organisational structure brings into Islamic humanitarian work aspects of a global framework of concepts and notions related to humanitarian work and is also an indicator of its ability to accommodate visions of professionalism and of a global nature.

The problem is not that relief NGOs may have a religious, sectarian or a political agenda, because most of them do, but that these affiliations are overlooked or ignored in analyses of the organisations' activities. Some analysts have long resorted to labelling and hence exclusion when dealing with the Islamic groups and organisations working in the humanitarian field. It is not wise to ignore moral intentions – including the religious motivation – when interpreting modern humanitarian action. It is also a mistake to ignore or overlook the political, economic and cultural interests associated with the foundation of such organisations, as well as their current practices and relations with donor countries. In addition to these two sets of factors, it is elementary to recognise the bureaucratic interests of the major relief and aid organisations, which are concerned with their own survival and expanding the scope of their activities.

These three groups of factors interact with each other and overlap in many cases. They all contribute to the increased politicisation of humanitarian activity, whose planning, implementation and funding are indeed influenced by many hidden agendas and goals. Therefore, many activists and humanitarian organisations are attempting to adopt certain standards that could ensure more impartiality, independence and integrity, thus rearticulating the basic principles of humanitarian intervention and containing the unavoidable politicisation. The goal is to enhance transparency and awareness of the various mechanisms of humanitarian activity as well as its limitations or even defects.

The future evolution of Islamic humanitarian organisations is very difficult to foresee. Yet there are issues that need to be settled if Islamic NGOs are to be integrated fully and successfully in the wider realm of

globalised humanitarian and relief work. First, they need to engage the humanist universal discourse instead of staying mainly or solely rooted in religious motivations. Islamic Relief Worldwide, for example, has introduced such notions into its strategic plans and discourse; but it remains to be seen how far the grassroots aid workers practise such notions in reality.<sup>16</sup>

Second, it is importance to shift attitudes that are based solely on cultural and religious specificity, that is, the religious point of reference regarding motivation and performance. Broader moral notions of human integrity and human agency could be introduced to balance specific religious notions.

Third, Islamic relief organisations will have to adopt a clear position on ties with political Islamist organisations as well as with the militant factions that espouse violent forms of *Jihad*. To be further integrated they need to drop these links and leave direct political action and *Da'wa* to political organisations, political parties, social movements and religious organisations devoted to such causes.

Fourth, the *Zakat* and *Waqf* systems need to be revitalised with a broader understanding of the general objectives of the Islamic Shari'a, thus re-energising its original humanist outlook. This could be the key that opens the gates for more vibrant Islamic social action and an Islamic contribution to the humanitarian and universal endeavour of global civil society at large.

Fifth, the concern should never be about the role of Islam as a source of inspiration for the ethical dimension of faith-based organisations, but what remains a cause for concern is using Islam in the field of humanitarian relief to serve particular *Da'wa* or limited ideological or political objectives.

#### From Islamic globality to global Islam

Since the start of the millennium, indications have emerged of a substantial shift in the global horizon of Islamic NGOs, especially after the serious problems posed for them by some 'War on Terror' policies (including freezing bank accounts and listing some NGOs as terrorist). Islamic Relief Worldwide, for example, has contributed to the establishment of the Humanitarian Forum as a platform to bring together relief agencies from different faiths and traditions, including secular charities and organisations.

<sup>16</sup> See the annual report of Islamic Relief Worldwide (2007) and the change in discourse and engagement in international programmes and coalitions to fight poverty and combat the food crisis.





### Box 6.3: Hinduism, poverty and civil society

In India social inequalities and economic disparities are neatly intertwined, perhaps because social inequalities have a religious sanction. The system of castes, the unique social arrangement which segregates and arranges individuals in a hierarchy of status based on their birth into particular communities, is a characteristic feature of Hinduism. Needless to say, socio-religious status and politico-economic power often coincide, leaving the 'lower' castes poor and marginal in all fields including the economic. Hinduism should therefore be an important and interesting site of investigation of the linkages between civil society, religion and poverty.

Hinduism is world's third-largest religion after Christianity and Islam in terms of its numbers of followers. India has the largest number and proportion of Hindus. Nearly 80.4 per cent of Indians – 828 million people – are Hindu, according to Census of India 2001 (URL).

There have been attempts to characterise Hinduism as a uniform and coherent system of beliefs and practices. This, however, is questionable. Some would argue that Hinduism is an umbrella term under which more religions than one are subsumed (von Stietencron 1995). However, we maintain that two distinct and broad world views are subsumed under the term, namely, Brahmanical Hinduism (variously referred to as orthodox, conservative, textual, Sanskritic Hinduism) and non-Brahmanical Hinduism (variously referred to as folk or popular Hinduism). Brahmanical Hinduism is essentially hierarchical and reflects the belief that inequality is inherent in human nature. The non-Brahmanical strand on the other hand, which challenges the orthodoxy, has propounded egalitarianism and denounced discrimination and degradation based on one's status at birth. Here, we explore the differences in the approaches of the two Hindu world views to the poor.

#### Orthodox Hinduism, heterodox Hinduism and civil society

Brahmanical Hinduism has been criticised not only for sanctioning hierarchy and discrimination, but also for its approach to life in this world. It has always been concerned with other-worldly outcomes of the worldly life. As a result, the discourse of Brahmanical Hinduism has never embraced work directed towards the material and social welfare of the common people, of the poor, who were mostly from the lower rungs of the status ladder. Hence a discourse on poverty is almost absent. In fact, concern for the material welfare of the Brahmins, the 'highest' caste, was endowed with religious merit.

On the other hand, many movements of the lower castes and classes, dating back several centuries and having allegiance to the Hindu religion, have protested against caste-based social exclusion in the wider Hindu society. Indeed, at the level of folk or 'little' traditions, or what Mark Juergensmeyer (1988) calls 'religious rebels', we find a more egalitarian conceptualisation of 'Hindu civil society'. These 'subaltern traditions' have to an extent engaged with the issue of marginalisation and therefore with poverty. However, their discourse on and contributions to tackling poverty remain restricted by the gross limitations on the power and resources required to organise such work.

The bhakti tradition, which swept almost the entire nation and questioned the tenets of orthodox Hinduism, dates back to the sixth century and continues to the present day. It embraces religious groups like the Lingayats of Karnataka, the Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotional cult) poets of south India, the Mahanubhav Panthis (followers of the Mahanubhav cult) and Varkari Panthis of Maharashtra, a community of followers of Kabir and Raidas in north India. More recently the Satnami in Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh), Ad-Dharm and Dera Sach Khand Ballan in Punjab, Mahima Dharma in Orissa, Dadu Panthis, Gorakhnath Panthis and many large communities offer radical perspectives. During the British colonial times the associations of Sri Narayan Guru in Kerala and Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra were religious in nature, but detached themselves from Brahmanical Hinduism.

However, between these subaltern traditions and modern Hindu nationalist forces lies a group of Hindu organisations that took up philanthropic activities similar to those of the Christian missionaries. Many of them are more liberal than the Hindu right wing but less radical and more resourceful than the folk traditions. They have, however, derived much from the folk traditions. Among them are neo-Hindu movements that emerged in the early nineteenth century and have continued well into modern times. They are different from the early twentieth century and post-Independence new age Hindu spiritual gurus. The articulations of these gurus are diverse.

The complexity of this situation prevents us from deriving neat generalisations. We trace a trajectory of the various Hindu movements and organisations in chronological order.

## Hinduism modernises: the neo-Hindu philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

While neo-Hinduism is no doubt a part of the Hindu philosophical tradition, it differs from orthodox Hinduism because of its universalism and liberalism. Established in early nineteenth century by Raja Rammohan Roy, Brahma Samaj was perhaps the first movement to attempt to protest against the inhuman and degrading practices of the Hindu religion. Two famous neo-Hindus include Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who founded Ramakrishna Mission, and Swami Dayanand (1824–83), who founded Arya Samaj.

It was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) who redefined the role of the *sanyasi* (renouncer) and in the process changed the face of Hindu humanitarian endeavour. This redefinition had already taken place, although in a limited form, in the Swaminarayan and the Radhasoami traditions. The commitment of Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), the founder of Swaminarayan movement for an extended form of *seva* (service), can be traced to the Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition, one of the traditions to have questioned the orthodox ritualism and hierarchy of Hinduism. It thus attracted a considerable following from the lower castes (Beckerlegge 1998). The vision of Vivekananda, also known as the ‘socialist *sanyasi*’, can be seen in this excerpt from one his famous letters to his sister, Mary Hale, dated 9 July 1897: ‘... may I be born again and suffer thousands of miseries... so that I may worship the only God that exists...the poor of all races...’ (Vivekananda URL). This vision has found expression in Ramakrishna Mission’s involvement in a range of social service activities for the disadvantaged – relief work during calamities, medical service, rural development, education, training and spreading the mission’s message with a special focus on women, youth and weaker sections of the society. According to the mission’s estimates, this work as of now involves 202 medical and allied units, 1,745 educational institutions and 160 branches around the world.

Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) society was founded by the disciples of Maharshi Dayanand to realise his dream of ‘spiritual, intellectual and emotional revival of Indian [Hindu] society’. It is often criticised, but its concern was to revive the Vedic tradition of India, and to ‘save’ the poor *Dalits* and *Adivasis* from the clutches of the Muslim and Christian missionaries.

Gandhi brought a new interpretation to Hinduism and in turn to the freedom movement, as he did not really separate religion from politics. He integrated *seva* into his political activism. Without a thorough social reconstruction, he believed, political freedom was meaningless. He inspired many to put his ideas into practice, which redefined the Hindu religion and also the politics of his times. Untouchability, the ill-treatment and neglect of lepers, and the lack of sanitation and personal hygiene of Indian villages and villagers were some of the issues he stressed. His understanding of poverty in India and his solutions to it were different if not radical. *Khadi* (handwoven cotton cloth) embodied his understanding of the Indian problem and the solutions that he sought for it – self-reliance and *swadeshi* (goods made in one’s own country).

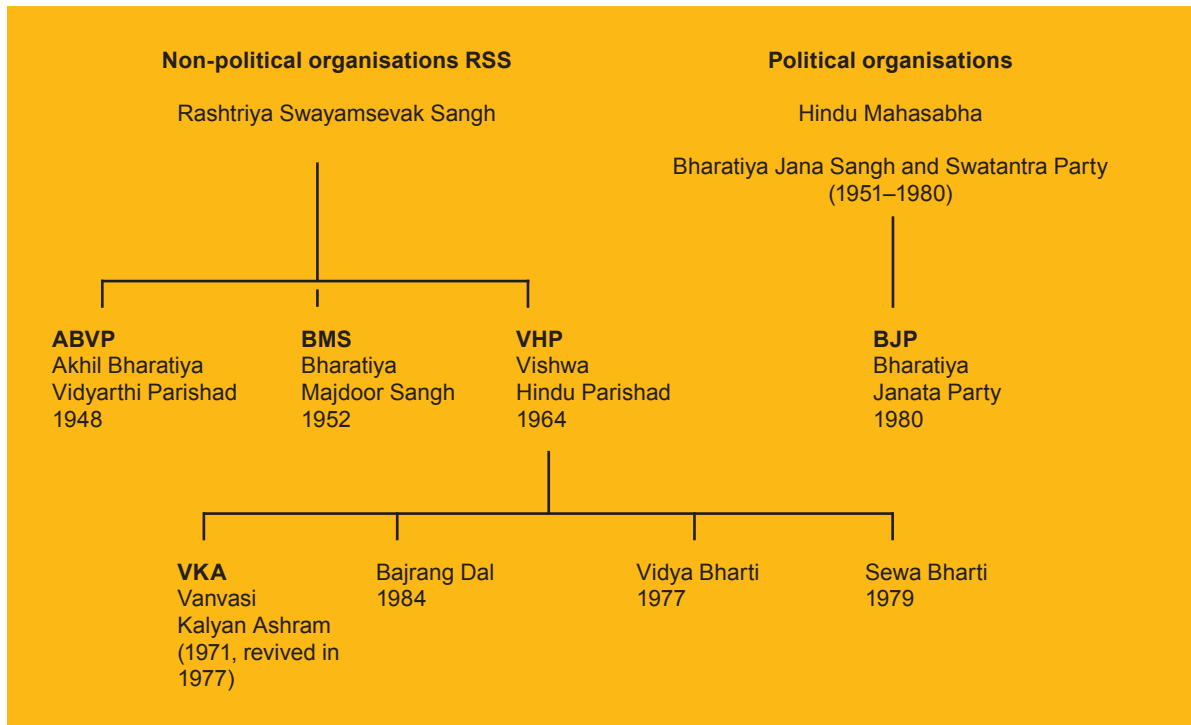
## The Hindu nationalist organisations and poverty

An attempt to identify civil society discourse and practice on poverty within the Hindu fold usually leads us to the ideology and activities of the right-wing forces of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. This is because, drawing on the financial resources of the ‘Hindu’ diaspora, it boasts no doubt the most articulate and powerful civil society initiatives within the Hindu religion. The activities of the Hindu right border more on the uncivil than the civil; yet they are to be taken into account for their organised and charitable work, and the space that they occupy in civil society (Jayal 2009: 144).

The Hindu right-wing organisations, or the Sangh parivar (Sangh family – the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangha and its affiliated bodies), as they are popularly known, share a certain organic relationship with each other, although there may not always be formal linkages between them.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) was born in 1925 under the leadership of K. B. Hedgewar. Arguably, RSS remained a ‘non-political’ body. It was and remains the ideological fountainhead of the Hindu right wing. The ideas of Hindu unity and Hindu nation remain central, and all the non-Hindu religions, especially Christianity and Islam, are characterised as ‘others’ in this philosophy.

Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or the World Hindu Council, was launched in 1964 with an aim of consolidating the Hindus of India and abroad. During the early 1970s the VHP was engaged in community service, prompted by the fear of disintegration of the ‘Hindus’, specifically the tribals, through Islamisation or Christianisation. Ironically, this community service was cast on the lines of Christian missionary work. Community centres, primary schools and



dispensaries were opened. In 1971 the Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra was founded to work in tribal areas; it was revived under the name of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) in 1977. During the period of the Janata government, with Bharatiya Jana Sangh as one of the allies, the VHP received substantial funds from the government for various social welfare schemes run through the VKA. The VKA remains the main body through which social services are delivered to the tribals. Today, according to its own estimates, VKA runs about 13,464 projects in 9,559 places. It includes 192 hostels for the tribal poor, with 6,355 inmates (boys and girls), 2,483 education centres (1,02,045 beneficiaries), 1,719 games and sport centres, 3,269 dispensaries and hospitals (5,40,933 beneficiaries), 1,233 agricultural and craft training centres (20,315 beneficiaries), 4,622 Shradha Jagaran Mandals (Hindu faith revival groups), 415 folk art promotion centres, 11,430 village committees, 48,112 villages reached and 1,028 full-time volunteers (Saxena 2008).

The VHP has a separate yet somewhat overlapping network of organisations involved in social welfare work, mainly targeting the poor *Dalits* and tribals. It includes 850 regular schools, 1,100 balwadis (nursery schools) and *Bal Sanskar Kendras* (centres which enlighten children in Hindu ideas and beliefs), 16,000 *Ekal Vidyalayas* (single teacher schools), mostly in tribal areas, in which according to the VHP's own estimates 400,000 children are being provided with free education. Also, through the Support-a-Child programme about 600 tribal children are adopted and supported by non-residential Indian VHP members. The VHP has 1,060 medical centres and also many schemes to encourage self-reliance and alleviate poverty. Its initiatives include 44 orphanages and three hostels for the children of leprosy patients. VHP volunteers were involved in relief work after the 1999 Orissa cyclone and the 2001 Gujarat earthquake. To eradicate untouchability, the VHP claims that it 'organises community meals, padyatras [rallies] of saints and rathyatras [chariot festivals] carrying local deities to the doors of the backward classes who are otherwise prohibited by the upper class pundits to go to the temples' (Agarwal 2008). It is clear that the major goal of these organisations remains 'reconverting' the tribals and *Dalits* into the Hindu fold without radically altering the social order.

Indeed, the social activism described above was meant to serve the political goal of Hindu unity and claim to superiority. The incivility of the Hindu right wing is exposed when we see this ideology at work behind terrible communal carnage in different parts of the country. There are definite linkages between the civil society work

of RSS, VHP and VKA and the rise in communal violence (Mathur 2008). Since 1984, with the dispute over the Ramjanmabhoomi temple at Ayodhya, they have directed their wrath explicitly against Muslims. Against this background, the Bajrang Dal (the army of Hanuman, the monkey god) was formed in 1986; and subsequently, some of the worst scenes of communal violence took place in Bombay (1992–93) and Surat, again in Gujarat (2002). Throughout the last decade regular propaganda and violent acts have been directed against poor Christians and missionary workers. The gruesome murder of the Australian missionary Graham Stains and his two young sons in 1999, and more recently the communal violence in the states of Orissa and Karnataka, are manifestations of the right-wing Hindu reaction against the 'forced conversions' carried out by missionaries.

### New age Hinduism and the poor

Towards the latter half of the twentieth century, an upsurge of Hindu spiritual organisations and guru-centric cults in India spread far and wide around the globe, mainly in urban centres. Organisations such as the Prajapita Bramhakumari, and gurus such as Sri Aurobindo, Swami Prabhupada, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Satya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandmayi, Sri Sri Ravishankar and Asaram Bapu are a few examples on the long list. They have articulated and propagated Hindu philosophy in a different way from their predecessors. Many of them were born during the Indian liberation struggle and became gurus just before or immediately after Independence in 1947. All of these spiritual gurus are known for their formal and informal courses in spiritual training and their global networks. In addition, they have founded schools, health centres and many other community-oriented programmes.

What is now known as Prajapita Bramhakumari International University (URL) was founded in 1936 by Dada Lekhraj. Today it boasts a female head, and strives for the creation of a value-based society by offering spiritual training with a significant enrolment on the part of women. In fact, the large proportion of women enrolling there has become an object of suspicion (Babb 1986). The institute, after being affiliated with United Nations as an NGO in 1980, and with more than 6,000 branches in 80 countries, has only recently become involved in village outreach programmes, health care projects with an emphasis on ophthalmological care and neuropsychiatry, training schools for nurses and community building programmes.

Sai Organization, inspired by the spiritual leader Sathya Sai Baba, has proliferated into a global organisation, with 11,000 centres in more than 130 countries (Srinivas 2008). The organisation offers many kinds of service, including general and state-of-the-art super-specialty health services free of cost to poor patients through its dispensaries and high-tech hospitals. Its drinking water supply project in Andhra Pradesh and in Tamil Nadu (especially in Chennai city) has helped millions of common people and farmers to quench their thirst and irrigate their lands.

Mata Amritanandmayi, popularly known as 'Amma', is from a fishing community in Kerala (Amritanandmayi URL). She became a spiritual guru with an international influence at the age of 28 in 1981. Her mission runs a chain of temples, a network of schools, a high-cost 'multi-super-specialty' hospital in Kerala and a hospice for the terminally ill in Mumbai (Warrier 2005: 5). Her humanitarian initiatives cover disaster relief and rehabilitation, health care, nature care, housing, food for the poor, orphanages and hostels for tribal and *Dalit* children, and monthly pensions for destitute women and for the physically and mentally challenged.

More localised forms of such initiatives include the Swadhyay (URL) movement, started by Pandurang Shastri Athavale, and the religious congregations of Anirudha Bapu and Nanasaheb Dharmadhikari. They have a considerable following among common people like the fisherfolk and other lower-caste and lower-class groups in coastal Maharashtra. They have addressed issues such as alcoholism, gambling and psychological maladies such as depression amongst their followers.

Outside India, mainly in the developed Western countries, Swami Prabhupada founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISCKON URL) in 1966. It emerged as internationally the most popular Hindu cult. Today it boasts 350 centres, 60 rural communities and 50 schools worldwide. Subsequently, many Hindu gurus spreading Hindu spirituality have become popular. Recently, Sri Sri Ravishankar's Art of Living Foundation has emerged as a highly vibrant organisation, spread over 140 countries and working on the issues of a stress-free mind and a violence-free world. It also works on women's empowerment and new methods of organic farming and healthy living (The Art of Living URL).

These religious gurus have been very popular, standing somewhere between the Hindu popular cults and the orthodoxy: less radical in their approach to social hierarchy and discrimination, but more universalist and liberal in

accommodating a wide range of followers. Among them Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Prabhupada and Osho draw their adherents mainly from the Western developed world – both Indians and non-Indians. Poverty remains marginal in their discourse. In India even Prajapita Bramhakumaris, which has brought spirituality closer to women, addresses poverty-related issues only to a limited extent. Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandmayi are the two most prominent spiritual gurus who have substantial work for the poor to their credit. However, a large section of their audience comes from the urban middle class. The more localised cults like Swadhyaya movement have followings among the poor and marginalised, but even they do not radically question the social structures that generate and perpetuate poverty. Some of these divine figures have also courted controversy for various reasons – from sexual exploitation to association with religious extremism. While modern modes of communication and networks have helped them spread their influence over wide geographical areas, new approaches towards solving the problems of life in this world – both spiritual and material – have made them look different from their predecessors.

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The code of ethics of the forum states:

*Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone, and that it shall not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint or act as an instrument of government foreign policy.*  
(Humanitarian Forum URL)

Established in 2004, the Forum has so far engaged 20 principal organisations, including Islamic Relief Worldwide, Oxfam, Qatar Charity Organization, Mercy Corps International (American), Al-Khomeini Organization for Relief, the British Red Cross, the British Department for International Development, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the World Assembly for Muslim Youth (Saudi Arabia), Human Rights, Freedoms and Human Relief Organization (Turkey), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the Swiss International Development Agency. The Forum aims to build a sector of Islamic non-governmental organisations that operate under clear criteria for efficiency, accountability and transparency, as required by most of the communities, host governments and international organisations and donors. In addition, it aims to build bridges and partnerships between the humanitarian movements in the Muslim world and the West as well as assuring that humanitarian assistance and the available resources in the Muslim world are directed to the people who need them most, while bearing in mind international governmental regulations. The Forum also aims to integrate the NGOs operating in the Islamic countries into the international community by means of capacity building and partnerships, as well as enhancing a well-organised environment for both religious and non-religious NGOs. The Forum has adopted various models of cooperation and exchange of expertise among the participating organisations, as well as trust-building and capacity-building measures and other means and techniques for the promotion and understanding of humanitarian policies and criteria.

The year 2004 also saw the launch of the Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition (DIHAD) (URL), which has been meeting annually to bring together organisations working in the field from all backgrounds in order to exchange experience and develop skills. The annual

participation of Islamic organisations necessitates their engagement with organisations and bodies that are not faith-based. Such platforms within the Muslim world can contribute to resolving the challenges we have listed.

In 2008 the first World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists (URL) was held in Istanbul, bringing together conveners from different backgrounds, Islamic and international, official and non-governmental. It served as a space for discussing the future of relief and development work across borders and circles of interest. The new phenomenon here is that Islamic organisations in the West, especially in the United States, played a crucial role in marketing the idea and organising the event, a fact that we will return to shortly.

There are two significant background factors to these changes. The first is the fact that there has been a parallel and rising recognition among Muslim scholars that human welfare has been marginalised as a core aim of Islam in Islamic jurisprudence as practiced, and there is a need to reclaim it. There is an emerging trend now within Islamic scholarly circles to reintroduce the theory of the high or end goals of Islam (*Maqasid*) into the Islamic paradigm. The theory of the end goals of Islamic Shari'a is seen, then, as a manifestation of the normative underpinnings or the basic aims of Islam as a religion. What should be at stake as ultimate ends, according to most Muslim religious scholars, is the preservation of life, wealth, reason, the human species, and the honour or dignity of all humans (Auder 2008: 253–8). This development should have a marked impact on the vision and action of Islamic organisations simply because most of them still draw heavily on religious opinions (*Fatwas*) in their actions. A good example of such an impact of *Fatwas* on humanitarian work is that for a long time *Zakat* money was seen as a source of public funding for a religious community, which posed problems if any wanted to assist non-Muslims with these funds. It was also supposed to be allocated immediately to address pressing needs, and the idea of investing it to support long-term empowerment programmes or development projects was not readily acceptable. Yet due to the change in circumstances – the overlap between relief and development and accessibility to communities in need that do not share the Muslim faith – Muslim scholars were asked by relief agencies to issue a *Fatwa* allowing Islamic humanitarian work to be more inclusive and open. With the gathering return to the humanist ultimate goals of Islam (*Maqasid*), scholars started issuing *Fatwas* allowing such an extension of services, including





to non-Muslims. After being approached by the Islamic Relief Worldwide, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi issued a *Fatwa* that *Zakat* money (not only *Waqf* money) could be used to build schools and meet institutional needs. He also allowed the distributions of meat during *Kurbani* (*Eid Adha*) to non-Muslims.<sup>17</sup> The same questions were addressed by relief organisations to Sheikh Ali Jumaa, the head of the Islamic *Fatwa* body in Egypt, and he gave the same answers.

Recent literature by specialists in *Waqf* studies has also focused on the need for Islamic organisations to play a 'global role' rather than just act globally, inviting them to be stakeholders in reshaping a more just world (Abdallah 2008).

The second background factor to these current changes is the increasing and more visible presence of Muslims in the West. The fact that Muslims as a minority started framing questions about how to reconcile their faith with their citizenship, and how to live according to Islam in a society that does not share the same faith, imposed *Ijtihad* (reform of interpretation of religious texts) on the Muslim scholarly community worldwide. The *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) of minorities began to emerge, giving religious opinions to the Muslim minority that, again, focused on the ultimate goals of Islam and managed to free itself from narrow, local considerations and the impact of community norms in respective countries on the limits of thinking about Islamic issues.<sup>18</sup>

Those interlinked changes could have an unprecedented impact on Islamic thinking and would enable the Islamic humanitarian organisations to become more empowered in developing a more humanist and global perspective of thought and action, and to become an integral part of the global civil society.

It is important to stress here that developing a humanist vision of Islamic relief organisations does not mean that they would desert their Islamic ethical frame of reference. We believe humanitarian organisations can be motivated by Islam while at the same time embracing the majority of codes and standards for delivery of services, especially in emergency situations. On the other hand, it is important to understand the shift that can take place in relation to Islamic reform and *Fatwa* development. Full secularisation or a disconnection of the ongoing reform from its Islamic roots is possible for a small number of organisations over a long period of time but would be most likely undesirable. After all, it is their Islamic identity that allows such organisations to enjoy the trust of their constituencies and to receive the billions

of dollars of donations they depend on in their work.

Islamic organisations have to strike a very delicate balance between the Islamic, the humanist and the humanitarian. From where we stand, it does not seem to be an extremely difficult enterprise.

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<sup>17</sup> *On the Fatwa*, see Al-Qaradawi (2008: 151–73).

<sup>18</sup> *On the development of jurisprudence of minorities*, see the special issue of the Arabic-language *Journal of the European Council of Iftaa and Research*, No 10, Dublin, May 2007; see also *IslamOnline.net* (URL).





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