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## Muslim Charity

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# *Journal of Religious Culture*

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### Muslim Charity

A Concept of Fundamental Solidarity

By

Edmund Weber

There is no question about charity in Islam: Allah himself has ordered almsgiving: "Narrated Anas bin Malik: ... The man further said, 'I ask you by Allah. Has Allah ordered you to take zakat from our rich people and distribute it amongst our poor people?' The Prophet replied, 'By Allah, yes'."<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental relevance of Islamic charity, *zakat*<sup>2</sup> and *sadaqa*<sup>3</sup>, roots in the Muslim understanding of God. According to the proper message of Mohammed the first and primary name and quality of God is *rahman* and *rahim*<sup>4</sup>. Allah is - so to speak – *rahman*, the life giving uterus, *rahim*. Like the uterus he gives life to the men without any pre-condition. Life is a gift free of charge not a reward for something. And if men have become sinners during their life-time God will forgive them all their sins without any condition; they have only to beg his par-

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<sup>1</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book 3, Hadith 63, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/)

<sup>2</sup> *zakat*, arab.: purity, alms. *Zakat* is one of the five fundamental principles of Islam: A true Muslim has to give a certain portion of his income to the poor people.

<sup>3</sup> *sadaqa*, arab.: what s.o. is entitled to get; in this case: what poor people are entitled to get. Later Islamic tradition interpreted *sadaqa* exclusively as voluntary alms and *zakat* exclusively as obligatory charity. However, that is questionable (see below).

<sup>4</sup> *rahim*, arab.: womb, med.: uterus; (producing) kinship; *rahman*, arab.: realizing *rahim*, producing life and kinship.

don like children! Allah enjoys forgiving sins. His nature is *rahim* and his realization *rahman* will say his essence is to give and to maintain life. Like a mother he will do everything to preserve the life of her children even if they destroy it. If men are getting God's grace, i.e. life and forgiveness free of charge, then generosity and mercy to the fellow-men is the only ethical consequence.

Property and wealth of human beings is not a reward of their deeds but a free grace of God, delivered as a trust charge, *amanat*.<sup>5</sup> Therefore human beings are only fiduciaries of their property and wealth. This applies particularly to that portion of their wealth which belongs to the needy: "And in their (the rich people's) wealth the beggar and the outcast had due share" (Surah 51, 19).<sup>6</sup> What rich people give to the poor is in reality not their own property but the God given right of the poor people; and therefore the rich people are only their trustees. The Koran says: "the (righteous) worshippers (are those) who are steadfast in prayer and *in whose wealth there is a right acknowledged for the beggar and the destitute*" (Surah 70, 22-25). Or: "O you who believe! Spend a part of what We have given you before that day arrives when there shall be neither trading, friendship nor intercessions. Truly, it is the disbelievers who are the wrongdoers" (Surah 2, 254). Here is said that the actual disbelievers are those people including Muslims who keep back the property of the needy. This means that the rich man devours foreign property, he is a robber and therefore nothing and nobody will help him on the day of the Last Judgement.

This God given property of the needy, which the rich are only holding in trust, is absolutely taboo for everybody not being needy: Therefore, when the Prophet "was presented with food, he asked about it. If he was told that it was a gift, he ate out of that, and if was told that it was a sadaqa he did not eat of that."<sup>7</sup> This taboo is so strict that even the Prophet did not dare to eat a particular date because he was not sure if it was a question of *sadaqa* will say a portion belonging to the poor people.<sup>8</sup> When his grand-sons Al-Hasan and Al-Husain, were trying to eat a *sadaqa*-date they were set right by the Prophet: "Narrated Abu Huraira: dates used to be brought to Allah's Apostle immediately after being plucked. Different persons would bring their dates till a big heap collected (in front of the Prophet). Once, Al-Hasan and Al-Husain were playing with these dates. One of them took a date and put it in his mouth. Allah's Apostle looked at him and took

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<sup>5</sup> *amanat*, pl., arab.: trust, trust charge.

<sup>6</sup> The quotations of the Koran are mostly taken from: The Holy Qur'an with Translation and Commentaries. Islamic Publications for The Holy Qur'an Association. Istanbul 1998. There are some explanations added by the author or the translator.

<sup>7</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 005, Hadith 2357, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Abu Hureira reported: Whenever the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) was presented with food, he asked about it, If he was told that it was a gift, he ate out of that, and if he was told that it was a sadaqa he did not eat out of that.

<sup>8</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book 42, Hadith 612, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated Ana: The Prophet passed a date fallen on the way and said, "Were I not afraid that it may be from a sadaqa (charitable gifts), I would have eaten it." Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Sometimes when I return home and find a date fallen on my bed, I pick it up in order to eat it, but I fear that it might be from a sadaqa, so I throw it."

it out from his mouth and said, 'Don't you know that Muhammad's offspring do not eat what is given in charity?'"<sup>9</sup>

In order to prevent any other misuse the Prophet did not allow even to buy back a good once given as alms. "Narrated 'Umar: "Once I gave a horse in Allah's Cause (in charity) but that person did not take care of it. I intended to buy it, as I thought he would sell it at a low price. So, I asked the Prophet (p.b.u.h) about it. He said, 'Neither buy, nor take back your alms which you have given, even if the seller were willing to sell it for one Dirham, for he who takes back his alms is like the one who swallows his own vomit'."<sup>10</sup> Charity has the same legal status as *mahr*, the bride price, which cannot be reclaimed under any circumstances.

The Prophet so strictly observed the charity taboo because he was much afraid of the Day of Judgement. Then Allah's wrath will punish the rich people who out of avarice and exceeding love for wealth misused the share or inheritance of the needy for their own interests. The Koran says: "Who hoard their wealth and enjoin avarice on others, and hide that which Allah *has bestowed upon them* of His bounty. For (such) disbelievers We prepare a shameful doom" (Surah 4, 37). And: "But whenever He (Allah) tests him (the rich man) by restricting his (the rich man's) subsistence; he says: 'May Lord has humiliated me.' (This answer is not correct. The Lord says:) No! But you do not honour the *orphan*. Nor do you urge another *to feed the needy*. Rather, you devour *the inheritance* (of the orphan) unsparingly. And you love wealth with exceeding love." (Surah 90, 16-20). And: "Have you observed him who denies the Religion? Such is he who repulses the *orphan*, and who does not urge others to *feed the poor*" (Surah 107, 1-3). Here we see that the misuse of *amanat* which belong to the poor does not only break faith with the needy; it is even an act of faithless and disloyalty to Allah.

A rich man as a trustee is not even allowed to use that *sadaqa* property for getting public applause as a generous supporter of the needy ones. He would infringe a trust misusing foreign property for self-interest. The judgement about that misuse is very strict: "Who gives alms in order to be seen by the people has associated an idol with Allah."<sup>11</sup> And this would be the most horrible blaming of God.

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<sup>9</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book 24, Hadith 562, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated Abu Huraira: Al-Hasan bin 'Ali took a date from the dates of the sadaqa and put it in his mouth. The Prophet said (to him) in Persian, "Kakh, kakh! (i.e. Don't you know that we do not eat the sadaqa (i.e. what is given in charity) (charity is the dirt of the people))." Sahih Bukhari, Book 24, Hadith 568, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated Abu Huraira: Al-Hasan bin 'Ali took a date from the dates given in charity and put it in his mouth. The Prophet said, "Expel it from your mouth. Don't you know that we do not eat a thing which is given in charity?"

<sup>10</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book 24, Hadith 567, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/); cf. Sahih Bukhari, Book 86, Hadith 105 [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: The Prophet said, "The one who takes back his gift is like a dog swallowing its own vomit, and we (believers) should not act according to this bad example'."

<sup>11</sup> [Sa'd, Allahs Wohlgefallen auf ihm, berichtete: "Ich hörte den Gesandten Allahs, Allahs Segen und Friede auf ihm, folgendes sagen: »Wer betet, um dabei von den Leuten gesehen zu werden, hat Allah beigesellt; und wer fastet, um dabei von den Leuten gesehen zu werden, hat Allah beigesellt;] und wer Almosen gibt, um dabei von den Leuten gesehen zu werden, hat Allah beigesellt.«" (Ha) In: Von der Sunna des Propheten [From the Sunna of

On the other side, true and beloved Muslim are those people who feed the needy without any worldly self-interest, only for the love of Allah, and without any self-righteousness and arrogance because they are afraid of his wrath on the Day of Judgement: "And they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive. Saying, 'We feed you for the sake of Allah. No reward do we desire from you, nor thanks. We only fear a day of distressful wrath from our Lord.' Therefore, Allah has warded off from them the evil of that day, and has made them find brightness and joy" (Surah 76, 8-11).

The Koran, always emphasising charity as God's will, names the people who are entitled to get alms: "What ever you spend for good must go to parents, to your near relatives, *orphans and to the poor and the wayfarer*" (Surah 2, 215). "Righteousness is not whether you turn your face to the East or to the West; but righteous is he who ... gives his wealth for the love of Allah to the relatives, *orphans and the needy, and the wayfarer, and those who ask, and for (the liberation of) the slaves*" (Surah 2, 177). Another list is given in Surah 9, 60: "Alms are only for the poor and the needy, and those who collect them and for those whose hearts are to be reconciled (the non-Muslims), and for the ransom of captives (slaves) and debtors (who have to pay a big fine or blood money) and for the way of Allah and for (the hospitality of) the wayfarers. This is an obligatory duty from Allah, and Allah is Knowing, Wise."

Here we see: Allah strictly controls the rich people if they do their duty, and that there is not made any distinction between *zakat* and *sadaqa*. There is nothing said about *sadaqa* as a voluntary alms. If *sadaqa* would be a voluntary gift then it could not be a share or right of the needy. Otherwise a rich man could hold back the share *sadaqa* without any fear to incur Allah's wrath. But we have seen the undistinguished wrath of Allah against all who misuse the *amanat* of the needy; it may be *zakat* or *sadaqa*.<sup>12</sup> There can be no doubt about it. The Prophet told his followers in no uncertain terms: "Giving of *sadaqa* is essential for every Muslim."<sup>13</sup> It's not surprising that Mohammed "did not leave anything (after his

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the Prophet], ed. by Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rassoul, Köln 1994, p. 62. Quotation in italics. English translation by the author.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., Sahih Bukhari, Book 25, Hadith 588, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated Ibn 'Umar: Allah's Apostle has made sadaqat-ul-Fitr obligatory, (and it was), either one Sa' of barley or one Sa' of dates (and its payment was obligatory) on young and old people, and on free men as well as on slaves.

<sup>13</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 005, Hadith 2202, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Sa'id b. Abu Burda reported on the authority of his grandfather that the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: "Giving of *sadaqa* is essential for every Muslim."

Sahih Bukhari, Book 73, Hadith 51, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari: The Prophet said, "On every Muslim there is enjoined (a compulsory) *sadaqa* (alms)." They (the people) said, "If one has nothing?" He said, "He should work with his hands so that he may benefit himself and give in charity." They said, "If he cannot work or does not work?" He said, "Then he should help the oppressed unhappy person (by word or action or both)." They said, "If he does not do it?" He said, "Then he should enjoin what is good (or said what is reasonable)." They said, "If he does not do that." He said, "Then he should refrain from doing evil, for that will be considered for Him as a *sadaqa* (charity)."

death) except his arms, a white mule, and a piece of land which he had given as sadaqa."<sup>14</sup>

However, Islam forbids begging principally, and a beggar will have to suffer a horrible penalty on the Day of Resurrection: "Hamza b. 'Abdullah b. Umar heard his father say that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) had said: The person would continue begging from people till he would come on the Day of Resurrection and there would be no flesh on his face."<sup>15</sup>

Begging is not allowed because the donator seeing a poor in need has to give sadaqa immediately. The rich people by themselves have to take care of the needy. They have to behave like parents who seeing their children hard up will take care of them immediately and not wait till they ask for help. There are only three situations a poor is allowed to beg because in these cases he or she cannot wait: "Qabisa b. Mukhariq al-Hilali said: I was under debt and I came to the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) and begged from him regarding it. He said: Wait till we receive Sadaqa, so that we order that to be given to you. He again said: Qabisa, begging is not permissible but for one of the three (classes) of persons: one who has incurred debt, for him begging is permissible till he pays that off, after which he must stop it; a man whose property has been destroyed by a calamity which has smitten him, for him begging is permissible till he gets what will support life, or will provide him reasonable subsistence; and a person who has been smitten by poverty. The genuineness of which is confirmed by three intelligent members of his people; for him begging is permissible till he gets what will support him, or will provide him subsistence. Qabisa, besides these three (every other reason) for begging is forbidden, and one who engages in such consumes that what is forbidden."<sup>16</sup> Qabisa b. Mukhariq al-Hilali was a debtor and therefore the Prophet accepted his begging. However, the Prophet was not a rich man; therefore he himself was a receiver of sadaqa. And so he promised to help al-Hilali by giving him from his own expected sadaqa.

The most practical effects of this strong charity-centred message of Mohammed are the unnumbered charitable trusts, *waqf*<sup>17</sup>, in the Islamic world.<sup>18</sup>

The Islamic ethics of charity impose a strong social obligation to other people on the Muslims, particularly to the needy. However, this solidarity is not limited to their co-religionists; it is universal, including all non-Muslims. All the passages of Koran and Sunna we have quoted do not reserve Muslim charity to the members of the Ummah; they refer to all needy.

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<sup>14</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book 53, Hadith 330, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/): Narrated 'Amr bin Al-Harith: The Prophet did not leave anything (after his death) except his arms, a white mule, and a (piece of) land which he had given as sadaqa.

<sup>15</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 005, Hadith 2265, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/)

<sup>16</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 005, Hadith 2271, [www.searchtruth.com/](http://www.searchtruth.com/)

<sup>17</sup> *waqf*, arab.: foundation

<sup>18</sup> Cf., <http://www.islamic-relief.com/Prjsec/1.asp>.

The vast charity culture of the Muslim communities has been ignored by Western scholars by ideological reasons. However, it is a scientific must to study all systems of charitable practice, their specific spiritual motivations and their religious concepts. Then we can smooth the way for the mobilizing of the charity resources of all religions. The increasing new global poverty needs the motivating help of all religions and religious communities: *zakah*, *sadaqa* and *waqf* of the Muslims, *charity* of the Christians, *nara seva* of the Hindus, *dana* of the Buddhists, and the social welfare work of all the other religions. The abuse of charity for making converts should give way to an inter-religious and inter-cultural co-operation of all charity workers.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf., Journal of Religious Culture, No. 46 and Nr. 67