Islamic Relief Organizations. Between ‘Islamism’ and ‘Humanitarianism’

The predominant conception of international aid remains anchored in a dualistic vision of the world: a ‘North’ considered wealthy and developed comes to the rescue of the ‘South’ oppressed by poverty.

The ‘civilizing’ missions that justified 19th-century imperialism were substituted by themes such as ‘third world-ism’ and development aid — the second half of the 20th century. After the Biafra war, defence of fundamental human rights begins to justify claims to the ‘right to intervene’ as practiced by non-governmental organizations, such as Doctors without Borders, setting the tone for what humanitarian action should be.

Despite its heterogeneity, the field of international aid seems to function according to the North-South principle, the North often considered wealthy and developed comes to the rescue of the North-South principle, the North often concerned organizations hold a worldview that distinguishes itself from its Christian or secular homologues? These organizations constitute themselves in reaction to ‘Western’ hegemony in the field of humanitarian action: for that reason, they claim specificity, a rooting in the Islamic tradition. But simultaneously, their insertion in the field of humanitarian action contributes to a reformation, even a re-interpretation, of this tradition to be able to compete with the dominant norms. Also, to analyse the practices of these organizations allows one to see how they combine various registers of action. They look to inscribe their action in the heritage of the Islamic tradition of charity. The emphasis is placed on the Qur’anic injunctions or the texts of the Hadith, which call upon Muslims to do charitable works: whether it be by the donning of hadith, or the qurbani, donation for the occasion of sacrificial festival. With the exception of several Muslim countries that have reintroduced an official system of zakat collection (principally Pakistan and Sudan), the practice of zakat is largely left to local Muslim communities. In this ‘third world’ space, different types of zakat-collecting institutions have multiplied from Islamic banks and local zakat-collecting committees (such as the ijaza al-jizah in Egypt) affiliated with a mosque or an Islamic association. On their side, they develop projects in which priority is given to those that benefit Muslim populations. This is based on three reasons: political, pragmatic, and dogmatic. The political reason has to do with the fact that the concerned organizations hold a worldview that identifies ‘Islam’ with the Afghans: in 1985, the Egyptian Union of Islamic Relief and the Islamic Relief Agency (international network of the Sudanese IARA), and Human Concern International (engaged specifically in Peshawar as the Islamic Coordinating Council, in which also Kuwaiti and Saudi Red Cross associations take part). In order to analyse the development of these organizations, one must place value judgements aside and avoid the simple imputation of ‘Islamism’ or ‘humanitarianism’, both of which are found in different zones in ‘humanitarian crisis’, and more generally, where there are populations in need of assistance. Thus, in Khartoum just as in Islamabad and Sarajevo, one obviously finds offices of both Doctors without Borders and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). Created in 1978 in Jeddah as a response to the ‘Islamic wajah’ of the Sudanese (Da’wa Islamiya), the Islamic Relief Agency has collected funds for Afghanistan; and in 1987, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens and pop singer converted to Islam) took the lead of a collective of associations in England and founded Muslim Aid. These organizations and others such as IIRO, the Islamic Relief Agency (international network of the Sudanese IARA), and Human Concern International (engaged specifically in Peshawar as the Islamic Coordinating Council, in which also Kuwaiti and Saudi Red Cross associations take part).

The Afghan war. The Afghan war incited numerous mobilizations in the Muslim world, notably amongst movements that advocate the establishment of an Islamic society, such as the Muslim Brethren of the Maghreb. In the mid-1980s, several relief organizations were created to come to the aid of the Afghans: in 1985, the Egyptian Union of Doctors created a humanitarian branch, the Lajnat al-Ighatha al-Insaniya (Human Relief Agency); in 1986, the Organization for Social Reform (Islamic Reform in Karenistan) (Da’wa Islamiya) to collect funds for Afghanistan; and in 1987, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens and pop singer converted to Islam) took the lead of a collective of associations in England and founded Muslim Aid. These organizations and others such as IIRO, the Islamic Relief Agency (international network of the Sudanese IARA), and Human Concern International (engaged specifically in Peshawar as the Islamic Coordinating Council, in which also Kuwaiti and Saudi Red Cross associations take part.)

Of particular interest are organizations that constitute themselves in reaction to ‘Western’ hegemony in the field of humanitarian action: for that reason, they claim specificity, a rooting in the Islamic tradition. But simultaneously, their insertion in the field of humanitarian action contributes to a reformation, even a re-interpretation, of this tradition to be able to compete with the dominant norms. Also, to analyse the practices of these organizations allows one to see how they combine various registers of action. They look to inscribe their action in the heritage of the Islamic tradition of charity. The emphasis is placed on the Qur’anic injunctions or the texts of the Hadith, which call upon Muslims to do charitable works: whether it be by the donning of hadith, or the qurbani, donation for the occasion of sacrificial festival. With the exception of several Muslim countries that have reintroduced an official system of zakat collection (principally Pakistan and Sudan), the practice of zakat is largely left to local Muslim communities. In this ‘third world’ space, different types of zakat-collecting institutions have multiplied from Islamic banks and local zakat-collecting committees (such as the ijaza al-jizah in Egypt) affiliated with a mosque or an Islamic association. On their side, they develop projects in which priority is given to those that benefit Muslim populations. This is based on three reasons: political, pragmatic, and dogmatic. The political reason has to do with the fact that the concerned organizations hold a worldview that identifies ‘Islam’ with the Afghans: in 1985, the Egyptian Union of Islamic Relief and the Islamic Relief Agency (international network of the Sudanese IARA), and Human Concern International (engaged specifically in Peshawar as the Islamic Coordinating Council, in which also Kuwaiti and Saudi Red Cross associations take part.)

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