Chapter 8

Islamic Philanthropy as a “Discursive Tradition”

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ABSTRACT

By examining philanthropy towards Zaytuna College, the first Muslim liberal arts college in the U.S. and ISNA, and contextualizing it in the discourses of giving among American Muslims, this paper seeks to offer a theoretical framework for contextualizing Islamic philanthropy during ‘crisis’. I argue that philanthropy in this context should be seen as a gradually evolving ‘discursive tradition,’ and not an unchanging one. Given the discourse of Islam in America being one framed in the rubric of ‘crisis,’ and the attempts by American Muslim organizations to garner philanthropic support using this framework; it is important to understand how certain crisis situations impacted discourses of philanthropy towards this sector. This paper attempts a Foucauldian analysis of how American Muslims negotiate this discursive tension in the realm of giving. I build on the work of various scholars and offer a framework that treats philanthropy towards Islamic schools, cultural and educational institutions as a ‘discursive tradition’ to understand how the dynamics of philanthropy are changing in this sector. I propose that a discursive approach could also offer us new insights into how philanthropy is being transformed, under certain institutional constraints and relations of power.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking during a lecture organized by Zaytuna College, C.A., the first Muslim liberal arts college in the U.S. Dr. Hatem Bazian said: “Al-Waqf is to designate a particular property or land and to donate the proceeds that are driven from that to

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donate for the general public.’ The development of architecture in Spain, the modes of funding higher education, independent of the state can be attributed to the Islamic concept of Waqf, Dr. Bazian points out. He was referring to the tradition of Islamic endowments towards education, that makes it possible for them to enjoy academic freedom and independence; so they could produce scholarship and original research, which may be at odds with the establishment.

Waqf is the term used to denote Islamic endowments that have been around from the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Dr. Bazian points out that this form of religious endowment built on the existing forms of pre-Islamic endowments to form some of the first universities in the world, including Al-Qarawwiyn, established in 859 A.D., much before Oxford University and others, in Europe. While Zakat and Sadaqa are the two religiously ordered forms of charitable giving, and are considered obligatory on Muslims, Waqf is any form of individual endowment, that wealthy individuals set up for perpetual benefit of society (Singer, 2008). In this paper, I will discuss primarily how religiously inspired philanthropy among American Muslims towards two institutions of culture and higher education, respectively - Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and Zaytuna College – has been and continues to be re-interpreted, in an era of modern philanthropic giving. Using the notion of a ‘discursive tradition,’ I place the study of Islamic philanthropy in the debates about the role of philanthropy in culture production, higher education.

I submit that by a close critical examination of the discourses of Islamic philanthropy (I.P.) during crisis situations, we can understand the phenomenon of how these two groups seek to legitimize their work, gain followers as well as gain greater philanthropic support. I hope to show that the discourses of philanthropy have become more ‘inclusive’ and ‘liberal’, over a period of time and are influenced as much by cultural dimensions and institutional constraints – governmental as well as societal- in American society, as they are by religious practices among American Muslims. These changes in the discourse of I.P. have occurred in the context of a ‘crisis’ mode, with the American Muslim community responding to challenges – both external and internal. Crisis can be understood as one of the ‘techniques’ that have been used to frame discourses of American Islamic Philanthropy. This discourse about ‘Islam’ and ‘Philanthropy,’ are not based on any permanence of the categories of Islam or philanthropy, but have involved a constant process of interpretation and re-interpretation by several groups of people. While each of the groups has sought to position their work as addressing the needs of contemporary society, they have relied on tropes of tradition and history to legitimize their claims.

With the growing realization that critical thinking is at the heart of social change and in particular, religious education is key to creating a citizenry that is actively engaged in promoting a just society, both Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and Zaytuna College have positioned learning and higher education, as being part of
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