

# THE POLITICS OF PHILANTHROPY

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*In any era, there is a politics of philanthropy that informs the way practitioners make decisions about benevolent actions. At the same time, there is a politics of philanthropy that shapes the way in which people think and write about philanthropy, whether they are scholars or popular authors. This discussion first provides succinct working definitions of key terms and institutions related to Muslim philanthropy. It then examines how the study of Muslim philanthropy has changed in response to the current politics of philanthropy. Ottoman imperial philanthropy provides well-documented historical examples of how the politics of philanthropy shaped choices about benevolence projects. The examples in this article are based on my own research and the publications of other scholars of Ottoman history. The advantage of the Ottoman case lies in the variety of evidence available, including the physical presence of many large, endowed building complexes, together with their endowment deeds and documentation of their functioning over time. A careful study of these endowments makes it possible to illustrate what the politics of philanthropy entailed for the Ottomans and also raises more general questions for consideration in other contexts. Deemphasizing the state as the necessary framework for politics, while acknowledging a politics of philanthropy, opens up rich possibilities for deciphering the ways in which specific benevolent actions are inseparable from the complex social, economic, and cultural interactions that configure human behavior.*

*Keywords:* Muslim philanthropy, politics of philanthropy, Ottoman history, benevolence

## Introduction

This article claims that in any era there is a politics of philanthropy that informs the way practitioners make decisions about benevolent actions. At the same time, there is a politics of philanthropy that shapes the way in which people think and write about philanthropy, whether they are scholars or popular authors. The present discussion defines politics as a nonviolent contest for power among people who seek to control limited resources, whether these are assessed as monetary wealth, status, or control over the means of force or violence. This understanding adds individuals as competitors for power to the basic definition of sociologist Max Weber (1946): "'politics' . . . means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state" (p. 78). The current discussion is intended to highlight the public

and competitive aspects of benevolent giving. It assumes that all philanthropy is political in the sense that it emerges and is inseparable from the competition to gain, maintain, or increase influence through giving in any particular society and culture.<sup>1</sup> Philanthropic acts become evidence for the acceptable ways in which individuals in a society can leverage their resources to gain power.<sup>2</sup>

Benevolence has not traditionally been analyzed as a field of politics. More often it is associated with devout religious belief, secular public mindedness, or altruism. Yet the personal declarations of donors are difficult to corroborate as evidence; equally, motives for benevolence related to the power or status goals of donors are rarely articulated by them as such, probably because such motives would be viewed with skepticism if not outright disdain. In any case, motivations for any benevolent act may be mixed, with religious belief or humanitarian concerns overlapping with status or power goals; they are not mutually exclusive (Ostrower, 1996).

Competing donors may be individual rulers, rival courtiers or politicians, government ministries or agencies, political parties, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). For example, acts of legitimation undertaken by a sovereign and the competition and maneuvering for appointments among individuals are forms of politics. They may simply be the wealthiest inhabitants of a particular city quarter, town, or village. The relative power of donors may be most obvious in the size of their donations, but also of note are the location, the identity of the beneficiaries, and the longevity of a project. Although not the focus of this article, it is worth noting that recipients also participate in a politics of philanthropy in order to gain access to donations by proving their superior deservedness or need. Historically, the category of “deserving poor” is a common one in discussions of how benevolent distributions should be made. In the contemporary world, NGOs and development and aid organizations compete for private grants and government allocations by trying to prove the superior worth of their work and the greater need of their beneficiaries.

Deemphasizing the state as the necessary framework for politics, while acknowledging a politics of philanthropy, opens up rich possibilities for deciphering the ways in which specific benevolent actions are inseparable from the complex social, economic, and cultural interactions that configure human behavior. Whether benevolence comes from the wealthy and powerful or from people of more limited means, donors make choices about who deserves to benefit, in what way, and to what extent. Since elites of each class and sector model their behavior on that of elites, this article suggests that similar political dynamics may be an aspect of philanthropy at every level of society. To a greater or lesser degree, donors' choices may be related to the needs of the beneficiaries as perceived by the beneficiaries themselves.

In order to explore further the idea of a politics of philanthropy in the context of Muslim philanthropic giving, this article will first frame the discussion with some necessary working definitions. It will then examine how the study of Muslim philanthropy has changed in response

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on the empirical research that I have published in books (Singer, 2002 and 2008) and in various articles (Singer, 2003, 2012, 2016). The argument for a politics of philanthropy emerged out of these empirical studies, but has not yet been fully developed.

<sup>2</sup> For a wide-ranging, succinct discussion of the definitions of politics, go to <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?printable=1&id=20225>, which is an OpenLearn course from the Open University (UK). See Singer (2014) for another aspect of this discussion.

to the politics of philanthropy in the present. Ottoman imperial philanthropy provides well-documented historical examples of how the politics of philanthropy shaped choices about benevolent projects. The advantage of the Ottoman case lies in the variety of evidence available, including the physical presence of many large, endowed building complexes together with their endowment deeds and documentation about their functioning over time. A careful study of these endowments makes it possible to illustrate how the politics of philanthropy shaped Ottoman benevolence and also raises more general questions to consider in other contexts.

### Some Working Definitions

One of the basic and ubiquitous acts of Muslims around the world and throughout history is philanthropy or benevolent giving.<sup>3</sup> Benevolent giving is an action doubly embedded in the lives of Muslims. First, as an obligation of faith, Muslims are required to pay *zakat* (obligatory alms) calculated as a percentage of annual income above a minimum threshold. *Zakat* is technically neither benevolent nor voluntary; although it is sometimes interpreted or misunderstood as a form of philanthropy, its motivations are belief in and obedience to God. It resembles a community tax, since *zakat* funds are meant to benefit specific types of individuals within a society, such as poor and needy people. The religious and cultural authority for *zakat* starts with verses of the Qur'an<sup>4</sup> that are reinforced in *hadith* (reports of the doings and sayings of the Prophet). According to Islamic tradition, failure to pay *zakat* risks horrific forms of punishment to be visited on the believer after death, but the implementation of this is in the hands of God and not of people. Historically, there is little evidence about how *zakat* was paid or apportioned in any premodern Muslim polity.

The situation is quite different when considering *sadaqa* (voluntary benevolence). This second framework for giving is also mentioned throughout the Qur'an and *hadith*, and generosity is a salient feature of the classical narrative of the life of Muhammad, as well as of the biographies of famous learned figures, mystics, rulers, and artisans, whose lives exemplify normative recommendations that Muslims be generous and contribute to sustaining and strengthening the community (Singer, 2008, pp. 114–145). The goal of *sadaqa* is to demonstrate faith, to enhance the standing of the believer on the Day of Judgment, to benefit the Muslim community, and to serve the public good. It is an ethical value associated with being Muslim.

Verses and images that remind believers to pay their *zakat* and encourage them to give *sadaqa* generously are found not only on paper in manuscripts and books. They may appear carved into the wood of mosque doors and shutters; painted and fired into household ceramic dishes and the tiles that decorate mosques, schools and tombs; woven into fabric; etched into metal; and they may be repeated verbally in the sayings and expressions of daily life in all the languages that Muslims use. Voluntary giving takes place irrespective of a specific political, economic, or social context, although it may be shaped by the personality and resources of the donor and according to preferences dictated by time, place, gender, profession, environment, climate, or space. Equally,

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<sup>3</sup> This article uses "philanthropy" in the broadest sense, to include all voluntary giving by individuals, large and small, to groups or individuals, public or private, in cash or in kind.

<sup>4</sup> For example, 2:25, 2:110, 2:177, 9:34–35, 9:60, 9:103, 58:12–13.

social or cultural norms may limit or configure individual donations with respect to the choice of beneficiaries, or the shape, size, and location of the endeavor.<sup>5</sup> The overlap between zakat and sadaqa is their shared outward appearance as benevolent gifts and their reliance on the existence of a community in order to take place at all. Giving, by definition, is a social and not a solo activity. It is essentially a form of civic engagement precisely because it requires interaction with other people.

The *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society* (2017) defines philanthropy as "any intentional act of generosity" (p. 2). Intent, *niyya*, is specifically mentioned in some discussions of zakat and sadaqa because the intention to fulfill a religious obligation or to make a benevolent donation is an essential part of its definition as such. This intention, however, is not necessarily meant to be spoken or recorded (although it may be), but rather is part of the accounting between a believer and God on the Day of Judgment (Singer, 2008, pp. 57, 137). Laws and statutes shape and regulate both obligatory and voluntary giving, but it is left to God to track compliance with religious obligations and the extent of voluntary generosity, and ultimately to judge the motives of individual believers. Muslims, in writing and in speech, frequently use expressions that suggest that only God knows the real heart or mind of any individual, their true motives, and it is according to these that people will be judged on the Day of Reckoning. If this is the case, then the presumption to judge the motives of another individual comes dangerously close to blasphemy.

The most visible type of sadaqa under the Ottomans was *waqf* (Turkish, *vakıf*) or endowment. Endowments became common in the Islamic world from roughly the ninth century on. The largest endowments were complexes of buildings that included all or some of the following: a mosque, a school, a college, a caravanserai, a Sufi hospice, the founder's tomb, a public kitchen, and a bath. Smaller endowments could, for example, support a single institution; establish a bridge, a well, or a community fund; and contribute rugs, candles, books, or other items used in mosques and schools. Under the Ottomans, multipurpose, single buildings were endowed from an early date. As resources expanded, successive endowments came to include articulated complexes in which each purpose was housed in its own building. The most extensive endowments were those of sultans, women of the imperial family, and leading members of the military-administrative elite.

An endowment was a charitable act, intended to provide ongoing benefit (*sadaqa jariya*). Such donations ensured the necessary infrastructure for a vibrant Muslim community. Waqfs were historically the means by which social and welfare services were routinely established and maintained throughout the Muslim world. Many of these services are those provided today by government welfare offices (education, health, poor relief), but they also included ritual facilities (mosques, ablutions pools, cemeteries) and infrastructure projects (water supply, roads, bridges). Provisions for maintaining buildings were included in endowment deeds, a signal that the complexes were imagined as enduring through time, a permanent feature in the socioeconomic life and built fabric of the cities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Singer (2008) for more on zakat and *sadaqa*, as well as McChesney (1995), Sabra (2000), Bonner, Ener, and Singer (2003), and Fauzia (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Arabic: *waqf*. For a general introduction to the topic, see Peters (2002). For more on renovations, see Ergin (2007).

The historian Marshall Hodgson (1974) maintained that from about the tenth century, waqfs replaced zakat as “the vehicle for financing Islam as a society,” pointing to the way that they supported religious, social, cultural and economic activities. The impressive physical record of these large complexes is one of the most common legacies of Ottoman rule in the former lands of the empire. Some extant buildings continue to serve their original functions, while others, repurposed, still stand to mark the site. Each often preserves the name of its founder as a permanent designation of the city neighborhood where the building is located.

Hodgson also observed, “Through the waqfs the various civic essentials and even amenities were provided for on a private yet dependable basis without need or fear of the intervention of political power” (1974, p. 124). Perhaps unintentionally, he pointed to an unresolved matter of identity with respect to Ottoman sultans, relevant to members of the elite as well, a conundrum that became typical of the Ottoman era, in which the largest endowments were established by the ruler. In the Ottoman polity, the sultan was the wealthiest and most powerful individual. As ruler, he was entitled to a one-fifth share of the booty from any conquests, and with this he could undertake benevolent projects. Any sadaqa of the sultan was recorded to his own credit as a good Muslim. And yet the public expectations of a sultan were inextricably shaped by his being *the* leading Muslim in Ottoman society. In part to confirm his standing and legitimize his rule and that of his dynasty, the Ottoman sultan undertook benevolent works for the benefit of Ottoman subjects. His actions were simultaneously his in two ways, personally, as his own, and publicly, as the Ottoman sultan. It is thus impossible to consider any individual sultan in isolation from his power and status as the ruler of the empire (Turan, 2009, p. 19). As a result, Hodgson's observation that the private donor was protected from “the intervention of a political power” is not really relevant. In a similar way, an individual Muslim had a private relationship with God and a public role (no matter what size) as a member of the Muslim community to which he or she belonged. This essential condition is the basis for considering benevolent acts as part of a politics of philanthropy.

## Politics Comes to Muslim Philanthropy

Politics emerged as an analytical category for examining philanthropy in general in the late twentieth century. This development occurred parallel to the growing number of humanitarian organizations, international aid projects, and NGOs worldwide. Programs and courses for the study of philanthropy and professional training programs increased while university departments and programs of study multiplied. Their graduates today work as advisors to individual donors, to banks, to foundations, to NGOs, and to grant recipients. Specialist journals and professional academic and practitioner organizations exist as well to provide platforms through which to meet, discuss, and share research and experience.<sup>7</sup>

Initially, modern western scholarship addressed Muslim philanthropy through the study of religion and law. The religious and legal components of Muslim giving received concentrated attention from scholars who focused on zakat and sadaqa as they appeared in the Qur’an, hadith, and legal texts to define normative practice. These early studies of Muslim charity looked at

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<sup>7</sup> Among the most serious professional academic organizations are ARNOVA (Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action) and ISTR (International Society for Third-Sector Research).

institutions like zakat, sadaqa, and especially waqf because their status as legal institutions meant that they had a significant footprint in the large corpus of legal literature from virtually all periods of Muslim history. However, this literature revealed little about the practices of individual Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

The study of endowment-making developed more extensively among historians because of the relatively large number of endowment deeds (*waqfiyyat*) that have survived from the premodern, early modern, and modern periods. These set out, often in some detail, the terms and conditions of individual endowments as prescribed by their founders, generally including an introductory section that emphasized the piety of the founder and his or her desire to benefit the Muslim community. Little complementary evidence before the Ottoman period has survived that can provide a sense of how well the endowments, once established, functioned over time, the specific challenges they faced, and what resources they might draw on when the endowments were insufficient. Academic assessments contained a healthy dose of skepticism about the genuine quality of the benevolent intent of the founders, seeing their waqfs more as self-serving institutions established by wealthy individuals. Some studies of waqf claimed that, collectively, the control by endowments of extensive agricultural properties across the Middle East and North Africa had a negative impact on the modernization of landholding practices and agrarian regimes, interfering with economic development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Others addressed the nature of local property regimes and the way they disrupted colonial attempts to reform landholding (Powers, 1989).

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars became more creative and critical in their explorations of philanthropy in Middle Eastern and Muslim societies. This change has come in tandem with increasing numbers of academic studies of philanthropy in general. The study of Muslim philanthropy has gradually emerged as a mature field of research since the second half of the twentieth century. One clear sign of its complete integration as a topic of study is the regular publication of articles about philanthropy in journals whose scope extends beyond the study of Islam or the Muslim world.<sup>9</sup> Numerous collections of articles on Muslim philanthropy published in edited volumes or special issues of journals are another indication of how the topic has become part of the academic mainstream.<sup>10</sup> Publication of articles on Muslim philanthropy are also found alongside works about philanthropy in other faiths, cultures, or national contexts.<sup>11</sup>

One example of the relative visibility of the topic is the special issue of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2014) that included five articles on "The Politics of Benevolence." Together they demonstrate how strong the commitment to philanthropy is in the modern and

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<sup>8</sup> The most comprehensive discussion of waqf is in the article by Peters, et al. (2002). A review of the historiography can be found in Singer (2008, pp. 90–100), while Powers (1989) provides a detailed analysis of the French and British colonial narratives of waqf.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Atia (2013), Baron (2003), Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003), Clark (2003), Ener (2003), Özbek (2005), Özbek (2008), Petersen (2011), Sabra (2005), and Singer (2005, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> For example: Bonner et al. (2003), Lacey and Benthall (2014), Nejima (2016), Pascual (2003), and Singer (2014).

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Ilchman, Katz, and Queen (1998) and Frenkel and Lev (2009). For more recent examples, see Miura (2010), Ghazaleh (2011), Joseph (2014), and Harasani (2015).

contemporary Middle East and Islamic world and how deeply embedded benevolence remains in the intersecting spheres of governance, economics, and ideology. At the same time, they illustrate the diversification of initiatives by states and individuals and by local, national, and transnational NGOs that stretch to include religious practice, diaspora engagement, human rights, women's protections, and basic welfare services. The articles demonstrate the extensive attention now being given to the politics of benevolence as well as the extent to which actions identifiable as "Muslim philanthropy" share structures, goals, and concerns with other philanthropic acts and initiatives across the spectrum of belief and politics.

The inauguration of the *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society* (2017), or *JMPCS*, marked an expanded insertion of Muslim philanthropy into the web of scholarly publications. A permanent space is now reserved for publishing research on Muslim philanthropy.<sup>12</sup> A specialized journal is a means to claim academic territory and legitimize a field of academic research. It signals that there are a sufficient number of scholars who define some aspect of their research as contributing to a certain field, such that they are happy to read regularly a collection of articles addressing its various aspects. Moreover, they also (perhaps unconsciously) make a commitment to contribute something to the journal as well as do the work of soliciting articles and reviewing them. Finally, a journal usually requires a press to publish it (as long as paper publishing continues). This can happen only if the press believes it can benefit financially from the journal. Even if there is originally a subvention required, the capacity to pay the subvention is another sign of the strength of the field.

The *Journal on Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society* (2017) has also decided that it will welcome submissions from both scholars *and* practitioners "who work in the area of Muslim philanthropy and civil society" (p. 1) as legitimate, although still subject to review. Its editorial board comprises scholars and practitioners. Essentially, the journal has taken a position in the politics of academic publishing. In this way, the journal has acknowledged its field as one in which the distance between scholarship and practice can narrow or even disappear at times. This approach challenges academic notions about how knowledge is produced, according authority to experience in a novel way; at the same time, it creates true challenges for achieving the critical and dispassionate evaluation of evidence while embracing the insights that practitioners may offer.<sup>13</sup> The *JMPCS* also includes Muslims, Christians, and Jews on its editorial board, reflecting its goal to reach a multifaith readership of academics and practitioners.

Together with and inextricable from the expansion of interest in philanthropy as a topic of academic research in general, and in the Muslim world in particular, was the impact of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Even before that date, some of the research on Muslim philanthropy had investigated the connection between philanthropic donations and the funding of political violence by Muslims. Following the attacks, Muslim benevolence, in its many forms, was frequently cast in the Western popular press and even in some academic literature as a negative force. In addition, it became clear that there was a widespread assumption that most Muslim philanthropy was being

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<sup>12</sup> Another new journal focusing on a more circumscribed aspect of Muslim philanthropy is the *Journal of Islamic Philanthropy & Social Finance*, which also began publishing in 2017.

<sup>13</sup> For example, a reflective and critical assessment of a career in international aid can be found in Vaux (2001).

channeled to support political violence, irrespective of the intentions of many donors (Burr & Collins, 2006).

A convergence of developments in philanthropic practices, academic study, politics, and violence has made benevolent giving by Muslims more visible in the early twenty-first century as well as more politicized and vigorously contested. The assumption that philanthropy was an instrument of violence for radical political Islam helped to direct the attention of scholars, along with pundits and policy analysts to the political motivations for benevolent donations.<sup>14</sup>

## The Politics of Ottoman Imperial Philanthropy

It is useful to turn attention away from the more charged discussions of contemporary philanthropy to historical ones in order to gain more nuanced insights into the politics of philanthropy as an aspect of power dynamics in societies. As previously noted, the extent and endurance of Ottoman imperial endowments created a particularly rich record of these dynamics. Before continuing, however, it must be noted that concrete evidence for philanthropic acts being intentionally politicized is just as difficult to obtain as the evidence for personal piety and altruism. All of these are either self-proclaimed or observed circumstantially.

Philanthropy in the Ottoman Empire was practiced throughout society, at almost every level of the economy, within all confessional groups. For the most part, philanthropic giving was framed in the language of religious piety. For the Muslims, Christians, and Jews who made up the bulk of the Ottoman population, benevolent giving was intimately connected with salvation or the attaining of Paradise within the context of each belief system. At the same time, charitable giving was clearly part of the lexicon of political and social acts that announced, consolidated, and legitimized power and prestige. Social and economic hierarchies were marked and reinforced by the gradients of giving.

Mine Ener's (2003) groundbreaking study was one of the earliest to engage explicitly with the idea of a politics of philanthropy in the context of studying Muslim philanthropy.<sup>15</sup> In her book, Ener examined how care for the poor was politicized in nineteenth-century Ottoman Egypt and how it turned into a field of competition between Europeans and Egyptians, as well as among Egypt's own elites and politicians. Ener's example involves not only the competition among Egyptian-Ottoman elites but also between those elites and foreign actors who had a certain influence in reshaping the vehicles and substance of local philanthropy.

Yet care for the urban working class and underclass poor had been a part of Egyptian politics for centuries. In medieval Egypt, the Fatimid ruler led his elites by example in times of crisis, releasing grain stocks to the market at enforced low prices in years when the annual Nile flooding was either inadequate or too great. He then obliged his ministers and commanders to do the same, dictating the quantities that each should make available for sale and the numbers of people to be supported. These gestures, considered also as a form of benevolence, provided subsistence for the

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<sup>14</sup> See GhaneaBassiri (2017) for a discussion on much smaller negative impacts on Muslim giving in the United States during this period of time.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on the politics of philanthropy from the perspective of a long-time practitioner, see Vaux (2001).

urban population. They proved the capacity of the ruler to care for his subjects and to prevent extended food shortages, as well as his ability to control the behavior of his elites and to outdo them in the performance of benevolence (Sanders, 1994; Sabra, 2003).

Ottoman imperial philanthropy had excelled from an early era in the construction of multipurpose buildings, and then in the construction of complexes. Each was funded by an individual member of the Ottoman dynasty or the Ottoman elite. Although men and women were equally able to establish endowments, the Ottoman princes were excluded from this activity until they became sultans. Such an act on the part of a prince would be considered a breach of order and a sign of misplaced ambition to replace the ruler. The philanthropy of princes' households was in the hands of their mothers.<sup>16</sup> Endowments kept the buildings in good repair, paid salaries for personnel, and covered the costs of purchasing necessary materials for the schools and kitchens (e.g., books, basic foodstuffs, serving dishes, and firewood).

The largest of these complexes is the Süleymaniye in Istanbul, built and endowed by Sultan Süleyman in the 1550s. Sinan, the celebrated Ottoman architect, planned the mosque dome to outshine the iconic Byzantine church, the Aya Sofya, which had been converted into a mosque after the conquest of Constantinople by Süleyman's great-grandfather, Sultan Mehmed II. It was probably also intended to surpass the mosques built by Mehmed II and Süleyman's grandfather, Bayezid II, a symbol of Süleyman's accomplishments and the increased status of the Ottomans in the world (Necipoglu, 2005). Dominating the Istanbul skyline, the Süleymaniye also defines the center of a city quarter, naming it as well as constituting it as a ritual, cultural, commercial, and social space. No Ottoman ruler before or after Süleyman endowed as large or magnificent a complex, probably a factor in ensuring his reputation among the roster of sultans.

The complex offered the neighborhood and the city a place to pray; the tombs of Süleyman and Hürrem from whom people could seek intercession with God to ease life's burdens; schools and colleges to train future generations of scholars and administrators; a hospital to care for the sick and train medical personnel; a public kitchen to feed the complex staff and others, up to 1,000 persons twice daily; and a hostel. It provided employment to hundreds of people in jobs ranging from prestigious to menial. The mosque grounds were a large, peaceful, and protected park planted with trees, offering grand views to the Bosphorus and access to its breezes in summer. While always announcing the distance between the benevolence of a sultan and that of his subjects, the Süleymaniye was continually a site that enabled the faithful to undertake their own spontaneous acts of generosity by giving to the beggars who frequented the mosque premises.

While Süleyman was focused on planning and construction of the Süleymaniye, his wife, Hürrem Sultan, was busy overseeing the progress of an endowed public kitchen in Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> The Haseki Sultan *imaret* was one of several hundred such kitchens in the empire. Benevolent food distributions existed in the Muslim world long before the Ottomans and were simultaneously an act of benevolence, a social welfare institution, and a political tool used by rulers to legitimize their power. Among the oldest is the *simāt al-Khalīl*, the Table of Abraham, in Hebron. It was attested by the eleventh-century Persian traveler Nasir-i Khusraw, who noted that on a daily basis, it fed anyone coming to Hebron with a loaf of bread, a bowl of lentils cooked in olive oil, and raisins (Nasir-i Khusraw, 1881, pp. 57–58). Under the Fatimids and Mamluks in Egypt, the sultans

<sup>16</sup> For an extended discussion of imperial women's philanthropy in the context of the household, see Peirce (1993, pp. 198–212) and the discussions of philanthropy throughout Peirce (2017).

<sup>17</sup> For more on Hürrem, see the recent biography by Peirce (2017).

distributed food on special occasions such as Ramadan, and in times of hardship, they also engaged members of the elite to contribute donations of food aid. Purpose-built kitchens contemporary with the earliest Ottoman principality existed elsewhere. In Tabriz, the foundation of Rashid al-Din (1300) included separate kitchens and menus for travelers and for orphans, students, and Sufis.<sup>18</sup> However, it was under the Ottomans that the imarets became a widespread feature of multipurpose endowments, serving meals daily to a defined group of beneficiaries.

The Jerusalem public kitchen is another example of how a politics of philanthropy informed decisions about where to invest in public benevolence. Although the facility seems to have functioned successfully, at least at the outset, it was not particularly glorious in its appearance, nothing like the large imperial mosque complexes in the capital Istanbul or in larger cities of the empire (Singer, 2002). Jerusalem was a mid-sized town of perhaps 8,000 to 10,000 people, with no outstanding industry or agriculture. The enduring importance of the city was entirely out of proportion to its physical location and expanse, its population size, or natural resources. Competition among different religious groups in the city for control over physical and symbolic space was ceaseless. Successive political regimes, including the Ottomans, not only protected the city from foreign predators but also competed with their predecessors to mark their presence and control sacred spaces. The Ottomans had to equal or better the achievements of their Muslim predecessors in order to claim the city for their own prestige in the present. This was part of an ongoing challenge to prove that they deserved the titles of caliph, sultan, and protector of the Islamic holy places of Mecca and Medina, Jerusalem, and Hebron.<sup>19</sup>

Because imarets and other imperial endowments were tied directly to the prestige of the dynasty, their ability to function could reflect well or badly on the sultan and his government. It was no simple matter to maintain the large kitchens. They were probably not the most expensive structures to build in any complex, being functional and largely unadorned. Nor were they the most prestigious. However, it appears that the imarets often consumed a larger share of annual endowment revenues than any other single institution in the complex. Not only did they require wages and maintenance, like every other building, but they also required regular supplies of food, firewood, water, and cooking and serving equipment to accomplish their role, which included sustaining all the other employees of the complex as well as guests, students, and some indigents (Singer, 2012).

In Jerusalem, not only the previous Muslim dynasties but also Jews and Christians had filled the city space with buildings that embedded their legacy in the city's stones. Moreover, the Ottomans could not hope to upstage or replace the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, whose long-established prestige and prominent location ensured them of premier architectonic status on the Jerusalem skyline (Grabar, 1996). Lack of space meant the Ottomans had to forego familiar benevolent building initiatives like mosques and madrasas. Instead, Süleyman achieved maximum visibility for his local endeavors by rebuilding the city wall; restoring, expanding, and endowing the water supply system; and adding large, new fountains to meet the daily needs of the population, carefully built at eye level for the city's residents. Maintenance of the water system

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<sup>18</sup> See Sanders (1994, pp. 28, 52, 75, 59), Singer (2002, pp. 145–152), Zarinebaf (2007), and Kiel (2007).

<sup>19</sup> See Ener (2003), Singer (2002), and Sanders (1994).

was supported by an endowment created by Süleyman. The public kitchen was significant in the local landscape, as one of very few structures that the Ottomans managed to insert into the already-crowded urban fabric. Hurrem's kitchen had to take over an existing space, but it was a house originally built by a notable Mamluk woman. A public bath, built to create an income stream to support the kitchen, was another institution with an important visible presence in the city. Even these less spectacular forms of imperial benevolence in Jerusalem announced daily through their provision of food and water to residents and visitors alike that the city was Ottoman (Singer, 2016).

Hurrem's kitchen in Jerusalem illustrates another aspect of the politics of philanthropy. Over time, an enduring tug-of-war emerged among the city's residents over who could successfully gain a place on the distribution rolls, and thus be eligible to receive meals there. When the kitchen stopped distributing cooked meals (for some period in the nineteenth century), even the most illustrious families in the city found it advantageous to be listed as recipients of the flour and oil being distributed. This makes sense if one understands that they had inserted themselves into the chain of recipients in order to become donors themselves, controlling who would be the ultimate recipients of distributions from the imperial public kitchen (Singer, 2003). Other endowments throughout the empire underwent similar processes, becoming embedded in the political networks of the Ottoman palace, and those of towns and quarters alike.

Locations of specific endowments within any given city, not to mention the cumulative distribution of philanthropic projects across imperial space, were an additional political aspect of these benevolent undertakings. The cities of Istanbul and Jerusalem can be read as texts of the politics of Ottoman philanthropy, in which members of the Ottoman imperial family, their viziers, notables, high-ranking administrators, and many others participated. They were positioned and planned according to the health, education, and welfare needs of each city as well as of the empire, adapted to the status and wealth of the founders. As such, each endowment was a tool and a marker of the ongoing competition for status.

Hurrem's double bath in Istanbul, built in the 1550s when she was the most powerful woman in the empire, has a prime site near the Hippodrome and the Aya Sofya. Sultan Ahmed I (r. 1603–1617) situated his enormous Blue Mosque immediately nearby. The locations of mosque complexes built by Süleyman and Hurrem as memorials to two sons who died young also point to the relative political importance of each: The Şehzade complex built in memory of Prince Mehmed, the prospective heir who died in his early twenties, sits on the principal urban axis leading from the palace to the Edirne Gate in the city walls. It was along this route that the army departed on campaigns into the Balkans (Cerasi, 2005). The mosque of Cihangir, who was of lesser political standing due to physical infirmity, sits across the Golden Horn above the Bosphorus shore in a picturesque but more peripheral area of the city.

Note, too, the cluster of mosque complexes on the Asian side of the Bosphorus in Üsküdar, established by several queen mothers. Although the Asian quarter was commercially and culturally significant, the mosque complexes of sultans in Istanbul were almost always inside the old city walls, in proximity to the political, ceremonial, and commercial center of the Ottoman city and its imperial palace. The city of Bursa contains imperial mosques from the early Ottoman era and the tombs of the first six sultans, while Edirne is the site of mosques that document the stylistic

transitions in size and shape that accompanied the rapid territorial expansions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and yet no imperial tombs.<sup>20</sup>

Once the Ottomans conquered the Hijaz, they monopolized philanthropy in Mecca and Medina as yet another means of signaling their dominion over the holy sites and their leading role in the Muslim world. Süleyman and Hürrem's endowments in Jerusalem were part of this project, as were Süleyman's endowments in Damascus and Baghdad. Ottoman endowments to support the tombs of renowned Muslims contributed to enhancing their prestige as guardians of holy sites. The tomb of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari was reportedly discovered outside the walls of Constantinople during the Ottoman siege of the city in 1453 and subsequently developed into a sacred space of the city. The tomb of the mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) was reconstructed by Selim after he conquered Damascus in 1516, and Süleyman did the same for the tomb of the jurist Abu Hanifa (d. 767), founder of the school of Muslim jurisprudence followed by the Ottomans.

Public works initiated and sustained by philanthropic endowments and donations reflected a much broader spectrum of fiscal capacity and social standing, part of an ever-more local politics. Although the contest for power was most visible at the imperial scale, philanthropy could serve more modest or local political ambitions. Anyone was a potential participant in the politics of benevolence, and the question was only whether one could afford the "entry fee" and make something sufficiently appreciated so as to have the desired effect, or any effect at all. Neighborhood mosques, primary schools, wells, and other endowments were part of the urban and village landscapes, often bearing the names of their founders. Donations of single books, carpets, looms, candles, or other equipment needed in educational, economic, or cultural institutions were affordable by those who could not fund buildings (Çizakça, 2000, 2006). In the eighteenth century, fountains became fashionable for the person eager to leave a mark on the cityscape. Sultans, queen mothers, and viziers endowed magnificent waterworks, but fountains could be built in sizes to fit almost any budget and slipped easily into the dense urban or sparser rural landscape. Hundreds remain, many still functioning, throughout the ex-Ottoman lands.<sup>21</sup>

Performances of philanthropy, such as the festive circumcision and marriage celebrations organized by Ottoman sultans for their sons and daughters, could also have an obvious political agenda. Because circumcision was one of the key lifecycle moments shared by young boys in Muslim Ottoman society, sultans or other well-off families regularly sponsored the circumcision of the sons of people in their households or of poor boys. In the imperial celebrations, the boys were given new clothes, festive meals, front-row seats at entertainments, and a purse of coins. These events were extensively documented in Ottoman times, described in chronicles, and in some cases, magnificently illustrated. They were anticipated as a regular part of a sultan's benevolence.<sup>22</sup> Under Sultan Abdülhamid II at the end of the nineteenth century, group photos were taken of hundreds of boys with their new clothes to document such occasions. In the shifting power

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the impact of imperial philanthropy on the spatial development of the three cities, see Kuran (1996).

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed and illustrated discussion of these fountains in Istanbul and their patrons, see Hamadeh (2002).

<sup>22</sup> For discussions of these festivals and examples of the way they offered a stage for imperial benevolence, see Terzioğlu (1995), Atıl (2000), and Faroqhi and Öztürkmen (2014).

structures of the late Ottoman era, Abdülhamid emphasized these philanthropic donations as a mark of the sultan's enduring status, even as internal constitutionalist and international challenges threatened his standing and the prestige of the empire.<sup>23</sup>

Istanbul is a text of benevolent works from the Ottoman past and continues to be one in the Turkish republican present. The burgeoning economy of later twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Turkey has made possible extensive private philanthropy. As in the past, it is relatively easy to read the text of public space for clues to the hierarchy of local and national economic and social power (Singer, 2011). Although private philanthropy is not a common vehicle for national politicians, it remains part of the "toolkit" of prestige for those seeking social and cultural status.

## Conclusion

The focus on "politics" offers a useful counterpoint to discussions of philanthropic giving that begin from a premise of religious motivation. These discussions must address the theology and belief systems that are often entirely credited with motivating individual giving as well as shaping the norms in a particular society. However, it seems an incomplete undertaking to isolate religious belief from the dynamics of society and culture, politics, and economics.

The claim that there is a politics of philanthropy does not seek to assign a moral value to any specific philanthropic gesture. Nor does it judge philanthropy as less valuable or ethically unjust because it has a politics of its own or is a vehicle for existing politics in a given society. Rather, the argument put forward is that new and instructive ways of deciphering the significance and impact of philanthropy emerge if a politics of philanthropy is acknowledged and traced. It further emphasizes that acts of philanthropy are products of the complex social, economic, and cultural interactions that configure human behavior. Ultimately, understanding "any intentional act of generosity" and its implications requires an appreciation of its multiple contexts, origins, impact, and reception.

The Muslim character of any philanthropic act is, ultimately, only one of the act's identifying features. Others, to list only some possible influences, include size, location, and beneficiaries, any of which may be determined by where the donor lives, his or her financial situation, or a personal experience that prioritizes certain concerns over others. A person may choose to establish a new initiative, one that will naturally be identified with the donor. Or someone may contribute to an existing endeavor, becoming part of a collective. Each of the contexts makes it possible to define and analyze a political aspect of philanthropy and the extent to which donors aim to participate in contests for power and influence, or to avoid or withdraw from them.

The "politics of philanthropy" is a frame for the study of benevolence that can offer new insights. It articulates an appreciation of benevolent giving as a multifaceted practice including a spectrum of giving from extremely modest to globally significant. Muslim benevolence has by now been studied, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as an aspect of history, politics, law, culture, economics, architecture, art, sociology, anthropology, and international relations, each discipline approaching the topic with its specific methods and questions. At the same time, this transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon is a shared aspect in many human societies so that it is a valuable axis of comparison.

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<sup>23</sup> Özbek (2005, 2008) discusses this topic extensively.

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